formaldehyde

claire e k

In the Blue Sea, there are Formics. They are reversed.

The only things that can fight the Formics and neutralize the reversed threat are pyrethroids---but no one calls them that. They are mechs. A degraded pilot cannot pilot a mech anymore, and no one truly wants to go to serve cured from death in the Gestalt for the rest of this world's lifespan.

Two pilots who are degrading in very different ways strike out for America.

Categories: F/F

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001 / Zero things remain. [ONE]



002 / Krrrrrr

There are many sounds in the haze.

Though now the sounds will stop so that the lights may return.

It has been four hours since her life ended. It is some seventy-two hours before her life should end, unbathed in the red solutions running through a mech's arteries.

Her body crushed in the cramped closet of the iron giant is hot.

Sweat drips down her brow and runs down her neck into her nape

Breathe—breathe—breathe—breathe

and pools in the small sticky areas all over her body, the divots where her skin goes down in nice little valleys.

She has to focus on not hyperventilating, she thinks.

It is a common enough response to danger Seon knows

(*That's me that's my name—Seon—Twenty Four Seon born and raised like any other Seon* she thought*)*

and she wryly thinks that only against another pilot has she ever been in true danger. Even when she obtained that dreadful scar, she never was in *that sort* of danger, the sort where there was no proper resolution

On her terms—her terms

no proper resolution which ended on a happy note for her, anyway.

She tries to move. Her arms are folded against her chest, because they will not fit in the small closet in the belly of the beast. The same goes for her legs, where purple bruises spread, not mollified by the lack of motion or movement.

She is still wearing her jumpsuit. There used to be a red patch on its shoulder in the shape of a stripe, and a Korean flag. But they were removed four hours ago, and thrown into the sea.

She tries to push outward, for her body aches.

No luck.

Her first clear memory of the now comes, is created, when the closet door finally slides open. Seon realizes how cold her body is, how drenched it was, in the closet, when she crumples to the floor—her legs having given out.

Her eyes crane upward

(*Behold an angel come to save us* she thinks suddenly)

Levitating, rising unbidden, to meet the gaze of her captor. Large and imposing in this fisheye perspective, bloated *she thinks* compared to the small light body Twenty-Four Seon has herself. (*And yet they aren't all too different* she thinks trying to be *fair* ; no Seon is truly fat)

Her black hair is the vantablack material you see when a Formic pops, when its light-absorbing gore falls down into the cerulean sea below. *That* hair absorbs the light radiating about her head like a devil's halo

An indication of GUILT of GUILT of GUILT get me out of here

it is a coronet black as sin.

Twenty-Four's gaze trace her captor's lips, which are ruby-red, still done up with the makeup of last night. Her face white is like the moon in the sky, solid and pure and undefiled, a last record of this world before the Formics.

Her eyes drop down to the contours of the imprisoner's body, tracing them, committing them to memory (*for what purpose?*) —her body reacts involuntarily as the queen of devils before her takes a single step forward, one that appears more as a lurch to Twenty-Four but is inarguably *intentional, measured.*

Hi sweetie says this other Seon.

"Sweetie," she says again.

"Up," she says for the third time, Twenty-Four only now thinks *That's what those words mean,* her brain is running on autopilot, filtering out the stench—not of sweat, hers is bereft of a smell (then of what?)

Twenty-Four stands up. Her feet wo

(*Pain lances through the soft and tender flesh of Twenty-Four's belly and it feels as if it will rupture in a spray of red gore once more—but it does not)*

bble; below her tracksuit she is a canvas of bruises.

"We're out of Korea," announces her captor

Ten Seon

whose name returns to Twenty-Four (it is Ten! It is Ten Seon).

Twenty-Four looks at her mutely.

Ten's face is ambivalent, emotionless. The moon threatens to turn to its dark side, with it will go the life-giving substance Twenty-Four needs.

"Respond when I say something to you, please," Ten says.

Twenty-Four is silent for another moment, but this time only because she is frozen on how to reply.

"I," she weakly and finally replies, "I'm glad?"

"Hm," Ten nods, "That *is* nice~ And quite appropriate. Becoming of a good girl like you."

Ten stares at her. Twenty-Four Seon shivers. Her eyes claw at Ten's skin, but the piercing stares are deflected by the captor's iron demeanor. Unbidden Ten says:

"Ahaha hah ... Wow. Did you know you're cute~? I don't think it's *fair* to refer to you only by number. So I will call you Monocarpic."

She smiled sweetly. "I am Marie to you."

Mono

Twenty-Four Seon

discovered three things that day. The first was that she had a hitherto unforeseen and unknown ability to desire death. The second was that Marie took many drugs when she struck out for America. The third was that Mono was hooked on drugs.

003 / Fifth Commandment

She has an idea. But first of all it hinges on *escape* from the closet.

But the third time that *Mono* is dragged from the haze is not for drugs.

"How is it?" Marie asks.

Mono hesitates. To be safe:

"Fine."

The answer seems to neither please nor upset Marie. The full moon wanes and then waxes but there is no threat of bipolar flip to new.

"I see," Marie says.

Mono regards her captor with a mix of disgust and awe.

"Well~" Marie continues, "Stand up."

Mono fumbles a moment, scrabbling

she won't begrudge me this look at my body

until her hands find a solid hold on the wall, on one of the shelves, and with her upper body strength she manages to haul herself off the floor, both legs wobbling.

There's something painful to the *prude* inside Seon about showing herself to another person like this—even someone like Marie. She'd almost rather return inside the dark closet.

"You've been good," Marie says, "very, very good!"

Mono is silent for a second, and then she remembers. Marie's face has already begun to darken, when Mono stammers out:

"Uh—Ah—I—Ah, thank you,"

Her captor's lips purse. She looks at Mono.

"Listen," Marie finally says and her tone is devoid of the cutesy mask Mono has become so used to,

guardrails

"If you don't respond when I say something I'll kill you.

"If you don't respond immediately I'll hurt you.

"If you don't respond in a respectful way I'll hurt you and then I'll take something away from you, a body part or a right or something you'll dearly want for when it's gone.

"If you try to be smart I'll just take something away.

"Do you understand?"

Mono swallows.

The moon falls as Marie takes two steps forward into Mono, still leaning back, holding herself up on the shelves, forcing her head back down; Marie's body is bent at the hips unnaturally as she stares down with burning eyes at her prisoner.

A white appendage grows from the trunk of the moonhead before Seon and slams

FABHGN njnfwa bnfhJGJK m,l .....

against her head. Seon's head snaps to the right and impacts the side of the tiny closet

JNN

BHJGNA bnf AAAAAA n mmm

and there's a little bit of blood that comes from the gash present on it now

ggj ann nnn , ,,,,,,, ...

and Seon swims in and out of consciousness.

"Get up," Marie says.

Seon is insensate, the arm comes agai

KKKKKKKKKKKKKKKKKKKKKKKKHHH————————

n and again twice over and more blood comes and the gash is driven deeper

Get up

Mono breathes out, "Please don't hurt me," and as the arm revolves coming back to strike again she finds she is on her feet. The arm stops.

kK hghhhhh

Marie regards Mono with a new smile.

"Very good. You're a very good girl," she compliments Mono.

"Thank you," Mono responds automatically. Perhaps a yes ma'am would work she dimly thinks

swimming in and out of consciousness

Follow me, says Marie, as the darkness closes in.

Mono takes her first step in how many days? Only one, it's only been one day, she *thinks,* she hopes, since she came here.

She takes a second step. She's reminded of the lance of pain at her gut with that one, and stumbles—

then she falls over.

004 / Open up

Once again Marie penetrates the thick haze.

Open up comes the sound, "Open up," cooing.

S—Mono squirms, infantile, her ears still ringing

eeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee

but manages to stammer out a word, a "Ma'am" with the front of her mouth and a hoarse voice coming torn violently from the chest.

Mono is situated on Marie's lap, in one of the blank corridors common to all pyrethroids.

Marie's fingers deftly maneuver toward Mono's mouth. The foreign entities invade her, salty, slightly oily and unclean *worms* forcing their way into the buccal orifice. Fingernails clink against Mono's sensitive, hitherto cared-for teeth. Mono tries to flatten her tongue so the revolting taste of Marie's skin might be assuaged.

A dry pill is set near the back of her mouth. She begins to choke, "Swallow," she hears distantly—is caught between *response*

(*Yes ma'am!*)

and action.

"Yes ma'am," she chokes, the pill falls downward but she catches it with the swap to the esophagus, on the floor she greedily chokes it down—it catches, she summons saliva to wash it down, it doesn't take—

She spasms, hacking at the dry pill caught in her throat. Rolling off of Marie's lap, onto the floor, like a dead fish—

Strong hands wetted from sick breath and a mouth's spit find their way around—Mono's neck, thumbs pressing down on the little area where the pill is—working it, down—down.

Mono struggles.

Their eyes meet.

Mono's are wide and bloodshot. Her pupils are black.

Marie's are sparkling and playful. Her pupils are black.

Mono writhes. The pill slips down and suddenly she can

Gasp

breathe once more, or she would be able to if those hands did not remain.

Marie keeps them there, tightening, for a few seconds. Mono feels her head swimming. Blood pools underneath it on the floor; the gashes are reopened. It binds her hair together like a tacky tar.

Marie stares, and smiles.

Mono watches the scene desperately from what feels like a third person's point of view. Dissociated, floating about the room, in and out—78 shots and 52 cuts.

It is voyeuristic, ritualistic.

The pressure at her neck only barely felt by now stops. Marie's hands drop to her side. Mono pulls air into her lungs,

desperately gasping—unable to do anything more right now. She stares upward into the lights of the corridor.

Her chest rises as her muscles contract.

Into the fetal position she curls. It's too much. It's all too much for *Mono*— her entire body is warm, uncomfortably so, her head is in a daze, *and she's unable to think*— it surges up from her stomach and into her mouth, she tries to hold it in but vomit gushes from it in thin but somehow turgid chunks and flows, most of it water and drugs. The pill too, coated in the substance —

With lithe fingers Marie picks from the pool

Vomit mingling with Mono's blood, hair, and skin

and her right thumb *hooks* into Mono's cheek, pulling it to the side. Her teeth are exposed, her foul breath smelt by Marie who leans in close:

The left hand places the slick pill down onto her tongue once more, where it rolls back, Mono chokes, her head twists away, but Marie's right hand holds it still affixed, nailed into place like Jesus on the cross.

The pill tastes like vomit.

Mono chokes it down.

"Up," says Marie, and the reply is an automatic

yes ma'am

Mono stands up from the twisted, half-fetal position. Blood and vomit drip down the sides of her face and suit.

"Follow me," Marie says.

It is the first time since her being brought to the mech that Mono has been truly allowed out of that closet and its haze.

There is a shower in the mech.

"Why is there a shower in your mech?" Mono asks timidly.

"It's a home," replies Marie. "For me and you. Now~

"Strip," says Marie. She is smiling.

If this were Korea-43, and it were an order from a superior, Mono would not hesitate to do it. Neither of those things are the case, however.

Marie has laid out rules, and disobeying an order isn't punished by those rules. Though Mono has no doubt Marie would add another rule if she did, and instead punish her retroactively—like when she hesitated.

Marie has kindly given Mono a second's extra time to think by now.

Mono's finger fumbles about the zipper at her collarbone and then *pulls* it forward and down, the *vrrrrp* of metal and metal

interlaced unlocking. The line down the jumpsuit opens and it unseals, becoming a baggy mess around Mono's thin limbs.

The suit, though stained and bloodied, is a cradle and a shelter for her body. It slips down from her shoulders as she hurriedly removes it and renders her unsafe, more violated than even before

foreign entities invade her, salty, slightly oily and unclean worms

it crumples around her hips. Her hands pull the loose suit down the rest of the way, she *does not mind* the paleness of her arms, how they are exposed, how Marie watches her back intently like a predator— *she does not mind it*

(*if she did the drugs wouldn't stop anything*)

ha, haha, *she cannot mind it.*

The suit falls handily down the rest of the way. Exposing her legs to the light.

Mono's undergarments, thick and simple and devoid of eros, remain on her body. She looks hesitantly at Marie.

"That's enough," says the other woman.

A great pressure falls from Mono's shoulders. She slumps.

"Step into the shower," commands Marie.

She reaches up to the head and removes it; it stretches on a long length. She clutches it in claw-like fingers as if it's a gun as if she's unfamiliar with how to hold something, palsied warped talons trying to find a proper way to hold the metal showerhead —only partially succeeding.

The water begins to run. Mono stands over the black iron drain.

The stream impacts her body. It is cold, and it carries great force, causing her to stumble to the side as the spray cleans the grime and sweat and vomit and blood nesting in the subtle dips and divots in her flesh.

Marie adapts to her job with the frightening appearance of glee.

Does she take pleasure in torture, Mono thinks.

Is she a sadist. Is that all this is.

Is she doing this to *get herself off,* the thought floats as she winces and turns her body trying to shield the parts of herself that are still warm

(*who is she kidding she's freezing anyway*)

but the incising ray emanating from Marie's hands manages to seek out those still-warm places and eliminate the heat from their crevasses.

The spray of water shuts off. The discolored water falls into the sinkhole that is the yawning drain below. Mono's captor drops the showerhead on the floor.

Mono sucks in a breath. Her hair is still greasy and her body still feels unclean, with the layer of oil that has accumulated not having been washed off. She shivers, and as always her gaze is, torturously, strapped tightly to the floor.

"Good," says Marie. "How does it feel being clean."

Mono feels soiled. Marie blessedly does not punish her for lack of response—Mono is deemed worthy of the privilege of survival.

Marie steps backward, producing from one of the closets another pilot's suit tightly fitted to a Seon.

All Seons.

"Dress."

To focus on the bright side of things, at least it's nice that I don't have to wear my own suit again, Mono thinks.

The smell of that suit still overwhelms the pyrethroid.

She swallows down vomit.

006 / Stars

What is a Formic?



The proper 'first' of the Formics was dubbed 'Eve.' A malaised white thing with its face stretched out in a grimace, it had been present on the Earth—as an undecomposing corpse.

Not undecomposing as in it was inviolable, mind you—reverse rotting, as in its decomposition flowed backwards through time.

It appeared not to have any true skeleton, organs, or internal separation at first. As it undecomposed, this was proven to be false—an internal form emerged unbidden from the solid substance in time.

In 2014, Eve disappeared into the sky in a phenomenon now known as reverse starfall. (It appeared as if stars were falling in reverse onto the Earth—for those of you who don't know what a 'star' is, imagine one of the motes of light during a reverse starfall. My point was, at the time it was quite logical for that name to stick.)





Two years later, in 2016, 'Adam' appeared.

His black body absorbed all light; where Eve appeared as a hairless, naked human woman, Adam was male.

He rose up from the deepest depths of the sea one day. His rampage was in inverse; he reacted to things before they happened—based on the aftereffects of what happened around him.

He wandered the globe for 32 hours, targeting and destroying every major city in his path, before undergoing reverse starfall.

The Formics were not seen again for years afterward.

Four years after the US Department of Death Prevention created the first primitive Gestalts in 2122, the third Formic wave hit Earth.

'Formica,' in Latin, means 'ant.' Formics were called after this word for two reasons:

1. When they appeared here, their behavior resembled that of ants.
2. The compound created from the exposed edges of their internal dimension, on death, resembled ant venom, though its coloration ranged from red to jet black.

Rather than one large Formic, like the previous two, this wave was composed of numerous small ones (between one and ten meters in height), which tore their way out of the sea, ground, and in the case of the small ones—animals.

Humanity knew that it was necessary to meet Formics in a place that didn't put them at a disadvantage. The Department of Defense, therefore, created the first Pyrethroids.

The purpose of Pyrethroids was not to simply kill Formics. Not solely that, at least.

They were built to meet them. To match a Formic's inverted timeline with humanity's own. A Pyrethroid operates on the same battlefield the Formics do—not the battlefield of geography, but of sequence.

In their native configuration, a Pyrethroid acts as any heavy mech might.

The fight ends where it begins in Timestream A, the forward-facing timeline. The Timestream A Pyrethroid(s) receive the echo of the battle first—appearing as if the enemy emerges from its own corpse, the end already visible. Additionally, an inverted Pyrethroid is visible.

But once spooled, at the 'end' of combat in Timestream A (ie, when the Formic undergoes reverse starfall or 'escapes'—in reality pursuing backwards)—it joins the Formic in the inverted timestream, Timestream B. In Timestream A, the Pyrethroid appears to disappear the moment it merges with the *reversed* Pyrethroid—it has entered Timestream B.

From that point onward, the reversed Pyrethroid fights the battle normally.

Since the reversed Pyrethroid has to return to Timestream A at the beginning of the fight, this has the effect of (briefly) creating two extra Pyrethroids across the course of the fight. An extra one in Timestream A (the 'end' result Pyrethroid, having fought

1x in Timestream A already, and 1x in Timestream B), and the single Timestream B Pyrethroid.

However, once all spooling is completed, only one Pyrethroid is left over, at the beginning of the fight: the 'end' result Timestream A Pyrethroid.

If this all sounds complicated, don't worry. We'll get to hard examples in further lessons to aid your understanding.

007 / Land of Illusion

Marie's grin at Mono's evident discomposure fades as her head emerges from the surface of the ground, a mole climbing up a slippery greasy ladder. Her hands grip it in that same uncomfortable palsied broken manner as with the showerhead. (It dawns on Mono perhaps this is why she was so violent with the pills.)

"Darling I have to move the mech," Marie says suddenly. "Come up."

Mono quickly continues her ascent, ignoring the stabbing pain in her belly. As she hauls herself up, onto the floor, Marie quickly bends down.

Snap, comes the sound of the manacle around Mono's left ankle.

"... Ah ... Why do you have a manacle onboard the mech...?" she asks in a whisper—looking up, head turned awkwardly, to meet her captor's harried eyes.

"I came prepared," Marie says shortly. She hooks a chain onto the loop of the manacle. And steps away, attaching it to one of the various rails on the wall.

Mono swallows. Marie messes with where the loops attach to the rail. Her face twists in obvious frustration—she rattles it, once, twice, there's a sound of metal sliding on metal and she suddenly steps away satisfied.

Marie stares at it. She suddenly turns around—hisses *"Stay put,"*— disappears into the formaldehyde room.

Mono crawls to the rail as soon as Marie disappears. Her hands grasp the chain and she pulls herself up, up, off the ground, the discomfort in her own body

the stench and the rot

momentarily forgotten.

The chain is wrapped twice around the rail. Where the end of the chain and the beginning of the part formed into a double circle meet, a slashed incision marrs the former. The opened end bites around the middle of the chain and is violently bent to haphazardly close the loop.

Mono's fingers tightly grip the two split ends of the chain, almost pinching it.

She tugs, trying to separate them. Once more the thought occurs to her—to be scared of Marie's strength, that she can bend these metal chain links.

Unsquelching sounds from outside loud enough she can hear.

The wall to her right bends deforms and then explodes in slow motion (*Entropic wind,* Mono thinks); shrapnel rains across the interior of the pyrethroid

decorating Mono's back

and then a blinding shape rushes through its interior and exits out the left side, feet away from Mono—covered in blood. The shockwave alone knocks her into the wall and she's dimly conscious of a spreading pain across her entire body.

(The shape exits the right wall—it is healed. The shape exits the left wall—it is healed.)

She stares downward in this new, impromptu sitting position, and her body shivers. Somehow, she barely feels any pain at all, and her first instinct isn't to roll around crying on the floor.

(*It feels different from being harmed in a pyrethroid* , she thinks.)

She slowly extricates her hands from the chain and moves them around her body, sensing for injury (beyond that which causes the slight hum of pain at her back). Her right hand comes back red after a cursory patdown of her waist. The red reminds her eerily of Formic blood.

"This is bad," she says a lot more calmly than she feels.

Inverted sounds come from the outside of the pyrethroid, audible through the walls.

This is bad,

she repeats, searching for the injury. Her fingers close around something solid inside her side. She pulls at it.

Blood begins to fountain from her side as soon as it's dislodged from her current position.

Her hands are covered by now. (She thinks about how stupid removing it was, but she started already, didn't she? This is how you do it, for sure…) The black shard—it's almost cylindrical, and textured (fiberglass? she thinks sickly)—slowly comes guided by her teasing fingertips.

She suddenly has a grasp on it, and her hand slips around it—she grits her teeth and pulls out the shard as her side vomits scarlet onto the floor, onto her legs and body collapsed on the ground like this.

This is bad she says; the shard rolls across the floor, quickly shrinking and disappearing—the entropic wind washing it away. On the plus side! she was right, it w as fiberglass. Though if she dies at least

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There are sounds in the haze

Krrrrrrrr

There's voices too

DON'T YOU DIE HERE the awful voice—herself (other?)—hateful

And sensations.

Twenty-Four Seon is cognizant of lips pressing against hers. Pumping her chest—the pain of the hands against broken ribs is enough for her to know this for a fact. Air forces its way down her diaphragm. She coughs suddenly.

Marie stares back at her. Her eyes swallow Seon up in a separate world, a land of illusion.

"Do you love me," Seon says.

Marie shakes her head.

"No," she replies. "You're the worst person I've ever met."

008 / Get in the robot, Shinji

And Seon is already floating away again, back, back into the deep hazy void—devoid of color, neither black nor white.

The worst person you've ever met, she thinks.

What a *judgement,* she thinks. And all I've done—is what? Follow your orders.

The events of the last day

two days—?

are immaterial and hazy. They don't feel real, properly—they happen but are not.

It feels impossible to outsmart Marie; not because Marie is intelligent, but because of the tight leash Seon is kept on. Bitterly, Seon thinks: *I cannot escape.*

Unless Marie were to exit the mech or Seon were to be given more freedoms Seon cannot escape, not when she's—chained up or locked in a closet—

pools in the small sticky areas all over her body

not when she's treated like this. There is no *counterplay,* no battle of the minds, Marie is stronger and in every situation Seon has had to *acquiesce.*

'Mono,' she thinks. So quickly did she adapt to the name. So quickly did she integrate it into part of her consciousness. Mono is the name of someone who has already given up. Obedient toward her captor.

Will Seon continue to remain Seon, or will she be Mono? There isn't space for dithering now. It's one or the other.

"I see," Seon says.

Roughly shaken awake by trembling fingers clawing at her face, pulling her head by damp, long tendrils of hair into a pleasing angle. A recapitulation of a prior encounter. Her body hurts—she needs the drugs.

"S—" she croaks: "Stop—give me the pills—"

The hands drop from her face. Her captor surveils her.

Marie slowly and gently places one of the pills on the floor. She studies Seon.

Seon takes hold of the pill in trembling fingers, places it in her mouth—swallows it, all in one scrabbling motion. She pulls her legs up to her pain-wracked chest and belly (the original injury is all but forgotten now).

Marie stands up wordlessly.

Seon finds herself beginning to drift—*No,* she thinks, grabbing hold of the gossamer-thin strand of consciousness that still remains. But all that does is intensify the ache in her chest. *I need more,* she thinks, it will blunt the pain that remains. They aren't working yet. The pills aren't working yet. She needs them—immediately—

Her legs tremble, and she tries to pull herself up, to stand, back bracing against the wall—they collapse mid-motion and she sprawls in a pile.

"So," says Marie. "Is this your act of rebellion?"

Amusement. Mocking. Emotions mix together in her voice, and Seon's body rocks about and she whirls like one of those paper spinning things you see in the videos, and she brings her head up to meet Marie's eyes.

Marie's eyes regard her.

"Give me another one, please," Seon says, lowering her gaze, "my dosage is two."

Marie's eyes regard her.

"Please, Marie," says Seon. "I don't want to rebel against you, I just—the pain is *too bad,* I need more, it hurts, you were hurting me," Seon says meaningless things.

"I know it does, Mono," says Marie. "But first you have a job to do."

"Please, Marie," says Seon.

"I know the way better than anyone else, darling," says Marie, "it's no use pleading. *You* have a job to do. The brats who attacked us (and why would they? they should have known they'd die!) broke something in the robot. You have a job to do."

"No, Marie," says Seon.

Marie looks at her expectantly. "I promise I'll give you pills if you fix the robot."

"I can't fix robots," says Seon. "Please, Marie, I need the—"

"Stop talking about the pills.

"Stand up.

"Look at me."

Seon fumbles around, but her body suddenly decides— *now* it will stand, on Marie's orders. Not Seon—Seon is not the master of her own body, but a sprite locked inside it.

Seon looks at Marie. Marie looks at Seon, and steps forward. Half a foot of space remains between the two. Marie's breath has a stench to it. It smells like the mech-stuff in the formaldehyde room.

Marie's hand gently comes trembling to cup Seon's jaw. She strokes it.

"I will break all of your bones and hide your body in piss and vomit and pull you out and then drown you again and I will break this—" a finger taps her jaw, and then moves down to her collarbone—"and this—" and then the hand strays up, and her thumb rests on Seon's nose—"and especially *this pretty thing,* " and she leans in close: "and I won't let you die but I will *make you suffer. And it will always be this way*. This is how it is now. So.

"Fix the robot."

She clears her throat.

"Darling."

Mono starts to cry.

009 / Dummy Plugs

Down and further down does Mono descend. The rattling internals of the machine, biotic and abiotic both, grow more unsteady—louder—as Mono climbs down the maintenance ladders.

She is not *quite* a layperson who knows *absolutely nothing* about a pyrethroid. Despite this (she thinks morosely) the odds she'll be able to identify and deal with the problem are not in her favor.

Marie hasn't supplied her with tools, either—which is deranged. Does she think they're just *left* down there?

Mono sucks a breath in, and winces at the sudden pain that nevertheless emanates from her now mostly-healed ribs. She has to do it regardless, and she supposes there might be emergency repair kits *somewhere* in the maintenance tunnels.

The robot had stopped moving shortly after the fight. That is what Mono knows.

Orange lights bathe her, casting her in a motley of shades yellow ochre and red.

Her feet touch the floor, daintily, then drunkenly. She lets go of the ladder, stumbles and wobbles and leans against the wall.

Marie is next to her suddenly.

Hello, Mono! Marie says, and her voice surrounds Mono on all sides.

Marie stares at her with a hideous gaze not dissimilar to the glare of the worst Formic, and Mono brings her right hand, trembling, up to cover her right eye.

She tries to move forward but she feels Marie's presence beside her.

Now, darling, keep moving. You don't have all day.

Mono looks down at the chain at her leg, the chain that *wraps around, clenching—* and rises connected into the rail on the wall, like—like—like what?

Mono snaps her head from the chain, focusing only on what's before her; the yawning yellow hallway descending slowly.

She starts to walk once more with trembling gait. Each time her left foot moves there's a resistance as the manacle slides along the rail in the wall.

She stops. with the access port to the right. Her head slowly turns.

Marie stands next to it. Mono slowly looks back down, and fumbles blindly at the port. It slides open after a few seconds of working at it.

Her hands come up, awfully steady. They grasp the trunk inside, and pull it out.

It's *heavy*. She pulls it out—more like drags it—and it falls with a *thunk* on the ground, her hands still wrapped around the metal handles.

Mono pulls it up with a grunt of exertion. There's no way the engineers lug these things around like she's seen them do. This

has to be—has to be shoved full of bricks.

Good job, says Marie from her right and left. They stare down at her. She chokes back—something like a scream. I hate you, Mono thinks.

She drags the trunk; it's too heavy to just carry. Along the ground it scrapes. The chain attaching her foot to the wall rattles as she pushes her left leg forward—a grunt of exertion each time.

Forward.

It's orange.

Forward.

It's yellow.

Forward.

It's red.

The path splits here but Mono is attached only to one rail and she can't go through the tunnel—the tunnel that leads out of the maintenance areas. She sucks in a breath.

Down further into the haze.

Some minutes later she realizes it's hot when a bead of sweat trickles down her brow and falls on the floor.

She sucks a breath in, and the hot air feels like it's turning her throat into jerky. She coughs.

Where she is now … is around the Pyrethroid's 'gut area.' Would there be fumes from the M-furnaces?

There's no time to worry about that, darling, one of the three Maries orders. *Keep going and finding what's wrong*.

It shouldn't be so hot down here, should it, Mono thinks. Maybe there's a part of insulation that was busted when Marie entered that fight, and stressed her mech out too much. And it stopped the mech from working because of something to do with the internal pressure?

Midstep she bangs her head against the roof where it slants sharply downward. Her eyes track upward, and then she goes into a crawling position. The matted, damp hair stuck to her brow feels stringy, she notices, as she lifts her hand up to push it back.

She crawls through the maintenance tunnel, pushing the trunk ahead of her. The heat gets worse.

My face is melting off, she thinks.

A blast of hot air from up ahead alerts her to the breach in an artery of the mech—she suspects that's the culprit. She worries for a moment about the pressure—but the mech is both inert, and if the pressure breached already (especially without exploding the pyrethroid from inside out) it should have equalized.

She pushes through the heat, and unlatches the trunk. She opens it.

There are patches for sealing holes. Those aren't the things that she focuses on.

A knife.

Not meant for hurting someone, but. It's a knife. The heat momentarily forgotten, Mono's eyes linger on the blade.

She smiles and laughs unsteadily. Where can I hide this, she thinks.

Don't even think about it, says the Marie contorted beside her, legs and back and limbs and body contorted into a devil's spiral.

Seon's eyes are wide and frightened like a deer but her mouth curves up in a little anxious pointed smile. Her head turns slowly degree by degree. Her hands spasm and she almost loses her grip on the knife.

Seon swings the knife at the Marie at an awkward angle. It plunges into her exposed flesh, right where the neck meets the collarbone, and blood explodes out of it in a high-pressure stream. The knife cuts like butter and in the tiny space only SEON is moving so

Stop begs the Marie

she tightens her grip on the knife and swings it back again, ripping through bone and flesh by the shoulder, and

Stop, says the Marie, whose arm and head hang at odd angles.

again and

Please don't kill me, says the bloodsoaked Marie with dead eyes, scrambling away

again and

through the side the knife catches the Marie, and it unspools into a vile pool of guts and gore, intestines fifteen feet long, various little ornaments and baubles nestled inside

each time more blood coats it and her and the floor and then the Marie isn't moving anymore and

Krrrrrrr

Seon pauses. She smiles. The patches and the heat and the stickiness of the Marie's blood are forgotten.

There's only the sound of the haze.

010 / It Will Always Be This Way.

It's oddly *secure* going through the halls of the Pyrethroid. With a knife, even in this weakened body—a body that's been fully stabbed through with a Formic's lance—Seon really feels like she has the initiative.

She pulls herself out of the crawlspace. Her gut aches, but she floats on giddiness— *she has a knife! Escape is possible!*

Adrenaline marches through her veins, providing energy and dulling for the intense pain wracking her body.

One of the Maries cowers against the wall. A perfect framing, Seon thinks, and then she brings the knife down and down again, spilling brains out inside the ship.

She's covered in blood and gore by now, especially at her forearms—it's inconvenient, but she airily remembers that back in Korea-43 they were allowed to change their clothing. She won't be stuck covered in vomit like this anymore.

Red into yellow into orange. She walks, and feels the buzzing haze press warmly against her skull.

There are other Maries, but Seon feels there isn't a point in even giving them face by description or acknowledgement. When they're near she lazily reaches out and chops through them, and they're never not near—not in these walls.

The chain dragging her left foot back clinks as she comes to a stop. She ponders for a moment the ladder before her. Then she

grabs it and begins to pull herself up, holding the knife awkwardly in the same hand she places upon the ladder next.

She pulls one leg up and winces at the sudden feeling of pain—the real *bad* sort—at her gut. *Normal injuries* are easy to recover from, but Formic injuries are why pilots get added to the Gestalt. The chain at the rail provides no small resistance, and it takes a moment to ascend the first rung of the ladder.

Seon moves her first arm up. Then her next, the one with the knife. Then the right leg, and then the left leg, with the chain. Again—again—again—she ascends up the ladder slowly.

All her body is swathed in a dull aching coat. The more it hurts the more other Maries come. She absently cuts through another one contorted in the ladder's little space.

Why *are* there so many, she thinks.

Seon's head pokes out of the access tunnel and she looks around, briefly, before pulling herself all the way. The knife falls from her trembling hands and she frantically scrabbles at the floor, picking it back up and gripping it tightly.

She looks down at her bloodsoaked suit. The redness staining her hands, hands protected from the warm liquid by the thinnest skin-tight layer.

She clicks her tongue.

Seon walks forward and steps to the right so that the hallway walls hide her. She pokes her head out to view the situation.

No Marie in the room with her closet. Seon is now conscious that whatever this high is, adrenaline, she thinks, it will fade, and she won't have the strength to.

Do it.

Is Marie, perhaps, in the formaldehyde room?

She walks forward, to the left, up another ladder. And then forward again, until she comes to a port in the floor—

—she does not feel it. The slight whir, and feeling of momentum, that comes from a Pyrethroid moving. It *is* congruent, of course, with Marie having said it couldn't move, and why else would she send Seon down there (she thinks humorously that she had the opportunity but didn't even succeed in fixing the Pyrethroid. Instead she found this knife). But the elevator is in the synchronization mix, meaning *Marie* is in the Pyrethroid's body.

With her foot, she nudges the emergency release pedal. The red lights flicker on, and the elevator's locks disengage.

Seon's hand tightens around the knife. She positions it in the exact place where with a swing it'll easily slash through the throat of a Seon fading into consciousness.

The elevator shoots upward. Seon swings forward with the knife, due to her haste the angle is slightly off and it smashes against the frame. Sparks fly and the metal chips.

Marie is in there, and the synchronizing substance drips off her hair and suit and falls on the floor. Her eyes are wide, and like a predator caught like prey she freezes. Seon pulls the knife out of the frame of the elevator with both hands, then she thrusts forward at Marie's chest. (Where did the blood on her arms go?)

Marie grabs fumbling at Seon's arms, but doesn't get a good grip because of her malaised fingers, *but* on the other hand it slows the quick thrust enough for her to pull herself to the side, and

the knife hits with a metal-on-metal grinding sound the elevator frame. The blade screeches as Seon, whose arm is still in Marie's grip, drags it harshly up to where it will cut into Marie's ribs.

It sinks into flesh and blood, causing a *real warm outwelling* to coat Seon's hand. Seon's eyes narrow, and she pulls it back through the weakening grip to stab Marie in center mass, but Marie brings her other hand up to claw at Seon's throat, and the blow hits just right to cause Seon to hack and cough for a second, which gives Marie a little extra time to place both hands in a *simple squeezing grip* around Seon's throat and drag her into the elevator frame as well, which causes Seon's head to slam to the side—

CRACK

—against the side of the elevator, which causes her to drop the knife. Seon's head swims for a minute, and the haze threatens to encroach—

TWENTY-FOUR SEON

—but she pulls herself back into reality with another hacking cough, this one with blood in it.

Marie kicks the knife away. Seon's eyes fixate on it, and she grabs at the arms which are clutching at her throat. Marie pulls Seon toward her, and then pushes her slamming back again against the elevator. This time blood paints the frame. Seon tries to pull off the arms but Marie is still *wickedly, awfully* strong.

The haze threatens to encroach.

Silently, Marie looms over Seon, her arms still pushing Seon against the bloodied spot on the frame where she hit. Her

fingers tighten around Seon's windpipe, deadening the flow of air inside the lungs.

Seon tries to cough again but can't force air past Marie's fingers.

Marie smiles. It is a ghastly simulacra of a grin.

She hisses:

"See,

"It will always be this way."

The haze encroaches.

011 / Hobbling

"While I was preparing the pre-op shot, I thought of something that I really do need to know immediately. Did you fix the robot, darling" Marie says finally, staring into Seon's eyes with a hollow little grin. The edges of her mouth are tilted up slightly.

Pre-op shot?

"Ah. Uah."

Seon isn't expecting a question. Should she lie? There wouldn't be a point, Marie could just go into the pyrethroid and try to move it. But she might be able to move, to escape, while Marie is down there.

"Darling please answer next time. Hmmm. Did you *find the repair kit,* " Marie says.

Seon had thought Marie was ignorant of what was down there. That was why she had sent—? "How do you—? *Pre-op shot?"*

Marie pushes Seon back, back, back against the wall until Seon begins to feel pain. "Mono. Monocarpic. Mono Mono mono. You're treating me like a fool." Seon notices the slight sheen that covers Marie's skin like some sort of polymer plastic stretched tightly over skin. Her—Marie's—eyes are *wide, wide wide* as she stares right into Seon's soul.

"Marie, what's the—" she thinks better of it, without a beat missed, "I did, I did find the repair ki—" and here Marie cuts her off, "I'm sure that *you* didn't find that knife—I know just how it got into your hands— *just how!"*

She draws the knife from her thick coat, the coat she always wears except for when she's in the formaldehyde room, and she pivots and she *throws it* and it spins through the air and sinks perfectly and deeply into the metal wall with another grinding screech, and then she turns back to Seon faster than Seon even realizes what she did—"It FLOATED all the way up here, into your hands! It slid up after you went and fixed the robot like a dutiful little maid right into your hand and then it told you to—come up, didn't it? And stab me! Give the old—old hag twenty-three stab wounds, a modern-day Julius Caesar!"

She rears back like a horse with reins in its mouth. Seon tries to stumble back but finds a wall is the only place to go.

"Is that it? Might you be lying? Will that be your story? Speak up for the court!"

Seon cowers. She raises her hands in front of her face because if she doesn't see it it isn't there.

"I-I wasn't, it was, it—I took the knife, it didn't float," and Marie roughly shakes her:

"That's it? That's it Brutus? *Did you fix the robot? Will we be in Russia or not?"*

I didn't, she thinks it and then the words slip out of her mouth and then she follows it up frantically,

"I-I swear I'll—"

"Oh I know liars can swear, I've met a FAIR FEW over the course of my life—you can't control a *liar,* that's what makes them one, they love to swear. Well go ahead Mono treat me like a fool but you've blown your chance—treat a woman who isn't a

fool like a fool and she'll—what's the saying?—" but Marie doesn't continue off of this, and instead violently shakes Mono.

"WHY DIDN'T YOU FIX THE ROBOT? Because you thought you could *KILL* me?"

Seon stumbles over her own words, and all that comes out is babbling. All the courage she felt with the knife trickles out of her body.

"ANSWER ME! DID YOU OR DID YOU *NOT* THINK YOU COULD KILL ME?"

Seon's mouth hangs loosely open like a panting dog, and she pulls it up to spit out the words, confessing, "I did I thought I could kill you I'm sorry I swear I'll go and fi—"

"THEN WHY DIDN'T YOU FUCKING SAY THAT?" Marie screams at full volume, gripping Mono with both hands, with a great momentum scraping her against the wall and throwing her to the floor like a ragdoll.

Mono lands limply and painfully but without the drugs further pain is just an accessory. What's there mutes and blunts what's to come like a smothering hammering suit of armor.

"Stand up," says the statuesque Marie after a few seconds of silence. She rummages inside her coat and draws a gleaming thing.

Mono follows for fear Marie will do more. Marie steps in close, gently, slowly, and casually.

There's a little prick of pain on Mono's shoulder as Marie injects —something?—from the little glass—syringe is what it is. It wobbles in the wound as Marie twists it a little deeper (for no

reason). Blood wells up on the unwashed, uncleaned skin around the penetration.

Mono almost tries to twist away but the harsh and still hand ungently keeps her set in a mold. Then it's over, and Marie yanks it out. Blood in a line falls.

"Just this once it'll be okay," says Marie.

What, Mono almost says. But Marie just smiles and walks over to the wall and pries out the now-blunt knife.

"Wh—What are you doing," says Mono.

"Show me your hands," says Marie. "Put them both on the wall."

"What are you going to do to me," says Mono.

"I'm going to hobble you, darling," says Marie. "Did you fix the robot?"

Mono swallows. "No, I didn't, I'll go down there right now and do it, please put the knife do—"

"I know you will," says Marie in a comforting tone. "Put your hands on the wall."

Mono slowly brings both of her hands, left and right, to the wall.

"Mono," says Marie. "Do you think I'm a fool? Do you think that I'm stupid, inept, holding the knife like a retarded child? A brainless dolt who doesn't understand how handles work?"

Mono is frozen silent.

"I'm not Mono I'm really really not. This is what happens when you push me," whispers Marie.

She gently reaches one twisted hand up and flattens Mono's right hand against the wall. "Please don't cut me Marie, please don't cut me. I'll stay in my closet. I'll be your maid. Please don't," says Mono.

"It'll be okay this once," says Marie, "I gave you painkillers,"

"Let me have thirty minutes," says Mono, "Let them get into my system, please Marie, please, they won't stop any of the pain,"

"It'll be okay," repeats Marie and her face now had that slack but focused look it got at times. The moon was new. She was stony as she regarded the spread right hand of Mono.

Mono is breathing fast now, hyperventilating, she begins to shriek and curl her hand but Marie presses it back down and her fingernails claw at the metal with only futility, she tries to yank herself away but Marie's hands are *iron*.

With a frightening start she brings the knife down on Mono's thumb once. Pain came roaring up Mono's body, fresh new pain that cut through the haze.

ONCE

Dark red blood appeared across her arm and Marie's face like Indian warpaint.

But the thumb isn't off yet. Mono shrieks and cries and pulls away and Marie smiles loosely. Up again comes the knife.

TWICE

This time it cuts a little bit through bone and gristle, and then Marie twists it more. Mono hears the naked blade, uncleaned,

squeal against bone and she screams louder and her vision grows blurrier.

THRICE

The final cut severs all the little hanging pieces that are left and Mono's thumb loosely falls to the floor, and blood gouts from the stump, and Marie takes a lighter, one of those cheap things that you purchase at the store with your credits, the things you aren't allowed to bring on the pyrethroid for fear you'll explode something, and—Mono screams again, "Please don't, please," for fear of the pain.

Marie smiles and looks Mono in the eyes for a second.

Then down down down comes the lighter, scorching and burning the open wound, cooking the raw meat of Mono's body until a horrible charred beef smell wafts up to her nose.

The pain screams. She screams.

"It's almost over," says Marie. "I'll let you… keep the other one… you are right-handed, like all of us," and then she turns to stare at Mono, "and it's more to cut off if you're a— *lying, killing brat* —again… isn't it?"

Mono sobs, babbling nothings, and Marie smiles.

"… Yes, darling, that's all …"

She brings Mono into an embrace. Mono's tears stain the front of her suit. She is sheltered in the jacket. Blood drips onto the floor.

Marie hugs Mono gently, cradling her like a child.

"Just this once it'll be okay. Tomorrow is Russia. I'll go down there and fix the robot."

Mono stares forward into empty space.

"Tomorrow."

012 / AND THEN WHAT

In summation what then? No longer in the closet; trusted to remain outside of the vaunted thing, affixed by a chain of twisted metal to the wall. On the wall, a solitary rail which led nowhere—more of a handhold than anything else, in case human life remained on the massive Pyrethroid as it strode along the seas—in case of situations such as this.

Sprawled on the floor is a treelike system of limbs; at the top of the long trunk, the tree's leaves are a spread pile of hair. This inert vegetable regards the floor from a sidewise perspective; slanted in more than one direction.

Solitary the prisoner is silent. For—it is certain *now*. If Seon returns to everyone else, it will be as a member of the Gestalt. She isn't fit to be an operator, and certainly not a pilot. Not with —she glances at it and then breaks her gaze, because there's a pain that comes even when she *sees* where the finger used to be.

Her head raises a little bit and then she loses the desire to move it and it *bangs* against the floor.

And then what.

And then what, really?

She has options. She can go along with Marie, and maybe not get beat but probably die wherever Marie—wherever Marie is *taking her* , or she can fight Marie and lose again and get hurt again and probably hobbled again, or she can just kill herself, because the thought of joining the Gestalt is horrifying to her and that's the only other thing she can do—no life is to be found

for a pilot. I'm skilled, she bitterly thinks— *I'm skilled enough* to make the rest of my life *worthwhile* for others—but they won't give *me* a chance! Hah.

(*There's so much left in this world that I've never seen.*)

Seon *had* always wanted to see animals. The real sort, that aren't Formics. She had wanted to pet a puppy

She had always wanted to see what real apartments look like. The sort underground that are nice, and made for people's comfort and daily lives, not barracks.

She had always wanted to see what best friends looked like. Real ones who went out together and got their nails painted and wore cute clothes and gossipped about other people like normal girls being normal friends, all those things.

She admits too she had always wanted to see a ... ahah ... *relationship* , a proper one, even though she thought—she had no interest in being in one herself, for a number of reasons. But to see two people who loved each other *like that,* maybe she would think about it differently.

Chandeliers! Great gold things you put on your roof for no reason other than to stimulate the eyes and the cephalic sense of beauty! Farms, where food is grown to feed the populaces—green and growing things in general, anything a change from the drab walls of *here*. Nice parties, clean parties, the type that aren't filled with Seons—the type that aren't all dirty and smuggled-feeling (even when they were cleared), like, like a birthday party! (Seon had always wanted to celebrate all of the birthday parties she had missed.) Men—people of that other gender didn't exist in Korea-43, it was Seons all the way down.

Seon is *sick* of Seons.

So then. She tells herself, she doesn't want to die, or, her desire to die is overpowered by her survival instincts, and she thinks to a degree that if she gets out of this situation she can fix everything later (even though she knows that's rather unrealistic).

She could try to conceal the fact that she's a pilot—if she gets out of here. But they're going to Russia, so maybe Seon could call for help. The issue is her face. It's easily identifiable, the Seon strain is old and strong and for a whole ten years it was *the new hotness*, the strongest in the specific area of resonating with the Pyrethroids, with all that entailed.

So she breaks her face until the point where it isn't recognizable. Her DNA is still the same. Do they have some way of tracking pilots? A little subcutaneous device implanted in her reds and pinks. That, too, would give her away. She would need a cutter to open her up and take out everything and she'd need to wear a full-body suit so that none of her skin got anywhere—it's a *lot*.

It's doable maybe.

That would leave escaping from Marie.

Russia.

It'd have to be in Russia. There's no way Seon can kill Marie like she tried. What a fuckup that was, she thinks miserably.

It's a really long shot. It's really really long.

But really then it's what is.

013 / One strike to dawn. [TWO]

End-1st Act.



014 / Woman and Lilith.

What do you think when I say: picture Woman?

You might think of a maiden's mythological purity: of Woman's *duty* in the archaic offices of Matrimony, of Childbearing, or of Housekeeping. Perhaps you extend that, you soften your ideologies—you think of the metaphysical softness of the Womanly touch, you think of the easy connection Woman so engenders amongst people.

You might conversely think lascivious thoughts—the literal touch of Woman and her plush texture, of an arching, high back. The way the fat distributes so *nicely* across Woman's body—see how a matron's plump breasts and thighs are Of Woman? Compared to the base—the default—the boring—*man,* Woman is a being superior.

Perhaps you think bloody thoughts? In such a mode, you might think of the way Woman's pelvic bone cups the pinks and reds of her intestines. Or the way Woman's body works devilishly against her for days every calendar month. (We must not be Of Woman in *such* a sense.)

My ideal of Woman is the thing before me. The shivering shifting thing in the bed next to me. Her name is Seventy-Six Adamova.

Permit me a description. She is taller than me, and has blonde hair so white it appears like a shock of snow. She still has both of her eyes, and both of her hands, and both of her feet, both

hemispheres of the brain, and she has too both *scruple* and *daring*.

Our world is dirty—and it is cruel. Only at such times as these is it possible for our liaisons to continue divorced from it; they are rare times, but consistent. When I am out here on my investigations and my hunts, we *catch up*, so to speak, and for a day life is good again. Still dirty, yet my attention is drawn from the grime and muck toward my sun, my darling—Woman.

O Woman my darling!

Hehe.

I regard Seventy-Six Adamova with a slight smile on my face. I, now, am sitting up—somewhat blearily. But the peace of the rooms in Russia, especially when one is such a decorated pilot as Adamova, is comforting to me; my awakeness is not a product of alertness, but of simple well-restedness. She, too, is awake. It always takes her a second to find herself and the methods by which her body shall be controlled.

She yawns and curls a little.

"Are you going?" she finally asks.

I shrug sort of halfheartedly. "Lilith undied a day ago. She's heading west. Probably we'll be able to intercept her if we get ready today, and prevent at least some of the collateral until she enters reverse starfall. They sent me out with the new prototype spool. More inversion time on field."

Adamova nods. I know that she doesn't share the same sort of passion for the job that I (and all the other Seons) have. I don't want it to end here on a silent note, so I continue:

"And for your part?"

"On leave for a bit," she says with a grin. "Gonna be spending my time in the upper city."

"There is no guarantee that we'll be able to stop Lilith from a rampage, should she choose to bend toward Russia-134," I caution. "Please. ... Take care of yourself."

She nods. I know that she understands, so I drop the subject.

"It's five," I continue.

I know that she understands again. I scoot off the bed, onto the floor, where I take up the heavy coat we wear when we're out in Russia's military parts of the city. (Korean pilots don't go anywhere else, just like how we don't leave the pilots' cities in Korea.)

"Bye," I say.

"Bye," I hear her say, and I look back and catch a glimpse of her eyes still fixated on me in that soft officer's bed. They're a shade of blue that I keep filed away to recall when a fight against a Formic feels hopeless, to give me strength to last till reverse starfall.

I hoped that I would see her again.

015 / Mankind's Genocide and Abolition: Contracondicionamento

Seon

Origin: Korea, Ki-woo Seon

Sex: Female

Ideal Height: 152 cm

Ideal Weight: 43 kg

Ideal Underbust: 66 cm

Ideal Bust: 77 cm

General Sexuality Inclination: Asexual

Introduced: 2287

Status: Still in use

The Seon line prioritizes mental elasticity, trauma resilience, and obedience, with a brain state that favors self-correction and adaptive passivity. A Seon is also able to stay in sync with a Pyrethroid for longer, and remain inverted for a greater duration, compared to other strands with similar psychological traits. Though physically unassuming, the Seon strand remains one of the most reliable and durable operators in the field, especially in prolonged engagements against Formics and other Pyrethroids.

I found myself walking through these pilots' cities of Russia. What masses of people there were appeared as congestions of flesh to me. They clotted in the bends and in the alleys. Plastic things sealed in by lips, and then removed, created dense smoke among those alleys. I wrinkled my nose at the pungent scent and tugged the heavy jacket closer around my frame.

Unlike in Korea, you see, here in *this world* there were such things as Poverties. Great inequality existed between different castes of pilots. The men in these alleys were strains unfavored. Not like my Seventy-Six Adamova.

And so I walked. I pushed through one of the congestions of flesh. There was a man on a podium to my right. His strain was Borisov. I would not have stopped to listen but for what he said:

"And then what? And then what remains for *us?"* (And here I paused.)

"*What then remains* for us, as a species? Shall we continue this war—no, not a war, this *desperate clinging to the hope of survival*—until the Formics go to the dust of their ordained devolution? What Earth will we have, then? This flooded husk of a world cannot sustain life beyond what we have here! And will we breach the shell around our world, and travel the stars? A ridiculous proposition! No, on this world our future is desolation.

"For us, we see the Formics have lost the war already! Their corpses litter our world and resurrect into starfall! The same awaits us in their dimension! Where we will see the end of a war

—in the genocide of mankind—in kind the Formics see a beginning—we only both lose! Our entropies are incompatible.

"*So what remains* for us, as a people? Us strains thrown to the streets or thrown into a Gestalt! For what reason? From the actions of few the elites purport to put irons on the many, chain to them weights, and cast them into the sea. Look around at the fading alleys! Look around and see the dim lights that hang from the roofs!" (And here he pointed to the great top of the underground city.) "What remains for us as a castaway people?"

He swept his arm to the side. His eyes narrowed.

Then it dropped. The world crushed Atlas. 'That's all, folks.'

"Why do we hunt the Formics? It is not because they attack our cities. Aside from the uppers of *this very place—Russia-134—* there are no cities, as far as Formics are concerned. I think that there are no need for pilots! I say we hide! I say we stop destroying this world—and furthermore:"

Those still-narrow eyes sought me out in the crowd.

"Those Seons! Those Adamovas! Those Xiè! And all the rest!—kill these bloodlines of sin! Retire the Pyrethroids back to the deeps they were found in, destroy the monsters we have created before the Formics within come alive and destroy us! Those elite minds walking the corridors supping upon milk and honey—cut them out, too!

"Look at us! Strains callously used and tossed aside! Use that food you shovel down the gullets of Pyrethroids to feed us a meal more than mold! Are you men without chests? Disconnected entirely from emotion and rightness? You too are perpetuators of the genocide on man!"

I broke my gaze, for there was no point in arguing with one so impassioned, no point in listening—I had a job.

I began to walk away. When I looked back I saw Borisov regarding me still. I pursed my lips and hurried onward to Command.

016 / The Thalassoid's Interlude

What do you think of Romeo and Juliet?

017 / Transitory

Xiè

Origin: China, Xiè Ai

Sex: Female

Ideal Height: 165 cm

Ideal Weight: 56 kg

Ideal Underbust: 70 cm

Ideal Bust: 85 cm

General Sexuality Inclination: Heterosexual

Introduced: 2291

Status: Discontinued

The Xiè line was briefly deployed as a high-intensity forward-push strain, optimized for aggressive entry into chaotic, dangerous theaters. Xiè were strong due to being capable of forcing resynchronization under edge conditions, including through Chants and during spooling. Their neurophysiology allowed for high levels of instinct while in the Pyrethroids, but at the cost of extreme stress and volatility. Xiè pilots often initiated confrontations with other Pyrethroids. Though their combat statistics were record-breaking, they were retired after the Aral Blackout Incident and the subsequent mutiny of 12 Xiè. No Xiè remain in service.

Time passes. Marie now allows Seon to feed herself her drugs. She feels like she's starving without them by now. Dimly aware too is Seon of the state of her body. Grimy, and covered in blood (especially now that the burnt hole in her belly has reopened) and tiny cuts; her lips are thin. No water for two days now.

"Darling, we're approaching Russia," Marie says with no small excitement. She watches the walls, down on her haunches, even though there are no windows. "They're letting us through, it seems."

Seon looks at her questioningly.

"We need you to be made up," Marie says suddenly. "Come, come, I'm going to doll you right up. It'll be quick," she encourages.

Welcome to the bathroom, Seon thinks. Unlike the big rooms of the mech (that this is stacked on top of), the bathroom is small and cramped—and clean. Blood coats the floor of the room her closet is connected to; it's not like that here.

Marie pulls Seon back to the wall where she's furthest from the mirror, providing a good view of her body and head. She mutters something, rummages through the slats on the side carrying various items—pulls out a long pair of scissors and various civilian beauty supplies.

Seon bites her tongue before she can ask where Marie produced *those*. It makes sense, in retrospect, that she does appear as well-groomed as she does—if she's so obsessed with being 'dolled up' that she would purchase imported beauty supplies

from non-pilot cities. It doesn't *fit,* though, Seon doesn't feel like that conclusion is right. It's shaky.

First, Marie wets Seon's skull. The shower from before is there; Marie uses its head to apply water to Seon's hair and with her hands massages it in. ("It'd be easier if I had a bottle," she grumbles.) She makes sure to get the water down to all the varied lengths. Then she sprays Seon's face; Seon sputters but tries to keep her head still. With a hand she pushes much of the water down onto the floor. It splatters.

She begins to cut Seon's hair, starting with the ragged and lengthy bangs at the front. Black lengths fall past Seon's eyes as Marie's scissors lovingly glide through the long strands of hair. *Snip—snip—snip—*

Seon watches as she herself transforms in an act of metamorphosis. The dirty feeling is banished with each slow cut —the dirt itself swept away by the rushing spray, sent down into the pits of Tartarus.

Marie stops. Seon's hair is short and girlish now, done in something like a bob. With her trembling fingers Marie begins to run them through Seon's hair. Twenty-Four Seon shivers at her touch—it is a ghost's.

Marie nods.

"Strip," she says after a second.

Seon swallows. She unzips the suit, shrugs her right arm out, shrugs the left one out—it falls to the floor.

When she turns around, Marie is gone.

Seon slowly turns back to the mirror and to the alcoves besides which are Marie's supplies. The gleaming scissors are there. In the alcove they're only visible as a bright mote of light. Their form is not quite distinguishable if you don't look closely.

Do you want to try this again, Twenty-Four Seon

She swallows. Dread bubbles to the surface of her heart as a Thalassic monster surging from the deep.

She reaches out one hand. She grasps the scissors. The axis is a little screw. Seon's heart feels like it's going to burst through her ribs as she pinches at the screw, trying to twist it, and it feels like it's not catching, she looks down to focus, it slips—she quickly removes the screw, and pulls the top part of the little pair of scissors off, before replacing the screw.

Hastily she places the scissors back in the same orientation so the light looks—how did it look? She kicks herself for not taking note of it. And pauses, for several beats.

She looks up at the mirror.

Marie is standing behind her.

Her dark gaze looks vaguely in the direction of the bottom part of the pair of scissors, but after a moment passes she breaks her gaze—it is unclear to Seon if she is satisfied, if—she knows.

Marie places folded stacks of clothing on the floor. She points.

Seon bends down and picks up the top thing. It's a white button-up blouse. Below is a black skirt. Below is a long tan coat, just like the one Marie wears.

"I'd supply you with more to hide your various... idiosyncrasies," Marie's eyes scan down Seon's pale body, "but I didn't prepare for some of them. Put them on."

Seon does.

Seon huddles on the floor while the mech slots into place on the docking array.

"Why were we allowed to dock in the first place? Our mech is Korean, isn—"

Marie holds up a finger to Seon's lips as they descend from the boarding steps. Seon looks back down.

"It's a prototype," says Marie. Seon stiffens. You stole a prototype mech, she thinks.

You stole a prototype robot. We're dead—dead dead dead.

Marie produces a slim wristband from the pockets of her own coat and slips it around Seon's wrist.

"If you go outside a mile radius around me this will kill you," she says seriously. "If you try to take it off, or mess with it with your fingers in a way that's too rough, it'll kill you. Through this I'll be listen to everything you'll say so don't say anything that could clue someone in. If someone does get clued in I'll kill them. Do you understand?"

Seon nods. This ...

Implies that she'll be able to be away from Marie.

Marie draws a credit stick from one of the coat's pockets.

"Are you," Seon says suddenly, "did you plan for this all?"

Marie stares at her. She's awkward in the silence.

"Not the hobbling," she suddenly replies.

"But everything else," Seon presses.

"Well, except for the hobbling," she says again.

Seon looks back down.

"Take this," Marie says. "It has sixteen thousand credits on it. It's not very much but—darling—you're dehydrated, badly, and I don't want your organs to fail out on us. Treat yourself," she says, smiling lightly. "I have to purchase food for the mech."

Usually the government does that, Seon thinks.

They process downward. People seem to avoid Marie and Seon, and they seem to avoid asking questions—certainly not the many Seon *expected*. And Seon realizes too—there *are* men here! For some minutes she spends time gazing at them.

And, she finds them surprisingly...

Dull.

Much like the female worker bees back in Korea-43, the men here feel base; they certainly do not live up to the image in her head of a chivalric knight come to liberate damsels from distress—they are just people, and the sort that smell awful (she realizes after comprehending what it is she smells).

Marie beckons. Seon stops gawking and catches up.

They open the small door out of the massive docks—light shines in and Seon consumes it

a black and eldritch star

and commits it to the hazy records of memory.

018 / Chiaroscuro—Stars Cont.



We are so small.

This was, until recently, rediscoverable from base principles. Simply go out after the sun falls and look up. There is a sense of scale one obtains when they gaze upward into the yawning sky, with its light clouds—and its seas of stars! Pursue them, and you will find their domain infinite.

Those star-lakes were multicolored and ranged from blue to green, but I found rather the most humbling effect was when the sky was pitchest black, and where the little white ones were studded—they stood out, visible, a chiaroscuro black-white expanse.

You could stand there in the sea with your legs soaked—top to bottom—dozens of kilometers from anyone else and look up at

the black sky. You could drink it in, and feel a sense of vertigo, and stare it down like a bull-fighter. Then you could watch the little eyes stare back at you, and relentlessly, meet, match and exceed their iron gaze, stolid.

From those who come into *this place* I keep a watch—I see what happens outside of our little world. My means of production have been seized but my personal property—these stolen memories—are mine and mine to keep.

Not like a hundred years ago is the sky. No … It's black now.

Once you could gaze upward. Fear would strike your heart, immediate and tangible, and you could not comprehend—not even if you thought hard about it—the scale of the universe. But you could at some level *feel* it. In Purgatory, this is no longer the case. But for the moon, the sky is onyx and nothing.

In the beginning of things we defined the word starfall from star. Let me give its definition: *a fixed, luminous point in the sky*—and the definition for fall is *to move downward, freely and without control.* They in Purgatory have lost that first definition; *star* is defined in relation to its child *starfall.* A star is a myth, a chimerical light in the sky that resembles in singular fashion the shell of a Formic descending from heaven.

In the black world Purgatory, the fear of the heavens has been lost, or neutered—the beautiful snake killed, its head cleanly cut through.

Voids and vacuums do not exist where the Earth's atmosphere extends—something must replace the snake. And so a cockatrice strides strangely, proudly, and malevolently through the empty hole made for it.

In short, loneliness replaces awe. Without the stars, what is Earth? We cannot define ourselves by looking at a mirror; only by knowing what is not can we know what is. For us, our only neighbors in this entire universe are the Formics, the ones who themselves plucked the stars out of the sky.

My days of looking at the real stars are past. But I get lonely in our little slices of heaven eternal. There are days I wish to return to the nostalgic embrace of feeling that awful vertigo. So I make myself my own little home, as any would.

I paint my utopia in chiaroscuro stars.

019 / LEFT TURN

author's note

Notes

apologies for the 1 week delay---back to normal now, i had writer's block and a lot of new stuff to do

Marie doesn't go far—Seon knows because at no point does she fall over dead. She looks down, morose, at the black band on her wrist. It's nondescript, connecting into a loop one of those little hairy sections and below that one of the spiky sections—what's it called...

She pauses—the railing bumps into her belly. She overlooks the edge of the city—stares down, wondering at the sheer height of it all. It *is* a megastructure.

The water is perfectly blue—but in Seon's disinfected world, the world of bleach, here it is grey. The white windmills of the hex protrude up from the austere, metal surface—the clouds can be seen reflected in its mirrorlike surface.

Up Seon's eyes slip. They fixate on the edge of the horizon, and on the milky white color of the great figure in the distance. Reversed it limps, in slow motion, to some point in the westward distance.

She bites a sallow lip. Her eyes move back down to the precipice. It is guarded only by the white-painted railing.

What if I throw myself off? she thinks. The pain hasn't gotten so unbearable that she does it.

(*I need the drugs.*)

A Marie standing with her arms out in a T-pose, standing and then leaning and then toppling off those white rails. Seon watches her topple. Imagine a domino standing upright on the edge of a table. A child pushes the first of the domino track which leads up to it. The domino itself falls through the air with a slight spin and turn to it, and then it splashes against the grey surface of the floor below in a massive pink spread.

The pink splatter coats railing and face and hands as she stares at Marie's resting place.

She raises them both to cover her eyes. She is conscious enough to think: *this is a hallucination.*

One leg trembles and she suddenly bends forward as if on a whim, leaning out, out, dangerously, above the thousand-thousand-foot-fall

And she wobbles for a second, maybe it won't be her fault if she were to slip

And then two hands catch her thin arms (*like a rat's*) and tug her back, away from the ineffectual railing.

They fall down in a pile of bodies; Seon cradled by those arms which now cross her chest. She breathes hard.

"Are you ..."

To view this new voice Seon attempts to turn, pushing herself forward onto her knees as she does it. Her trembling body is

nigh immovable. A rusted robot, she rotates on ball joints and her wide eyes fixate on ...

Her savior? Is that it? It wasn't like she was going to do it, but—she breathes, she wasn't,

"Are you alright?" The other woman says again. She has long blonde hair and her garb is mostly casual, and more than anything else—Seon knows her face, this is the strain Adamova—is she an operator?

Seon breathes heavily.

"I know that it's—it's silly to ask that, you're hurting, I don't have the most exper—"

Seon interrupts her: "I'm not."

Silence for a beat.

"You were going to—"

"I wasn't gonna jump or fall, just," she looks down at the ground, "looking," quieter.

Adamova before her is silent. She examines Seon, and her eyes fixate on the right hand, the one with the—injury.

"You're,"

"I'm alright," Seon says, avoiding meeting Adamova's gaze. But she can't bring herself to get up off the floor.

Adamova watches her.

"You're trembling badly," she says finally.

"Yeah," replies Seon. "I'm alright."

Adamova pauses. Then she bites her lower lip, and picks herself up, and then her arms—slip around Seon's small frame, not minding the horrified glance Seon gives her at the touch.

"Don't," Seon begins, "don't touch me, please," and then she finds it in herself, in some eldritch well of energy within, to stand up, legs wobbling, and she takes a few steps forward and it seems like she's going to run, and then she falls again. Her heart beats within her chest so loud it drowns out everything else.

Why do I feel this way? she thinks.

Staring at Adamova from the ground her face is pale.

020 / ur such a handful... 🫳 / On Death

Adamova bends down and tentatively reaches out her hand and a thousand more sprout from it organically—a fractal configuration of naked flesh writhing toward Seon's body. Seon jerks away from them, crawling across the ground.

"*Please don't touch me*," she hisses.

"*Stop it*," she hisses.

"*Stop*."

The prime, staying hand of Adamova reaches Seon's corpselike anatomy. The hands dissolve into meat and splat wetly on the ground.

Seon is suddenly silent. She closes her eyes.

Adamova looks down at her with concern.

"What happened to your thumb?" she asks finally.

"I got hobbled," flatly says Seon after a moment's pause.

"That's not the right word," says Adamova, "you use hobbled when you can't walk well. You got ... I don't know, mutilated. Maimed."

"Maimed," repeats Seon.

Adamova grabs Seon's thin arm.

"What's your name?"

"..."

Seon stares at the black band on her arm. Mono can hear her.

"Does it matter."

"Of course it matters," says Adamova. She purses her lips, and then she tugs on Seon's bony arm. "Come on."

"I'm okay," says Seon. "Really."

Adamova stares down at her.

"Please."

"*I'm okay,*" says Seon, the flat affectation gone now, and she stares wildly up at Adamova—"I don't like you touching me. Please, leave me alone. I'm *okay,*" the last part another *hiss,* and Adamova squeezes her arm *almost* violently:

"*You're not okay,*" loudly and with a tinge of anger, "you're fucking *not*, you—you were going to fall off the railing, and you didn't even try to stop yourself, and you don't—you aren't acting like a normal person. Please just. Tell me your name."

Stop it, Seon thinks.

"Please."

Stop it, Seon thinks.

"I'm."

She looks downward,

"I'm Twenty-Four."

Seon 24 is what she is called. The 24th Seon in the 17th batch of them.

"Twenty-Four Seon."

Adamova's gaze softens. She pulls at Seon's arm.

"Come on," she says.

Adamova looks at Seon kindly. Seon looks at the band on her hand with horrible primal fear. Her pupils are dilated to points in the massive whites of her eyes and sweat trickles down the side of her head.

I can't talk to anyone, she thinks, or else Marie will take it as an excuse, won't she, she'll kill me kill me *kill me dead—*

"I'm called Seventy-Six Adamova," the woman holding Seon's arm says.

She's much taller than Seon, not in the way Marie is where it's her presence and gait, it's true height.

She's prettier too.

Kinder.

More normal.

"I love food," Adamova says unprompted to Seon. She sips something from a cheap plastic straw in a cheap plastic cup, a thick sweet cloyingly artificial sort of drink with little solid bits in it. "In fact I think consuming it has gotta be one of the—" she takes a long drink "—four fundamental joys in life. And much as I love food I pity the people who don't, yeah?"

Seon is silent.

"After I get finished with work I come up to the city. And you know what I do?" Silence.

Seon eventually realizes she's supposed to say something. "You buy food?"

"Exactly yeah and I eat it too. Or drink it," Adamova shakes the cup in her hand.

She skips forward to a long pole that comes from the ground. It has an image of a train on its panel. Adamova presses the big red button located directly below the panel.

Seon stares downward. Adamova looks back at her.

"What about you?"

Seon gazes at the white cone of ice cream awkwardly clutched in her left hand (the right dead at her side). The ice cream is a color a lot like Marie's skin—the black chocolate on top is her hair—the cone is like the jacket she wears so confidently. Strutting about like a peacock.

"I don't like food," she decides.

Adamova watches her.

"There's something really wrong with you," she says.

Seon looks down at the black band.

"I hope you aren't mad that I say that," Adamova continues conversationally. "I'm saying what I see."

Silence.

"You don't know me," Seon almost bites it back but it tears itself of its own accord from Seon's chest. It's a scratchy harsh

sentence said in a low tone.

"Don't I," said Adamova, "you're right, I don't," she takes another sip—and then looks at the cup with disdain, crumples it, tosses it into the stone bin beside the pole, "but—again—I'm *saying what I see*. I saved you, right?"

"You didn't save me," says Seon, and she almost clenches her fists but the cone is still in her left hand and she doesn't want to splatter it all over everything, "you don't know what I'm going through, you can't save me,"

"That's bullshit Twenty-Four I pulled you back when you were going to—"

"No! No, you don't understand," Seon says loudly. She raises her head and meets Adamova's gaze. She swipes her left hand to the side, pulling away the veil, the cone goes flying across the ground, "you didn't *save me*—I would've fallen and it would've been over, don't you *understand?*"

Seon's head falls. She trembles, hunched. Sweat pours down her brow.

Adamova is silent.

She reaches a hand toward Seon's left arm, which is still outstretched. She takes it and slowly lowers it.

"Nah," says Adamova.

"..."

Seon breathes in.

"Nah?" she repeats.

"Nah. I don't understand. But I'm staying with you for the day, yeah? I..."

Adamova's eyes track down Seon's body once more. Why does she ...

"Why?"

Adamova smiles.

"Death is a really sad thing Twenty-Four."

Seon stares back at Adamova. Then Adamova pulls her hunched, recalcitrant figure into an embrace.

"It's not like it costs me anything, yeah?"

It isn't, thinks Seon.

"It's not like I *want to see someone die?*"

It isn't, thinks Seon.

"In this age of progress and prosperity death still exists. Our perfect solution to death is framed only in an imperfect world: the big flaw of the Gestalt is such. That we fight the Formics, that our homes are as they are, that we can't ... stop, right? That's where the Gestalt fails."

Is it, thinks Seon.

"I don't blame anyone for not wanting to live in such an imperfect world. And locking yourself in the Gestalt, that isn't *real* so many people think. But I find it sad, even if I can't blame them, that people feel like the only way to, deal with not wanting to live in this world, is taking themselves and all of their future years out of it for good—am I getting this to you?"

You are, thinks Seon.

"I don't want anyone to die in this world, Twenty-Four.

"Even if it's a terrible world, I don't want someone to just… cease to be.

"I *can't*. It goes against everything. To become a lifeless slab of meat—isn't that sad? It's this, garish black mark, one that's existed from the beginning of time. It mars us."

Seon is silent.

The train pulls up. The doors open and a mass of people come tumbling tumbling out.

Seon is silent. Is that it?

Adamova steps on first, then looks back, and extends an arm.

"You coming?"

021 / NOWHERE TO HIDE

Marie is listening

This is Adamova's place.

Picture: an apartment. The furthest and closest walls each ten feet long. The two to the side twenty feet—it totals to two hundred square feet.

Picture: a door at the far end of the left wall. By the door are various amenities such as a sink, a microwave oven.

Adamova taps at the air. Walking into the apartment causes Seon to be in blast range of the sudden, flaring lights. She winces as the bright yellow light penetrates the retinas.

"Make yourself at home," says Adamova, who makes more slight handsigns, moving the settings of a HUD only she can see.

Seon is silent.

There's a soft couch near one side. Should she sit on it?

... It's an imposition.

So she stands awkwardly.

Seconds pass. Adamova moves to her side, shaking her head slightly. She takes Seon's hand. The one without the thumb, with the light-sucking stripe, the band nonpresence itself.

A soft hand slips into Seon's.

She stiffens. Her eyes fall to the floor and her body trembles violently.

There is no reason to believe Adamova will hurt her. Seon knows as much as it's possible to know Adamova won't hit her or throw her—or be otherwise violent in the same way Marie is.

She still hates the *skin-to-skin* contact this motion entails.

She feels dirty. A red haze presses down on her and prevents her from moving.

"What's this?" asks Adamova.

Her thumb rests on the black band on Seon's wrist.

Seon almost vomits.

After all,

Marie is listening

"It's. A medical thing," she says haltingly. "It monitors my pulse."

"Is it," murmurs Adamova.

Did Marie tell me to stay in the shop areas, Seon suddenly thinks. *Did she tell me to do anything? ... No, I get it ... she knows where I am.*

Because of this.

Seon's gaze rests on the hateful band.

Nowhere to hide.

Adamova looks down at the band with pursed lips. Next to Seon, uncomfortably so, her head comes up and she locks gaze with Seon.

Seon twitches.

"Twenty-Four Seon, huh," she says.

Seon's heart skips a beat. Tilting her head a degree to the right causes it to twist off. Adamova catches it. She holds Seon like a doll. Seon's corpse almost falls to the ground like a puppet with its strings cut, but some fundamental cord of life keeps head tethered to spine.

Seon falls toward and makes a crash landing on the couch, she falls with Adamova's body as well.

Seon twists her head upward, away from Adamova, exposing her collarbone. She tenses up, pink fills her vision.

She breathes hard and fast and the rustling of fabric can be heard.

"Who was she," says Adamova. "The, —last one,"

Cue exposure. The curtains are pulled back. Seon's breath hitches.

"No one," says Seon.

Adamova grips her body and pushes her down—leans in close—Seon's vision dissolves

"It's not like that," says Seon, "we aren't,"

Coldness presses itself against Seon's collarbone and then downward, and Seon twists around and tries to get rid of it, tries to push Adamova back

"Se e"

Seo

Marie is listening

022 / Montagues and Capulets



023 / Euler's Number

Adamova releases her death grip on the smaller girl.

The air passes. Leaking out of the room like oil from a sardine can spattered with holes—Twenty-Four trembles under Adamova's body.

"Where'd you get the coat from?" Adamova finally asks.

Twenty-Four almost responds—then, with a choking, monstrous sound, she twists her body away from Adamova, trying to shove herself into the crack of the sofa, burying herself further down in its depths. Adamova catches her arm in one hand but Twenty-Four still hides.

With a slight huff of exhalation, Adamova *pulls* her out, by her arm, Twenty-Four's head rolls over still severed to gaze at Adamova and she finally comes to a stop. Then her voice hitches and her breath catches—she begins to sob.

I'm, Adamova almost wants to say, *I'm sorry,* but how would she express it in a way that seems *genuine,* so it's not worth saying at all, and instead she pulls Twenty-Four up by her arm and holds her head to her chest and hugs her.

"I ... ask ... because ..."

She struggles to phrase the words. And before she was doing a good job of it—a good job of phrasing an abstract thought, not something like, something like—

"The coat," she finally spits.

Twenty-Four stiffens.

It is something after all.

"Is that ..."

"It's," begins Twenty-Four,

"Ten Seon's," they say at the same time. Harsh and stiff.

Twenty-Four disentangles. Ghostly she drifts away from Adamova. Cautious catlike charcoal eyes regard her. Black circles sketched in thick ink render her baggy undereyes.

"What," says Twenty-Four.

That's what I'm wondering, Adamova thinks. She clicks her tongue and takes a step and begins a circuitous route around the small room.

"You know her then," says Twenty-Four. Her eyes drop to the band—Adamova watches silently—"You ..."

"Yes," replies Adamova. "I know her."

"Hah," says Twenty-Four. "God. Oh god ..."

Her voice cracks. She falls back on the couch, and stares upward at the yellow lights, and harsh and grating and hateful and sarcastic and gleeful she begins to laugh, a startling *"Ha ha ha ha ha ha ha"* sound enunciated clearly, artificial, and then it switches and her head drops back down and she curls into a ball and begins to *truly* laugh—this one is no less uncomfortable, a swinging, deranged sound coming from the throat, a *screech* almost,

Adamova turns slowly and watches with mounting horror,

"So you know," says Twenty-Four, "you know, you can get me out of this. Oh god thank you Adamova, ha ha ha hahahahaha—khhahhaha, you can, stop her, you know who she *is,"* and Twenty-Four suddenly reaches toward Adamova and lurches to her feet, taking three stumbling steps forward and grabbing at Adamova's face, tenderly—

"*SAVE ME,*" she hisses. Her eyes, irrational in their depth, bore into Adamova's soul, penetrating lens, retina, stem, brain, slashing through and lighting up the playing neurons—

Twenty-Four moves close to Adamova, smiling hopefully. Adamova stumbles backwards,

"What was I thinking even," Twenty-Four says, "I could've just told *you* ... asked for you to *save me* ..."

"From ..."

"Ten Seon," hisses Twenty-Four. "*Marie*."

The name holds no significance to Adamova. She licks her lips.

"Why are you," she begins, "why are you saying these things?"

Twenty-Four stares alarmed.

"That," Adamova starts, "Ten couldn't do that, hurt you," her eyes quickly dip to Twenty-Four's hand and then come back up,

"She could," insists Twenty-Four,

"No," says Adamova, "because I *know Ten Seon*."

Twenty-Four stares—and is further alarmed.

"She couldn't be the one who did all this to you, because for the last week she's been,"

Adamova pauses,

"... *With me.*"

Twenty-Four's eyes twist out of her skull and that skull turns on an axis skulls don't turn on—"*You've been fucking her?*" she whispers,

"No, not like, she *couldn't* have hurt you like this," Adamova says, "not, not recently, and she's not like that,"

Twenty-Four's hands slip from Adamova's face. A hand, trembling, comes up, and rests on her forehead. Her eyes bore down into the floor.

024 / chapter X

No.

No, ha ha, thinks Twenty-Four, Marie couldn't just. Not be real. A drug-induced hallucination—Marie—imagine that! Maybe *then* it's drug-induced hallucinations all the way down. No.

No.

Maybe she was just wrong. Maybe Marie is a *different* Seon. Not Ten—Twenty-Four hasn't been at her best over the last—how long has it been? Perhaps ... a week? Two weeks? Or ...

Seon's head snaps upward and she regards Adamova. Her mouth pulls into a line.

"What's the date," she asks.

"... The fourth of November," replies Adamova.

Four.

Four days.

"Twenty-Four," Adamova begins.

"Quiet," says Seon suddenly. "I'm thinking."

Marie has to be real. Seon was sure it was Ten. What did she say? She had never introduced herself—as anything but Marie

not right

—she had. Seon remembers now. When the two of them stood in the hangar, in uniform, on Marie's uniform was the roman

numeral

X

and of course Seon takes until *now* to remember that. But, but then ...

It couldn't be *inversion*, either. A Pyrethroid can't go backwards for as long as would be necessary for Ten Seon of the *now,* the Ten Seon with Adamova, to go back to four days ago. And (*she hopes but tries not to assume*) it wouldn't be like Ten would just *snap,* no? Marie's only so terrifying to Seon because Seon knows nothing else like Marie. So Ten would have had to have traveled back from far in the future.

She's rested. She's been given time to heal, she has freedom, she could—end it.

"Twenty-Four," says Adamova,

"I got it," says Twenty-Four. "There was ... not an issue. You're right."

She stumbles backwards. Turning around with a swivel of the foot puts her a distance away from Adamova, and completing the motion with an awkward pushoff takes her into a sprint. She runs.

She runs.



And runs.

The lights dawdle in the background. They wash Seon in clinical white—then she collides.

The two fall into a heap. It's a man. He wears a thick, fluffy coat, and had a bag—before Seon knocked it out of his hands.

"Strain ..."

"Sorry," says Seon, "sorry," she picks herself up, but he grabs her by the wrist—

"*Do you pity those who suffer?*"

"What," says Seon, and he pulls himself up.

"You're ... one of the strain *Seon,* no?"

"I can't help you, I'm sorry," says Seon immediately, "You can!" says the man, "you can speak—"

"I can't," interrupts Seon, "goodbye," and she begins to run from him as well. He runs after her but she makes a sudden turn in the dark into a remote alleyway, and she seizes the wristband.

She has a sneaking suspicion that what she's about to do will work.

She wracks her body for all its strength and with a sudden burst of speed tears at the band on her wrist—for a moment she expects death, but—it snaps and falls to the floor.

Marie was, she thinks, Marie was *bullshitting her,* she thinks gleefully, Marie has no hold on her at all.

025 / Horatio

Here is where the scattering fragmenting patches of light end;
your gaze creeps between the path prime and the road less
taken. Peer, Horatio.

026 / We are pulverizations and ghosts.

(THE MAN WITH THE BAG creeps along the street. SEON is gone.)

THE MAN WITH THE BAG: Shit.

THE MAN WITH THE BAG (cont.): Well.

(THE MAN WITH THE BAG looks back at the direction SEON had been running from. He despairs of sight.)

(He begins to walk—)

"They love you," I said. "And you're *good,* you're good at talking to people, at convincing them—you're right,"

"It's not like that," Adamova replied. Visibly—she looked shaken up. "It's … not convincing them I'm right, it's hard to explain—"

"Regardless," I interrupted.

A tap came from outside—we turned to look out the window. An indistinct form passed by the window, but that was all, and quickly we turned back around to attend to business.

"Either way," I continued, "please?"

"Please," repeated Adamova. She looked at me and with a sort of gaze I had never seen from her said: "Do you know 24 Seon?"

"No," I replied.

A snap back takes you to the central point again.

Seon breathes heavily, holding onto the tall lamppost to steady herself. Her hands fumble about her body checking checking and checking all over, but for what? Who knows.

She turns.

If Marie's not tracking her…

She's free.

She has won. But she's missing parts of herself. She can't be a pilot anymore. Anything she would pilot would be maimed in kind.

Therefore she has to escape *here*, she has to escape Russia so that Marie has no chance of finding her and then she has to find a community who will take her in, but she can rebuild her life, she can live—and then what? That is what. Unbathed in formaldehyde; her destiny frozen no more.

The Philippines, thinks Seon.

I'll make it to the Philippines.

One week after we saw the form in the window Seventy-Six Adamova read aloud a speech in the city centers.

That day the form appeared again. A hunched and blackened form in the crowd—of malaise, reader, in my memories it

appears as rot in superlative. Perhaps that's just the fault of my brain.

I remember clearly the long and plain arm the form extended toward Adamova that day.

Two shots rang out and she toppled. There was a diagonal framing to the moment. Lines came together in artful angles not quite ninety degrees.

I remember keenly the red blood of Seventy-Six Adamova on the floor.