

SUNSET 2053.1

The elevator stops at the 193th floor. A noisy crowd of tourists stormed in, vividly arguing in a messy language that █ doesn't understand and pushing █'s back firmly against the cold steel. Just when the door is about to close up, a random kind man stops it for letting in two gasping men in a hurry, which forces █ to stand on █'s toes.

█ can't see their sweating faces, though for a moment █ has been wanting to give them an eye roll. Yet it is not obvious who should be blamed, isn't it? █ manages to look at the time after squeezing █'s watch in sight, but █ finds out in frustration that its gears have stopped at an unknown moment before 17:00, when the elevator finally starts accelerating.

"Damn..."

It was an uncomfortable ride. Besides being in an overcrowded cube, the feeling of weightlessness in deceleration always discomforts █. The feeling of being sucked up into the cloudy sky like dust. Luckily that did not last for long before the elevator stopped at the top floor. The loudly chattering tourists are led to the cubic edifice silently standing next to the rooftop square by a tired looking guide. █ dashes to the connecting bridge between the two platforms, the regular meeting spot, while avoiding the people hanging around and taking their precious sunlight dose, and the wandering androids as waste collectors.

█ is still there staring at the horizon. █ recognises █ by █'s familiar orange coat.

"Hey!" █ grasps. "Sorry for being late..."

█ turns around right away, checking █ quickly. "Good to see you. I was just thinking about a plan B in case you don't show up..." █ shakes █'s hand while keeping looking at █'s face. "But look at how heavily you are sweating... We can grab some cold drinks if you would like to."

"No... It's fine, thanks. How much time do we still have before dark? I guess we are running out of time." █ points at █'s watch. "It is dead on my way here."

"It's okay. We still get around 1 hour. Then..." █ clicks the tongue and makes a gear-turning gesture, "our actual layer will be moved down one level, and say 'until next week' to the sun."

"Yeah..." █ also presses █'s arms on the railing, leaning forward like what █ did before. "Have never thought that one day Sunday could really have this literal meaning before moving to settle down here..."

"That makes it more precious, huh?"

"Indeed..." The lukewarm light does feel more adorable after █ has cooled down from running. And the colour itself, the intertwining crimson red and dark orange like a thoroughly ripe blood orange which would start its decaying process the next moment if not consumed immediately, is the very thing biting your slowly pumping heart. "Yet it can't be priced on the market. We are fucking equal here, or we are supposed to be like this."

"You should have thought about that before moving here, right?" █ changes to a more sarcastic tone, "or is this longing another special experience for you?"

"No." █ raises the tone. "And yes, I have. But I just did not expect that the feeling would be so intense..."

"Well..." █ takes out a cigarette, "Bad for you." █ lights it up.

They both keep staring forward in a silent interlude.

"You should know that..." █ continues, "to fight is not the only option. We can always choose to run away."

"I don't think so..." █ murmurs, not knowing if there exists any alternative for █. The smoldering sunset in the distance is swallowing every inch of vacant space in █'s empty eyes. It is so ardent that it leaves a burning trace of scorch, an ever-lasting ulceration on █'s ego, every time when the thought of the possession of it gets stronger. █ is voluntarily burned by it. *Hic ardebo. Hic moriar.*

"You have ever considered seeing nature?"

"Hm..." █ are somehow pulled out from █'s keen obsession for the light by the question. "We are seeing the sun, so nature, right?"

"Not at all..." █ takes a long drag. "At least for me. I mean the things that are really beyond control, the pure wildness, the seeds that fail to burgeon and rot in the soil or whatever."

"What do you mean then?" █ is still confused.

"You see..." █ tries to picture something. "All these things surrounding us are all carefully controlled by thinking beings like you and me. And it always upsets everyone when something derails. But nature is different. There is no such order there and it is much more stable than our volatile wills..."

"Maybe. But this thought of you is carefully controlled by you too. Would you be upset if I deny that?"

"Hehe... You got me..." █ waves the left hand, trying to wipe the unfinished picture that █ has just drawn in the air, "I am not trying to teach you anything here. I understand and I won't stop you from achieving what you have been wanting to..." █ slows this tone, "But, remember to play safe, alright? Not for yourself, but consider that as doing me a favor, and for which I can pay you..."

"No need..." █'s mind goes blank for a second until they both are disturbed by the mechanical voice from the broadcast: "Dear citizens of the Zenith, we are here to kindly remind you that the next shift will take place in 5 minutes. Please stay out of the highlighted areas in order to avoid unnecessary injuries while the mechanism is running. Thank you for your cooperation."

"But thanks..." █ whispers the words that █ thinks no one else would hear.

"So... Here we are again. The beginning of another period of uncertain waiting." █ turns around and leans the back on the railing, staring up to the darkening cloudy sky and letting out a long sigh, as there come 4 roaring steam whistles from the geometric forest below. The shift begins.

"You know I would, I will always come back." █ narrows █'s eyes at the almost sunken sun.

"As I identify myself as a man of nature, I believe in the manipulating power of uncertainty." another sentence jokingly spoken again. █ finishes the cigarette and waves hand to an android nearby.

"But, yes... Please do what you have to do and come back again." The android arrives and █ places the cigarette butt at where it should be. "Goodboy!" █ pats gently its round iron head, which reflects the dark red from above, then █ straightens █'s coat. "And you, you are not leaving now? They are urging."

"I know..." █ nods, "Just want to stay until the end. I have my tricks to tackle the keepers."

"Ha! You did manage to get some privileges, didn't you? Unfortunately I am just a normal citizen here. And..." █ puts on the old leather hat. "Take care. I will be waiting." █ lowers the brim, and leaves in a hurry, leaving █ contemplating the historically red sky. The ticking sound of turning gears coming from the bottomless forest of buildings below. It always brings something down, something up.

SUNSET 2053.2

It always feels unnaturally cold when walking on the hanging corridors. █ hears the humming mechanism miles below, and looks up to the unreachable dome miles beyond. There is no wind howling in the interspace between the buildings after the layer has sunk below the surface. Yet, █ still feels cold. And this feeling intensifies when the dooming red light casts on your back, emitted by a crimson giant sphere. It is said to simulate perfectly the functions of the sun, except its ray doesn't warm anything up. Maybe it simulates a dying star in its last phase. And for some moments, you wish it would trigger an explosion that denies all.

█ checks █'s watch. It magically starts walking again after the meeting with █. And it tells █ that █ still has 23 minutes to reach the meeting spot. And █ hopes that the client would be punctual as well. The machines don't wait.

"Maybe it would be the last time..."

█ doesn't like smuggling people through different layers. He does enjoy stalking under the interlayer labyrinth and making everyday a sunday, and he trusts in his agility and dexterity, but he does not trust others. What if the client died? (This hasn't happened to █ yet.) Who is to blame? █ can not control them like a marionette to avoid deadly situations. Yet █ has to do this. In any case, the price for achieving something impossible is unimaginable. █ wants to change. Yet █ does not know what. For a person without legal status in Zenith, there is nothing else to do. Go ahead, run away, dash to the crumbling tower, cross the stormy waters to reach the only lighthouse under the sunless sky, and don't see asides to avoid drowning. This is what █ has done exactly. █ sneaks into the right alleyway without getting attention, swiftly climbs down the rusty ladder. There is a silhouette waiting in the shadow. Some oily liquid slowly drips from the eaves.

After seeing █, the silhouette, a slightly obese man with glasses, steps forwards out of the dark. His forehead is sweaty in the chilling air, █ notices.

"He... Hello, the Threshold, yes?"

█ nods. Although █ appreciates his discretion in dressing, his body shape still gives █ some concerns about this man's dexterity, which would be crucially needed later when passing through the mechanisms between layers.

"I must warn you again of the potentially fatal danger in this journey. The machines never stop when one stands in their way. If you do not feel fully prepared, you can always go back before we cross the first gate after the shift starts."

"I... I know..." He takes off his glasses and wipes the sweat off his forehead. "I have to..." He then rubs his eyes and puts his glasses back on. "Yes... I am prepared."

"We still have 17 minutes before the shift. You still get some time for consideration. I won't stop you in any case." █ pauses, then adds, "Make sure you can move fast, if you think you are prepared for this."

"Uh-huh..."

Nothing more to say for now. █ finds a relatively clean place under the roof and sits down, while the client chooses to lean on the wall. It begins to rain, of course not naturally under the iron sky. It is meant to simulate the real one, which █ got the chance to witness sometimes when staying at the upper layer. █ doesn't like it at that moment, because rain hides the sun. But here, it seems much more adorable. The mist of rain distorts the red sphere on the gloomy horizon and blurs the monstrous iron cubes in the distance. In the mist, those pathological colourful spots on the smooth surface of all the structures are all carefully hidden. It would be fine, wouldn't it? Maybe the man beside █ would believe it, for he has taken the unknown risk. Like sitting in a train travelling through the foggy forests deep in the mountains on a stormy day. Who is there outside of the window? You can not tell and you can not see, but listen to the pouring rain hitting the window and feel uneasy about when to get off.

"Why do you want to move to the next layer, if you wouldn't mind?" █ suddenly feels the urge for this question, "Or why do you want to leave?"

"...I don't mind..." He sounds hesitant, "For love, I guess."

"Yes...?"

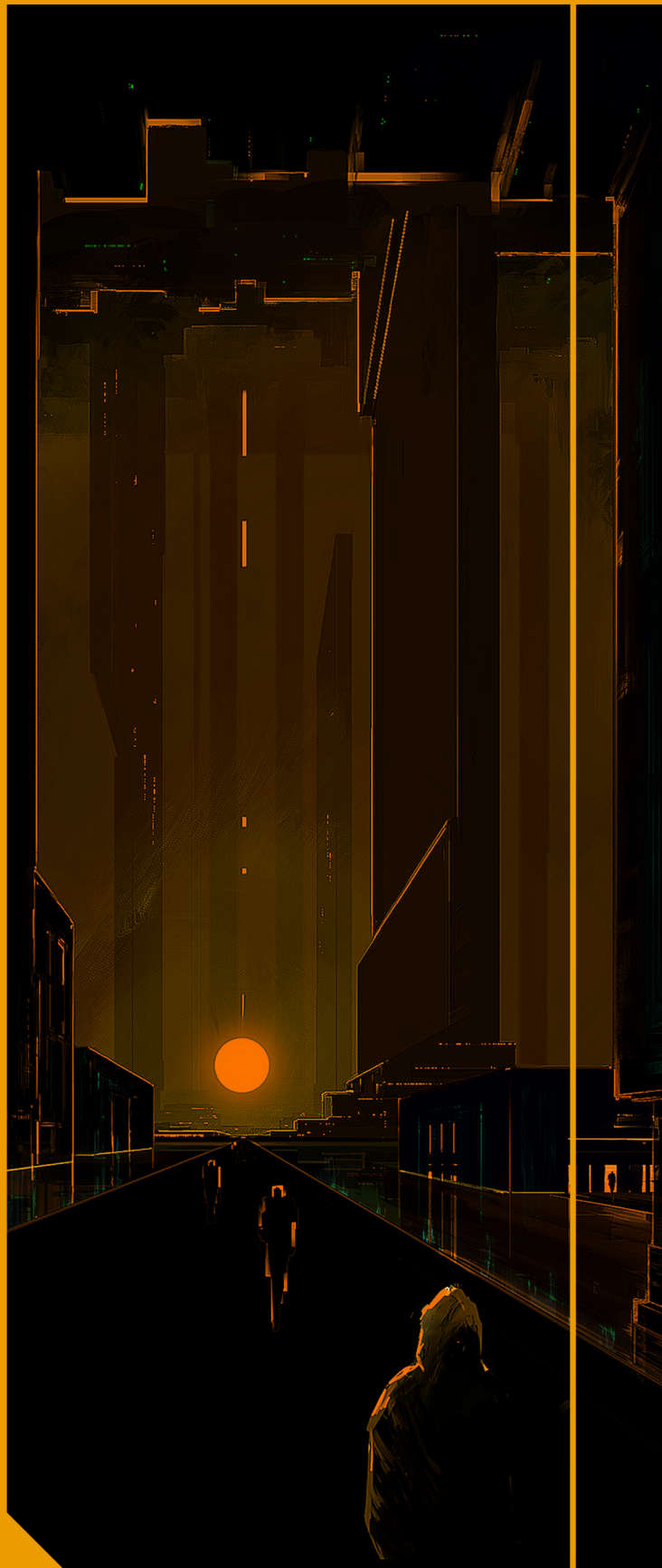
He slowly walks forwards, closer to the rain dripping eaves. "You see... I know someone there. Haven't met her face to face but I think I have fallen in love with her... But the authorities don't take that as a serious argument for moving there..." He shrugs his collar.

"Well... They sure are mean about that. Normally people would just give up." Some water drops splash on █'s clothes. "You can still go back."

"I know."

█ already gets a feeling of déjà vu in this conversation. █ really doubts this man could achieve this safely and soundly, and the reason he provided makes his attempt unworthy indeed for █. Yet, it is his choice.

The mechanical broadcast echoes in the air on time, so does the sound of steam whistles. It is time to move. █ gets up from the ground and looks the man in the eye. The latter nods, rendering all of this somehow comically epic. █ surly does not want to take this as a suicide mission. They move to the trap door, while the hand of the watch ticks steadily until they both hear the sound of the first mechanical movement coming from below. Like always, like destined, █ lifts the door, turns on the torch and sink with the client into the lightless mechanical labyrinth between layers.



There is no rain, no wind and no smell. There is the murmuring sound of the ticking gears in the abyss below. There is the sound of their steady footsteps walking on the hanging corridor. There is the dull sound from far behind as mechanisms gradually wipe off the way they came. The sounds don't melt with each other. They are the hands on the watch, and the watch is this secluded space, transiently existing during the shift.

"You don't seem nervous. I mean, for the first time."

"I know what's coming. Your patron has already explained it to me."

"Good to know. Just keep your eyes on the way ahead and don't worry unnecessarily." ☐ checks the watch, "And we might need to hurry a little bit. Being there in advance is better."

"You decide. I follow."

☐ accelerates. Everything seems fine until now, and the client seems easier to tackle this time. Yet, his slight chubby belly might cause some trouble later when climbing the ladder maybe.

"So... What is she like?"

"Well..." He thinks for a while, "A... Actually, I don't know much."

"Is that so?" It surprises ☐, "Yet you think it is worth taking this risk..."

"Yes. Because she reads the Red Door, an author, maybe you know..."

"Nope..." ☐ pouts, although no one can see. "Is a woman reading this author really that special?"

"For me, yes. A woman reading an ill-minded macho anarchist is quite... intriguing."

"Hm? You don't seem to have something good to say about that author..."

"No. He is a crazy man. But his books... maybe you should have a look too, since you are handling something... not that legal."

"Yes?" ☐ raises one eyebrow. "Then I guess reading his books leads you to our illegal deal."

"Not exactly. I prefer the legal way, if it was not for the authorities. As I said, they don't let me pass."

"Pff... Those hypocrites won't let anyone pass. They only care about equality, or just their kind of equality."

"So... You are not content with them? Then probably you would like his books, for a potential rebel as you."

"Not exactly either." ☐ turns ☐'s head and glances towards the man behind. "I am doing this so that I can see the sun as I want."

"I see..." He rubs his chin, "Well, in fact I don't see... Does that mean... love for you."

"For the sun? Nah, I don't think so, even if by any chance the sun reads too, and we read the same author."

"It could be possible... but well, if you say so." He shrugs.

☐ turns ☐'s head back, "But I could try his books after this."

Something finally appears in the distance on this monotonous corridor, which reflects the torch light back. They reach the pivotal area of Zenith. All they still need to do is enter there, wait for the mechanisms to rotate, then exit to the target layer. ☐ checks the watch again. They are before another trapdoor, about 5 minutes ahead of schedule.

"You know what to do right? After I lift the door, climb down quickly and find somewhere you can cling to before the mechanisms begin to rotate."

He gives a firm nod.

The silence returns, except, again, the sound of running gears and their steady breath. What if someone dies here? Then he would have the ticking sound as his shroud when his bone and flesh are crushed and devoured by the never-stopping mechanisms after falling from above. This is clearly not yet on ☐'s to-do list today. The special sound, like the flare waited by ☐, arrives as scheduled when the watch tells the exact moment. ☐ grabs the handle and tries to lift the trapdoor as always, while the pale reflection of that square door grows clearer in ☐'s widening eyes.

"Shit..."

The door won't budge.

