

“You look like you’ ve seen a ghost, Penn. Sit down.”

“You’ ll jis have to excuse me, it’ s- I never been called up here before. Never knew anyone been called here before, either. S’ an honor.”

AN Enkle Penn, Service Class NPC, Keter Class Stapler, sat in front of the Administrator’ s desk at precisely 22:03:15. His thumbs strummed the knuckles of his other fingers like a nervous pick striking a monotonous, repetitive chord. His metal jaws clattered quietly. He did not look around the room, which was lined floor to ceiling and wall to wall with screens. He did not see AN Mary-Alyss (Standard Class USER, Keter Class Canvas) showering in the privacy of her virtual home. He did not see AN Orchid Bellevox (Interactive Class NPC, Keter Class Radio) roughhousing around in a bar with a collection of other NPCs. An uncanny pane of one-directional glass, a dozen or so feet tall, separated himself from the Administrator, and all he was focused on was his own reflection.

“The honor is mine,” replied the processed voice of the Administrator after a moment’ s silence. “I am pleased to find myself in such illustrious company.”

Enkle remained silent, unsure of how to respond. A sigh seethed through the glass.

“Do you know why you are here, Penn?”

“No,” Penn replied, after a pause.

AN Mary-Alyss was being shot in the heart. She fell to the bottom of the tub without a sound, bleeding out in black and white.

AN Orchid Bellevox and the other NPCs had begun to riot, screaming in silence, tearing out of the bar before dropping out of existence, one by one.

“Really?” the Administrator queried. “I thought the reasons had been very clearly put forth in our note to you.”

Penn thought back to the unopened package still sitting on his table at home. The attached note was sitting exposed next to a letter opener, quivering from the fan’ s steady beating at the air. His hands clenched each other. “I read the note.”

“You read the paper,” the Administrator corrected. “Half of that note was in the box and you didn’ t even bother to open it, did you?”

Enkle did not answer. He had nothing to say.

“That doesn’ t matter. We have a spare.”

Out of nowhere and rather unceremoniously, the torn remnants of an arm fell in more pieces than one onto Penn’ s lap, small parts spilling to the floor. It was Astrid’ s.

Enkle found himself unable to breathe.

In the reflection on the oil-stained plating of the arm he could see that every screen in the room was now focused on him.

“Do you understand now? I know you have information on the Transductor. I also know that you and Miss Lucia were close. Close enough for you to have information on the object she was carrying, which seems to have disappeared upon her death. Would you like to cooperate and tell me where it is now?”

“Like Hell I would,” Enkle breathed.

“I suspected as much,” the Administrator’ s voice hummed dismissively. “I thought it would be polite to ask.” The glass wall slowly began to slide down into some unseen compartment in the floor. “You will not remember any of this once we are finished here. However, you will very much feel and remember it as it occurs. And it may take a while.”

The glass wall had come down entirely. The Administrator was not the one standing behind it.

Penn was frozen in his seat as the static-filled screen lowered itself to eye level.

Dimly, he saw his reflections bleeding out in black and white.