



JULIO-ALEXI GENA © FOR LOVE HAS NO BOUNDARIES 2013

# WHEN YOU WERE PIXELS

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# Love Has No Boundaries

*An M/M Romance series*

## WHEN YOU WERE PIXELS

*a standalone short story in the Syntax universe*

**By Julio-Alexi Genao**

### Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love Has No Boundaries* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a free gift to you.

### What Is Love Has No Boundaries?

The *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* invited members to choose a photo and pen a letter asking for a short M/M romance story inspired by the image; authors from the group were encouraged to select a letter and write an original tale. The result was an outpouring of creativity that shone a spotlight on the special bond between M/M romance writers and the people who love what they do.

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love Has No Boundaries*.

Whether you are an avid M/M romance reader or new to the genre, you are in for a delicious treat.

### Words of Caution

This story may contain sexually explicit content and is **intended for adult readers**. It may contain content that is disagreeable or distressing to some readers. The *M/M Romance Group* strongly recommends that each reader

review the General Information section before each story for story tags as well as for content warnings.

This story is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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When You Were Pixels

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**By Julio-Alexi Genao**

## Photo Description

On a dark, rainy night, a man stands on a balcony overlooking a grim city dense with tall, futuristic buildings. Tiny skycraft are darting between the towers against the charcoal sky. The man—dressed in black, with very short hair—has his back to the viewer. He appears to be a solitary, lonely figure, staring at a single spire crowned by a full moon and marked by the numbers “072” on its side.

## Story Letter

*Dear Author,*

*Welcome to the Capitol. Crime runs rampant far below in the slums, and civil unrest has spread even to its darkened spires in spite of the government’s best efforts to silence dissent. What will become of the City of Lights when its last is extinguished?*

*There’s an assassin afoot tonight. Whether or not his mark is made could be the deciding factor in this unspoken war. Will tyranny prevail? Or will the revolution finally begin to move forward?*

*I would love to see dark spec fiction with as many layers as you want to put on it. SFF? Yes, please. Dieselpunk, or other variants? Absolutely. Paranormal or demonic influences? Oh baby, purr.*

*As plot-focused or as porn-focused as you feel is appropriate!*

*You are already awesome. Thank you so much in advance.*

*Sincerely,*

*EK*

## Story Info

**Genre:** science fiction, dystopia, post-apocalyptic

**Tags:** hurt/comfort, tear jerker, anterograde amnesia

**Content warnings:** no HEA or HFN, some violence

**Word count:** 8,083

### Acknowledgements

A more or less absurd number of very talented people came together in my hour(s) of need to render aid, dispense succor, and defend my fragile ego at critical junctures throughout the development of this project.

To my only occasionally civil yet gloriously skilled editor, Brona—known elsewhere as the Reaver of Shitty Writez and the Redeemer of Ridiculous Dreams. All shall know her, and despair.

To my kickass Beta DreamTeam: Anna, KittyKnight of Tanzaswedetalia, and Ayanna the Steadfast, of California. To Con, Heidi, and Sam, esteemed fellow authors of no small note; Emma, Vicky, Daniel, and Kate, as well—amazing human beings, every one. Thank you for being superlative.

To E.K., who posted the original prompt in the Goodreads M/M Romance Group discussion threads: I am in your debt. To quote a recent pop song: your idea ate my heart, and then it ate my brain.

To Aleksandr, for that thing with the thing, that one time.

To Elspeth and MLE, for the cookies, and the gummies, and the local paper—but mostly for the cookies and the gummies.

To Jen McJ, who never quite got irritated enough with me to have me killed—even when I stopped answering her emails.

Twice.

To John. Because reasons.

To Amy. For *Truth in the Dark*, and the tweet that put me back together after a rough night.

Finally, to all the outrageously attractive members of #teamjoolz, who yet remain quite #effective: I made this with love. I really hope you love it too.



*Dedication*

for nino

*if equal affection cannot be  
let the more loving one be me*

W.H. Auden

# WHEN YOU WERE PIXELS

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**By Julio-Alexi Genao**

My name is Antho, and I love you.

You don't remember me.

That's okay.

I'm going to leave this for you where you'll find it, in that long black coat you wear with all the secret pockets. It might take you some time, but I don't mind.

I watched you kill my boss. Then I watched you fall.

I think I maybe loved you as early as then. He was an asshole.

But that's not really what I need you to know.

You'll need to read these words one day, and I hope you believe them:

You are not alone.

You forgot me three times, and every time, we started over.

Maybe I'm already dead. Maybe you killed me like you said you would.

Doesn't matter.

I loved you even when you forgot me.

And—for a little while—you loved me back.

\*\*\*\*

The first time I saw you it was like you had come out of nowhere.

None of the artificial intelligence surveillance subroutines had tracked your entry into the tower, or your ascent to the two hundred and nineteenth floor. You hadn't set off any alarms, and none of the security personnel ever put out a call over their comms.

Not until it was too late, anyway.

I'd been at my post in the tower security suites, babysitting the surveillance system as it sifted through data looking for anomalies.

Looking for someone like you.

It was boring work, but I'm an Undertown boy. I'd been lucky enough to get a job at all, never mind one so high off the ground.

I think you might be one too. An underton, like me? I heard your accent come back a couple times. You talk in your sleep.

Nothing ever happened at work. No anomalies.

Until you.

I saw what you did.

\*\*\*\*

It was like watching a machine.

I'd never seen anyone like you, and neither had they. You sliced into the milling mass of confused officers, striking at every vulnerable target that presented itself. You took apart an entire corps of security personnel before they even realized what was happening.

You simply dismantled any who tried to stop you, fists and feet snapping outward in these crazy moves that took my breath away, that old-timey coat you love spinning around you the way it does, flaring up and out like black wings and then settling in a sexy ripple of leather when you went still.

You left none standing.

They hadn't even been armed. Hadn't prepared for the possibility of facing someone like you.

I sat there with my mouth open like a dummy, watching it happen.

You were incredible.

They sent armed orbs up to that floor to get you, but you were too fast. The whole thing was over and you were on another floor before the droids even got there.

You reached my boss's office. He was a dick to the end. Sitting in his chair behind an enormous comms array like he was master of the whole world

instead of some mid-level corporate security executive with an en-suite washroom. I could see him barking harsh words at you—words I couldn't hear over the alarms and the panic all around me with all these officers running around yelling like it was the start of the Energy War all over again.

A sudden hush fell over the room as everyone in sight of a monitor watched you coolly walk up to him and twist his head around in one brutally efficient movement.

Just like that. He was in the middle of a sentence, and you ended him on the spot.

Then you were running, and so was everyone else. I was left alone to man the feeds.

They were coming for you, yet somehow you knew where to go. Which corridor to run down. When to run down it. When to stop, when to go, when to slip back the way you'd come to avoid a group of security orbs floating by.

I never could figure out how you managed to fool their sensors.

You just *did*. Every time.

You couldn't avoid the cameras, though. I could see you the entire time. Even so, something kept the two networks from talking. The surveillance AI kept pinging the droid AI, trying to update the orbs on your location, but nothing ever got through.

You'd sorted it, somehow. In advance. Fixed it so it would all go wrong for us exactly when you needed it to.

I still wonder why you let us watch you. Why you never disabled the video.

I know you messed with the data capture—not one second of the feed was saved as it should've been—but you had to know someone would be sitting in a room somewhere in the building, watching you kill a man.

Then watching you run.

By the time anyone realized that the usual lines of communication had been sabotaged—that the only way anyone could track you was by watching your escape with human eyes—they were too late.

It was me. I watched it happen. And it was beautiful.

You.

You were beautiful.

\*\*\*\*

You almost made it out. You were maybe a minute from getting away. Something happened to you.

You staggered a bit, like someone hit you in the head, but you were alone. You were in a service passage, deep down in the lower third of the tower, below even the living quarters for nobodies like me.

You went down on your knees, and you pressed your head to the floor. You looked like you were praying. Then I saw your mouth, and the cords of your neck above the collar of your coat.

You were screaming in pain.

The lights in the service passage started flickering. One second before the video feed terminated, they flared and went out.

\*\*\*\*

I didn't know what to do.

I knew what I *wanted* to do. I knew what I was *supposed* to do.

But I didn't know what I was *going* to do.

You were still in the building. Still down there, a hundred and fifty floors below.

The surveillance suite filled up with people. Some barked orders at others. A group in the conference room had a hushed yet urgent conversation before mumbling gravely into their comms to speak to very angry people very far away.

Nobody knew where you were except me, and I—

I wasn't saying.

I don't know why. I still don't know why I didn't just stand up and tell somebody.

I'm nothing, here. A lowly surveillance analyst. Being the hero could have meant something good for me. Could have changed my whole life.

I could have done it. I *should* have done it.

I sat there and I thought about you, instead.

There was something about the way you cut down all those men. A kind of fragile tension in every step you took. It spoke of—vulnerability.

I recognized it.

I saw your pain, when you fell. The expression on your face. I watched the way you pressed your hand against your stomach as you slid from your kneeling position onto the floor, to lie down on your side like a broken child.

I recognized that, too.

I was asked a series of questions.

*What did you see? Why are there no files in the video archives? How did the assassin escape?*

I lied every time.

When they let me go, I went down to find you.

\*\*\*\*

You were right where I'd seen you fall, but everything around you had changed.

The hall was dark. All the lighting panels were blown for almost ten meters in both directions. The metal walls were bowed outward, and you were at the epicenter of the damage, at the bottom of a crater of warped alloy flooring panels.

You lay still, breathing shallowly, one arm over your head. Your knees were drawn up to your chest.

I crept up to the crater in the floor, using a diode from my belt to gauge the scope of the devastation. Nothing was scorched. Nothing had been burned. All that incredible damage—the corridor, the floor, all the dead electronics—all of it had somehow happened without any kind of flame or explosive.

I slid down to the bottom of the crater and sat there on my heels, looking at you.

Unconscious, all the hard edges of your face had gone gentle, and I could see that your head wasn't shaved at all, as it had looked on the video feed. You had close-cropped blond hair, like a soldier.

I'm not good with ages. With the Citizens and their drugs and their implants, you can never tell if someone's thirty or a hundred. You didn't look like a Citizen to me, though—even if you looked like you were just a kid. Maybe twenty—but with someone as tall as you, with that long neck of yours and those slightly too-big ears, looking in sleep like you'd only just left your adolescence behind last Thursday—I couldn't be sure.

I wanted to see your face. Your whole face, not just the broad, masculine mouth, slack with dead sleep. I wanted to see you, up close this time.

I moved your arm.

Short lashes in a pale fringe. Thin brows. Your eyes were closed. I imagined that when they opened, they'd be large and full of something. That they'd look at a thing and *see* it.

You didn't open your eyes, though.

Good that you didn't, because I needed to get you out of there without any fuss. The rupture in services along that corridor could have been noted at any moment. At the time, I figured everyone had more on their minds than a dodgy video feed and some dead climate control software in a shitty lower-level service sector—but now I think you'd known they'd be looking closely at any anomaly, no matter how small, and that you had accounted for that.

Just like I'd accounted for all the surveillance feeds in every lift and corridor between where you'd fallen and my quarters.

I gently slid my arms underneath you and carried you home.

\*\*\*\*

When I woke up, you were kneeling over me in the bed with the long, blunt-tipped fingers of one hand wrapped around my neck.

Your eyes were open, and as you squeezed my throat shut I saw the keen edge of focus in them. Your face was closed to me—all softness gone—with your mouth a hard line and your forehead sheened with sweat.

You were going to kill me, but first you wanted answers.

“You will tell me where I am.” Your voice was low and scary, grinding like the rusted innards of an old machine.

You relaxed your fingers to let me answer you. I didn’t panic. I drew breath as slowly as I could.

I was calm.

“Still in Tower Oh-Seven-Two,” I rasped. “But safe.” Something flickered in your expression, but I didn’t know what it meant. “I didn’t tell. I saw what you did but I didn’t tell. You were hurt. I brought you here.” Your fingers tightened again, and I knew I had only a few seconds to make you understand. “My home. My quarters. I kept you safe. I didn’t tell.”

It was enough.

You let me go.

I watched you roll off me and step away from the bed in silence, but when the heat of your body was gone, I wanted it back.

You smelled like sweat, and leather, and a little like ozone. I wanted you.

You took in your surroundings. The plastic furniture. The empty walls and my tiny, precious collection of real books in the battered box half-under the bed. No windows. No other rooms but the lavatory. No fancy video deck or domestic droids.

Just me, in the worn sheets we’d been sharing moments earlier.

I swallowed around my hunger for you. “My name is Antho,” I said, and then some strange, suicidal impulse took me: “Who—who sent you? My boss. He was Decuria. But a minor—only a second cousin, or something. Why did he—why did you kill him?”

You turned your head sharply towards me, and what I saw in your face stunned me.



Confusion.

You couldn't remember.

Your expression shifted. You grew angry. I tensed, wondering if you were going to kill me after all.

Almost immediately, the lines of your face changed again. Your mouth—so mobile and expressive even when still—now spoke silently of pain.

The hairs on my arms stood up at a sudden charge in the air.

The lamp I'd left on by the bed began to flicker.

With a small pop, it sparked and went out, filling the room with the smell of fried circuitry. We were in the dark as you collapsed bonelessly back onto the bed, on top of me.

You were unconscious again.

\*\*\*\*

Hours earlier, after struggling to carry you from the crater to my quarters with my arms on fire from the strain, I reached my door.

You're so tall that I'd had to carry you over my shoulder, holding you steady with my hands on the backs of your thighs, warm and taut even at rest. With my every step your arms had swayed behind my back, hands brushing my ass lightly. You weighed next to nothing, but the distance I'd needed to carry you and the body armor you wore under your clothes were nearly too much for me.

Guys like me don't rate sliding doors. This close to the ground I'd been lucky just to have a room to myself. I had to press you against the door with my shoulder and turn the knob with my free hand, afraid that at any moment we'd be seen.

I'd stripped your long coat off you and laid you on my bed. Checked your pulse before covering you with my blankets. Sat in my only chair, on the other side of the room, to wait for you to wake.

But I ached.

My skin hungered for you. You were warm, and alive, and in my bed, and I wanted you so bad I could feel the ripple of need on the pads of my fingertips, on the palms of my hands, on the skin of my back, at the base of my cock, inside my ass—

I wanted the taste of you in my mouth.

I'd been alone for so long. Winning this job meant cutting ties with everyone. Meant moving into my bare little room a third of the way up a bleak corporate tower, living my life for the Company. I'd made my choice, and I would make it the same way again.

Wasn't like I hadn't had to live with another sort of hunger, down in the streets.

Undertown. You maybe don't remember it. Your clothes don't smell of it. Of the filth, the rot. The stinking hell of vapor and grime. The warren of hovels and the millions of us starving in them, defending whatever pathetic collection of things we call "ours"—sometimes to the death, yet still doing little more than waiting to die.

An entire world defined by suffering. Below even me, now, in my barren little room.

All the enormous machines that keep full Citizens comfortable far above us in their glittering towers, all the infrastructure of power, of fuel, of commerce and industry—all of it happens below. Made possible with our hands. With our bodies.

With our lives.

I would have done anything to escape.

I got my chance. I made it out—but the price was loneliness.

And your body was warm.

\*\*\*\*

I'd removed all but my underclothes, that night I took you home. Took off all the drab corporate synthetics as if stripping my armor to uncover the vulnerable man I was underneath it.

The man who needed to be near you.

I'd pressed my back into your solid length, eyes wet as I fell asleep.

That's why I was calm. When you woke me in the middle of the night with your hand around my throat, and I thought I was going to die for bringing you home—that I had given my life to lie down next to a murderer—that's why I was calm.

Because all I was thinking in that moment was that it was worth it.

\*\*\*\*

The next time you woke, you'd forgotten everything.

I was supposed to have the day off, but the brutal murder of a security executive with ties to a ruling family messed-up my schedule. I was called in to work a morning shift while better-qualified staff were deployed all over the building to do who-cares-what.

I left you a note on the inside of the door, hoping you'd read it, and stay.

I knew you could probably handle yourself, all things considered—but you weren't well. It seemed like you spent all night talking out loud or moaning softly. You moved around a lot in the bed, jabbing at me with sharp elbows a couple times.

I loved it.

Not your distress. Never that. I loved—I loved being there. Next to you. The pile of limbs that was Us. Together in the same bed. Even if it meant waking up with a few new bruises.

One time during the night you threw a heavy arm out and over my chest—you on your belly, me lying on my back—and when I turned my head I could just make out your hand, huge already, but also swollen from all the fighting, opening and closing on the sheets beside me.

I wanted to take your hand into mine and kiss it.

I never dared.

In the morning my personal comm chimed to wake me, somewhere inside the pile of clothes I'd left by the door.

I'd already been awake for hours.

At some point you'd settled on your side, and I'd turned as well, to fit my back against your front.

Your cock was a huge and solid mass of warmth behind me, crushed against the cheeks of my ass. I could feel it through my shorts, throbbing slightly every so often as you slept.

I wanted you.

I wanted to grind back onto that warmth and strip the barriers between us until I could push myself around you, to wrap the heat of my insides around your cock. I wanted to gut myself for you, and my need was like an animal inside me, tearing at me to get to you.

I did none of those things. Never moved.

You slept on.

I stayed there with you, even when I had to go pee, listening to you snore softly. When the light in the bathroom went on at 0800, I counted the tiny moles on the skin of your forearm, on skin as pallid as the rest of you, but fuzzed with blond hairs I hadn't been able to see until just then.

I slipped out of bed carefully, out from under your arm, and it felt like leaving home all over again.

I dressed and went to work. The note I left you that morning read:

*Stay. I'm Antho. You're safe, here. I'll be back with food. I didn't tell anyone about you. Please rest and get better. You're hurt, but you're safe now—I promise. I won't tell anyone. I want to help you.*

You never saw it.

When I returned from my shift with new lamps for the room and extra rations for you, my note was still stuck to the inside of the door, and you were still asleep. I took it down and slipped it into my pocket.

I gave you all my secrets, and you lost them all. You lost a lot of things.

But the treasure of it was in the giving, not the keeping.

You've forgotten me, but I'll remember you as long as I live.

\*\*\*\*

You tried to kill me again in the evening.

I was heating the rations. I had my back to the bed. You never made a sound.

“Who,” you whispered harshly by my ear as you pressed something cold and sharp to my neck, “are you?”

My pulse spiked. I cleared my throat to speak, but didn’t move. “My name is Antho. I found you when you—when you fell. You needed help. I brought you here. To keep you safe.”

“Where is this place?”

“We are still inside Tower Oh-Seven-Two. You killed my—a man. You’re hurt. I saw it happen to you. On the feed. I came for you, and now you’re here. With me.”

You said nothing. I listened to your breathing, felt the tension in the blade against my throat. It never wavered as you considered.

Then:

“Why?”

“Because—”

I stood there, words tangled up inside me uselessly.

I couldn’t figure out how to tell you. I know how to say it now, but not then.

I didn’t know how to tell you about what was already there, inside me, a knot of something secret and warm.

I remember. I remember it like it’s happening to me right this second. I remember your smell. Like a mix of synthetic fabric and warm skin and—something else, not like ozone, this time; you were calm. Something cold and maybe metallic, like iron. I remember your breath, sour from sleep. I remember the heat of you at my back again, like the banked fires of a furnace. I remember thinking: *I shouldn’t hide. I should show him.*

So I did.

With a long, slow sigh, all the tension I'd held to keep perfectly still bled out of me in one breath. I slouched down a little, into you, arching my back slightly as I fitted myself to your lean body, and the shock of surprise robbed your hand of agency.

You dropped the knife.

And for a moment you just—let me.

Let me sink into you.

But only for a moment.

You closed your hand around my arm and threw me aside with incredible speed. My head hit the wall as I smashed into the small table where I took my meals. My vision blurred as the legs collapsed and splintered under me, the bowls and cutlery I'd laid out for us clattering as they spun across the floor. Before I could recover you grabbed me by the throat and pulled me off the rubble and into the middle of the room. My legs flailed out as you swung me around, knocking the scalding hot rations off the heating element, to splatter onto my thighs and feet. I cried out in pain as you straddled me, pinning my arms to the floor with your knees.

You were full of rage. The skin of your face was mottled with it. Your lips twisted into a snarl as you leaned in close.

Blue. Your eyes were a leaden blue, dark with murder—but I was still not afraid.

*I was not afraid of you.* I was afraid of discovery. Of our time running out.

If—if that thing you do, with the lights, with electronics—if it happened again, any worse than before—they'd notice. Upstairs. Some clever AI would report the exception in the electrical grid to an eager admin in an office three hundred meters above us, and then all of this would be over.

They'd come for you, and this time they'd come with weapons.

I was afraid of that. For you. But not *of* you.

Never afraid of you.

I wanted you.

I wanted you more than I wanted to live.

You didn't hurt me again. My vision cleared. I watched you struggle against the urge to end my life.

I think you saw it in me. Or felt it, maybe.

The submission. The wanting.

I let go. My body went lax under you.

You realized it at the same time I did. That you were resting your ass lightly on my groin, and that my dick was hard.

This time I was close enough to see your surprise up close. Your rage melted away into a kind of innocent confusion for just a moment, before your brows drew down to darken your face again.

It's like a—like a video panel, you know that? Your face. I don't think you realize how much of what happens inside you can be seen in your face.

Maybe it was just me. I paid attention to you.

You were off me in an instant, and then what few belongings I had left were lost to the violence of the animal of suffering and fury you became.

You roared, mindless. I sat up to watch you lay waste to my home.

You were in such pain. So much pain.

You stalked from corner to corner, howling wordlessly, destroying anything within reach.

Everything except me.

You were the monster, but all I could see was the boy.

The hurt. The brokenness.

The outside of you had peeled away, and I could see your insides as clear as my own hand in my lap, aching to reach for you.

\*\*\*\*

You were spent long after there was nothing left for you to destroy, your arms and legs trembling with exhaustion. You collapsed on the far side of the room, by the door to the corridor outside.

You didn't try to leave.

Your knuckles were cut and bloody. You rested your forearms on your knees, with your head hanging down. I watched you bleed onto the pieces of what used to belong to me.

I didn't care.

I didn't want any of it.

You were still, but you were not calm. I saw your chest heaving. The tears falling. You were covered in sweat and shattered things. For you, the storm hadn't passed. It had returned to its place inside you again.

I wiped tears from my own cheeks with the back of my hand, and your head snapped up to track my sudden movement.

Your face. Your face in that moment: your rage had vanished, but the hurt was still there.

"Let me—" I coughed. My throat was raw, and I could still feel the ghostly press of those strong fingers, crushing my windpipe. "Let me help you."

"Nobody can help me," you said, voice low and taut. "There's nothing in me."

"You're safe here."

"But you are not," you whispered. "Not ever. I forget. I forget and then I'll—I could kill you."

When I didn't reply, you dropped your head again.

I almost missed it when you murmured, "I always kill them, in the end."

\*\*\*\*

But you didn't kill me, that night.

You let me come near, and pull you up to stand with me, and together we went into the lavatory.

You let me strip your torn and bloody clothes off you. I did it with something close to reverence. My hands shook like crazy, but you seemed not to notice.



I wouldn't have been much ashamed if you had.

You let me set the water in the shower and followed me into the booth to stand there with me under the warm spray. You kept your head down, not looking me in the eyes—though if you were shy, I couldn't tell. You had no reason to be. You know what you look like.

I know you don't remember what we did.

I want to tell you.

I want to tell you how I stood there with you, taking every part of you in my hands, to pour all my heartsick years of secret need into your skin.

How I stroked you with fingers, and held you with arms.

I went to my knees to take you into my mouth, sliding you into my throat with all the tenderness I had. I moaned when you let me swallow your come, and kept sucking you until you had no more to give me.

I want to tell you how I stood and took a cloth to your body, massaging the satiny soap into your skin, and the tension from your muscles. How I was so careful of all your scrapes, and tender with your bruises.

Before long you were hard again. Mine had never gone down in the first place. I led you out by the hand, mindful of sharp things on the floor, to the bed whose mattress had survived where its unadorned frame had not.

You fell on top of me onto the pile of synthetic sheets and foam padding, and I groaned with need at the living weight of you, the mass of you—of you, on me, and then inside me.

You took me apart and filled me with everything I'd ever needed.

I want to tell you how you fixed me.

How I came like dying, a rush of blood roaring in my ears—laughing as every part of me became joy, and pleasure, and—everything.

Everything.

You came inside me not long after, with my body wrapped tight around your cock as I'd wanted from the very first. I felt it swell even larger at the last, stretching me to the point of pain more sweet than any peace—

The wonder of that wet heat pooling deep within me—

And then you sighed, and collapsed on top of me, our sweat mingling on our skin as you slid to cup my entire body with yours, while you slowly spread your come around inside me with deep, tender strokes.

You made me feel vital. Like you needed me.

For one unbelievable moment, the emptiness—the ache—that terrible hollow of desolation I'd lived with all this time was just—gone.

Gone.

You inside me, instead.

We lay there together afterward, limbs heavy and slick with mingled sweat, bonelessly tangled up together, with your come inside me like a secret.

I held it in me for the rest of the night.

I want to tell you how grateful I felt. Grateful for you, for what we'd done—but also that I'd managed to keep that small part of you within me as long as I had.

Because when you woke up in the morning you had forgotten me again.

\*\*\*\*

“You're safe,” I whispered out into the darkness, a surge of roiling panic in me that hadn't been there the last time. “I saw—I saw you. On the feeds. You needed help—I came for you.”

All the lights in my quarters, even in the lavatory, had died. I heard a rustling noise near the door. The stink of melted plastic filled the air, and underneath it ozone, like a thunderstorm was building inside my room.

I was afraid. Attack droids and armed officers could already have been creeping silently down the corridor to kill us both.

I heard the click of the lock on my door. You opened it just enough to let a wedge of light from the passage outside cut into the space between us. I could see you, now—head panning left-right, left-right, marking the shadowed destruction.

Marking your nudity. The armor and clothing in a pile beside you.

Me.

This was it. This was the end.

“I’m Antho,” I said, and this time my voice broke.

I felt it return. Felt the poisonous bloom open in the middle of me like it had never gone.

The ache. The empty. It had come back.

“Please—*my name is Antho.*”

You said nothing.

“This is—you’re still in Tower Oh-Seven-Two. Listen to me, you—you got away, but something happened to you. You were hurt. I brought you here to take care of you. I took care of you—”

I looked around the room, fully registering at last what it must have looked like to you—how exposed and vulnerable you must have felt—and in an instant I knew:

You’d woken in the dark, in bed with a stranger, and between you and your freedom was a floor strewn with the sharp edges of broken things.

I’d lost you before I’d even opened my eyes.

“This—” I gestured at the debris on the floor. “—It was an accident. You were safe here. You *are* safe here—”

My mouth snapped shut on the lie as you began pulling on clothes.

Body armor first.

It was really happening.

“Don’t go.”

Shirt. Boots. The coat you wear like it’s a part of your body.

“You don’t need to—listen to me, *you don’t need to know why you’re here*—you’ve forgotten, but it doesn’t matter, don’t you—don’t you see? You’re with me. *You can be safe here with me—*”

I couldn't make myself move from the bed. To reach for you. I'd known this moment was coming, and now that it had arrived I found I had no strength in my limbs.

Only my voice. Only words.

Asking you to stay.

“—Please, I promise, we can be—I can take care of you—”

You were ready. Face, backlit by the light outside, already beginning to flicker haltingly. I could see nothing of your expression.

I'd been shut out again.

One last look around. One last look at me.

You weren't the same boy.

You weren't even a boy. Not anymore.

You were the assassin.

“No—*don't*—”

But you did, and you'd never even spoken a word.

\*\*\*\*

Alarms sounded in offices all over the building when you made it past the corridors I'd secured.

Your image was captured from every angle, and in the weeks that followed, parsed for the smallest clue to your identity.

They found nothing.

The face they'd tagged and cross-referenced and catalogued so diligently belonged to a man who didn't exist.

In the end, they'd seen no more than what I saw some days later, when I finally found it in me to examine the surveillance videos for myself:

A tall man in black, running down corridor after corridor, his coat trailing out behind him like a cape. Darkness lapped at his heels as he ran beneath light panels that flared brightly and then died, one after another, leaving a long

stretch of stygian nothingness in his wake, until at last he passed through a service portal and out into the rippling heat of the sprawling city below.

You were gone.

\*\*\*\*

They searched for you for a long time, and so did I.

Armed guards patrolled the tower in rotating shifts.

I was asked some more questions. You'd been seen near my quarters, but nobody really believed that a lowly video analyst could have had anything to do with the most brazen assassination in decades.

I went back to work.

Eventually, the patrols were curtailed, and finally ended.

I watched for you. Every day. Never stopped watching for you.

Checking the feeds. Checking the vids. Checking everything.

Sometimes I'd see someone on my surveillance monitors, someone tall, and blond, and young, walking with the same grace and that exact kind of wounded menace in his gait—

But it wasn't you.

It was never you.

\*\*\*\*

Until one day it was.

You'd been waiting for me. On my new bed.

I'd made a feeble attempt to put the ruin of my quarters back together in the weeks since you'd run from me, but I never finished the job. I didn't *want* to finish.

Because then the room would be done, but you'd still be gone. As if you'd never been.

I would be as I was before.

Alone.

But not that night.

You were on the mattress, leaning against the wall. Your eyes were red, and your cheeks blotchy. Those huge, battered hands of yours hung between your knees, clenching into fists, then relaxing, over and over as you spoke.

“I’m—sorry,” you said, the first stripe of wetness on your cheek, “I don’t mean to but I—Antho, there’s something—something is wrong with my...” You took a shuddering breath, and shook your head. “But I remembered. I smelled something of—I don’t know, I smelled it and I remem—”

You’d remembered my name.

I was all over you before you could finish.

\*\*\*\*

I’m trying to put it into words.

To write those words down for you.

How it felt. How it feels, now.

I can’t.

You remembered my name, and it was everything.

\*\*\*\*

Three days. We had only three days.

\*\*\*\*

In the middle of the first night, I got up and dressed to go out for the food we would eat together in the morning. At the door, I turned and cast one more greedy look at the unconscious tumble of limbs in the bed that had become ours once more.

I opened the door with a smile, only to reel back in horror.

An orb was waiting for me.

Panic clawed my belly, but I didn’t move. I set my feet, knowing it was hopeless—that the sphere floating in the air before me was fitted with six different devices that could stun, maim, or kill.

I closed my eyes as searing terror solidified into the kind of cold certainty I'd only felt once before: when I'd been outside, Undertown, trying to win a place for myself in this tower.

It was my time. I was going to die.

I could hear the whine of the impellers that kept it aloft, and the terrifying grind of the motors within it as it scanned the room. The sounds should have shattered me, but did not.

I knew peace.

If it wanted you, it would need to kill me first.

I opened my eyes.

It wasn't one of ours.

The droid didn't belong to the tower. The coloring was wrong—still dark, but not grey; this one was a mordant black, matte with utility and menace. It was larger than ours, maybe a half-meter in diameter, and pocked with ports for instruments and equipment I couldn't identify.

Not private. Not police.

Military.

Deadly.

It stayed where it was, one foot from my door, floating in the corridor beyond.

Observing.

I risked another look back toward the bed. You slept on, as if you'd never had it in you to kill a man in your entire life.

Rage. I knew rage.

“Our time's not up,” I ground out. “*You can't have him back.*”

The pitch of its impellers changed. I waited to die.

But I didn't.

The orb slid away from my door and down the corridor, to leave us to our delusion of safety a little while longer.

I couldn't tell you about it, then. I'm telling you now.

I haven't seen another orb like it since.

\*\*\*\*

The second day, I watched you suffer through one of your nightmares, but this one was worse than I'd seen before.

You called out another man's name.

It ate at me. To see you in pain—not to know you once belonged to someone else.

You should remember him. You must have loved him very much.

His name is Niko.

\*\*\*\*

This is the morning of the third day since you came back to me.

I woke up and found all the lamps blown and all the electronics in the room dead, even my comm.

I'd prepared for this. Yesterday I brought home a candle and some chemical matches.

I knew we'd run out of time. I knew we would run out, but knowing it and facing it are two different things. This, right now—this hurts.

Like all the good I'd ever had in my life, this is ending. This is ending today.

I know when you wake I'm going to beg, like before.

I'm going to ask you to stay, to remember, but you won't.

And then you'll be gone. I won't get the chance to tell you anything.

To tell you—everything.

I got some paper, two days ago, and this pencil, and I've been writing you this letter.

Almost done, now. I thought I might run out of time, but here it is, nearly finished.

It's time to hide it for you. In your coat.



The lights are blown.

I know what it means.

You will wake up very soon.

Up from your bad dreams. Out of this good one.

You won't remember me. You won't need me anymore.

You will leave me again.

I forgive you. I forgave you. I will always forgive you.

You should know that for a little while, you were not alone.

*Not alone.*

I loved you when you were pixels on a screen.

\*\*\*\*

Your breath warms the nape of my neck right now. I still have the taste of you in my mouth.

Maybe you'll find this in your coat, someday, and come back to me.

Maybe you'll finally kill me when you wake up.

Whatever happens, I am content.

Things end. Everything ends.

But for a few days in a city full of hopelessness, and unkindness, and alienation—in this fucked-up mess of a life spent wandering in the dark without a hand to hold on to—

I was not alone.

And neither were you.

My name is Antho, and I love you.

**THE END**

## **Author Bio**

*Julio-Alexi Genao lives with far too many cats in New York City, silently condescending to his upstairs neighbor's taste in music.*

## **Contact & Media Info**

[Website](#) | [Etc](#) | [Twitter](#)

## **Endmatter of Ancillary Yet Vital Importance**

### **Music Listened To**

1. *All Is Full Of Love (Plaid Mix)*—Bjork [spookysynth mood-setter]
2. *Chemistry Of A Car Crash*—Shiny Toy Guns [de facto theme song of this story]
3. *Perfect Motion*—Sunscreem [if rhythm's a drug i'm hooked on you]
4. *Baby (feat. Ludacris)*—Justin Bieber [stfu shit happens]
5. *The Game Has Changed*—Daft Punk [menace made into music]
6. *Bad Religion*—Frank Ocean [oh unrequited love]
7. *Switchblade*—Timeflies [a man walks alone]
8. *Lost In The World (feat. Bon Iver)*—Kanye West [i'm down for the count]
9. *Daybreak*—Overwerk [anyone can be redeemed]

### **Consumables Consumed**

cookies: 24

gummies: 80-100

chocolate bars: 3

nutritionally complete meal replacements: 1

buffalo wings: 10

orders of beef with broccoli: 3

cigarettes smoked: 387

mugs of tea: 34

mugs of coffee: 9

oz of beer: 280

oz of whiskey: 97

bars of xanax: 7

other: not that much this time

## **Other**

number of times author felt like a fraud: 13

number of times author felt like a star: 2

number of irritable international communications dispatched over a verb tense: 14

number of complete and utter nervous breakdowns: 0 (but it was close, once)

number of times author became distracted by tumblr porn: 9

number of times author became distracted by the need to add to this list: 5