

Playing a Poor Hand Well

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Playing a Poor Hand Well

by [liodain](#)

Summary

Finances and romances: neither of them ever seem to go as planned. White collar crime and dysfunctional relationships.

Notes

Written for the Watchmen kinkmeme; Sept 09–Jan 10. *There have been quite a few stories with Dan taking in and taking care of Rorschach, feeding him, patching him up, etc. I'd like to see a fic where, somehow, Dan loses everything. And since he's always relied on family money instead of a job, he ends up out on the streets or something (don't know what would happen to Archie if he got his house taken away, but I'm sure a clever anon could think of something). And who better to help him deal with that and impart street smarts than someone whose been living at the poverty line for years?*

It's not necessarily a very kinky prompt, but I'd like to see Dan in trouble and completely out of his depth, with Rorschach as the one who has to reach out and protect.

Original unedited anon posts with the odd bit of blathering in with the feedback : Parts [1–6](#), [7–18](#), [19](#), [20](#)

Chapter 1

Dan Dreiberg empties the dregs of his third cup of coffee and pours himself a fourth, washes the spoon, dries it and puts it in the cutlery drawer. Wipes down the counter. Folds the dishcloth. He tries to find something else to stall with, but his kitchen is spotless.

He sighs, and slowly sits down to survey the evidence of his ruin.

He's in trouble, and for once it's not something that punching a criminal can solve. He's got paperwork fanned out across his table, a sea of bank statements and bills with angry red print and bold lettering, months of neglected warnings. He'd left his unopened mail to accumulate since it had seemed so trivial in the grand scheme of things, and—as much as it galls him to realize he was so blithe about it—he was rich. Everything had always taken care of itself.

It seems that his funds had been dwindling for a while, and Archie's latest overhauls had drained the very last of his resources.

Stupid, he thinks. Stupid naïve boy. Head in the clouds, pissing your money away without a care in the world.

But it can't have *all* gone on Archie, surely? He has a pen in one hand, and it feels like he should underline and circle and make cramped notes in the margins—follow the money, see if there's a leak, plug it—but he doesn't know where to *start*.

He drops the pen and takes off his glasses, folds and places them neatly to one side, pushes his fingers into his hair and tries not to panic.

[#]

Three hours later he's none the wiser, though the borderline hysteria has faded into a kind of numb detachment, so at least he can look at the letters properly without feeling like he's going to start hyperventilating. He stacks the papers into an orderly pile, weighs it down with his calculator and pushes it to the corner of the table for now. He's going to lose the brownstone. He's defaulted on five months' payment and the window of opportunity for sorting out that particular mess with the S&L has long since slammed shut. As far as they're concerned, he's ignored every one of their warnings.

With shaking hands, he makes a note to file for bankruptcy first thing tomorrow.

Waiting for a new pot of coffee to brew (he's lost count of how many cups he's had), he switches on the radio to catch the tail end of the news. There are heavy footfalls from the basement steps, easily heard over the tinny chatter; Rorschach making his presence known.

He takes a deep breath and thinks about how to explain his situation without bringing the full weight of his partner's disapproval crushing down on him. Rorschach isn't well off, he knows that much. Dan suspects he lives dangerously close to the breadline, but he never mentions it, never complains, gets by with thriftily mended clothes and the very occasional delve into Dan's kitchen cupboards.

Dan feels a little sick. He's well aware that their partnership was borne of mutual convenience rather than necessity, and he'd never thought of Rorschach as being dependent upon him for anything. The realization is unsettling.

The radio clicks off. Rorschach mutters something about the liberal bias of NPR by way of a greeting, helps himself to a mug of fresh coffee and sits at the table.

"Hey," says Dan. "I have some news."

Rorschach is already leafing through the papers, spreading them in an overlapping, cryptic arrangement. It's the same thing he does every couple of days with his right-wing rag and Dan's copy of the *Gazette*.

"It's um. It's not good," he continues.

"Foreclosure, Nite Owl?" Rorschach sounds almost incredulous. "Reneging on your obligations?"

"I—no! Uh. Yes. Technically. I didn't know." Dan slumps into the opposite chair. "God, I had no idea. I know it's not an excuse, but. I just. Oh Jesus, it's all such a mess."

"Ehn. Bad. Very bad, Daniel." One gloved fingertip is resting on a bill, pen hovering.

"I know that," Dan says defensively, sliding the paper away. "I'm doing my best to sort things out, okay?"

Rorschach carefully places the pen down on the table. "Wasn't a criticism. House will be repossessed, very bad situation."

Dan shuffles the papers back into a pile, sighing. "Yeah, it is. I spoke to Hollis already, he can store most of my gear at the yard. I'll be living out of Archie until I get a job and find a new place."

Rorschach grunts. Dan recognizes the tone. "What?" he asks, trying to decide which flaw in his plan Rorschach is going to pick at first.

"Refueled lately?"

Dan grimaces.

"It's January, Daniel. Will be very cold." Rorschach's fingers grasp the edge of the table, leather leaving grubby marks on the freshly-polished surface. "Besides, it would draw attention, Owlship always flying over the city. Or if you want to keep grounded, where? No, impractical. Can't live like that."

Dan takes off his glasses and drags a hand down his face, covers his mouth. "What am I going to *do*?" he says weakly. "God, Rorschach. What am I supposed to do?"

Rorschach has become very still, inkblots drifting slowly between different pseudo-expressions, all of them stern. The kitchen is quiet save for the clock ticking and the periodic gurgle of the coffee percolator. "Can show you how," he says finally.

Dan can usually follow the lateral thinking and occasional disconnect, but he's perplexed this time. "Huh?"

"How to survive," Rorschach clarifies. He stiffens, squaring his shoulders, inscrutable gaze fixed somewhere over Dan's right shoulder. "Can stay. At my place. If you like."

"Rorschach," Dan says, not even trying to hide his surprise, nor his sudden embarrassment at the realization that Rorschach may have thought he was angling for such an offer.

He can't deny that he's tempted, but he's under no illusions. Living in close proximity will drive him nuts in next to no time; he's familiar with many of Rorschach's awful habits (he's caught him putting unwashed cutlery back in the drawer enough times). And yet, here's an opportunity—presented by

the man himself, no less—to *know* things about him.

Probably more than Dan really *wants* to know, if he's honest with himself.

"I—thanks, man. But I couldn't impose."

"Have always been generous with your hospitality. Would like to return the favor." Rorschach seems agitated, words fired in clipped rounds, fingers tightening on the table edge.

Dan stares levelly at his partner. "You don't owe me, you know. You don't need to do this out of some sense of obligation. Besides, I don't want to intrude on your... civilian life, and it's, uh, always been pretty clear you don't particularly want me to, either."

Rorschach stands, chair scraping loudly across the tile. "Very little choice," he says. "For either of us. Get your things."

[#]

It's late evening, muddied and compacted snow frozen over into a lumpy, perilous gauntlet, dirty ice sparkling under the orange streetlights. Dan follows Rorschach through the jigsawed backstreets of the borough, keeping a discreet distance between them. He's uncomfortable enough wearing his costume beneath his everyday clothes (too bulky to pack) without the added risk of blowing his identity by association.

Finally, Rorschach pauses at the back of some run-down tenements, and gestures: up.

"How is this going to work?" Dan says, shoving his holdall onto the roof and clambering up from the fire escape. He's sweating despite the temperature; the layers of his uniform make for good insulation. Rorschach is crouched on the edge a few feet away, waiting for him. "Am I going to have to do this every—"

"Same number of steps on the inside," Rorschach says. "Landlady won't be pleased to find I have a long-term guest, would appreciate your discretion. In here." He swings down, feet finding purchase on the sill, and slips inside the half-open window.

"Long-term," Dan says defeatedly, following with twice the effort and half the elegance. He drags the holdall in after him, and drops it on the floor as Rorschach hits the light switch. The bare bulb flickers on, casting its feeble glow over the room.

Wow. Well. No wonder he spent most of his time in Dan's kitchen.

"Excuse the mess," Rorschach says, in a tone that suggests he expects Dan to do anything but. He shrugs out of his trench and hangs it on the back of the door. "Wasn't expecting company."

"I see," Dan says, carefully neutral.

The room smells musty, like it needs a good airing, but judging by the dark blossoms of damp on the ceiling and walls, that wouldn't do much good in the long term. The wallpaper is peeling off in some places and is entirely gone in others. There's a couple of different colors in evidence, old decor revealed in onion-skin layers, recounting a history of chintz. The floor is bare save for a rug, which on closer inspection turns out to be a fraying carpet remnant, any pattern long since obliterated.

There's something that Dan would be hard pushed to call a kitchenette in the far corner, just a cheap laminate worktop (stacked high with tinned goods and packets of ramen, both empty and unopened), a small sink with a cold-water faucet, a kettle, and a hot plate in a condition that contravenes any

number of health and safety regulations. Dan picks up a familiar mug from among the canned goods. It features a cartoon owl with 'hoot!' in a speech-bubble.

Rorschach has the good grace to seem abashed, and may have even been on the brink of a justification disguised as an apology, but he's interrupted by a vigorous thumping on the door.

"Kovacs," a female voice says, muffled. "I know you're in, I can hear you moving about."

Rorschach visibly starts, and the sudden movement makes Dan realize just how tightly wound he is.

"Rent is not due for another three days," Rorschach says in a raised voice, a strangled edge to it.

"Don't you forget about it!" A final thump for emphasis, and there's the sound of retreating footsteps.

Rorschach lifts his fedora and slides a hand over the back of his head, rumpling his mask. Dan thinks of the way he tugs his own fingers through his hair when he's embarrassed. He must be *mortified*.

"Uhm—" Dan begins, wondering if he should pretend that he hadn't just learned Rorschach's last name in a devastatingly anticlimactic fashion.

"This isn't going to work," Rorschach growls, before Dan can say anything. He tosses his hat onto the narrow cot and paces the short length of the room. "Logistically. Too risky to be in uniform here, even using window rather than door. Will inevitably be spotted." He halts next to Dan. "Ehn. Been here ten minutes and have already had my identity compromised."

"Shitty day, huh." Dan tries to sound adequately sympathetic.

The mask shifts in a series of diabolic patterns. Dan gets the distinct impression he's being glared at.

"Okay, okay. I'll speak to Hollis. See if I can beg his couch until this fiasco is sorted. I really don't want to be trouble."

Rorschach shakes his head. "That wasn't what I meant. Already know where I live. Surname. Can learn a lot from that."

Dan resists the urge to roll his eyes. "I'm not going to investigate you, Rorschach. I mean, it's not like you dug up all the information you could find about *me*, once I told you my name and where I lived —

Rorschach interrupts with a non-committal noise.

"—kidding. I figured that's exactly what you did." Dan grins at him. The hard feelings there have long dispersed. "So. What's the plan?"

Rorschach tugs the sleeves of his suit jacket over his shirt cuffs, an idle habit for anyone else but a stalling gesture from Rorschach if Dan's even seen one.

With sudden decisiveness, he reaches up to gather the fabric of his mask between his fingers, and pulls. Dan opens his mouth, means to say *wait*, or *what are you doing*, or *are you sure you want to do this*. Silences the small, unexpected voice that says, *let me do that for you*.

But he finds it impossible to articulate anything. Dan can only watch helplessly as Rorschach is flayed away by inches, revealing the man beneath.

[#]

His given name is Walter, and he's a sour-faced redhead with eyes like mud. He makes them coffee

in silence. It's instant, whitened with powdered milk because he doesn't have a refrigerator, and over-sweetened with sachets of sugar pilfered from various fast food joints.

"Thanks," Dan says, warming his hands on the mug. It's creeping towards eleven at night, and it is freezing. The elderly radiator is broken, and the window rattles in its rotten frame, letting frigid air and city noise seep in.

Rorschach—*Walter*, god, he's never going to get used to that—nods at him and sits opposite, cross-legged on the floor. Dan can't help but steal glances at his face. He never put much thought into what his partner must look like under that ever-changing latex (and he admits to himself with resignation: it's because he's already beyond fascinated with the mask). He'd seen his mouth and jawline enough times that he reckons he could have picked him out of a line up, but the unkempt ginger curls and the hollow, acne-scarred cheeks and the boyish freckles aren't features he'd ever had attributed to the Terror of the Underworld.

Rorschach scowls at him. He seems to only have two expressions: irritated, and carefully blank. Dan misses the inkblots already.

"Pay attention," he says, gesturing with a red sharpie at the arrayed paperwork. "Here, in August. What was this transaction for?"

"I still don't remember." Dan rubs at his eyes, knocking his glasses askew. "I've already waded through this crap for hours today without figuring anything out. Can we give it a rest until the morning?"

"It's Friday tomorrow," Rorschach says. At Dan's puzzled expression, he explains slowly, "I have to work."

"You hold down a day job?" God, no wonder he looks so ragged. To go out almost every night and do what they do, then pull a full working day? That takes dedication, real drive. Possibly an unhealthy obsession. Dan finds that he isn't as surprised as he sounds.

"Apartment doesn't pay for itself. Don't have the luxury that wealth affords," Rorschach says, with only a hint of vitriol. Dan can see he's taking his hosting duties seriously. Rorschach circles a figure in spreading red ink, trails a connecting line to an amount on a different bill.

"Yeah, well," Dan sighs. "Neither do I, not any more. Gonna get some sleep."

"Hnh." Rorschach continues his annotating without looking up. "Spare linen is under the bed. Hope floor is acceptable."

Dan's too tired and miserable to even care about brushing his teeth or washing, so he drags out a musty blanket (without taking too close a look at whatever else might be lurking under Rorschach's bed), and surreptitiously shakes out as much dust and other unidentifiable debris as he can. His holdall makes a impromptu pillow, and he falls asleep to the squeak of marker pen on paper.

[#]

He doesn't sleep well, drifting in and out all night. The room is dimly lit the first couple of times he wakes up. Rorschach has moved from the floor to the table and is still poring over his paperwork. Dan feels a pang of guilt at leaving him to sort out his mess, and it manifests as convoluted, unsettling dreams when sleep takes him again.

At some point, Rorschach is crouched next to him in the dark, watching. That's inexplicable enough to be a dream, too.

The light is out the next time he wakes, and his toes are painfully numb. He tucks the blanket around his feet and tries to get back to sleep, but the floor is making his hip and shoulder ache so he rolls himself into a position that's marginally more comfortable, and listens to the clamor of the streets. It's so loud here, every tire squeal and raised voice and rumbling bassline demands his attention.

Rorschach lives in the heart of it all, Dan realizes. Breathes it every moment, is neck-deep in it, never detached from the squalid reality. Part of it. Not cloistered away in a comfortable townhouse, cosseted by wealth.

He can see the shadowy form of his partner curled on the bed, the steady rise and fall of his outline as he sleeps. Dan finds a new thread of understanding, feels it wind tightly around his heart.

[#]

The early morning is shrouded in winter's dark cloak, dawn still hours away. The building is mostly quiet—only the occasional thump or slam or squalling infant—the majority of its occupants probably rise with the sun. Rorschach, though, seems to run on his own internal clock. Despite setting no alarm, he is already up.

Dan can *hear* him. Heavy, short breaths, accompanied by a rhythmic creaking.

Oh, god help me, he thinks, and squints one eye open.

Rorschach is doing a set of push-ups, floorboards complaining as lean, muscled arms exert force against them. Dan watches for a couple of seconds longer than he can feasibly explain, then sits up and fumbles for his glasses.

"Good morning," Rorschach rasps, voice rusty from sleep. He's barefoot, wearing a pair of gray slacks and an undershirt. Something nags at Dan, and it takes him a moment to put his finger on it: the suit jacket and trench must make him look broader across the shoulders, and the fedora adds a little more to his height. He's actually a pretty small guy, for all his presence. He turns the thought over like a curiosity, something peculiar and fascinating.

Rorschach flows to his feet with practiced ease, bends over to paw through a pile of laundry at the end of the bed. The muscles of his back flex beneath the undershirt as he extracts an odd pair of socks and a rumpled green shirt.

Dan makes an indistinct noise that can hopefully be interpreted as a complaint about the ungodly hour, and limps stiffly towards what he should be the bathroom door. Rorschach doesn't try to stop him, so he guesses he figured right. His limbs are aching and he could do with a shower.

It's pitch dark and the pull-cord light switch doesn't illuminate things for him, but the buzzing fluorescent tube over the mirror works well enough. He kind of wishes it didn't; the mildew propagating between the tiles is probably entitled to voting rights. He squints at himself in the fractured mirror, rubbing at the textured imprint the holdall has left on his cheek.

He regards the toilet lid with some trepidation, and after lifting it a couple of inches he loses his nerve and decides to take a shower first. He strips and steps into the yellowing tub (careful not to touch the slimy-looking shower curtain), and turns on the faucet.

He yells—*shrieks*—when he's doused with a jet of icy water, stumbling out of the bath to shiver and drip onto the floor. Yeah, that was just what he needed. Swearing to himself, he towels off as best he can with his own shirt and pulls yesterday's pants back on, the fabric clinging uncomfortably to his damp skin. He shuffles back through to the living area, teeth chattering.

"Have to be up earlier if you want hot water," Rorschach says, eyeing Dan as he pulls a fresh shirt out of his bag.

"Thanks for that," Dan grumbles. *Asshole*. "Good morning to you, too."

"Will be back by quarter of six," Rorschach says. "Might want to take a look at that, in the meantime." He nods in the direction of Dan's paperwork, stacked on the table.

Dan smiles grimly. "Thanks. I will. Enjoy your day."

"Funny," Rorschach says, closing the door behind him.

[#]

Dan spends most of the morning standing on line at the bank, only to find he doesn't have the right bits of paperwork with him and that he filled in at least one of the myriad forms incorrectly, despite checking and double-checking. The perfectly-coiffed girl behind the desk is cheerful and polite as she explains where he went wrong, but she can't seem to maintain eye contact. He's acutely aware of his unironed clothes and the stubble on his jaw, and every time her smile falters, Dan's spirits sink a little lower.

He stops by at Hollis' at lunchtime, intending to thank him in person for taking care of the more incriminating items in his basement. Hollis ushers him in off his doorstep and sits him in the chair near the fire, and brooks no argument as he plies Dan with sandwiches and cola.

"I just feel like such an idiot," Dan says, finishing the last of his drink.

"So you should," Hollis says sternly, refusing to indulge his self pity. "It's not all about beating the bad guys, son. You gotta keep track of these things, too."

"I know," Dan mumbles, scritching Phantom behind one ear and sneaking him a bread crust. "I can't thank you enough for helping me out, Hollis."

"Hey, think nothing of it. You need a place to stay for a few days?"

"I uh—that's okay, a friend came through for me." Dan grimaces. *Jesus, why the hell am I blushing? Get a grip, Dreiberg.*

"Oh, really?" Hollis grins knowingly. "Do tell!"

"Oh god. No, it's nothing like that," Dan says, aghast. "It's—I'm staying with Rorschach."

"Rorschach? Your partner, Rorschach? Mister He-never-tells-me-anything-about-himself? *That* Rorschach?" His expression battles between stunned and disbelieving. "No, you're pulling my leg. Really? How d'ya swing that one, Danny boy? I'm intrigued."

The fire crackles companionably. Dan closes his eyes and leans closer, letting it warm his face until his skin starts to prickle and redden. He shrugs slightly, trying for nonchalance. "He offered."

"Well, ain't that something." Hollis shakes his head, then stoops to collect up the dishes. His voice echoes through from the kitchen. "Been a strange couple days, huh?"

Dan pulls a face. "You have no idea."

"Here," Hollis says as Dan pulls his coat back on, preparing to leave. He pushes a couple of bottles of beer into his hands. "Take these. You look like you could use 'em."

[#]

There's a 'help wanted' sign in the window of the Gunga on the corner of 40th and 7th. Dan reads it over twice, knowing fine well he should go inside and ask about it, but his stomach flips at the thought. Tomorrow, he tells himself. When he's had more sleep, a shave, and hopefully a shower that's not sub-zero in temperature, and yeah, possibly when he isn't secreting alcohol about his person like a bum.

He walks away from the restaurant so he doesn't have to stare himself down in the window's reflection. *Coward*, he thinks. *What are you afraid of?*

He wishes he knew. It's a nebulous apprehension; not easily explained, but not easily ignored, either. Change, he guesses. Finality. Acceptance that his life will be different now.

He stops by the brownstone to pick up the morning's mail. There's a letter from the bailiff on his doormat, among fliers for fast food and a couple of polythene-wrapped magazines, beaded with moisture. He turns the envelope over in his hands a few times, then stuffs it in his back pocket without opening it.

His house is too quiet, like he's been gone for months and not just overnight. He almost feels like an intruder, breaking the tenuous stillness with his rummaging. He digs out his sleeping bag from the back of the linen closet, and gathers whatever he can carry out of his kitchen cupboards. After a moment's consideration, he adds to the pile a pair of rubber gloves, and a bottle of the most potent cleaner he can find.

Dan stands in the doorway for a moment on his way out, late afternoon sun throwing long, golden shapes over his hallway floor, and tries to imagine never coming back.

[#]

It's getting dark again by the time Dan reaches the tenement building, but he still feels conspicuous scaling the fire escape in the half-light—more so than if he had been dressed as a giant owl. He can't quite manage to appreciate the irony, hanging from the rooftop by his fingers.

He shimmies into the window with a bit more grace this time, and drops an exaggerated bow to the empty room. "Thank you, I'll be here all week," he says to nobody in particular. "Oh, god."

He slings his sleeping roll down next to the cot, stacks the food he brought next to the pile already on the worktop.

Dan pulls the letter from his back pocket and smooths it out on the table. It sits there menacingly, corners bent. Sighing, he pulls up the creaking chair, and makes an effort to be an organized and responsible adult. He cannot continue this pattern of avoidance, especially after Rorschach was up half the night doing this *for* him, like a parent doing his kid's homework at the last minute.

A flush of shame heats his cheeks, but he still can't bring himself to open the letter.

It takes a little while—it's difficult to concentrate with the noise in the building, all the loud music and shouted conversation—but he figures out Rorschach's marks without too much trouble. He's highlighted everything that can't be accounted for in the utility letters and bills and the fistful of receipts Dan brought with him. He marks some smaller, round figures that were probably ATM withdrawals, and the irregular figures that were holiday gifts, or groceries and similar sundries.

Most of the larger sums are aviation fuel for Archie, and there's a series of transactions that Dan knows are for particular mechanical parts and electronics, used to upgrade the engine and console.

The rest, though: regular, sizeable figures, four or five times a month, transferred to an unknown source? He has no definite idea of what they are, but he has an increasingly strong suspicion that he half-hopes is correct. With the right information, it's something Nite Owl might be able to do something about.

A key scrapes into the lock, rattles violently, and the door opens under the impact of Rorschach's shoulder. He kicks it shut behind him.

"Hi, honey. How was your day?" Dan prays that his delivery is as deadpan as he thinks.

Rorschach fixes Dan with a look so filthy it makes him squirm (and his pulse pick up). He *really* misses the inkblots. At least they would let him pretend that expression could be casual indifference. Everything is so stark and raw now, truth laid open to the bone, and Dan's not so sure he's comfortable with that.

"Same as every day," Rorschach growls. "Shiftless clock-watchers taking every opportunity to shirk their duties, idling away hours at a time, prattling about trivialities. No respect for an honest day's work. Laughter is like nails down chalkboard, sets my teeth on edge. Feels like chewing grit for eight hours."

"Huh," Dan says. "Well, I did ask. Feel better for getting that out?"

"No."

Of course not. Dan taps his pen on the tabletop, letting the impact slide it through his fingertips.

"What do you do, anyway?"

Rorschach hesitates for a moment, then deftly twists the pen from between Dan's fingers before it hits the table again. "Stop that," he mutters. "Enough noise, without you."

Dan knows a pointedly unsubtle change of subject when he sees one. His curiosity flares brightly in response, but Rorschach is clearly not in a forthcoming mood. Well, even less so than usual.

"I was just thinking," he says instead, hand flattened over a stack of bank statements. "What do you know about fraud?"

[#]

Not a lot, as it transpires. Their work has always been with the less subtle, more immediately violent sector of the criminal fraternity. Rorschach says he knows some people who do, though. And by 'knows', Dan takes him to mean 'has beaten the shit out of, probably on several occasions'.

Rorschach has stashed Dan's costume alongside his own in a nondescript box, half-covered by garbage bags and sodden newspaper in a corner of a dead-end alley. Dan's not sure he could find the same spot again if he tried. The route is convoluted, snaking. It's not because he is distracted by the novelty of walking the streets shoulder-to-shoulder with Walter, neon and shadow saturating his unforgiving features.

He moves the same, even without the mask. Same purposeful stride, same tilt of the head that always spoke of sharp eyes, glittering and watchful. Those eyes may have proven to be flat and emotionless, but they're no less perceptive.

Dan realizes he's been distracted a lot, lately.

"You could've always come to the Owl's Nest to change, you know," he says, cringing as his bare

foot slides in something viscous and gritty. He leans against the alley wall to pull his other boot on. "It'd be a bit less—uh."

There's a dismissive sound from behind the dumpster sitting adjacent. "Academic, now." Rorschach emerges, adjusting his scarf with the soft creak of glove leather, suddenly larger than life.

"You ever been caught?" Dan asks, encompassing the alleyway with a tilt of his head. He fidgets with his cowl. The edge rolled against his face when he pulled it on, and his attempts to straighten it have been futile so far. He could use a mirror or at least some kind of vaguely reflective surface to sort the stupid thing out.

"Once," Rorschach grunts. He hesitates a moment, and Dan's next question dies in his throat as gloved fingers slip across his cheek to fix his cowl for him. "Don't want to talk about it. There."

Dan blinks, astonishment masked by his goggles. "Right. Thanks, buddy."

Despite their years working together, despite placing his life in Nite Owl's hands on a nightly basis, Rorschach would not have done that even a week ago. Would have balked at the very idea.

Strange couple of days, and getting stranger by the hour. Boundaries shifting and walls crumbling to reshape the familiar architecture of Dan's life.

He shakes his head, takes after the retreating form of his partner before the city envelops him.

[#]

"I can't think like this, man!" The kid is wailing, his back arched painfully over a bar stool, dreadlocked hair brushing the beer-soused carpet below. Rorschach has him pinned like a bug, hand pressed almost casually to his stomach, fingers digging into the soft flesh under his ribcage and skewing the circuit-board print on his t-shirt. One booted foot holds the stool steady as the punk desperately flails for purchase (that isn't a canvas trench coat) to haul himself upright with.

"Don't need to think, just tell us what you know," Rorschach growls, leaning heavily until the punk ceases his squirming and wheezes pitifully instead.

Nite Owl crouches next to the kid. His face is turning purple-red and spittle drools from his lips, slips down in a glistening string to bead in his hair. The other bar patrons shift uncomfortably in his peripheral vision. He ignores them. Nobody ever wants to interfere when they're at work, even when that happens to be something objectionable like two grown men roughing up a teenager. This is Rorschach's New York.

"Best do as he asks, son," Nite Owl says amiably, every bit the concerned good cop. "Because it's hard to snatch credit cards when your fingers are broken."

"Heh, you think this is some two-bit pickpocketing racket?" The kid strains out a thin laugh. "Oh man, you really have no fucking idea."

Rorschach yanks him up so they're face to face, stretching the fabric of his shirt as the kid recoils. "Enlighten us."

[#]

"Little information to give, just a runner with delusions of grandeur." Rorschach paces another length of the room as he turns the facts over out loud. He's positively animated, face bright and sharpened as he begins a stream-of-consciousness analysis. "Didn't know any names. Rendezvous points of

minimal significance. Different every time, won't correlate to base of operations. Hehn. Kid didn't even know what he was carrying."

"He said it was heavy," Dan says, leaning with one shoulder against the wall, arms folded. "That doesn't sound like credit cards. Besides, mine isn't missing. They're obviously doing this some other way."

Rorschach grunts in agreement. "Question is, how."

"And to how many other people," Dan says. "I might have been targeted because of my name. My —my father was pretty well-known in finance. Or it could have been random and the gang just hit paydirt. Either way, the kid seemed sure this wasn't a small deal."

"Hrm," Rorschach presses his fingers to his chin. "Will meet with my police contact tomorrow, check for any reports of similar theft. Think you can get any useful information from the bank?"

"Uh," Dan rakes his fingers through his hair, recalling his uncomfortable encounter that morning. "Not as Dan Dreiberg. I'm hardly their favorite person at the moment."

Rorschach nods, presses his lips together into something that might pass as a sympathetic expression somewhere.

"Aha, no," Dan jabs a finger in his direction. "You don't get to look at me like that, not *now*. Too late, buddy. We're onto something."

Rorschach snorts. "Early days yet, Daniel. Your situation could be unrelated."

"Are you telling me to get a job?"

"Just a suggestion."

[#]

Dan is awakened unceremoniously by a sharp nudge to his ribs. Rorschach is looming over him like a harbinger of doom, cast into shadow and haloed by the dim bulb behind him. It's dark outside (it always seems to be night here), and the tenements hold that pervasive silence, the way buildings do in the early hours.

He means to say, "It's Saturday morning, let me sleep," but it comes out more like "hrrnk". Great, not only is he starting to smell like him, now he's making noises like him too. He pulls his sleeping bag up to his nose.

Another prod, harder this time. Something is dropped onto his body, slides off onto the floor beside him with two gentle thumps. "Alright," he sighs, voice muffled under quilted layers. "What."

"Get up," Rorschach says. Nudge. "Come for a run." Nudge.

Dan sits up, presses each eye in turn with the heel of his hand, then retrieves his glasses from atop the sad bundle of yesterday's clothes. "Okay, okay. Jesus." His sneakers are lying where they were dropped, laces draped limply over the floor. "Do you always go running at stupid o'clock? Should I just give up hope of getting some decent sleep for the foreseeable future?"

"Had adequate rest. Too much fosters wickedness." The rebuke rolls off his tongue like something rote-learned. "Makes you complacent and slow. Get up."

Dan adds 'sleeping in' to his mental list of Things Rorschach Finds Morally Reprehensible, between 'skateboarding' and 'soap'.

Speaking of reprehension, he recalls the beers stashed in his coat pocket with a jolt and resolves to move the bottles before they are discovered. Rorschach knows he drinks; tolerates it when it's in Dan's own kitchen with only a cursory grunt of disapproval, but Dan suspects that bringing it into his home would be an entirely different matter.

He pulls on some sweats and the sneakers, struggles with the laces, distracted.

Rorschach frowns impatiently. "Might still be hot water when we get back, if you hurry. Here. Breakfast."

That's as much incentive as Dan needs. He takes the stale slice of bread Rorschach proffers, holds it in his mouth as they descend the fire escape, eats it slowly as he watches him warm up.

[#]

The streets are treacherous underfoot, churned-up slush frozen in the gutters. A veneer of crunchy frost coats the pavement, glinting with deceptive beauty under the orange streetlights. It's bone-achingly cold and the city hibernates, the baseline hum of its slowly-waking denizens gathering intensity as the night sky crawls toward dawn.

Rorschach is jogging a few paces ahead of Dan, his hair a beacon against gloomy brickwork and tenebrous, mirror-dark windows. He's agile and sure-footed, setting a relentless pace as if the sidewalk isn't ice-rimed and precarious, stance subtly shifting to maintain his balance with each rhythmic footfall. His breath billows out in a ghostly fog, mingles with Dan's as he passes through the same space moments later.

They draw up several blocks on, in front of a newsstand. The chill air burns in Dan's lungs, making him cough and cough and brace his hands on his thighs.

The vendor greets them with a "morning, boys". He has coffee in a paper cup. It smells divine, and Dan is struck with an intense craving for something roasted and fresh, anything but the bland instant stuff that is only good for caffeine-delivery. He sighs.

Rorschach strips off one of his gloves (woolen, not the familiar purple leather) and produces a warm coin from the palm of his hand; he wordlessly trades it for an edition of the *New Frontiersman*. Dan reaches for a *Gazette* and Rorschach catches his wrist, drops his hand back to his side, shaking his head. "Can find a copy elsewhere. Subway car, park bench. Library. Save your money."

The vendor narrows his eyes.

"Hey," Dan pulls his mouth into an unimpressed line. "You just bought—"

"Is not disposable like other publications. Not willingly discarded." He tugs his glove back on. "Hard to get as a consequence."

"I think you'll find that's because nobody else buys it," Dan retorts.

"Not true," Rorschach says, nodding to an older gentleman who has arrived at the newsstand. He's solidly built, his shoulders straining the seams of his winter coat, and he sports some remarkable facial hair. He nods back solemnly as he buys himself a copy of the paper in question.

Rorschach saves Dan the embarrassment of an apology by taking off back down the avenue, paper

tucked firmly under his arm. Dan shoots the vendor a rueful smile, and follows.

The sky is transitioning through shades of gray as they return, with a wash of yellow on the horizon that promises a low, fierce sun.

The shower is lukewarm at best, but it's good on Dan's sweaty, cold body. The endorphin rush is slowly ebbing away and he's feeling pretty zen; even the moldy shower curtain isn't bothering him much. Rorschach's insistence on a morning run might have irritated him at the time, but he recognizes the gesture now. Rorschach is including him in his life, in his own peculiar way. The thought kindles a feeling that he can't quite pin down.

He washes quickly, leaving enough warm water for his partner.

[#]

"Shit," Dan mutters, calm dissipating in an instant. He upends his holdall over the cot, shakes it. "I thought I packed my razor."

Rorschach pulls on a shirt, dark blossoms diffusing through the fabric where it touches showered skin. He watches Dan impassively as he roots through his stuff with increasing frustration.

"I was going to—the Gunga has a position available. I was going to go down there today." He rubs at his cheek, bristles rasping under his fingertips. "I can't go looking like this."

Rorschach grunts, disappears into the bathroom again.

Dan grumbles to himself; he can't afford to just go buy one, and he doesn't want to go back to the brownstone. If he can hold off the bailiffs long enough by simply not being present to sign a possession order—

Something shining and metal hovers in his peripheral vision, glinting dangerously. He registers *weapon* and his reflexes kick in before he can process the situation rationally. He spins to grab Rorschach's wrist and yank it up, twisting the straight-razor from his hand. Wide-eyed astonishment sharpens into something instinctual and Rorschach counters with an equally spontaneous elbow to Dan's shoulder. The pair of them stagger apart, hearts racing with the sudden flush of adrenaline.

"Jesus, Rorschach," Dan says, exhaling shakily. "Sorry, I—"

"My fault," Rorschach says gruffly, bending to pick up the razor and the ragged hand-towel that had been lost in their skirmish. There are bright spots of color high on his cheeks, and his ears are pink. "Should have realized. Good reflexes."

That sounded dangerously close to an apology. Dan gapes, fumbles his words trying to attribute blame to himself then falls silent as Rorschach offers him the straight-razor again, handle first. Dan takes it slowly, turns it over in his hands. "Thank you, but... I don't know how to use one of these," he says. "I'd end up slitting my own throat."

He really, really wishes he hadn't seen the muscle under Rorschach's left eye twitch.

"Sit down," Rorschach says in a tone that's so close to long-suffering that it makes Dan grin.

He keeps grinning as Rorschach sharpens the blade with the ball of his thumb, and as he draws a mug of water from the kitchenette faucet. His cheeks start to hurt when he advances on Dan with a lathered shaving brush.

"Stop that," Rorschach says flatly. "Relax."

Rich, coming from a guy who's about as relaxed as a coiled rattlesnake, and only half as pleasant. The smile drops off Dan's face.

He barely flinches when the cool metal touches his cheek. He would congratulate himself on his own bravery if he wasn't so distracted by Rorschach's fingers holding his chin, thumb pressed beneath his lower lip as the blade scrapes his skin. His eyes are turned down, focused intently under pale lashes.

Oh shit, Dan thinks, and lets his own eyes fall shut. He can feel the man's breath on his face, on sensitized, freshly-shaven skin, and adrenaline is still pulsing through his system, making his palms sweat and *oh shit* he actually smells *clean* just soap and—

The blade skates down his neck in a final, sensuous sweep and there's no way Rorschach can have missed his hammering pulse. Dan thinks he's going to do something very stupid in a moment if he can't, if he doesn't—

The blade vanishes, replaced by calloused fingertips tracing his jawline. *Just checking the shave*, Dan thinks as he leans forward and kisses him. *Shit*.

Chapter 2

It's barely even a kiss, just a rough brush of his lips at the corner of Rorschach's mouth, but the intent is there and that's just as destructive. The straight-razor clatters to the table, dropped by a suddenly trembling hand, and Dan reaches out automatically to steady him.

Rorschach jolts away, hand raised to fend him off or as if he's about to take a swing, and the look on his face—

"Don't touch me," he spits, and the look on his *face*—

He takes another step back and then draws himself up, the way he does when they're about to face ridiculous odds. Shoulders squared, hands fisted, chin raised defiantly. The disappointment and betrayal and *horror* drop away and his abrupt lack of expression is as much a mask as the black and white.

Dan opens his mouth to say something—*anything, god, just stop staring at him like he's edible*—but Rorschach turns to yank the door open violently, and closes it behind him in much the same fashion.

Profanity from the apartment next door, something about the noise. There's thumping on the adjoining wall.

"Fuck." Dan says out loud, weakly scrubbing his hands down his face. *Way to complicate things, asshole. You know he's not right in the head about that kind of thing.*

But that look on his face, battling with the disgust and the fear—

Yeah, way to complicate things. He briefly considers giving chase, but he's lucky to have thus far avoided serious injury and doesn't want to tempt fate. Besides, he at least knows that a showdown in the middle of the street in broad daylight is categorically *not* the way to deal with this mess.

He sifts through the assorted foodstuffs on the kitchenette counter, unwraps a packet of ramen and crunches his way through the raw brick, because he doesn't know whatever trick gets the hot plate to stay on long enough for the kettle to boil. The roof of his mouth is tender by the time he's done with it, but he feels less shaky with something in his stomach. He decides to stick to the day's plan, Operation: Get a Job.

His coat clanks as he pulls it on. Those goddamn beers. Dan fishes them out of his pocket, taps them together lightly as he thinks.

He stashes them on the roof in the end, tucked against a vent. They're wrapped in newspaper—with a pettiness he's only slightly ashamed of, he's used the middle few pages of the unread *New Frontiersman*—and from a distance they look like so much trash.

They'll be plenty cold by the time I get to drink them, he thinks, with a strange sort of optimism.

[#]

"So, Mister Dreiberg. Danny—can I call you Danny?"

"Um. I prefer Dan..."

"Okay. Have you worked as waitstaff before, Danny?"

"Dan. I haven't waited before, no."

"But you have some experience in the service industry, yeah?"

"I'm afraid not, no. I er—don't."

"Do you have *any* relevant experience?"

"I don't. Sorry."

A pause.

"Are you a junkie?"

"Am I—I'm sorry, what?"

"Do you take recreational drugs, Danny. Are you a katiehead?"

"No! Jesus, no way."

"Great! When can you start?"

[#]

He heads back to the tenements again, a rather grubby uniform tucked under one arm and unable to shake a faint sense of humiliation. He subconsciously searches faces of passers-by as he walks, striving to catch a glimpse of fiery red among the bland, featureless mass of his fellow pedestrians.

His shoulder is beginning to ache, and hauling himself in through the window makes him grit his teeth.

Unsurprisingly, Rorschach hasn't returned. The newspaper and straight-razor and fragments of ramen are all undisturbed. A squirming coil of guilt snakes around in Dan's stomach. He desperately hopes he hasn't driven Rorschach away indefinitely. The more he thinks about it, the more it seems likely that he could be gone for days. Weeks. Or even—

God, don't even think that.

He idles away the rest of the afternoon, moving restlessly about the apartment. The bathroom is almost presentable after being subjected to the wrath of his scrubbing brush, though Dan doubts he could ever truly call it clean. The shower curtain certainly isn't salvageable.

Bored, he tries his work clothes on. The shirt is unironed, too tight across the shoulders, and the cuffs are curry-stained, but he is quite taken with the black clip-on bow tie. It reminds him of when he used to attend the occasional formal event, back when he had more time to write and people paid attention to him.

His name tag says *Hi! I'm Danny*, with the name scrawled in indelible marker. He grimaces.

Someone is playing an electric guitar somewhere in the building. It's horribly out of tune or maybe missing a string entirely, and Dan's not even a Hendrix fan but he can't stand to listen to *Purple Haze* being butchered so mercilessly. The screaming argument across the hallway is an almost welcome distraction.

Finally, it's dark enough to hit the streets.

His costume is waiting for him, though Rorschach's is gone. He feels some measure of relief at that. He's out there and Nite Owl will be able to find him, and perhaps they will be able to sort things out with the masks safely between them. He suits up quickly, acutely conscious of how vulnerable he is, semi-naked in the alleyway without Rorschach as his second pair of eyes. No backup.

He interrupts something unsavory on West 39th. Assault, or attempted rape perhaps; all he knows is the woman is screaming and he's hitting the guy harder than he usually would. He drags his unconscious body over to a spark hydrant, ropes him to it.

The woman is shaking, and Nite Owl cups her shoulder reassuringly as he radios in, maintains eye contact even though he's wearing the goggles. She's looking right back at him, red, wet eyes and shock-pale skin and she could be anyone—they could always be *anyone*—but tonight Dan thinks *she could be my neighbor*.

His hands clench into fists, and he feels suddenly, disconnectedly vengeful.

"Can you get yourself home?" he asks. She holds his gaze a moment longer, then looks down, to the left. She nods. The motion spills more light over her face, and Dan finally sees it as she turns to leave: the swollen nose, dark bruises covered by make up, smeared with tears (screaming over Hendrix).

"Wait," he says, voice tight in his throat. How many times has he mistaken a silent, desperate plea like this for gratitude? "I can take you somewhere safe."

He escorts her to a shelter he knows, helps explain things to the volunteer out front. A familiar silhouette catches his attention as he leaves, and he feels himself shiver and break out in gooseflesh under his armor. His mouth is suddenly dry.

"Rorschach," he says, greeting him in carefully neutral tones.

"Nite Owl." Not angry, not apologetic. Flat. Just Rorschach. He tilts his head towards an adjoining alleyway, starts walking. Dan follows him into the slanting shadows.

[#]

They patrol a few blocks into Midtown East. Things are quiet, only a pair of drunken fratboys giving them trouble, following them around and loudly announcing their presence for the benefit of any criminals in the vicinity. Rorschach halts abruptly and turns to face them when their slurred taunts become crudely sexual; it's almost funny but mostly just pathetic to watch them stumbling over themselves as they scramble to get away.

They turn into yet another trash-strewn alley to scale a rusted fire escape, winter night buffeting them with diagonal sleet. Rorschach hunkers down on the edge of the roof like an oversize gargoyle, one hand holding his fedora in place as he surveys the streets below.

He crooks a finger, and Dan crouches next to him, hesitant. For all his rhetoric, Rorschach is a man who operates in degrees of silence, and the quiet between them is currently wound tight and creaking under the tension. Dan doesn't know what to do with all the words he has.

Rorschach tugs his journal from the inside pocket of his trench. "Have some information," he says, straightforward and businesslike. Distant. "Evidence of heightened fraudulent activity, majority of victims hold accounts with Bank of New York."

Dan watches the flex of Rorschach's gloved fingers as he unconsciously rubs along the spine of his journal. He's uncomfortable, edgy. More so than usual. Dan subtly shifts his weight to lean away

from him, gives him a couple more inches to breathe in. "That's who I bank with."

"Was a heist. Last year."

"What?" Dan pulls up his goggles, frowns. "I don't remember any—how did we not know that?"

"Kept quiet. Very quiet. Safes and deposit boxes weren't touched. Thieves stole equipment. Computers." Rorschach flicks open his journal, shakes out a piece of folded paper and catches it before the wind can tear it away. "Data."

That explains a lot. Dan exhales noisily between pursed lips. "Yeah, they'd want to keep *that* quiet. Christ." He steals a glance at his partner. Rorschach is intent on the street below. Dan can't tell if he's actively watching for something, or just trying to avoid looking at him. "So, the runner was probably carrying hard drives." Dan taps gauntleted fingers on his thigh, staccatoing against the Kevlar. "Selling them?"

"No. Don't think so." He tilts his head towards Dan at last, unreadable patterns spreading across his face in slow succession as he tucks his journal away. "Data would be encrypted, no market for that. Risky investment."

Dan nods and straightens to his feet, brisk wind snapping his cape around him. "So, we're looking for someone with a particular skill-set. Cryptographers, hackers?"

"Ehn." Rorschach stands, holds the paper out between finger and thumb. "Have narrowed down some suspects."

Dan takes the note carefully—*don't brush fingers, don't linger, just take the goddamn list*—scans it for familiar names, then tucks it into a pouch. "Alright," he says, daring a grin as he pulls his goggles back into place. "Let's go ruffle some feathers."

They slink over the rooftops, figures silhouetted against a yellow-dark sky that is spread with pollution, choking out the stars. Rorschach idles in the alley below, waiting for him as he descends the fire escape. He skips the last couple of steps, hopping down to the sidewalk with a flourish. That usually elicits some dry remark about showboating, but not tonight. Any relief Dan might have felt at Rorschach's willingness to continue their professional relationship is cracking under his cool indifference to their personal one. *But hasn't it always been that way? Are you just reading him differently?*

"Hey," he says, sucking it up. They have to have this conversation eventually, perceived cold-shoulder or no. Better to get it over with, like ripping off a band-aid. Or setting a broken bone. "About this morning—"

"Save your breath, Nite Owl." Abrupt, but distant, still. There's no heat there, and it's not like him to pass up a perfectly good chance to be button-poppingly vitriolic. "Don't want your apologies any more than I want—" A swift spread of ink bleeding out into nothing, and finally a hint of color to that monotone. "Don't want to be—"

He breaks off, tilts his head back and rolls his shoulders under the trench. Dan hears him suck in a breath through the mask, and it's that tremulous sound that worries him most of all.

He turns *don't want to be* around, holding it up in the context of their situation and trying to see where it fits, but it's just slightly the wrong shape. He is too tired for obliqueness this evening. "Are we gonna be okay?" he asks bluntly. He's struggling, now. He needs a solid answer, a touchstone.

Rorschach regards him for a long moment, blots spreading like bruises. "I don't know," he says,

tipping his head. The brim of his fedora casts a long shadow over his mask, and he turns away to stride down the alley.

Dan releases the breath caught in his chest, waits for his stomach to stop lurching. Finds himself wishing for the face that lies beneath the mask, to be able to read the faintest flicker of an expression, no matter how raw.

[#]

Dan is in a pessimistic frame of mind, and the rest of the night is an exercise in frustration. Their favorite suspect is two years into a life sentence. The next name they chase all over lower Manhattan, strung along by Ghost Shadow gang members until a thug in a Chinatown dive finally spills that their quarry is missing, presumed buried in a shallow grave.

Rorschach leads off again, and Dan huffs out a frustrated noise. He kicks a firecracker husk into the gutter to soak and clog the drains along with daffodil petals and peach blossom, all sodden and discolored by the gritty slush.

He's had enough tonight. Everything has felt so fruitless. His face and fingers are aching with the cold, and his *feet* hurt because he's always been so dependent on Archie to get them from neighborhood to neighborhood when they needed it. This whole charade would have taken a fraction of the time if they hadn't had to walk the beat. Time wasted. He swears under his breath.

"Call it a night," Rorschach says, watching him from several feet away.

"Yeah," Dan replies. He shifts uncomfortably, still unsure of where he stands, or if they'll even be able to handle being in the same room together, maskless. "Uh, listen. If you want me to go, I—you just gotta say the word, okay."

Dan reads consternation in Rorschach's stance for a brief moment, before he half-turns away from him. "Would not wish to make life more difficult for you."

Dan pulls his mouth into a humorless smile. *Hi there, Walter. Passive-aggressive much?*

[#]

He's back in Rorschach's apartment, which is made incrementally shabbier by its occupant's presence. Dan is honestly surprised to find him leaning against the kitchenette counter. He'd lost him somewhere in the cast-iron shadows of SoHo, and when he came to change out of his costume, had found Walter's clothes languishing in their back-alley box.

It seems that Rorschach's way of dealing with being in close proximity to Dan is simple: the mask doesn't come off.

He doesn't like it. That much is evident in the set of his shoulders and the tautness of his whipcord frame, in the arms crossed firmly over his chest. He's wound even tighter than he was the first time he brought Dan here. It suddenly seems a lot longer than two days ago.

"Hi," Dan ventures, pulling the window shut behind him. He shrugs out of his overcoat and hangs it on the back of the door, next to Rorschach's trench. The man dips his chin in acknowledgment and nothing more.

Dan kind of wants a cup of coffee, but Rorschach is standing in front of the kettle. The way things are torqued, he'd sooner ask for a punch in the throat than ask him to move.

"Oh, by the way," he says instead. Conversationally, like everything is perfectly fucking normal between them. Like they're normal fucking people. "I got a job."

Rorschach cocks his head at that, ink flowing in a slow cascade down his face. "Noticed Gunga uniform. Fortieth and Seventh?"

"Yeah."

"Hrn. Good." He turns away from Dan to tinker with the hot plate (hold the switch halfway down for four seconds, then click it home). "Can watch my mail-drop."

Dan stares at his back for a moment, incredulous. "Are you serious? Watch your own goddamn mail-drop." And maybe that's a little harsh, but there's something unpleasantly acidic oozing out from beneath the apprehension and uncertainty Dan has labored under all night. He has to make an effort to not raise his voice, but he's hitting a higher pitch than usual and that just embarrasses and frustrates him. "I won't have the time nor the *inclination* to go dumpster diving for you. I'll be *working*."

"Trashcan. Not a dumpster," Rorschach says petulantly, as if it's an important distinction. "Was just being practical."

The kettle finishes boiling, whistling loudly in the tense silence between them. Steam condenses on the wallpaper, a slick shine on the curl-edged vinyl, and when Rorschach turns with a mug grasped in one hand, it's darkened his mask almost entirely. Dan can pick out the topography of his features as the white latex reasserts itself through cooling ink. He looks predictably sullen.

Dan takes off his glasses to pinch the bridge of his nose, counts to five because he doesn't think he can make it to ten. "Okay, whatever. I start tomorrow. Late shift. I probably won't patrol afterward." At least Rorschach knows better than to make disagreeable noises at that, even if reproval is writ plain on his mask. Oh yes, Dan knows that pattern well. "I'm going to sleep," he mutters.

"Shouldn't go to bed angry," Rorschach says, and it sounds so goddamn sarcastic, that grinding monotone spitting out a platitude—

"Oh, okay, let's stay up and fight, then," Dan snaps, and he *is* shouting now. Shouting and shaking. "Clear the air. Come on, just get it out and fucking over with. Just. Enough of this."

Rorschach goes very, very still.

"Well? I'm sure you have some choice words for a filthy deviant like—"

"Daniel—"

"I mean, you've got no problem ragging on my 'liberal sensibilities' so why not—"

"*Stop it*," he's moving suddenly, and Dan feels drywall at his back, the scrub of peeling wallpaper against his shoulders where Rorschach's hands are pinning him. "Stop."

Dan's breathing hard, chest heaving like he just sprinted a block. His fingers are cold-numb and his face feels hot, and if everything isn't messed up enough already, there's that familiar, insidious warmth, gathering low. His anger bleeds out, displaced by impotent frustration and sharp, prickling hurt. He lets himself relax in his partner's grip.

"Not like that, Daniel," Rorschach is saying, fingers curled against Dan's slumped shoulders, rucking the shirtcloth. "Know how these things work. Realize you were trying to offer—ehn. Does not mean you're—"

—*don't want to be*—

—trying to offer—

—rent is due—

—how these things work—

Saliva pools in Dan's mouth as his stomach tries to crawl up his throat. Christ, and he thought things were fucked up before. He swallows hard.

"My god, Rorschach," he says, trying to keep his voice soft, if not even. "I wasn't—no. God, no."

Rorschach seems to realize how close they are standing, jerks his hands away from Dan as if he's hot. Takes two unsteady steps back. His Adam's apple bobs convulsively under the wrinkled latex at his neck.

"Why would you even think that I—" Dan rubs hard at his face, pushing his glasses up onto his forehead. "Oh, *Jesus*."

And Dan does know how these things work, sometimes. In forgotten, grimy places like this, where the destitute and the disenfranchised scabble to survive on a daily basis, where everything must be fought, traded or bartered for; where drugs and food and sex are prime commodities.

And god, the way Rorschach had wanted to crawl out of his skin, when his landlady had—

His hands are clenched into fists and held rigidly at his side, but Dan can see that he's shaking, can hear the breath shuddering out of him as though released under duress. "Sorry," he says, addressing the far wall. "Know you're better than that, Daniel. *Know* that. I... didn't mean— Sometimes, I—"

His words stutter out, confused and disjointed. Dan has no idea what he's trying to communicate, really, but listening to him fumbling around with disconnected sentence fragments is too much to bear. "Okay, buddy," he says, wearily. "It's alright. Let's just get some sleep, yeah?"

Rorschach sits heavily on the narrow bed, shoulders hunched under the suit jacket. "Not alright," he says quietly. "Inappropriate, to think of you..." he trails off.

"Yeah, well," Dan says, pausing in the bathroom doorway to lean against the frame. He laughs suddenly, a short, mirthless noise. "I started it. I'm sorry, man."

[#]

Dan sleeps lightly, dreams of flashing steel and painful silence. He wakes at some indeterminate hour, rain cracking against the window in hard flurries.

There are blunt fingers against his jaw.

Rorschach withdraws his hand slowly as he realizes Dan is awake. His dark eyes are unreadable, hooded in the rough shadows of his face and glittering under the flickers of neon that steal through the thin curtain. He's hunkered down, one hand braced against the floor; he doesn't seem to know what to do with the other.

The quiet of Dan's dream pervades, tense and dangerous and brimming with possibilities.

"You were snoring," Rorschach says. He doesn't sound entirely like himself.

Dan shifts, snakes an arm out into the cold air to snag the cuff of Rorschach's shirt. "Hey," he says, voice sleep-thick. "C'mere."

Careful silence, again, and a hesitant breath. He shakes his head—just the slightest movement back and forth—and stands. Dan hears the cot creak as his partner settles on it, and wonders what the hell he is supposed to do now.

[#]

He must have managed to drift off sometime despite his racing thoughts, and evidently got more rest than Rorschach. He's up before him, awakened by early gray light and muffled conversation from next door. It's not so chill this morning—though still plenty cold enough to make him shiver once he sheds the cocoon of his sleeping bag—and a cursory twitch of the curtains shows the streets have thawed under the night-time rain.

He stretches, brushes the grit off the bottom of his socks and just stands for a moment, unsure what to do with himself. The clunking, noisy shower would wake his partner, and god knows the guy never seems to get enough sleep. He doesn't trust the water to be tolerably warm anyway; his watch tells him it's coming up to nine.

The voices next door subside into sighs, and the telltale creak of mattress springs. Dan grimaces.

Rorschach is curled up facing the wall, shoulders rising and falling in a slow cadence. He's bereft of most of his layers, and he seems vulnerable in just his dress shirt and pinstripes, suspenders shrugged off and looped over his thighs.

He fights the urge to put his hands on him, claw at his ribs and wake him with a jolt, sweet, childish vengeance. Tamps down an equally strong and a decidedly non-platonic desire to crawl into bed next to him, to press against him and keep him warm. The dissonance makes him push his fingers against his eyelids until he can see patterns. *Don't start thinking like that, you idiot. Remember just who it is you're looking at. No absurd romantic gestures, and certainly nothing that puts you in range of a left hook, Jesus.*

Whatever that was last night, Dan's not sure he's been forgiven, never mind if it was some kind of bizarre reciprocation on Rorschach's behalf. He probably *was* snoring. That might even be preferable. Dan's still not even entirely sure why he did what he did, and could do with some time to deal with the implications that it dredged up.

He sighs. Snoring, right. Rorschach is a decidedly unconvincing liar. Dan finds himself wishing the whole thing had just come to blows. That shit is easier to understand, easier to apologize for. Easier to suture up.

Dan chews on the inside of his cheek, unconsciously rubs his fingers along his jawline. Coffee is a safely neutral offering, so he empties a half-dead roach out of a mug and crunches it under a tin can (makes a high, unhappy noise in his throat), gives the mug a cursory sluice under the faucet and employs his recently acquired knowledge to set the kettle boiling. He goes to pull on a sweater while he waits, and finds that he's running short of underwear already. Well, that's his morning task decided for him, though somehow he doubts that the building has a serviceable laundry room.

He empties out his holdall, piles his meager possessions tidily against a wall and throws his worn clothes into the bag. After a moment's consideration he gathers up a couple of Rorschach's shirts from the end of the cot. Gesture of goodwill.

Dan makes a note to keep the more vibrant garments separate from his own. He is far from being

fashion conscious, but even he can tell that Rorschach is about a decade out of date. He still has *some* dignity.

As he pours the coffee, the noises from next door reach fever pitch. Embarrassed and vaguely uncomfortable, he forgoes a cup for himself and leaves the steaming mug on the stack of papers next to the bed. A damp ring diffuses outward, darkening the newsprint. Dan can't quite manage to feel bad, considering the flavor of the headline.

He clambers out of the window, breath billowing into the gray morning.

[#]

He hauls himself back through the window several hours later, harried and agitated, and feeling like he's just gone a few rounds with a katie-up gutterpunk.

Rorschach is sitting at the table, reading his newspaper, red marker poised a couple of inches above the page. He looks up, one eyebrow quirked as Dan drops the holdall onto the floor with a thump.

"What happened to my paper?" he asks blandly.

Dan takes off his glasses, polishes them vigorously on the hem of his shirt while he composes himself. "I," he says, with brittle cheer. "Have been to the laundromat." He ignores Rorschach's question entirely; he figures discretion is the better part of valor. Besides, he's being communicative, and Dan doesn't care to plunge them into a tense almost-argument by explaining how he wrapped his precious rag around something so immoral as *beer*.

Rorschach's expression subtly shifts from careful indifference to something approximating pity...or maybe it's derision. "On a weekend?"

"Heh, yes. It was pretty busy." Cacophonous. The chug of the washers, kids shrieking as they play in the carts, strangers bickering over the machines or the scant few seats, a tinny transistor radio blaring over it all and wearing at his overtired, tautly-strung nerves. "But, like my mother always said, cleanliness is next to Godliness." He shrugs, sits on the cot to toe off his shoes.

"Hrn," Rorschach puts his pen down, closes and folds his paper. "And laundromat may be next to a church, doesn't persuade me to visit either."

"Oh, come on," Dan replies, resting one ankle on the opposite knee and rubbing the ball and arch of his foot. "You gotta do your laundry sometime. Even a hardass like you needs fresh underwear."

"Turn them inside out," Rorschach counters, not missing a beat. "More wear out of them."

Dan stares at him for a moment, struggling to appear more incredulous and less revolted. *Wait. God, did he just—*

"I never can tell when you're joking," he says.

"I don't joke. Bad for my reputation." Rorschach says, and Dan still can't tell if he's serious or not. It's like the way he used to be, back when they first teamed up, before he started getting flaky. It stings, somehow. "Go to the laundromat late night, less busy. Less... women. Junkies and transients are easier to deal with."

Dan can almost believe that. He'd wrestled with a dryer that had insisted on spitting out his quarters, sweating under the impatient glares of the other waiting patrons until a young woman had shown him how to rattle the coin slot just so. He'd found himself next to her on the folding table once his

load was done, and had tried to strike up friendly conversation. You'd have thought he'd been hitting on her, the way she'd clutched her laundry—*her* undergarments, *oh god you idiot, Dreiberg*—and hastily moved away, sparing him a dirty glance.

Yeah. On reflection, there's probably some kind of etiquette covering that. He smiles crookedly. "Thanks for the advice."

Rorschach grunts. "Can show your appreciation by returning center spread of New Frontiersman."

"It's, uh. Probably not legible any more. Sorry, buddy." Dan finally feels a twinge of guilt, pulls a face. "Hey, c'mon. How about we go find another copy."

"Don't patronize me," Rorschach says, but he stands and shrugs on his coat anyway.

[#]

They take a leisurely walk out, despite the persistent gray drizzle. Dan does anyway, taking it easy on his sore feet. Rorschach strides a good few paces ahead of him, seemingly unconcerned about being recognized in his trench and fedora. He drops back now and again to huff impatiently or filch a dime from between the cracks in the paving. Dan takes it as a good sign that he didn't just bolt for the newsstand and meet him on the way back.

Night falls as sudden as a blow, and when they approach the back end of the tenements, Rorschach thrusts the paper to Dan's chest. "Going to patrol," he says, pulling his mask and scarf out of an inside pocket. Almost as an afterthought, he adds: "Good luck with the job."

"Heh, right." Dan dips his head. "Careful out there."

Rorschach snorts at that, tucking his mask under his chin and melting into the shadows, slinking away like a mangy alley cat.

The room is starting to smell like it's primarily inhabited by two guys who don't shower much and eat a bean-rich diet, so Dan leaves the window open after climbing in. The clamor of the streets seeps in from below, car horns and tires skidding on damp asphalt, footfalls and rattled dumpsters and snippets of voices fading in and out like a radio skipping through the bands.

Dan drops the paper to the table, strips off his sweater and t-shirt, lets the cold draft play over his bared skin until his teeth chatter. It's a strange kind of penance, and he's not even sure what he's atoning for. There is no hot water for a shower, so he boils the kettle and gives himself a whore's bath in the bathroom sink (noting with some annoyance the ring of reddish-blond stubble that has magically appeared since he cleaned up).

He checks his watch. An hour until he's due to start. He dons his ridiculous uniform and hopes to god that he looks presentable.

[#]

The spitting rain hangs like a fog, curling Dan's finger-combed hair and soaking the hem of his pants until the fabric sticks coldly to his skin. His stomach churns with increasing nervousness the closer he gets to 40th, and he's already fabricating excuses for wimping out, seeing which ones hold up to close scrutiny (none of them), which ones might earn him a punch in the gut for even trying (all of them), and wondering what kind of pathetic excuse for a superhero is intimidated by something so ordinary as turning up to work.

He reaches the Gunga Diner and skirts around to come in the back way, through the kitchen, as he

was instructed. The fire doors are open, letting out the industrious sound of clanging pots, along with heavy billows of rich, spicy steam.

Dan is terribly aware that he is twenty-nine years old and hasn't worked a day in his life. Not like this. He's chagrined to find that he never really *wanted* to—far too comfortable with his wealth and privilege and the freedom to jaunt through the neighborhood at any time of night without repercussion on his day-to-day life. It's never been that easy for Rorschach, and Dan recalls with some shame all of the times he ever complained about being tired or aching. It's a wonder Rorschach tolerated it.

He scowls, tugs the collar of his coat up around his neck, and takes a deep breath. He's messed up so much lately with his finances, his home. With his friend. This is something he can do right. He squares his shoulders, raises his chin. He can do this. He's the goddamn Nite Owl, and he's never met a chicken tikka he couldn't take care of.

[#]

He takes his break around half-seven, hanging out in the back alleyway. The cold air is hugely refreshing compared to the sweltering kitchens and smoky diner. He huffs out a pleased laugh, amazed at himself. He's doing well. He hasn't dropped anything, hasn't botched an order yet and sometimes it's even enjoyable making small talk with the customers. The other waitstaff regard him with disinterest, but that suits him just fine.

There's a fold of bills and some loose change in his apron pocket. Not a fortune by any stretch, but something he can contribute to the rent, and that is so very important.

God, his feet hurt, though. And this is apparently a *quiet* night. He already knew it was going to be a hellish balancing act with the crime-fighting, but the full extent of it is only just sinking in. It's going to be tough keeping up with Rorschach on the legwork.

Speak of the devil. There's a familiar silhouette painting the brickwork opposite, intersected by the slats of a fire escape. Dan takes a few nonchalant steps out of the restaurant's sphere of light. "Evening," he says, pitching his voice carefully low.

Rorschach grunts in reply, effortlessly drops down into the alley shadows.

"How did you know I would be on my break?" Dan asks, curious. He hadn't even known himself.

"Didn't." His partner rolls his shoulders under the trench, abruptly changes the subject. "De Luca is a bust." Another name from the list Rorschach had given him, and currently their favorite suspect. "Skipped town months ago, have it on good authority that he's in Vegas, keeping a low profile."

Dan frowns. "So, we've hit another wall. Hell." He lets out a long breath, rubs at his arms. He's cold now, night air slicing through his thin shirt. Pale flakes have started to descend slowly to melt on the damp asphalt.

"For time being," Rorschach says. He turns, raises his hand in a farewell. "Will keep working the bars."

"Later," Dan calls after him. He checks his watch. Still another three hours until his shift is over. For the first time in days, he's itching to be out on patrol, wading through the sticky-floored dives in search of the one elusive clue that will break the case wide open. Or, more likely at this point of the investigation: the one elusive break that will clue them in. Dan grins to himself. The less patient Rorschach gets, the quicker people talk.

He brushes a few errant grains of basmati from his apron and plunges back into the kitchens. The humid air immediately steams up his glasses. Chef is yelling, "table four, table four," which is one of his, so he polishes the lenses hastily, and gets back to work.

[#]

Once he's cleaned down his tables and been shown how to close up, it's gone midnight, and nearer to one by the time Dan gets back to the apartment. He's got a warm paper bag tucked under one arm, and his shifts for the week scrawled on the back of a grease-stained order. He's scheduled for a *lot* of lates and he's not naïve enough to believe he isn't being taken advantage of, but it's not like he can complain. He's perfectly aware that he hasn't signed anything vaguely contract-shaped, and expects it to be a cash-in-hand situation when payday rolls around.

He hasn't decided if Rorschach is more likely to bust his balls for the illegal practice, or pat him on the back for denying the government fat cats their cut of his hard-earned cash.

Either way, it's sort of convenient. He hadn't considered that paying money into his compromised account would probably be a really stupid thing to do. On that note, he decides to talk to the bank again tomorrow; perhaps they'll be more amenable to a defrauded customer than to a bankrupt one.

He dusts the snow off his coat, unwraps the apron from around his waist and sits at the table, intending to stay up until Rorschach checks in. He's totally beat, so he doodles beards and devil-horns onto the pictures on the front page of Rorschach's rag to keep himself alert and occupied. The crossword is tempting, but shit, man. That'd just be rude.

[#]

He starts awake some time later. The room smells like rogan josh, and the pen is pressed uncomfortably against his cheek. He sits up, adjusts his glasses until everything looks less bleary. Rorschach leans over his shoulder, places a cup of coffee in front of him and slides the newspaper away. His shirtsleeve is torn and bloodstained, a coppery smear in the periphery of Dan's vision.

"Oh," Dan says, rubbing his forehead and checking his fingers for ink transfer. He doesn't care to see a *New Frontiersman* headline when he looks in the mirror. "Thank you. How long have you been back?"

"Not long." Rorschach nods at the Gunga Diner cartons. "Food?"

Dan's stomach growls loudly in response.

"Shouldn't be wasting money on takeout," Rorschach grouses, clattering through the dirty dishes in the kitchenette sink. He corners his prey, pounces, emerges victorious with a couple of forks.

"I didn't," Dan replies, taking the offered cutlery. He gives it a cursory inspection, wipes it on his apron. "Perk of the job."

Rorschach grunts, pokes at the food speculatively. "Regardless. Is indulgent, over-rich. Unhealthy. Full of salt and fat and preservatives, has addictive qualities. Also, have suspicion that meat is probably—"

"You don't *have* to eat it," Dan says irritably. So much for gratitude. He pries the lid off his carton, savors the swirl of aromatic steam. "I just thought you'd appreciate a change from cold beans and fish that tastes more like the tin it came in. I know I do."

"Vile foreign garbage," Rorschach mutters, shoveling in a huge forkful of curry. He talks with his

mouth full, spitting grains of rice down his chin. "Still, if you insist. Would be wrong to let it go to waste."

Dan snorts. Bastard manages to make it sound like he's doing him a favor. Should have brought him a vindaloo.

Despite the offensive nature of his food, Rorschach makes short work of his dish (and what's left of Dan's). They tear pieces from a peshwari naan as they talk, sat cross-legged on the floor with the brown paper bag between them.

"Found the runner again," Rorschach says, nabbing the last scrap of bread. "More useful this time."

"Yeah?" Dan pointedly glances in the bag, licks his finger to collect the last few crumbs. Rorschach ignores him with equal emphasis.

"Hn," he seems uncomfortable, fidgeting with his shirt and pulling the fabric away from his arm. Eventually he unbuttons the cuff and rolls up the sleeve. "Have a time and place for rendezvous. Suggest we trail the recipient, see what we can learn."

There's a gash a couple of inches long, trailing across his left biceps; a long, shallow knife wound. It seems more immediately important than planning surveillance.

"Hey, want me to take a look at that?" Dan asks.

"No. It's fine."

"I dunno man, it looks like it could use a couple of—"

"Can do it myself." Rorschach stands abruptly, moving away from Dan's probing fingers. He levers up a floorboard near the window and pulls out a small box, which is slammed onto the table with more force than is strictly necessary. He fishes out some rusting suture tongs and a curved needle that's clearly already been used.

"For pity's sake," Dan says, striding over to snatch the implements from him. "Come on, southpaw. You don't have to make things difficult for yourself." He stares down the baleful glare with all the patience he can muster. "Sit."

Small mercies, Rorschach actually does as he is told, or perhaps he realizes it's preferable to Dan watching him stitch clumsily with his non-dominant hand. Dan swabs the wound. It's not too deep and should only need two sutures, three at the most. "So, what's the big deal?" he says, examining the needle. It's none too clean. "It's not like I haven't done this for you a hundred times before."

He boils up a mug of water and sterilizes the needle as best he can. Rorschach is silent the whole time, as though the noise of the kettle is too loud to speak over. Dan feels Rorschach exhale as he leans in. It stirs the annoying bit of hair that curls against his temple. Rorschach still says nothing, only sucks in a new breath as the needle pierces his skin.

Dan ties off the last stitch, runs his fingers lightly over the sutures and tells himself this wasn't just an excuse to touch him. He watches Rorschach watching the floor, watches the tension in his jaw and the way he can't seem to stop swallowing.

"Hey." Dan winds up the remaining thread. "Hey, buddy."

"Daniel," Rorschach says, finally. His hands grip his knees tightly, knuckles white under purple and yellow bruises. "Need to know something."

Chapter 3

Dan wonders if it would kill him to use a pronoun now and then. He never used to drop them with such frequency. He was always fairly eloquent and cuttingly precise, even when he was on edge. While it's been bothering Dan for a while—along with the marked increase in his more violent tendencies—right now it just makes things frustrating as he tries to decipher what it is Rorschach wants from him. What the right thing to say is.

Dan folds his arms, and immediately conscious of his body language, unfolds them again. Tries to look open and unimposing. "Okay," he says encouragingly, waiting for the question or the accusation or whatever it is that Rorschach is trying to communicate.

Rorschach is still staring at the floor, shoulders slumped, fingers steadily relaxing to curl against his thighs in loose fists instead of gouging at his kneecaps. His brow furrows as he glances up at Dan, making eye contact for a brief moment before fixing his gaze about a thousand yards past his shoulder.

"What do you—" he says, and cuts himself off so sharply Dan hears his teeth click together. His eyes flick to Dan's face again, and away. "I don't know what you want from me, Daniel."

"What I want," Dan says, bluntly. He is probably supposed to shrug, say *nothing, buddy*, and let the whole thing slide, but hell, if Rorschach wants to talk about this, *actually* talk about it like an honest-to-god adult? He takes a deep breath. "What I want is you as my partner. And, for what it's worth, as my friend."

Rorschach makes a noise in the back of his throat, tugs down his sleeve. He can't seem to keep his hands still. He works his knuckles against an open palm. His disquiet is contagious, and Dan finds he is polishing his glasses, wiping the lenses over and over as a silence expands through the too-small room, suffocatingly dense.

"Liar," Rorschach says finally, low and dangerous. "*Kissed* me." He over-enunciates the word contemptuously, as though it were a profanity. "Not normal behavior for partner. Or friend."

"Neither is watching me sleep. *Christ*, Rorschach," Dan says, bristling suddenly, indignant over being called on his half-truth (heart thudding and body singing with a flush of adrenaline as he realizes what he's about to say). His voice shakes. "Yeah, okay. Okay. Maybe I do want... that. With you."

And there it is, the truth of it all in so many innocuous words. All his cards on the table.

Rorschach moans unhappily.

"Oh please, don't act so surprised. You knew what you were asking. You know what I—" He takes a deep breath, tries to calm down and make himself clear. "It's just the way it is, the way I...I can't change that." And fuck it, he's damned if he's going to be the only one fessing up tonight. Damned if Rorschach is going to get away with keeping his hand close to his chest. "*You* can't change it, either."

Rorschach glares at the floor, as though willing it to crack open and swallow him whole. Or possibly swallow Dan whole.

Dan steps closer, crouching in front of Rorschach, who flattens his hands to his face despairingly. "Look at me," he says. And softer, as though that would help: "Look. I don't expect anything from

you. I don't. But, god... I'm not stupid, man. I'm a detective too, remember."

Rorschach sighs into his palms, scrubs his hands over his face, slowly revealing his expression by inches. He tilts his head up finally, and Dan has never seen him look so human, or so defeated.

"No," he says. "You're not stupid, Daniel. So, why?"

Dan stands, stretching his legs out. He smiles tightly. It's a difficult question, and the best he can do is answer truthfully. "Hell, I don't know. You're a stubborn, unpredictable, ruthless bastard and you drive me crazy." He snorts out a laugh, says half-jokingly, "And you scare the shit out of me, sometimes. Maybe that's it."

Rorschach cants his head to one side, and before Dan can process that the man has uncoiled and is preparing to strike, he's kneeling face-down on the cot and sucking in air through the stale bedsheets, glasses crushed against his cheek. *Oh shit*, he thinks frantically, as his arms are wrenched behind him and the cot's wooden frame slams against the wall. *You broke him, you finally pushed him too far and now he's going to...*

"Ror—" The springs creak as Rorschach's knees sink into the mattress either side of him. Dan's shoulders wrench as he struggles to free himself, sending cold, bright darts of pain up his arms, settling in his fingertips with a numb throb. He turns his head to the side, hauls in a panicked breath with a loud gasp that breaks into a yelp as Rorschach claws his hand down Dan's belly, hooks fingers into the waistband of his pants and brings his weight against Dan, against his—God, what is he—?

"Like this?" He sounds calm. Far too calm.

"Rorschach!" Dan gasps, as the man tightens his grip on Dan's wrists "Wait, just...stop a minute. *Agh, stop—*"

"Thought this was what you wanted," comes the reply, and Dan hears it now: the calm fraying where it is stretched taut over all kinds of disgust and fear, where something else is emerging, tearing through. "Isn't it?"

He sounds desperate.

He sounds terrifying.

"Not like this," Dan says quietly, trying not to sound hopelessly aroused.

Rorschach releases Dan's hands, takes two steps away from the cot when Dan turns himself over, rucking up the sheets. He knows how he must look: rumpled and panting and hard, face hot, glasses askew.

Rorschach stares.

"Don't," Dan says, lunging forward to catch his wrist before he can bolt, bone and sinew grating under his grasp. "Don't you dare—"

"Not a coward." Rorschach wraps his hand around Dan's and pries up his fingers in turn, removing each digit with a firm grip; a reminder of how easily he could snap every one of them. His face is twisted into something terrible, lips curled back, eyes wide and glinting, feral. It does absolutely nothing to assuage the heavy throb between Dan's thighs.

Rorschach tugs Dan forward by his smallest finger, makes it twinge and pop, lets go.

God, what a mess, Dan thinks. He reaches out for him, tentatively curls his hands against his neck and rests his thumbs against his jaw, holds him there at arms length until he stops shaking so badly and his mouth is pressed into a line instead of writhing in a vicious snarl. *But then, you knew this wasn't going to be all soft focus and rose petals.*

He almost wants to ask, wants to understand why he's like this. A more insistently selfish part of him doesn't want to know, but wishes a lingering death on whoever was responsible, regardless.

"Walter," he says, instead. "What the hell are we doing?"

"Just," Rorschach says, pulling away, twitchy and shivering, color riding high on his cheeks. He sits on the edge of the cot, sets his jaw defensively. "Thought that was what you—"

"You know what," Dan interrupts, and exhales loudly as he sits down next to him. "Don't do me any favors, buddy. I don't want you to... I mean, it's not just about—" He gestures with his hands, only half-sure of what he's trying to convey, and no clue how to say it. "We're good like this," he says, finally. It'll have to do.

Rorschach grunts, dips his head in a nod. He clearly wants to edge further away, but is struggling with some modicum of dignity. "Yes. Apologies."

"Oh man, don't even—" Dan breaks off to yawn long and deep into the back of his hand. "I'm so goddamn tired," he mutters. It's been the longest, hardest few days he can remember. He hasn't felt this exhausted and emotionally drained since his last semester at Harvard.

He sees Rorschach glance at him, a slight tilt to his head as though he's trying to look without looking, as though making eye contact would be an inadmissible sin, or another confession that he isn't ready for.

"Sleep, then."

He says it like it's going to be easy. Like they both haven't spent the past nights sprawled restlessly and counting ceiling cracks in the dark.

[#]

There's note on the table, weighed down under a mug half-full of cold coffee. Dan stares at it for some time while he blows on the tips of his fingers to keep them warm. After a few minutes of stomach-churning apprehension (that is exacerbated by the jagged rise and fall of skirmishing voices elsewhere in the building), he grabs the torn strip of paper and reads the goddamn message.

No farewell, melodramatic or otherwise, no declarations of dishonor done. Just a time and a place in Rorschach's familiar chicken-scratch hand, the rendezvous and a date three days from now. He tucks the note into his wallet, between that eternally-hopeful condom he's had since '72 and the number of that one girl he'd always meant to call.

He realizes with a pang in his chest (maybe relief, maybe something less easily defined) that their shift patterns mean it's possible that won't see his partner until the rendezvous, unless Rorschach feels inclined to wake him, and he knows how likely that is. He sighs, then rips a corner from the *New Frontiersman* (it's become something of a vendetta) and taps the pen on the edge of the table for a few beats.

Eventually, he just writes 'I'll be there', empties the mug into the sink, and leaves the note on Rorschach's flattened, grimy pillow.

He's reminded that it's rent day when he goes to bundle up his waiter's apron. The loose change falls onto the floorboards, rattles percussively until it settles into an abstract join-the-dots at his feet. "Ah," he says, and crouches stiffly to collect it all back up.

The few bills he has, he stows in the first-aid box beneath the floorboards (and there's a leather-bound journal half-hidden there, too. He is far from Eden, but Dan knows an apple when he sees one).

Hopefully Rorschach will find the cash there and deduce its purpose. The last thing he wants to do right now is hand the money to his partner directly. It feels nebulously wrong to him, almost like an insult, and then there's always the risk it would be horribly misconstrued despite the issues they've already... well, not beaten out, so much as shoved around a bit.

In the cold morning light, he can't quite believe it had actually happened. Thinking back, the night has an unreal quality to it, as though he had been drunk. Perhaps Rorschach was right about whatever it is they put in Gunga Diner takeout.

Whoa there, he thinks, yawning widely enough to make his eyes water. *Next I'll be checking my cereal for subliminal messages. I just need a solid eight hours.*

Ha.

[#]

Waiting on line at the bank is just as depressing the second time around, if not more so. His clothes are as rumpled as ever, soaked halfway to the knee from the wet streets. He has two days worth of stubble that is starting to make his jaw itch, and the faint aroma of Indian cuisine seems to follow him everywhere. At least it's warm in the foyer.

He talks to a different girl this time, but the smile is the same. Nonetheless, he manages to get his account frozen and a promise of further investigation, even if he doesn't miss the skeptical raise of her eyebrow when he leans forward, trying to explain as earnestly as he can that he thinks he has been defrauded.

When she asks for an alternative address or telephone number to contact him by, Dan doesn't know what to tell her. The pity on her face is barely tolerable as he fabricates some thin excuse. It stings what little pride he has remaining. He leaves the bank feeling ruffled and vaguely indignant.

He can't shake the mood all afternoon, and it throws him off when he's at work. Enough that he spends ten minutes running his fingers under the cold tap in the kitchen after burning himself on a hot dish (and pretty much ruining his shirt when he dropped the food down himself).

"Get your fucking act together, Danny," his manager says, pulling him into the kitchens after he messes up a drinks order for the second time. "You high or somethin'?"

"Just tired," Dan replies, a measure more amiably than he feels. "Sorry."

He spends his break shivering out in the cold, swearing inventively under his breath and trying not to suck in the chef's cigarette smoke. He should probably try to be more sociable, but he doesn't have the energy. He's not being tipped too well, tonight.

"Here, man," the chef says to him, holding out a battered carton with turmeric-stained fingers. "It's stressing me out just watching you, Jesus."

"No," Dan says as politely as he can, tucking his fingers under his arms to warm them. "Thank you."

"Fine," she says, managing to pack all kinds of condescension into that single word. She exhales a final plume of smoke into the dark. "Break's over, then."

Dan lingers a minute or two longer after she disappears back into the kitchens, but the shadows remain resolutely empty.

[#]

This time the note is tucked into the folds of his sleeping bag, and Dan doesn't find it until he's burrowed down into the blankets. He has to get up and turn the light back on to read it only to find there's no message at all, just Rorschach's trademark signature bleeding into the paper. It's a typically strange gesture, and Dan is careful not to think too much of it. He doesn't leave one in return.

[#]

By the next night he is restless and feeling acutely lonely (which bemuses him; he's lived alone for a long time), so he slips into Nite Owl's skin instead of trying to sleep. He's not sure what he's going to do, look for Rorschach, perhaps. Bust a few delinquent asses, maybe. All he knows is that he wants to be out here tasting the sharp city air, instead of fighting a rash urge to curl up in the empty cot and wrap himself in his partner's bedsheets.

At the very least, he can find release for some bottled-up tension.

It isn't long before he gets the opportunity, routine catcalls from a huddle of wise-asses, slouching in the mouth of an alley and spoiling for a fight. There's the snap and rattle of a bike chain and he's swinging his fist before the sound stops echoing off the brickwork. The rest of the punks scatter before the first guy even hits the asphalt, bounding off like startled antelope.

He chases them out of the alleyway, across the busy avenue (there's the harsh squeal of tires; the thump of hands on a car hood; shouting) and straight into Rorschach's fists. Dan allows himself a moment of indulgence, watching him dispatch their prey with leonine ruthlessness.

He straightens his fedora and makes a show of dusting off his trench, then regards Dan with a tilt of his chin. "Good to see you out, Daniel." A careful pause. "Accustomed to your new schedule?"

"I, uh, can't sleep and I'm running on pure adrenaline, if that's what you mean." They easily fall into step, footfalls echoing in tandem as they wind deeper into the back streets.

Rorschach snorts. "Exactly what I mean. Welcome to life on the edge. Don't look down." He seems amused, and his body language has eased slightly. He's less tense, a touch more companionable.

Dan grins widely, suddenly giddy despite the stubble chafing against his cowl and the leaden weight of his tired limbs. "...and curry. Adrenaline and curry. Adrenaline, curry and caffeine."

"Explains the smell."

"Oho. Are you sure you wanna go there, buddy?"

[#]

It's later, and they're taking five in Union Square. Both of them are perched on the back of a park bench like rebellious teens, feet leaving dirt on the slats. Most of the city's scoundrels have scuttled back into the woodwork, and the readout in the corner of Dan's goggles tells him that dawn is not far away. He's aware that he has to work in a few hours, and it awakens a long-dormant defiant streak—that same subversive thrill he'd gotten back at university on those rare occasions when he'd partied

instead of studying. For a vigilante who operates in the gray areas of the law, it's been a long time since he's felt this way. He lets a mischievous smile play across his face.

Rorschach makes one of his noises, awkwardly clearing his throat. It sends a puff of breath into the icy air. "Daniel," he says, taking off his hat.

"Mm?"

"Meant to thank you. For rent. Very... good. To be able to pay on time, and in full."

"Hey, no—you're welcome. It's the least I can do, man." Dan feels heat prickle his skin. He rubs at the back of his neck, ineffectual through layers of leather and Kevlar.

Rorschach dips his head, turning the brim of his fedora through gloved fingers. "Appreciate it. Shairp can be... ehn. Difficult."

Dan stares at him for a long moment: the jaw tight under the mask, the fidgeting hands. "Don't mention it," he says, and brings his hand to rest briefly on Rorschach's shoulder. "Let's go home."

[#]

This time, it is the shuffle and tug of blankets that wakes him.

Rorschach doesn't lie so close that they touch, but Dan can still feel his breath on his face, across his cheek, shallow and uneven at first, becoming deeper as he sleeps. His proximity is strange to begin with, but Dan soon becomes accustomed enough to find comfort in their shared warmth.

It feels like something new is unfolding and taking shape in the quiet space between them, slowly transitioning and solidifying until it's something they can both begin to handle, without fear of breaking it.

[#]

It's the lunchtime rush, and Dan almost sends another dish crashing to the floor when he spies a distinctive redhead hunched in the restaurant doorway. It's only his quick reflexes that save his customer from a shower of bhajis. He flings a cheery 'enjoy your meal!' without even having to think about it, and sidles over to make sure Rorschach is seated at one of his assigned tables.

"Hey," Dan says, unable to save himself from an idiotic grin. He's already been chewed out over his stained shirt, and he hadn't thought anything could put him back in a good mood, least of all his partner's homely face. "What can I get you?"

"Coffee, please," Rorschach says, leaning in to frown at Dan's name tag. "Danny."

Dan raises his eyebrows and tries to look deeply unimpressed. "Very funny," he says, holding up a warning finger. "You know, only Hollis can get away with calling me that."

"Certain your revenge will be swift and terrible." Rorschach shows Dan a row of crooked teeth, an intimidating slit of a smile. It's more of a shark's leer than anything and it does nothing to beautify his worn face, but it tempers his usual dour expression. "Daniel."

Dan figures it will be more than his life is worth to call him Walt, or Wally. Those names suit him even less than Walter does. Instead, he cants his head to one side, a question riding on his lips. He doodles in a corner of his pad in an attempt to look occupied, addresses his question there. "Why don't you ever call me Dan? It's always Daniel, with you. Daniel, Daniel, Daniel."

Rorschach makes a contemplative noise as he pockets a handful of sugar sachets. "Hn. Shorten the name, shorten the man. Don't care to, but can do so if you find it preferable."

Dan glances up at him, surprised. He'd always thought it was a kind of distancing thing, a way to avoid being over-familiar. He should have known it was as much about respect. Regardless, he's always liked it as part of the weirdly formal note that marks his partner's speech.

(Wants to hear him say it as he's coming undone. Wants to hear him gasp it against his neck, ear, mouth; breathless and full of need, and—)

"N—no," he says, momentarily stunned and feeling the heat rise in his cheeks. *God, that's—* "I'd like it if you... uh, I mean—" *Oh, god, that's—*

Rorschach interrupts Dan's embarrassed stutters with his name, spoken so deliberately that Dan feels in very real danger of combusting. Rorschach taps his watch, looks vaguely bemused, but mostly impatient. "Have to get back to work, soon."

"Oh! Right, right. Sorry, Ror—uh. Coming right up."

"Came by to remind you. Tonight," Rorschach says a little later, voice rumbling quietly under the ambient chatter and clatter of the diner. Dan has to bend closer to listen. He swirls the dregs of his coffee, frowns as though he has scried something unfavorable in the grounds. "It is imperative that you are prepared, and on time." He puts the mug down, sorts through a handful of coins.

"I haven't forgotten," Dan replies. He pauses briefly, watching Rorschach arrange the loose change across his palm. "If you tip me, I'll punch you."

"Try it."

The coins are warm, and his hand lingers perhaps a second or two longer than necessary. He stares defiantly, as though daring Dan to say anything.

[#]

The weather is not in their favor. Relentless gusts of snow and a ferocious wind means visibility is poor, and traversing the rooftops feels like the most dangerous thing they'll do this night. For all the bullets and knives and bloodstained baseball bats they encounter, a tumble from six stories up is just as likely to end either of them.

After an interminable wait at the rendezvous point, they trail their new target into the meatpacking district. Rorschach mutters under his breath about the different kind of meat that is traded here, despite the weather keeping most of the skin trade off the streets. He prowls several paces ahead now, perilously close to the roof edge, a deep red thermogram against a ghostly moving curtain, easily picked out by the infrared setting on Dan's goggles.

It's bitterly cold. Dan's fingers are numb beneath his gauntlets, his face painfully taut where the wind and snow has lashed it. He thinks wistfully of his winter suit still safely bundled away in Hollis' workshop, and despairs at his lack of forethought. It's symptomatic of his increasing exhaustion. He's so busy berating himself that he almost walks right into Rorschach's back. He pulls up sharply. *Yeah, great. Knock your partner off a rooftop, why don't you. Idiot.*

"Lost him," Rorschach growls. One hand presses his fedora to his head, defying a squall of wind. The band of skin revealed between his glove and trench cuff is a raw pink. His mask moves sluggishly.

"How did you even keep an visual on him for so long?" Dan scans the streets below, spies a warm blot of color. "Never mind, I got him. Looks like he's heading towards that warehouse."

They climb down into the street below, and their feet crunch in the deepening snow as they advance on their quarry. He seems unsettled, moving at a pace that threatens to break into a half-run. Dan suspects they've been spotted, though usually punks tend to go for a flat-out sprint as soon as they catch sight of Rorschach. He tilts his head at his partner, about to signal him to move around in a pincer movement, when a bright spray of color lights up his goggles' display.

"Shit," he says. Seven, eight. Nine of them, not great odds. "*Shit*. We walked right into it."

Dan clicks his goggles back to normal vision—the thermal imaging is too chaotic with this many bodies, crudely abstract and distracting—and finds himself lost in a whirling shadowland of darkness and bright snow, of diffuse light from the streetlamps and umbral, menacing shapes that lurch and circle around them.

"Speak for yourself," Rorschach says, and launches himself at the nearest snow-shrouded figure.

Dan takes a fist to his jaw before he can react, teeth cracking together painfully. His reflexes are embarrassingly slow. He shakes his head, spits out the blood pooling in his mouth and tries to center himself, willing energy into his tired, frozen limbs. Focus, *focus*...

He anticipates the next attack and strikes out, felling an opponent, but catches a boot to his stomach even as he turns to counter it. He bares his teeth against the pain and barges into his new assailant, tumbling them both into a filthy snowbank with a desperate lack of finesse.

He's dragged up by his cape, his boots scrabbling for purchase on ice-slicked cobblestones, and something glances off the reinforced armor at his back. A knife-blade glints in the moment before it is consumed by the snow. Dan knows a brief flare of panic when he hears a brittle snap (the irrational, terrified part of his brain insists that it was his own neck), then he's stumbling forward onto his knees, thrown off balance when his cape is suddenly released. Everything is quiet again, save for the howling wind and the distant clatter of the high line.

He just sits for a few moments, watching his breath coalescing and dispersing in front of him, waiting for his heart to stop thudding hard enough to crack his ribs. He's starting to shake now. God, that was—it felt like the very first time. He hasn't been that sloppy in years. Scrapping like a kid in a playground, and about as effective. This needs to ends soon. He can't do this much longer. He's a liability, a danger to himself.

Rorschach looms into view, crouching in front of him, concern evident in the abruptness of his motions. "Hurt?" he asks, a little too urgently.

"No," Dan says bitterly. "No, just fucking useless. God, how do you do it, Rorschach? How do you keep up?"

"Practice," Rorschach says, hauling him to his feet, hands firm on his waist and shoulder. He's nudged forward a step. "Save the self-pity, Nite Owl. This way."

[#]

They duck into the warehouse through the loading dock. It is cavernous, dark and empty save for a few abandoned pallets and rusted meat hooks, its dilapidated walls coated in graffiti. There's a pervasive stench of congealed offal and a slick dampness to the concrete floor. The plant has not been derelict for long.

Rorschach jerks his head upwards. Dan follows his gaze. There's a sickly green glow emanating from a mezzanine at the far end of the warehouse. Dan has spent enough time hunched over the machine in his basement to recognize monitor glow when he sees it.

Rorschach makes a gesture with one hand: steady, quiet. They advance slowly, silently, and crouch beneath the mezzanine floor. There are piles of discarded pallet crates here, and a tangled column of wiring that dangles over the side of the suspended floor. Voices drift down from above.

"...not done yet cause it's fuckin' freezing in here! I can barely feel my fingers, how am I supposed to fuckin' type, for god's sake..."

"Oh, my heart weeps for you. Can you hear me playing my violin? You know how far I walked tonight, in the goddamn snowstorm? With that freak Rorschach and his birdy buddy following me the whole way?"

Dan frowns behind the goggles, mouths 'birdy buddy' indignantly. Rorschach shoots him a withering look, a grimace of warmed ink.

"*What?* Are you kiddin' me? You let em tail you here?"

The floor above them creaks as one of the men paces around. "Calm down, man. The kid spilled his guts, but it's all under control. I got the boys taking care of em. You know it's all a load of bullshit, they won't stand a chance. They're mostly urban myth, man. All rep, no balls."

A heavy sigh, then the clatter of keys being struck. "Whatever, okay. I'm done here tonight."

There's the noisy whine of a fan and the *gronk gronk* of a computer drive, shortly followed by the shuffle of something changing hands.

Rorschach reaches out, wraps a loop of cabling around his hands, and yanks.

The warehouse fades into darkness. The computer powers down with a high-pitched whir, and there is a moment of silence before the two men start swearing loudly.

"...fuck's sake. Blackout?"

"How the hell should I know?" The metal stairs resonate as they descend to the warehouse floor. "Got a flashlight?"

"Batteries are dead."

"I have one," Rorschach says, and demonstrates by cracking it across the man's face.

[#]

They lash them both to the mezzanine struts. Dan retrieves a decrypted hard drive from the unconscious heavy and radios in, while Rorschach menaces the cryptographer. He's nondescript; middle-aged and paunched under a shapeless huddle of warm clothing, and looks about ready to throw up.

"Jesus, look, I have two kids, don't h—hurt me, okay!" The man squints and tries to duck his head away when Rorschach shines his blood-spattered flashlight in his face. "I'll tell you what I know. Jesus, please..."

"I'm listening. Names?"

"Okay, okay. Uh. I know a name, but... I just do the technical stuff, you know? I'm just a, a—what do you call em? Hireling? Minion?"

"Accessory," Rorschach supplies helpfully, cracking his knuckles.

The man's face crumples, and he begins to snivel into his scarf.

Dan hunkers down in front of him, shoulder to shoulder with Rorschach. "I gotta know," he says, his curiosity getting the better of him. "Why here?"

"Are you kiddin'?" the cryptographer says miserably. "What we're running is a fuh—fuckin' high-tech art form. Who'd look somewhere like *this*?"

[#]

This is the part of the night that Dan has truly been dreading.

"Fucking thing," he mutters through chattering teeth, grasping uselessly at the zipper that fastens the front of his uniform. His gauntlets and cowl are already in their alleyway box, and frigid air is seeping in through the breaches in his armor, making him shiver violently. He's getting more vulgar every time the zipper slips from between his numb fingers, but he's well beyond maintaining decorum.

He just wants to get somewhere marginally warmer, nurse his bruises, and sleep.

He's close to giving up and just slinging his winter coat over the top, when Rorschach, already in his civvies, moves his hands aside. He opens the front of Dan's costume for him, straightforward and businesslike, and Dan hisses at the sudden press of cold air, gooseflesh breaking out beneath the damp fabric of his undershirt. He moves to finish stripping down, but Rorschach catches his hands midair, drops them to his sides.

"Wh—" he manages, before Rorschach's fingers tentatively graze the crest of Dan's collarbone. He sucks in a breath of iced air, feels it burn his lungs.

There's nothing businesslike about the way Rorschach insinuates his hands between Dan's costume and his skin.

Nor in the way he peels the material away.

It's slow and considered, almost exploratory, and it's like being gutted. It makes Dan want to succumb, to throw his head back, open himself and bare everything.

Rorschach's hands slide down, as light and cold as snow, and come to rest over Dan's stomach. His fingers press briefly against the firm muscle there, bunching the fabric of his shirt, then fall away.

He takes a step back and raises his chin, glares in challenge.

[#]

Dan can pinpoint precisely when the moment begins to slip away from him, critical seconds wasted as everything surges together, breath-stealing anticipation and intoxicating lust and a sudden, unfair lurch of trepidation that chokes up his throat and binds his feet to the asphalt.

Is this happening? Is he...? Does he want—?

Oh god, does he really want—

Those seconds of hesitation are all it takes for Rorschach's expression to ice over, mouth pressing into a firm line, eyes lost in the dark hollows of his face. He exhales, a faint *huhn* that steams into the night air, and he turns aside with the stiff deliberateness of a cat that has humiliated itself.

And he really wants this.

He really—

Stupid, Dan thinks. Stupid stupid. Move, for god's sake. Do something, you ass.

He slips on the icy ground, stumbling forward to catch Rorschach's arm before he can stalk away, pivots him around to face him. Dan's fingers press into rough fabric and then against rough skin, rasp against the scruff on his jaw as he brings his face closer.

He can feel the tension pulled taut, fraying down to its last thread as he leans in (slowly, careful, slow —) to press his mouth to Rorschach's.

It's nothing like violence and only a little like kissing. Rorschach's lips are dry and cracked and as stubbornly rigid as the man. He's unresponsive and tightly wound, tremoring under Dan's faltering hands and Dan doesn't know if it's because he's spooked, or—

Dan draws back, breath ghosting into the space between them. Now, more than ever, he wishes he could garner a clue to what Rorschach was thinking. "Is this okay?" he asks. "Oh, god, is this—"

Rorschach says nothing at first, doesn't snap that fragile thread but instead lets it slacken and unravel. His fingers leave cold points of contact along Dan's arms, light, neurotic brushes as he tries to ground himself.

"Not here," he says, his voice hoarse and uneven. "Back."

[#]

Rorschach is waiting for Dan to climb in through the window, hand held to his mouth, palm rasping over his chin. There's a long, ugly moment where Dan wonders if he's going to freak out, but then he takes Dan by the shoulders and guides him, pressing him to the wall. He's steady and purposeful but not aggressive, and Dan can sense the control he is exerting. It crackles like static and raises the hairs on his arms, makes his nerves jump and shiver. Rorschach's hands are unmoving, resting heavily either side of Dan's neck.

He's afraid, Dan realizes. This ruthless, untouchable man is afraid to touch me.

He has no doubt that Rorschach would be utterly repelled by the ache that wells up at the thought. He's always resentful of anything that smells like pity, although maybe he'd be mollified by the stab of contempt for whoever it was who twisted him this way.

"I could break you," Rorschach says grimly. When he looks up, his eyes are flat and unreadable. Dan's blood sparks and burns when his thumbs move to rest in the hollow of his throat. The hint of pressure leaves him lightheaded.

"I know," Dan says. *And I could break you too, couldn't I. Just as easily.* And on some level, that is what this is about, Rorschach rolling over to expose his soft underbelly on faith that he won't be disemboweled. The least Dan can do is arch his neck and bare his throat. "I've always trusted you with my life," he says. "Why should this be any different?"

A twitch of muscle high on his cheek, and then his eyes are narrowed under a furrowed brow,

uncertain and slightly unfocused. "It is different. This makes everything different. Daniel. This—"

Dan interrupts by twisting at the hem of Rorschach's shirt, tenting it away from his stomach until his words give out. He leans in to rest their foreheads together. Rorschach allows it, exhaling steadily as his nose presses coldly against Dan's cheek, breath hot on his lips.

"Or, you know," Dan says, wanting to grin at his stubborn insistence. How long have they been dancing around each other, really? "Not so much."

He kisses him then, makes it a natural extension of his words, brushes of light pressure and teasing with gentle teeth at his lower lip, and god, there's no way that sound came from *Rorschach*.

He does it again, just to be sure.

"Daniel," Rorschach says, and raises onto his toes to push hard against his mouth. He's not quite breathless and only a little needy, but it's all Dan wants to hear, over and over. He slips his hands under Rorschach's shirt and drags his nails over the braille of scars and welts and the ridges of his spine, trying to draw out more rare noises.

As though taking that as his cue, Rorschach's fingers travel hesitantly down Dan's chest and over his stomach, just as they had in the alleyway earlier, and come to rest on the jut of Dan's hipbones. His touch is frustratingly light, and Dan rocks against his palms until his fingers curl and tighten, if only to hold him steady.

Dan hums encouragingly at the pressure, arches his back to press closer still. There's the fleeting impression of heat, solid and straining against his thigh, and then Rorschach is stumbling back. His hair's a mess, his ears and cheeks and snub nose flushed pink, mouth working like a landed fish. He looks shell-shocked and ridiculous.

He looks human and real and right.

Dan tells him as much, blurting the words out impulsively as he walks them both to the cot. Rorschach looks at him like he's some kind of idiot, and maybe he is. Maybe this is the dumbest thing he's ever going to do, and that includes dressing like a giant fucking owl and punching people. Still, they have long since transitioned from merely partners, to more than partners, now they are defining just what that 'more' is. He's right. It changes everything.

To hell with it, he thinks deliriously as Rorschach sits heavily on the edge of the bed. His legs are sprawled apart, and Dan knows it's not a deliberate invitation but he drops to his knees anyway, fumbling at the button of Rorschach's fly. *I can't be sensible all the time*.

He tugs the material of his pants away and the muscles in Rorschach's thighs snap taut when his fingers brush skin. He makes a noise like he's being flayed alive, hips jerking forward involuntarily. Dan glances up at him as he slowly runs his knuckles along the underside of his erection, hot and firm beneath his gray underwear, and the look on his face, god—

Dan ducks down to nuzzle and mouth at him through the fabric, breathing in the sour, musky scent of him.

"No, Daniel," Rorschach gasps out, plainly horrified. He flails, pushes away from him and backs up. His heels dig into the mattress and ruck the sheets as he crawls up the bed, flattening his back against the wall, all uncoordinated, jerky motions. "No."

He hugs his knees to his chest. The gesture is so painfully childlike Dan thinks his heart might shatter. "It's okay," he says, before he can stop himself. Of course it's not okay. Christ, just look at

him.

"No. Can't let you—" Rorschach shudders all over, lips pulled away from his teeth in a snarl that doesn't disguise his distress, even for a moment. "Degrading. *Debasing*."

Dan sits back on his heels, ignoring the way his knees complain. He could try to explain how it's not, it's really not, try to explain just how much he wants to do this for him, but he's pretty sure that would make things worse. Besides, he isn't certain which of them is supposedly being degraded.

"Hey," he says instead, climbing up to sit next to Rorschach. He's uncurled a little, but there's an epic battle between shame and lust playing out across his face. Shame seems to be winning, going by his downturned eyes and pained grimace. "C'mon. Come here. Nothing complicated, just—" He loops an arm over Rorschach's shoulders.

He sits there stiffly for a minute, and then by some small wonder, begins to relax and slide against Dan by increments until his face is pressed warmly against Dan's chest. They sit in silence, hands stilled, listening to the city noises, the scrape and murmur of the building's tenants, and the steady rise and fall of each other's breathing.

"Sorry," Rorschach says eventually, voice muffled by Dan's shirt.

"Don't be an idiot," Dan says, squeezing his shoulder.

[#]

The cot is barely wide enough for one man, let alone two, but exhaustion apparently trumps practicality. Dan wakes up with his nose pressed between Rorschach's bony shoulderblades, face clammy from his own breath. His hands are tucked between his stomach and the small of Rorschach's back, mostly numb from being crushed there half the night, but even that doesn't make him want to move.

Besides, he aches like a bastard.

"Awake?" Rorschach's voice is more vibration than sound.

"No." Dan hunches his shoulders and burrows deeper, experimentally drawing his fingers over solid muscle. "Definitely not."

Rorschach tenses, but makes a noise that's part amusement, part mild irritation. With a creak of bedsprings, there's cold air and emptiness where a moment ago there was comfortable, dense warmth. "Didn't think owls hibernated."

Dan squints his eyes open to watch Rorschach stretch his arms above his head, spine curving sinuously under his crumpled shirt. His pants are still unfastened and sag below his hips.

"Don't tease," Dan mumbles. It sounds a little less playful than he intended. Sitting up, he swings his feet to the floor and shakes the feeling back into his fingertips, hissing as the rush of blood prickles and stings.

Rorschach pins Dan with a complicated look—self-consciousness, creeping desire, resolute defiance—then grasps Dan's chin and tilts his face to the side, his thumb pressed under his lower lip and blunt fingers spread along his jaw.

"Pretty," he says.

Dan closes his eyes under his scrutiny (it can feel like a stripsearch, sometimes). He winces when fingertips prod at the bruised skin on his cheek. "Yeah, well," he says peevishly, trying to pull away without much success. He's still sore about his poor performance in the snow last night, doesn't really care for the reminder. "You should have seen the other guy."

He senses Rorschach lean closer. "I did. Luckily for you." There's something dark in his voice, but the rebuke is softened by a daring brush of his lips to the corner of Dan's mouth. It's hasty and awkward, but it makes Dan's chest squeeze tight. "Have to get to work. We close this case tonight."

Chapter 4

The door clicks shut as Rorschach leaves for his day job. Dan flops back onto the cot with a deep sigh that's just a little too shaky to be contented, and rakes his hands through greasy, unkempt hair. Rorschach's earnest attempt at intimacy has left him feeling strange and restless. It's clear how hard he's trying, and something so simple as a kiss is a big deal, one he initiates even more so. It's like yet another mask has been shed.

Layers upon layers, and the idea of digging through them all makes Dan a little queasy. God knows how many more he will have to peel back, before they can—

Before they can what? Have a normal relationship? The absurdity of the idea makes him want to howl until his sides ache.

He's not sure what either of them are in this for, but he's pretty sure it's not the sex. It's not like he's been won over by Rorschach's scintillating personality, either.

Maybe it's just another manifestation of their fucked-up codependency. Maybe this will never progress beyond the tentative press of fingertips, and shared body-heat in the middle of the night. And maybe he can deal with that.

Maybe, maybe, maybe. The word is starting to lose its meaning.

Dan doesn't know what time it is. Doesn't really care, because he has today off and he'll be damned if he's not going to foster some wickedness. His hands are cold, and when he curls his fist around dense heat it almost burns, makes him hiss and squirm.

He closes his eyes, and thinks of a face some would say only a mother could love.

[#]

Dan makes himself more useful later, at the municipal archives and the NYPL (with trademark subtlety, Rorschach had left his library card balanced on top of the kettle). He spends hours and hours in a mostly-empty reading room, poring over newspapers and cross-referencing microfiche until his eyes hurt.

By the time the clerk is hurrying him out of the building, several pages of his order pad are scrawled with details of a Roger Lamb: one time management at the Bank of New York; more recently an alleged white-collar criminal and proud owner of a string of acquittals for wire fraud and embezzlement.

Sometimes money really does buy freedom. Dan is ambivalent about that.

Outside, it's as dark and cold as ever. Fat flakes of snow drift down to be subsumed by the slush-churned sidewalks. Dan pauses at the foot of the steps, and reaches up to rest one hand on Fortitude's stony paw.

"Almost through," he says to the lion. The statue stares ahead, impassive. Dan draws on his gloves, and grins. "You remind me of someone I know. Only you're a slightly better conversationalist." He pats the immense paw and walks away, negotiating the busy avenue.

[#]

"Danny!" He is greeted with Hollis' usual good cheer. It warms him, even if the diminutive is starting to make him cringe a little. "Come in, come in. Beer?"

"Hi, Hollis," Dan says, smiling as he is led into the living room, deflecting Phantom's insistent crotch-snuffling with practiced ease. The fire is crackling away as usual, casting shadows that flicker and jump. It's blissfully warm. "Ah, no. Not tonight, sorry. Working."

"You gotten yourself a job, then?" Hollis produces a cheese and pickle sandwich as if by magic, presses it into Dan's hand.

"Oh, yeah! Yeah, but—thanks—I meant *work* work. Sorry to say this isn't really a social visit, heh."

"Well, that's too bad. What can I do for ya, then?" Hollis lowers himself into his armchair, pops the cap off his beer with a churchkey.

"I need to suit up for the weather, it's cold enough to freeze hell out there. I came by to grab the winter uniform." He takes a bite of his sandwich. The softness of the bread makes it seem ridiculously luxurious.

"You know, back in my day, I went out rain or shine in a pair of shorts..."

Dan laughs. "If you had thermal armor, you would've worn it though, right?"

"Oh, hell yeah. Lemme go fetch it for ya." He places his beer on the hearth as he gets up.

They walk out into the yard. Phantom sits on the threshold, more inclined to keep warm than follow them. Dan braces himself against the diagonal sleet and weaves between half-dismantled automobiles (and Archie's somewhat conspicuous tarpaulined bulk) until they reach the shuttered repair shop. The tracks squeal as Hollis lifts the garage door.

"So, hitting the streets tonight?" he asks, as the lights flicker on. The garage smells of motor oil and greasy metal. Dan is struck with an acute longing for his basement. "You're right. Filthy weather for it."

"Yeah. My, uh. My financial issues were partly down to some high-tech fraud game. We're gunning for the ringleader tonight. Some guy in Brooklyn Heights taking the banks for a ride."

"Not your usual territory, Danny boy." Hollis picks through his bunch of keys, then crouches to open a footlocker secreted under a heap of oily rags.

"I know. I'm kinda worried about it, to be honest." Dan hunkers down beside his mentor, helps him haul out the aquatic costume and the radiation suit to get at the thermal gear. "I dunno, it's...I mean, it's bank fraud, not narcotics or prostitution. Do I go about this the usual way? Can I just march in there and punch the guy out? Maybe I should just wait and let the cops take care of it this time."

"You're working the case with Rorschach, right?" Hollis straightens up with a groan, braces his hands in the small of his back.

"Yeah, of course." The Snow Owl suit warms quickly under Dan's hands. He bundles the gauntlets and cowl up in the cloak and nestles his finger into the downy fabric. "Okay, I see your point. Um. This isn't gonna be pretty, is it?"

"Probably not. Best foot forward though, and don't smile too wide when the papers take your picture." Hollis grins at him, switches off the lights as they exit. "So, how's living packed like sardines working out for you two?"

"Well," Dan says, pausing as the door rattles down. He should probably think of something suitably neutral, but blurts out, "he blows hot and cold, you know? I can't really tell if—"

He shrugs and gestures vaguely. He's suspicious of the speculative look Hollis is giving him, even if it's entirely his own fault.

"You know," Hollis says, slowly. "Back in the day, Captain—"

"Oh, god, Hollis..." Dan interrupts him. "Not right now. I mean, thank you, but—"

"—you've got enough on your plate without this old fool meddling, I gotcha." There's no trace of hurt or indignation in his voice, to Dan's relief. "Go on, get outta here. Be seein' you!"

Dan pauses at the bottom of the stoop to wave a farewell, collar popped and shoulders hunched against the winter night. Hollis is silhouetted by the warm glow of his sitting room, and in that moment Dan wants nothing more than to sit at the hearth with a beer and listen to him ramble on with tales of the Minutemen for hours and hours.

[#]

Rorschach is sitting at the table, face as dolorous as ever, scraping the innards out of a tin of something that looks like beef stew and smells like ass. He doesn't so much resemble a lion as a scavenging stray. The impression is not easily dispelled when he scissors a chunk of gristly meat between his back teeth.

"That's pretty gross," Dan says, dropping his bundle on the cot. He decided to bring the uniform with him instead of stashing it, so he can change indoors. He's feeling particularly decadent today.

Rorschach just shrugs and chews, lets the fork clatter in the empty can. "Edible," he says, once he manages to swallow it down. "What did you find?"

Dan hands him the order pad, lets their hands brush. Rorschach shows no sign of even noticing, and Dan becomes uncomfortably aware that he hasn't so much as glanced at him since he got in.

"Okay?" he asks, a knot of anxiety forming in his stomach.

"Hrn." Rorschach leafs through the pages of Dan's neat handwriting, deliberately evasive. "As suspected, machinations of a rich man trying to get richer." He looks at Dan finally, eyes flicking to the shapeless heap of costume and back again. "Get changed."

Dan registers the way this mouth works around the words, the way the sinew of his neck tightens as he swallows.

It makes some kind of fucked-up sense. Rorschach has made his physical attraction clear, even if he struggles to act on it. It's probably easier for him to rationalize something like this, to maintain some plausible deniability with... consensual voyeurism, or whatever it is.

Emphasis on sensual, Dan tells himself and immediately cringes, feels self-conscious, then a little ridiculous. His fingers hesitate at the neck of his button-down. *Oh, come on*, he thinks. *How many times have you taken the suit off in front of him without even thinking about it?*

How many times.

He slips the buttons of his shirt and shrugs it off, The cold air roughs his skin into gooseflesh, and with a mild kind of horror, he feels his nipples harden. He looks up. Rorschach is watching him

intently, arms folded across his chest, lips slightly parted.

"Uh," Dan says as he kicks off his pants and adjusts the waistband of his underwear. He flashes a grin, abashed. "It's cold in here. Don't judge me."

Rorschach just stares at him, unblinking.

He's so fucking weird sometimes.

Dan fishes a fresh pair of boxers from his holdall, then strips himself naked with one swift motion. There's no discernible reaction from his partner, stoic and restrained and leaning against the table.

No reaction, until he begins to zip on his costume, and then there's a stuttering rush of exhaled air.

Great, he gets off on me putting my clothes back on, Dan thinks, a cynical laugh threatening to bubble out of him. He probably should feel offended or something, but Dan's heard of stranger kinks, and the way Rorschach tries to adjust himself surreptitiously is completely distracting.

He draws the cowl over his head. The leather rumples around his neck. Rorschach finally breaks his silent vigil to step forward and pull it around his face, working the mask into place. His hands are warm and coarse.

"Nite Owl," he says, fingers dropping to curl into Dan's shoulder. He leans in, on his toes. Rubs his cheek against Dan's like a cat.

He's so short, and undefended without his hat and coat and mask. Just sinew and bone and pale skin, veins traced out in blue. Dan is very aware of how much broader and taller Nite Owl is, how much more imposing the armor makes him. It's a disorienting shift of power, and startlingly uncomfortable. Uneven. Not *right*.

He opens his mouth, tries to think of a way to explain this, without it sounding like a rejection.

They're so close, sharing breath now. The beef stew kind of makes it easier to break the mood.

"Walter," Dan says, apologetic. He touches his elbow.

It holds enough weight and significance. Rorschach takes a step back and visibly composes himself, deepens his breathing, squares his shoulders, tries and fails to suppress the brief flicker of frustration (and relief) that plays across his face. He nods. "Ready?"

"Ready," Dan says. He shrugs on his winter cloak, even though he is already stiflingly hot.

[#]

"Nice neighborhood."

The sidewalks have been cleared here, snow heaped in the gutters instead of being compacted into ice or stirred into brown slush. Yet more snow mantles the neat rows of townhouses, their windows glazed with blossoms of frost. The rimed skeletons of potted shrubbery stand guard on the stoops. Overhead, the stars are sharp and clear, glittering coldly in the night sky.

There's barely any graffiti, no huddled youths on the street corners, and all of the streetlights work. Dan has definitely felt out of place before, but never in uniform, out on the streets under the cover of darkness. "I think we're a bit surplus to requirements," he says.

"Hrn," Rorschach replies. If anything he looks even more incongruous, his noir styling stark and

gritty against the pleasant backdrop of the neighborhood. "Forgetting why we're here? No better than downtown Manhattan. Still drugs and violence, still prostitution. Merely kept behind closed doors, hidden under a thin veneer of respectability. Hollow and dishonest. At least our streets don't try to hide their true colors."

Our streets. Dan has to smile at the grudging note of pride in his voice.

"Disgusting," Rorschach continues, as they stride past a residence with its drapes open. The room is lit up, displaying its sumptuous decor for anyone who cares to look. "Vulgar demonstration of wealth, gratuitous showcase of material possessions. Presume the owner is insecure, seeking validation from neighbors." A considering pause. "Or, perhaps inviting opportunists, no doubt in order to take advantage of a lucrative insurance plan."

"Don't you think you're being uncharitable?" Dan says, slightly wary of the way the conversation is headed.

A disdainful snort. "These people. They don't know the meaning of charity."

"Okay, that's bullshit." Dan stops, grabbing the sleeve of Rorschach's trench and bringing him to an abrupt halt. "You've sat in my kitchen, eaten my food, slept under my roof god knows how many times. How can you turn around and say something like that?"

Rorschach pulls his arm free, glares at Dan from beneath the stormclouds that are gathering across his brow. Dan knows what he wants to say: *You're not like them.* At least he seems to realize how hypocritical he would sound, excluding Dan from his sweeping value judgment.

Not that it's ever bothered him before. Dan seems to be the exception to a lot of Rorschach's rules.

They trudge on, icy pavement crunching under their feet.

"Is that how it is, then?" Rorschach says, head down. Trying a different tack. "Don't care to be your charity case, Daniel."

"You're being an asshole," Dan retorts sharply, rankled by that special brand of passive-aggressiveness that Rorschach reserves for people he isn't prepared to hit. "And I'm not in the mood to be guilted into an apology when *I* haven't said anything wrong."

It's another two dozen steps before Rorschach drags his hands from his pockets, and rubs his palms together in a strangely prim gesture. "Perhaps should have given my words more consideration," he says, another dozen paces after that.

"And?" Dan prompts, pushing it.

A puff of air crystallizes in front of Rorschach's mask. "And. That's not how it is," he says gruffly. "I know. I apologize."

"Good." Dan glances over at him. "Apology accepted."

"Simple as that?"

"Why make it difficult?" Dan shrugs, offers a mild smile. "You can pray a few Hail Marys later if it's penance you're after."

"Not religious," Rorschach says flatly. "Not any more." He slows his pace, makes a small gesture at one particular brownstone on the other side of the street. "That house, there."

Dan nods. "Around the back."

[#]

They scale the wall into the small square of yard and loiter uncomfortably in the building's shadows, conscious of how suspicious they look. The house is dark, save for one window on the uppermost floor; the room lit with the green glow of a computer monitor.

Rorschach crouches by the back door, fishes a roll of lock picks from the inside pocket of his trench. He nudges up his mask to tug off his gloves with his teeth, spits them into his lap. He holds the torsion wrench between pursed lips while he selects the right pick.

Deft fingers twist and slide the tools into the keyhole. Dan watches, rapt, and tries not to give himself away.

"Stop that," Rorschach mutters, releasing the torque and starting over. And under his breath: "trying to concentrate."

"I can go stand somewhere else, if you like." Dan tries to feign innocence, grins despite himself.

Rorschach hushes him brusquely, and after a few more minutes of nimble maneuvering, manages to get the door open. "Poor quality lock," he says, pointedly. "Cheap."

"Yeah, yeah." Dan slips past him, into the darkened residence. It's thickly warm in comparison to the frigid night air, and makes Rorschach's blots stir and spread. Dan feels his own face flush under the sudden change of temperature. "You can lecture me later, when I actually have a house to lock up."

They slink quietly through the kitchen and into the hallway. Dan's investigations turned up no evidence that Lamb has a wife or partner or children, the single overcoat on the coat-rack seems to support that. Dan leans through a doorway into what must be the living room. Minimal decor, no pictures on the walls or framed photographs on the mantelpiece. If he does have a family, they're not the sentimental type.

Rorschach is standing at the foot of the stairs, gesturing impatiently: stop messing around. He jabs a gloved finger: upstairs.

Dan takes point, and finds he's decidedly unstealthy without the knowledge of which floorboards creak loudest. Rorschach fares better, two paces behind and learning from Dan's missteps. There's the rhythmic click of computer keys being struck, drifting from a room on the top floor. The noise doesn't falter. Fortunately for them, their quarry is intently focused on his task.

The door is closed. Without ceremony, Rorschach kicks it open.

"Holy—" Lamb scrambles out of his chair, fumbles a pistol from the waistband of his slacks and aims it with unsteady hands. "What are you doing in my house!" he says, voice rising with an upswell of panic.

"Roger Lamb. Some discrepancies in your finances," Rorschach says, advancing on him. "Came to audit your accounts." He crowds the man into a corner of the room, grabs at him and Dan's heart leaps into his throat. Before he can urge caution, Rorschach twists Lamb's wrists upward and a deafening retort tears the air and sprays plaster down on them from the ceiling.

Rorschach grunts, and plucks the gun from Lamb's slackening grip. "Hope you have a license for this."

"Jesus," Dan mutters, ears ringing painfully as he shakes debris from his armor. He bites back the urge to snipe at Rorschach for his recklessness. Instead, he takes the pistol from him and ejects the magazine.

Lamb seems less stressed now that there isn't a loaded firearm in play, and gives them some back-talk as Rorschach cuffs him. "Did you take a wrong turn at 42nd street?" he goads. "Shouldn't you be roughing up whores or something?"

Rorschach shoves Lamb into the wall, bristling. Dan catches his arm before he can slug him in the stomach. "Easy," he murmurs. Rorschach gives an irritable huff, but relents.

Dan leans over the office desk, inspects the setup. There's a stack of hard drives, daisy-chained together with a thick twist of cabling. They grind noisily in time with blinking lights on a device that he recognizes as a 600 baud modem. The beige monitor displays blocky lists of digits, cursor blinking expectantly at the bottom.

"Mm, sixty-four kilobytes of memory. Sophisticated stuff," Dan says, trying to suppress the enthusiasm in his voice, without much success. "You don't normally see this kind of telecommunications hardware outside of banks."

Lamb laughs derisively. "I don't know what you think you're doing," he says. "I *know* people, you realize." His shirt is smudged with powdered plaster and gunshot residue. "Lunatics. You think you can break into my house? Treat me like a common criminal?"

"Criminal is criminal, regardless of status," Rorschach curtly informs him.

"Like you would know," Lamb says, contempt plain in his voice. "You're no better than the scum you lock up. Animals."

Dan sits himself in the leather chair, taps at a few keys experimentally. It seems to be a fairly simple interface despite appearances, responding readily to a few basic DOS commands. The display refreshes, a new stream of green digits stutter down the screen.

"Keep the streets safe for people like you," Rorschach is saying, equally venomous. "Can't avoid getting our hands dirty. Have learned not to expect gratitude."

"You've crossed the line, coming here," Lamb says. "Got ideas above your station. Who do you think—*ufff*"

"Rorschach," Dan says, sighing. He pages through a few more screens, sees a pattern beginning to emerge. "Okay, he's been interfacing between the bank and numbered offshore accounts, siphoning money using the decrypted data and routing it through—"

"Don't need the details, Nite Owl," Rorschach says. "Had enough of this. Call it in."

"Alright." Dan turns in the chair to address Lamb, who coughs and groans, doubled up as far as the cuffs will allow. "Hope you don't mind if I borrow your phone," he says. He lifts the receiver, disconnecting the modem with a harsh digital scream.

[#]

Neighbors twitch their drapes, or stand at their windows and watch openly as Lamb is escorted to a car and bundled into the back. Officers carry armfuls of equipment, lit up with the blue-red flash of police lights. Dan follows Rorschach's hasty retreat towards more familiar territory, keeps pace with little effort.

"Glad that's over," Dan says, the weight of the past couple of weeks already easing off his shoulders. God, is he glad. He's under no illusions, though. Lamb will be bailed almost immediately, but it will be hard for him to buy himself all the way out of this one—especially once the money is returned to the accounts it came from.

Rorschach makes one of his noises. It could be an agreement, but he says nothing further.

After a long stretch of uneasy silence, Dan tries again. "Hey," he says. Rorschach glances at him, marked by a slight tilt of his head. "Don't let what he said get to you. We do good work."

"I know that," Rorschach replies. "I'm not."

"Well, good. Okay." They walk onwards, ice crunching under their boots, turning into the alleyway that will take them to their hidden cache. Still, the silence simmers, and Dan can feel the pressure building up. Everything is different enough that he can't *not*—

"Okay. Okay, god, you know—" he says finally, and lets the words trip out unchecked. "You scared the hell out of—what were you *thinking* in there, walking right up to the guy when you could see he was armed? Jesus, man..."

Rorschach shrugs nonchalantly. "Wasn't pointing it at *me*, Daniel."

Wasn't pointing—

Of all the ways to—

He tips his head back, face to the heavens, and laughs, deep and honest and slightly too uncontrolled. Rorschach halts, waiting a few paces ahead for him to collect himself. *Oh, you bastard. You stupid, arrogant, infuriating—*

Dan barrels into him, hears the wind rush out of him as he thuds against the wall, but he recovers quickly enough and loops his arm around Dan's shoulders, pulls him down into an unexpectedly intense kiss. The latex slips over Dan's lips, slick and heated with Rorschach's breath; it makes his blood jolt and slam through him.

He presses his tongue against the thin barrier of fabric, slides inside Rorschach's mouth and is rewarded with a low, choked groan and his hands scrabbling over his back and shoulders.

Dan's own hands coax Rorschach's body into a long arc, trail up to pull away the scarf, coat, shirt collar, peel him back (layers and layers and layers) until his neck is indecently bare. Rorschach smells of grime and blood and latex, and Dan can feel the vital thrum of his pulse when he mouths at freckled skin, tendon and muscle working as Rorschach sucks in air like he's drowning.

"Daniel," he says, voice rasping with the effort. Daniel, Daniel, always Daniel, except now that it's needy and breathless, Dan wants him to *bite*, wants his gloved fist to twist in his hair, wants to harness that raw violence for himself.

Dan's inhales, feels air catch and burn in his throat when Rorschach's fingers clench hard at the back of his neck, and pull him away.

[#]

It's reckless of them—if not downright stupid—but they scale the fire escape and tumble in through the window still fully-costumed. The repercussions could be dire: blown cover and no daytime face to hide behind, but that's an issue for later. It's not important right now. Even turning on the light isn't

important right now.

They clash in the semi-darkness of the apartment, sickly light from the street outside drawn over them like camouflage and pooling the shadows between them, shrouding where they meet. The tenement is loud tonight, but the music and shouting is reduced to a hum, just static beneath the pounding in Dan's ears.

Rorschach's trench and hat and suit jacket are shapeless on the floor, and he is tearing at the trappings of Dan's armor with impatient hands. It's unbearably hot that he's doing this, that he wants to dismantle him like this, but he's moving like a predator and there's something about the sharpness of his motions that is concerning Dan: the harsh breath through his nose, the abrupt crash and turn of his mask.

It's far from the first time Rorschach has been angry at him, though usually the reason is more immediately obvious. Dan relishes the edge it brings, even as he knows he should stop, make sure he's okay.

"Steady," Dan says, hissing as a roughly-tugged zipper nips at his skin. Another piece of armor hits the floorboards, and he's down to his socks and underwear. "Hey, steady. What—"

Rorschach cuts Dan off with a still-gloved hand flattened against his bare chest and pushes, makes him step backwards to keep his balance. He sits clumsily when his calves hit the bed frame hard. There will be bruises tomorrow.

Rorschach bears down after him, and even just in shirtsleeves he's intimidating enough, makes Dan give up his words and move until his shoulders are against the wall. It vibrates against his skin, driven by a heavy bassline somewhere in the building.

He's being straddled, Rorschach is pulling and moving him until they fit together as best they can, but there are too many uncompromising angles and lines for them to ever align perfectly. For a small guy he's heavy, dense muscles laid over that whipcord frame, sprung like a switchblade but Dan knows that already, it's just another one of the inexplicable reasons he—

He closes his eyes, tips back his head, bares his throat and tests an old fantasy, lets himself believe he's at his partner's mercy. He can feel the tight flex of Rorschach's inner thighs against him, the heat and weight of his cock pressed alongside Dan's own and god, it's almost enough just to feel that, to feel the heave of his chest and the pressure of his fingers where they dip into the flesh of his arm.

Dan grasps at his waist and rises against him. The friction spurs his pulse into a thunderous thing and narrows everything down to breath and hands and heat.

Rorschach groans, and hearing himself seems to trigger an immediate recoil. He shoves at Dan's shoulder hard, pulls away to slump back heavily. The fight goes out of him like a switch has been flipped.

"What is it?" Dan says, catching his breath. He knows better than to try to comfort him by drawing him close again, so he offers something else. "Hey...talk to me."

"This," Rorschach says tightly, and breaks off.

Dan charts the swell and break of his mask and can easily imagine the face beneath, eyes squeezed shut above a pained grimace.

"This." Rorschach tries again, more evenly. Slightly louder, over the building's noise. "Only know this from dark places. Alleyways." A difficult pause. "Tawdry apartments. Never thought I...ehn."

There's no condemnation in his voice, but the self-disgust is rolling off him in waves. Maybe it wasn't Dan he was angry at, after all. The thought makes him ache.

Dan risks his fingers to touch Rorschach's cheek briefly, teasing the ink into hypnotic swirls. They see the very worst of the city, sometimes, all the sordid, ugly little habits kicked out into the light. Each one leaves its own grubby mark, and he knows now – it's hard to get clean again, living between the cracks.

"It's not always like that," he says. It's weak even for a platitude, but he doesn't know what else to say.

"Yet, here we are." Rorschach sounds defeated, and bitter about it.

"Stop, then," Dan says. He shifts slightly, subtle indication that it's okay for Rorschach to move off him, if he wants. "It's alright."

Rorschach drags the mask off, wads it up into his hand. He looks either furious to the point of tears or utterly miserable, and Dan can't tell which. It's probably both. "You don't understand, Daniel," he says, voice choked. Leans in and kisses him hard, urgently. His fist balls against Dan's jaw, latex bulging from between his fingers.

He's right, Dan doesn't understand at all, and it's pretty clear that sex will be anything but enlightening, no matter how much he wants it to be. Despite the lust cascading through him, heightened by that demanding mouth, he draws back. "Look...I don't think we should do this right now. You're—"

"No." Rorschach winds his fingers tightly into Dan's hair, pushes against him like he wants to melt right in. "Shouldn't." He pulls Dan's head back, scrapes crooked teeth over his throat, the underside of his jaw. He sounds lightheaded, distant. "Going to anyway."

"God," Dan says, the word high-pitched and shaking out of him, too loud in the small apartment. Rorschach picks up a rhythm, rutting against him in fierce jerks that make the bed rattle and creak. It's all Dan can do to cling to him, overwhelmed by the sensation and heat and god, *Rorschach*—

He starts, almost loses his grip as a loud thump lands near his ear. Someone is pounding on the wall. Rorschach stills instantly.

"Hey, Kovacs!"

His neighbor. There's diffuse, inebriated laughter: neighbor and *friends*.

"Hey! You getting laid in there, man?"

There's whooping and crude urging, more laughter. Rorschach presses his forehead into Dan's shoulder, his body tensed and shaking. A pained noise escapes from between clenched teeth; abject humiliation.

"Jesus," Dan whispers, prickling with embarrassment—for himself and for Rorschach. He rubs his hands down Rorschach's arms in the vain hope he can assuage some of his shame, but Rorschach pulls away, slips from Dan's lap and moves stiffly to brace himself against the table, head bowed.

Dan grabs a pair of pants, pulls them on and pads over to him. Hovers uncertainly, shivering. It's cold, without the heat between them.

The building caterwauls around them, disparate threads of shouting and music and arguments

weaving into something inharmonious. It's a long time before Rorschach speaks. "You're going tomorrow," he says, uninflected and only just audible.

Dan's not sure if it's a question. He desperately hopes that it is. It would be pretty fucking harsh otherwise, even for Rorschach, and he's not sure he can deal with any more emotional whiplash right now. "Yeah," he says. "Yeah, probably."

Rorschach dips his head in a long nod, and something that's been snagging on Dan's subconscious all evening finally catches. Just because he's technically a genius doesn't mean he can't be painfully oblivious sometimes.

"Uh, hey," he says, running his fingers through his hair. "When I go. Do you mind if I leave my sleeping bag here?"

Rorschach looks up at him sharply.

"I mean, the way some patrols go, it would be practical to, uh..." Not *very* practical, but that's not the point. "If you don't mind."

There's a long silence, and he can see Rorschach is carefully weighing the words, examining the implication with the same acuity he employs in their investigations. Dan knows he was unsubtle. That's also not the point.

Rorschach has to swallow before he speaks. "Don't mind."

"Good," Dan says, letting relief creep into his voice. He rummages for a sports sweater, drags it over his head. "Good. Okay, you know what? Wait here. I'll be right back."

He swings himself out of the window and up onto the roof, damp gravel biting into his feet through his socks. The paper is soaked and pulping, but the beers are still there. He slips them into the pocket of his sweater and climbs back into the building.

Dan scoots off the sill as Rorschach flicks on the light, raising an eyebrow at the clinking noise. Dan pulls out the bottles with a flourish.

The quirked brow becomes a frown, but Dan is not going to be so easily deterred. "I know you don't drink," he says, preemptively. "But I think we earned it tonight." *And Christ, we could both do with it.*

"Don't have a bottle opener," Rorschach says, settling himself back onto the cot. He thinks that's something to be smug about, but Dan has him foiled.

His waiter's apron is slung over the back of the chair. He delves into the pocket and comes up trumps, waves the opener in Rorschach's direction. It's pink, and the handle is shaped like an elephant. "No problem."

Rorschach actually rolls his eyes. The return of his sardonic demeanor is reassuring, even if it feels like something forced back into place, layers pulled tight around him once more. Dan hands him an opened bottle, sits next to him.

"Thank you," Rorschach says, in a tone that suggests if he had a houseplant, he'd be watering it as soon as Dan's back was turned.

Dan ignores him, pops the lid off his own bottle and tilts it toward Rorschach in a toast. "To, uh..."

"Partners," Rorschach suggests, inclining his drink.

"Yeah." Dan smiles. He knows what Rorschach means, but the truth can be double-edged in the strangest of ways. The bottles clink together. "To partnership. For many years to come."

Rorschach takes a sip, grimaces, and leaves it on the floor for the rest of the night.

[#]

It seems an impossible contrast of temperature: the ice-cold numbness of his feet where they hang over the end of the bed, and the warm clamminess of his face, buried in Rorschach's chest. His shirt buttons dig into Dan's cheek, and his breath is catching in his throat. It's not quite a snore, but still incredibly annoying because Dan's somehow hungover from just one beer and trying to drift off to sleep again.

Dan nudges him. It gets worse, if anything, a new raspy edge when he inhales. Dan digs his elbow in a bit harder.

Rorschach shifts to knee him the the groin with expert precision, and rolls him out of bed. Dan squawks, grabs at the covers—the snow owl cape: not just for crime fighting—and manages to drag it with him in a Pyrrhic victory.

"You're such a dick," he says, with some degree of fondness.

"Have things to take care of today." Rorschach is sprawling out on the cot, expanding to fill the available space like a particularly caustic gas. If he was a chemical, Dan decides, he'd be labeled 'irritant'. (Among other, more explosive things.)

Dan picks himself up and ambles toward the bathroom. "I appreciate the motivator, but coffee works just as well," he says. "For future reference."

[#]

Standing in the foyer of the bank feels like a persistently recurring, infinitely tedious nightmare, but Dan takes pleasure from the knowledge that he's going to wake up from it this time. The smiles aren't any more genuine, but perhaps the apologies are; he is a valued customer again, after all.

Some discrepancies in their records, they tell him, caused by teething problems with some new technology. The issue has been isolated and fixed. It won't happen again. Very, very sorry for the inconvenience, sir.

Dan smiles amiably, and doesn't question their hasty dissembling.

Next is the Gunga Diner. Dan's manager eyes the bruise on his jaw and his grazed knuckles, and hands over his pay with no questions. He's less gracious about him quitting, but Dan figures the turnover is high enough that he can probably eat here in a month's time without feeling uncomfortable. He already doesn't recognize a couple of the waitstaff.

The streets are wet, the sky pale and weak. A thaw is coming.

[#]

He's back at the apartment again by ten o'clock. Rorschach watches him as he gathers his things, rolls up the blanket and sleeping bag, stows them under the cot. His armor feels bulky under his jeans and sweater, makes him feel clumsy.

"Tonight, then?" Dan says, hefting his bag over his shoulder. All the paperwork is stuffed in there under his worn clothes. The bailiff's letter rides in his back pocket, still unopened. "Patrol, as usual?"

Rorschach nods.

"So, uh." Dan shifts on his feet, awkward. "Thank you. For everything. I don't know what I would have done without you, man."

"Would have managed," Rorschach says, with a wry twist of his mouth. "Eventually."

Dan wonders if he can get away with a bear hug. Probably not. He extends his hand instead. "All the same."

Rorschach stares at his hand, takes it cautiously. They've done this many times, gauntlet to glove, congratulating each other on a job well done. Never as Daniel and Walter, though, skin to skin, with the admission that they are men beneath the masks and all the vulnerability that entails.

The handshake becomes something less rigid and formal, a clasp, then a brief embrace. Dan flattens a hand over his shoulder blade, then lets it fall away.

"You really need to shower," Dan murmurs.

"Don't test me, Dreiberg."

[#]

Dan stops for groceries on his way to the brownstone: bread; milk; eggs; the morning paper. A quick glance suggests their bust wasn't front-page news. There's a slightly panicked tone to the headline, hyperbole about human rights or some such, and while the black-and-white picture nested into the article is moiréd and grainy, the man depicted is definitely not Lamb. He tucks the paper in with the rest of his shopping.

It takes him a minute to find his keys, settled to the bottom of his overcoat pocket, and a concerted effort to open the door. There's over a week's worth of mail and fliers on his doormat and they offer up a surprising amount of resistance. He sorts through the pile immediately, separates the envelopes that look like they could contain bills and takes them through to the kitchen.

He throws the bailiff's letter in the trash without even opening it, loses it among brightly-colored takeout menus.

The house feels stale, dusty. Dan cracks open the kitchen window, lets in a brisk gust of air to chase out the stuffiness while he clears out spoiled food from his refrigerator and fixes himself something to eat. He sits himself down with a coffee, unfolds the paper, and feels his stomach sink as he reads.

The article *is* about their bust, in the worst possible way.

There's commentary about the gray areas of the law, where the line is drawn. Whether vigilantism can be defended on moral grounds when it starts encroaching on private property – and into people's homes. *Give the American people uniforms over costumes*, one sub-heading declares. A brief interview with one Senator Keene follows, expressing some strong anti-mask sentiments. He declares them 'nothing more than masked criminals', and suggests vigilantism should be abolished for the safety of the country and its citizens.

Dan grimaces and drops his slice of toast back onto his plate, suddenly not hungry at all.

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The shower is hot, divinely so. It's enough to make him dizzy, but it's what he really needs right now, to sway under the water and watch the grime sluice away. It's not a symbolic thing, just a skin-deep cleansing. Everything leaves its mark.

The first scrape of his razor over his lathered cheek is pleasurable for entirely different reasons. He lets his mind wander as he shaves, and thinks of how a stubbled jaw feels against his own, and of the rise and fall of another's breathing. Those tenuous, fierce connections, and how they fit into his life as if they were always supposed to be there.

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Walter is poring over the paper when Dan pads back into the kitchen, barefoot and toweling his hair. "You're early," he says, grinning and grinning.

He swallows a mouthful of Dan's breakfast, taps the paper with his pen. He's annotated it with angry red scribbles. "Seen the news, I take it."

Dan says nothing for a while, just brings more toast, pours them both a fresh mug of coffee and sits opposite. The year has started out tough, and it looks like it's only going to get harder for them. So many things could break their partnership, could hold a mirror up to all their juxtapositions and send them reeling, but now there's something more in the balance.

Yes, he decides, as he watches Walter butter both sides of his toast and scowl at some private thought. *We aren't going to lose this*. It's taken a decade to get this far, and who knows where they will be in another ten. They aren't going to lose.

What doesn't kill them can only make them stronger.

'75 will be their year.

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