

**THE AUTOMATIC DOOR SLID OPEN A FEW INCHES AND THEN BENT AND BROKE FREE OF ITS TRACKS AS IT WAS HIT BY A BRIGHT BLAST OF FIRE.** Though each member of the family had their hands up—nine in all—two of them caught a red beam to the face and had a bright, burning hole blown through their foreheads before they collapsed onto the hardwood floor. Smoke billowed up from the back of their scorched skulls, and a smell like overcooked meat and burnt hair enveloped the living room. Soldiers burst through the door's fiery opening, the soldier in the front a tall, muscular man, with a beard and mustache that covered most of his face. His hair was thick and black, his eyes were dark, and what was visible of his face looked strong.

“There's someone not quite human being hidden in this residence! That's why I am here! This person is believed to have been here for the last year! What I will need from you ladies and gentlemen, is to point out who it is, and right now! Now, my name is Mehdi, and I need you to get ON YOUR KNEES!”

The family obliged, falling to their knees as if collapsing, their hands up and their palms facing forward. Fifteen laser rifles were aimed at the front of their heads, each soldier visibly excited about their new acquisitions. Some surely had itchy trigger fingers, waiting for someone to jump and do something sudden.

*One hundred thousand units transferred via palm-phone for these acquisitions and half the soldiers in my squad are ill-equipped to use them. Twenty long range laser snipers, fifty*

*electro-pellet blasters, fifteen laser AK's with the stippled grip, and ten multi-shot, triple barreled shotguns, stolen by Aldo's soldiers three days ago, leaving us with this quality, but unfamiliar option purchased at the last minute. So many weapons lost and so much money spent thanks to Aldo. There will be longer training sessions after tonight, fifty hours a week, if we can find the time. Of course, I might have to lighten the flock by then. A quick toss off the edge of our home platform will be the means of doing that. Of course, I'll have to deal with an explanation to some of the surviving members, and Mina, I'll have to tell her. She'll want to know that I'm not just killing indiscriminately. She'll want—*

“Boss, what are we doing?”

Mehdi blinked. He came back to the present, saw his soldiers in their black fatigue uniforms and their laser-rifles aimed squarely at the foreheads of the family members

“All right,” Mehdi said, and pointed to the stairs. “Make sure all the rooms on the top floor are empty.” Two of the fifteen soldiers ran up the stairs with the barrels of their weapons out in front of them.

“All right, ladies and gentlemen, I promise this will be quick. Now, where is the humanoid?” He stepped forward, and his eyes slid over the family. One Black woman looked about fifty, and one Hispanic woman, perhaps seventy. There were three younger girls, each around ten give or take a year. A middle aged Hispanic man that was probably husband to the woman in her fifties. And a teenage boy, probably thirteen, biracial. All the kids, probably biracial. But that told him nothing.

“Boss,” one of the soldiers said. “Toward the wall.”

Mehdi looked around and saw a glass case, and inside one Pulse Ray shotgun, and a scope, for long range firing. The red beam version. A very deadly, highly illegal, and extremely expensive weapon. Seventy thousand units at least. Mehdi's lips broke into a smile.

"I'd ask if someone's collecting, but I don't see any other firearms in here," Mehdi said, stepping over to the glass case and admiring the fine feat in robotic engineering. Everything in the year 2146 was built by robots. He strolled back to his original place, and looked at the family. His eyes were alight. "So who is the owner of that fine piece of weaponry?" None of the family members looked at him, but each kept their hands in the air. "Who has the access in this family to acquire such a firearm? This is Alias-77 after all, the platform with the fewest illegal firearms on the street. The weapon contained behind that glass is highly illegal. It was made or purchased. I don't think you have the means to purchase such a piece of machinery."

The family remained silent. Ten seconds passed before Mehdi raised his right index finger, his expression indifferent, and pointed it at the middle-aged Hispanic man. A split second later a loud whistle sounded, and the back of his head erupted as a thin laser tore through it. Blood splashed on the white sofa, and his body leaned back and lay half against the sofa he'd dirtied. His head lolled. A thin trickle of drool depended from the corner of his wet lips. The middle-aged woman screamed, her old, seamed hands going up to her mouth. The girls and the boy began to cry.

"I'll make it simple," Mehdi said, scratching at the section of beard on the right side of his face. "Point out the humanoid in this residence and I take my men and we leave." The cries continued. They gave no response. The lady—apparently, the wife—threw her body upon the dead man. The others kept their attention on Mehdi.

*Not bad. The team seems calm. The team might be ready for missions beyond this.*

Mehdi raised another finger, and pointed it at one of the ten year old girls. Then came the whistle, the splash of blood on the couch behind her, and the sound of the back of her head hitting the couch as she was knocked back with the force. What followed were shrieks, from the apparent mother, grandmother, and sisters. The thirteen year old boy only stared. The two soldiers that had been sent upstairs came back down to the main floor.

“Nothing?” Mehdi said, looking at them.

They shook their heads. “Nothing,” said the one on the left.

Mehdi nodded, the fingers of one gloved hand on his chin. He didn’t think he could trust any of his men completely. “Okay. Yeah, okay.” He put his attention back on the family. His eyes rested on the mother who was now holding the dead girl in the crook of her arms. She was talking to the body in a different language. Mehdi, his expression turning colder, said, “Hey, be happy you still have most of your family left. Now, who’s the next target going to be?”

No answer. He pointed his weapon and the mother looked up at him and screamed,

“Nooo!”

“No? Well, do you have something to tell me?” The fingers of one gloved hand drummed against the side of his leg, as he waited.

“There is no humanoid here!” she shouted at him. “Go somewhere else and look for humanoids!”

He nodded. “It starts with one.” He took a step forward. “It starts with just one. You saying no only makes my job harder. You think you’re protecting your kid, but you’re not.” He knelt down, now just a few feet from the mother and the rest of her family. “One day it’s not just going to be a humanoid that moves like you or me, understand? One day it’ll be weaponized. It starts with one and then before you know it they overtake our world.”

The mother stared at him with trembling lips. She shook her head, her dark eyes locked on his.

“There is no humanoid in this household. And if there were humanoids do you think you can just go house to house, and get every single one? What you’re doing makes no sense.”

“What did you do, mother? Hide it and tell it to wait until we left? You hide it away in some secret place? Do you think we won’t be able to find it?”

The mother’s face held firm, but it didn’t make a difference. Mehdi already knew she was lying. Years of interrogations had made him adept at reading the signs.

“Take them all out,” Mehdi said. “Make sure you save the mother for last.”

Ten of the fifteen soldiers opened fire, and thin red lasers punctured and split up the bodies of a family that had lived on this street for ten years. The screams that came didn’t last long. The soldiers had to do little to get the ones that attempted to run. It was effortless. Mehdi stood up and turned toward the staircase, his mind on where the mother might’ve told the humanoid to hide. And right there, standing near the bottom riser of the stairs with his hands at his sides, was an eight or nine year old boy. His shirt was red and had a picture of a popular cartoon, *The Galaxy Kids*, a show that had been a hit for the last seven years. He was looking down at the floor. His sobs broke the silence left after the slaughter. Mehdi’s soldiers turned, aimed their weapons. Mehdi smiled.

“Now if you had come out here earlier you could’ve saved us so much trouble, little man.” Mehdi extended his hand, and with a quick movement of his four gloved fingers, beckoned the boy in his direction. “Come over here, little man. I’m not going to hurt you.” A muffled chuckle from one of the soldiers with a weapon aimed at the boy followed this. Mehdi

ignored it. The boy hadn't moved, and Mehdi made a different request. "Pick your head up boy, and look at me."

It wasn't the first time he'd seen a humanoid, but still, he wanted to look into the boy's eyes before he signaled one of his men to take him out. Wanted to see how human the gaze looked. *Felt*. The boy, however, didn't look up at him, and instead kept his attention on the hardwood floor.

"I'm only going to ask one more time," Mehdi said, and lifted and aimed his own weapon. "I want you to look at—" And the boy did, lifted his head and looked directly into Mehdi's eyes before he could finish the repeated request. What Mehdi saw looked anything but human, it was something, in fact, that he had never seen before. The boy's eyes, which should've been brown, green, gray or even blue, were instead red. And before Mehdi could even begin to touch the trigger of his weapon the boy dashed upstairs and a split second later was out of sight.

"What the fuck," one of Mehdi's soldiers whispered.

"Upstairs!" Mehdi shouted. "Now! Go get him!"

The fifteen soldiers, comprised of twelve men and three women, moved past him and raced up the stairs. As this happened Mehdi stepped toward the glass case that contained the Pulse-Ray shotgun, and before he could even get his fingers on the glass he heard a scream. Seconds later one of the soldiers was thrown by some unseen force—obviously the boy—and made impact with the soldiers that had been working their way up to the top floor. The triggers of the guns were inadvertently pulled, and nail thin lasers shoot from the barrels and puncture the ceiling. There comes another shout from the top floor, then the sound is violently cut off.

"*Help! Heeelllp! H—*" Another voice cut off. Mehdi moved toward the stairs, his own laser rifle aimed. He moved quickly, climbing over two dead bodies, and taking a place at the

rear of the line of the soldiers as they were getting up from being knocked on their asses. But they had their own weapons aimed, and Mehdi made his way up the stairs behind them.

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Her name was Sherri, and she watched helplessly as the little boy yanked the laser rifle her fellow soldier was holding away, kicked him into the corridor wall, aimed the man's own weapon back at him and fired. This seemed to happen in a split second, and before Sherri could aim her own weapon and take a shot, the boy was gone, having dashed into the nearest room. The bedroom door shot shut with a hiss. Sherri moved toward the door with her laser-rifle aimed, her breathing shallow, and her heart ramming hard inside of her chest. She could sense other soldiers right behind her, soldiers with their own weapons aimed. And she could sense that most of them shared her fear. Sherri pointed her weapon at the door, then held three fingers up for the soldiers behind her. She ticked off one finger, then a second, then a third—

Sherri tapped the necessary screen to the side of the door and it shot open, revealing an empty room. Mehdi, now at the top of his stairs, pushed his way past Sherri and looked inside the room. He moved quickly toward an open window, and Sherri felt instantly embarrassed that she hadn't noticed it first.

“Dammit! Downstairs men! No—”

She heard the door downstairs open, and wondered who could've been coming back into the house.

*Who do you think*, a voice in her head screamed out. *The boy! Who else?*

But why? Why would it be the—

She followed Mehdi and the other soldiers back down the stairs, now the last in line. She kept the butt of her weapon against her shoulder. From the back of the line and at the top of the stairs she could see the open door, and watched as the soldier at the bottom of the stairs and the front of the line, attempted to aim his weapon and fire at the boy. The boy, holding a laser-rifle of his own now managed to get off a shot first, and connected directly with the center of the man's forehead. A hole the size of a tennis ball blew open the back of his head, and blood splashed the first three soldiers behind him. The soldier leaned forward, all life gone from his body, and tumbled down the stairs. The soldiers behind him scrambled to get over him, some firing at the boy from the risers. The boy managed to dodge their shots by dropping his weapon, leaping forward, and rolling on the floor and toward the living room.

“He’s going for the case!” the soldier at the front of the line bellowed. “*He’s going for the case!*”

Mehdi shrieked at his male and female troops. “STOP HIM! *FUCKING STOP HIM!*”

### 3

The soldiers with a clear enough aim pointed their weapons and fired, and Mehdi watched the boy dash forward, the bright, red lasers trailing him like dust as he ducked his head, leapt, and launched his tiny body through the glass enclosing the Pulse-Ray shotgun like a torpedo. Glass shattered and flew everywhere, lasers continued to zip at him, and in a quick, mid-air, acrobatic movement, one that could've been missed with a blink, the boy grabbed the Pulse-Ray shotgun. Then he landed, the Pulse-Ray shotgun in his thin, brown arms. The move was unbelievable, and something Mehdi believed him or any soldier he'd ever known would've



never been able to duplicate, even if given a ten thousand tries. The soldiers ran up behind him, and the boy pivoted with a speed that was uncanny and fluid, and down on one knee, the butt of the massive weapon jammed against his shoulder, fired. Mehdi tried to warn his soldiers to turn the other way

“NOOO—”

But it was too late. A red beam as thick as a pillar tore out of the barrel with a deafening whistle, and ripped apart the door and the three soldiers in front of it. They flew out of the house, arms and legs detached, their limbs and torsos bouncing off the end of the walk, and rolling into the street before ultimately coming to a stop, what was left of them dead and aflame. Mehdi turned around and charged back up the stairs, and before all the other men could head after him, the boy pivoted with a second lightning quick motion, and fired upon them. A hole was blown through the side of the house, and several screaming soldiers went through it, their bodies landing aflame and in pieces in the neighbor’s yard. The soldiers the boy didn’t catch, switched direction and ran down the stairs and at the giant hole newly blasted into the front of the house. With his eyes glowing red, and his face taut and emotionless, he pulled back again, the recoil barely nudging his body back as he sent another four soldiers soaring backwards, their bodies incinerating and dying in midair. They landed in random spots on the street, lighting outside like additional street lamps. The boy stepped out the front door, the massive weapon held steadily in his arms.

*Five or six of us left*, Mehdi thought, his forehead beaded with sweat. He blinked perspiration out of his eyes. He wasn't even sure of the count, anymore. He had ducked for cover when the boy had taken a shot at the four soldiers running at him. The ensuing eruption had sent bits of flaming house flying in every direction.

*"Slowly now,"* Mehdi said, and coughed as hot smoke stung the inside of his throat. He waited a few moments for the smoke to clear, and then moved forward with his soldiers behind him.

"Maybe we should go," Sherri said. She was right behind him. He could feel her breath against the side of his neck. She put her hand on his shoulder. "We're overmatched here. We need to regroup, we need to—"

He yanked a laser blade out of his right fatigue pocket, freed the blade, and turned and shoved it into Sherri's neck, again and again and again. She went to the floor and he continued to stab at her until her head was nearly decapitated. Satisfied, he shoved the laser blade back into his pocket, and looked at the remaining soldiers. "Does anyone else feel we're overmatched?" The soldiers shook their heads. "Good."

He did a quick count. Four soldiers, plus himself. That should be enough to end this if they were careful. He led his men slowly toward the giant hole in the front of the house. Most of the smoke had cleared by this point, and from the inside he was able to see a number of burning corpses out on the street. It looked like a collection of purposely set campfires.

Mehdi peered into the night, looking for the kid with the Pulse-Ray shotgun. For a moment it seemed as if the kid had disappeared, and then he suddenly spotted him. The kid was on his knees, his back turned to Mehdi and the rest of the group.

*It has to be a set-up*, Mehdi thought for a split-second, and then thought that it wouldn't have made sense. He and his men were standing in the door way of the house. All the little boy would've had to do was turn around, with the Pulse-Ray shotgun aimed as it had been, the butt jammed against his shoulder, and fire at the remaining five soldiers. The boy must've known they were there. No way a boy like this didn't.

Mehdi put his hand up to signal the remaining soldiers not to fire.

*"Everyone remain cautious,"* he said, and like Mehdi, the rest of the soldiers kept their weapons aimed. Mehdi stepped out of the house, the remaining soldiers flanking him. Outside smelled like smoked meat. The thought that the stench Mehdi was smelling was of the burning flesh of his fellow soldiers made the smell somehow worse. The crackle of the fires engulfing the corpses of his men and women was distinct, but did nothing to drown out the sound of the kids whimpers. Mehdi took another step forward, and the bottom of his shoe, crunching a pebble on the ground, made the kid's head perk up. Mehdi put his hand up again, to make sure that his men didn't fire. The kid looked over his shoulder at the men. The glow from the surrounding flames gave light to his unlined face, highlighted the tremble of his bottom lip, and the sparkle of the tears that has swelled in his eyes. One thing that had changed was the red glow that had been there. Now the nine year old boy's eyes looked like every other set of nine-year old eyes. The kid's eyes touched on one soldier, then a second, then Mehdi. Then he pleaded,

*"What happened?"*

"Yeah," Mehdi said quietly. "What happened?"

He pointed the weapon directly between the kid's eyes and before he managed to pull the trigger the kid's eyes flashed red again, and he snatched the firearm clean from Mehdi's hands, cocked it back over his shoulder, and slammed it into Mehdi's nose, breaking it.

*I don't understand it, Mehdi thought wildly. I don't fucking understand it.*

Mehdi fell back from the impact of the gun, and as he lay on the ground, surrounded by fires and staring up at a star-studded sky, he heard something near to him break, a gasp, a grunt, then another snap. He knew another of his men were dead.

“*Heellp m—*” another soldier grunted—Mehdi knew it was a man named Andy—and the words were cut off, and reduced to the fading sound of gurgles. Another man deceased. A third man shrieked, and the voice was temporarily cut off, and what followed was a half-shriek, half gurgle—a sound Mehdi had never heard before—then Mehdi’s sweaty face was splashed in warm blood. It leaked into his eyes, its bitterness found his cotton-dry tongue, and he wiped at it, spit it out, then rolled onto his stomach to see what the boy was doing now. The boy had his fist shoved down the throat of the last soldier that had travelled this way with Mehdi. The soldier’s eyes were wide, his mouth monstrously stretched and unhinged, as the boy strangled him by pressing his fist into the back of his throat. Three seconds later the soldier was dead, and as the boy was pulling his hand from the soldier’s mouth, Mehdi yanked out his laser blade, freed it, and took one last desperate leap at the boy, his arm cocked back, his hand squeezing the hilt of the knife. He connected, shoving all seven inches of its laser bordered steel into the back of the boy’s skull. A jolt ran through Mehdi, knocking him onto his back once again, and the laser blade flew out of his hand and slid against the concrete before stopping and flipping automatically closed by the curb. The kid stilled, then slumped forward as if becoming suddenly tired. He remained in that position, hunched over.

For five minutes Mehdi gazed up at the sky, breathing in great, shaky gulps of air. And he muttered the same words between his breaths.

*“I’ll do whatever it takes. I’ll do...whatever it takes. Whatever it takes...whatever it takes...whatever it takes...”*

**5**

**2150**

Quantum-59, is the second planet that the human race inhabited and is made up of platforms that hover thousands of feet above the sea. The closest thing to land that this world consists of is a number of massive black cliffs that jut up from various areas of the water like giant fingers, and caves are known to dwell within some of these structures. If you happen to visit or live on a platform that is low enough you can see them, otherwise your view would be obscured by clouds or ocean mist, more likely the latter.

Platforms hover at different levels and depending on the height you may or may not need a self-warming and self-cooling uniform, meant both to keep the human body at preferred temperatures during hot or cold weather, and to protect from airborne diseases that float up from what is a highly infected vast ocean. Most of the citizens make their way around the world by the commercial shuttle, a glider, or a rocket-pack.

The basic platform is a vast circle with a radius ranging between ten and one thousand miles, and the border of said platform is bordered by automaton guards, an invisible barrier, or in some rare instances nothing at all, the latter being a failure of that particular platform’s government. Areas to leap from platforms with a glider or rocket back have been designated, and safeguards are set up in such a way as to not let individual citizens leave without the proper gear.

*Arka* is the name of one particular platform in the North, and is one of the many spots that the eighteen to twenty year old crowd show up at. This platform is less residential and is seen by many as a hangout spot and tourist destination. Though no age limit has been implemented on this platform, anyone that shows up on the platform younger than seventeen is told to leave, usually by the leader of some random clique.

It was a cloudy day when one group showed up on the platform, each person dressed in red or blue self-cooling and self-warming uniform. This group consisted of five people, three of them students at the local high school located half a mile beneath this platform.

“I’m looking forward to this film,” said a brown skinned male with dark, short cut hair, and a red uniform. His name was Carlo, a nineteen year old that was of mixed race but mistaken by friends and acquaintances alike of being purely Hispanic. *No one’s pure anymore*, Carlo would often say with a half-amused smile and leave it at that. He unlatched himself from his glider harness and locked it up at a nearby glider stand—a quick hit of the switch and the glider was instantly incased inside of a tamper-proof glass tube. The remaining four did the same.

“You got the drinks, right,” Maxis said. He was a black male, with a small afro of curly black hair. He wore one of the blue uniforms, and was looking down at his phone as he spoke.

“You know it,” Carlo said, holding up a red backpack for the group to see. He slung the backpack over his shoulder. “We get caught with this shit though and we’re going to have issues man. You know what Maxis? Since you wanted the drinks so bad you get to hold the bag.”

“Give it to Alexis,” Maxis said. “Security’s not going to try to check a girl.”

“Yeah, until it’s already too late to do anything,” said a black haired, light-skinned, brown girl (purely Hispanic, Carlo would often joke), as she stepped away from the glider stand. “What are you going to do then, huh?”

Alexis slapped Maxis on the back of the head with one hand and Maxis shoved her away and she shoved him back. This was how Alexis and Maxis got along, and Carlo believed he was the only one in the group that found it childish.

Carlo looked at other two in the group, the twins, both blonde haired and blue eyed boys, and waved to them to hurry up.

“Come on,” he shouted at them, his hands cupped to his mouth. “I want to hurry up and see this movie! You pretty boys going to mess all this shit up!”

“Sorry Carlo,” one of the twins said. His name was Steven. “What movie are we going to see again?”

“Tripoli. With Lena DeCaprio. I told you this.”

“Tripoli?”

“Yeah, Tripoli. The one with Leo DeCaprio’s great, great, granddaughter.”

“Leo DeCaprio?”

“Leonardo DeCaprio,” Alexis cut in. “You got to watch the old movies. He’s so cute!”

Maxis smiled. “His great, great, granddaughter doesn’t look so bad herself.” He clutched his hands into fists and made a couple of quick pelvic thrusts, and the twins and Alexis chuckled.

“Okay enough about them,” Carlo said, looking around the platform. “Where the hell is this theater at?”

The group helped Carlo look around the platform. They saw nothing but a fueling station and a bunch uniformed teenagers, about forty or so feet to their left. Carlo approached the fueling station and the rest followed. The fueling station’s front side was made up of a glass wall with two automatic glass doors in the center. When they reached the fueling station the doors opened

and the group stepped in. The drinks were in fridges along two converging walls. Aisles of snacks made up the center of the store.

Carlo noticed a hall that led into a rest spot in the back, where for twenty dollars, a person could lie down in their own private opening in the floor, on a single mattress with a blanket and a pillow and nap, undisturbed. Carlo knew these stations well—liked them very much too—the dial that allowed a customer to adjust the temperature in their space without affecting the other guests his favorite feature.

Carlo turned to the clerk, shoving his backpack into Alexis's hands.

"Hold that, will you sweetie?"

Alexis took it and shoved it into Maxis's arms. "Hold that for me will you, sweetie," she said, and pinched his cheek.

Maxis rolled his eyes, but accepted it, slinging it over his right shoulder.

"Where's the theater," Carlo asked the clerk.

"Straight down that road," the bald man said, cocking his thumb over his shoulder. He wore a collared red and white shirt, and had a goatee. For some reason, he didn't seem to care for the question.

"What about the clubs," Carlo said. "Any clubs here?"

"Check the places around the theater and you'll find those too." The clerk put his hands on the counter, watching Carlo closely. It was as if he expected him to make some sudden move.

"All right," Carlo said, turned his hand over, tapped his rubber wrist band, and brought the home screen of his smartphone to life on his palm. "Give me a couple of singles."

The clerk did as he asked and Carlo swiped his hand over the scanner so it could deduct the funds. There was a light ding, the funds were successfully deducted from Carlo's cloud bank



account, and the clerk handed him a couple of single cigars. The group left the gas station. They headed toward the theater, blending in with hundreds of tourists and consumers, some standing around in circles and talking and some heading in the same or opposite direction.

“See, we should’ve just gone to the one that we always go to,” Carlo said. “Now we have to do all this walking.” Problem was, his issue with the platform went far beyond that.

“Stop whining,” Alexis said. “It’s good exercise.”

“Yeah, you’re in a chipper mood, aren’t you,” he said, lighting his cigar with his lighter and inhaling. Carlo relished the taste. Smoke shot out of his mouth in a light gray plume.

*Harmless tobacco*, he thought. *Ah, the convenience of human ingenuity.*

Maxis almost dropped the backpack as he switched it to his left shoulder.

“Yes,” she said, taking one of the cigars from Carlo and slipping it to between her right ear. “I am in a very chipper mood, indeed.” She looked over her shoulder at Maxis. “Maxis, I let you hold that backpack because I trust you.” She grabbed Maxis suddenly by the shoulders and shook him. “Because I *trust you, dammit!*”

She smiled and the twins laughed.

“Oh shut up,” Maxis told her and picked up his pace so he could hand the pack back to Carlo. “Here. You act like they’re going to search your bag just because you approach the counter with it.”

“The goal is not to draw attention to it,” Carlo said coolly. “And I must’ve did something right, because no attention was drawn to it, now was there?” He took his backpack back, slinging the strap back over his shoulder.

“Yeah whatever. Sounds like some paranoid bullshit to me.”

Alexis requested Carlo's lighter and used it to light the cigar, puffed, then handed it to Maxis so he could take a drag, and he accepted gratefully, tipping her a smile.

"Now," Carlo said, taking his lighter back and shoving it into his pocket. "I'm one of the ones not in high school and I don't want to live my days like I am, so we have to watch out."

"For the *criminals* you say, right," Steven said. He strolled behind the group, his brother beside him.

"Exactly," Carlo said. "We have to watch out for people. Crime works differently than it did in our grandparents' and great-grandparents' generations. Based on what I read."

"And what you've watched on the *History Channel*," Alexis said, smiling.

Carlo chuckled. "I love the *History Channel*," he said quietly. "But anyway, what I mean is look out for the gang-affiliated. Everyone here knows the signs. And if it's not that it's just some dudes trying to start shit. Let's try to avoid them, why don't we? What do you say?"

"I just want to relax," Maxis said.

"Me too," the twins said together.

"Same here," Alexis agreed.

Carlo nodded and puffed more smoke. "Okay than. Anyone talks shit. Ignore it. That's the warning my mom and dad always give me. Be about peace."

*Question is, he thought. Am I really going to be able to have peace on this platform?*

The group continued walk the platform, each of them taking in the sites. Further down to the left Carlo noticed an exercise yard, which included a pull up bar, a pushup bar, and an incline bench to do sit ups.

"Like a prison, isn't it," Carlo said.

"Hey," Alexis said. "People need to exercise. That's what *you* do."

“Not as much as you think. Still, a prison is what all of this reminds me of.”

“They have those in a bunch of places.”

Carlo shrugged. “They have them in a lot of prisons, too.”

“Do you think they shouldn’t have put it there?”

*Just something shitty I’m feeling, he thought. It just adds to that shitty feeling.*

It was strange, Carlo thought. Feeling this way. Like feeling a woman’s intuition or something. Why wasn’t Alexis saying anything? She was all about conspiracies.

Carlo ignored Alexis’s question and pointed to an arcade farther down to the left. Inside its wide entrance, bright, shimmering, multi-colored lights illuminated a dark room, the sounds of laughter emerging from within.

“You guys down to go later,” Carlo asked, regarding each one of them. It was more to make conversation than anything, because he didn’t think he wanted to stay here long enough to go.

“The shit’s a waste of time,” Alexis said.

Maxis looked at her. “Of course you would say that. You’re supposed to say girl shit.”

“And there little old Maxis goes,” Alexis said and put Maxis in a headlock with one, thin, red-suited arm.

“Get off me,” he demanded, trying to pull his head free. “I’m not going to get aggressive with a girl.”

“Not much of a reason to hold back if you consider Alexis acts like a man,” Carlo said.

“Let him go Alexis.”

She did as Carlo asked.

What struck Carlo as funny then was that Maxis didn't come off as weak. He as tall as Carlo, just not as buff. But Alexis, for whatever reason, could bully him. And Alexis, despite the distinctly dark eyes, was a very sweet looking, pretty girl. Head-locking people was something she generally didn't do. Except, of course, when it came to Maxis.

They reached the theater five minutes later, Carlo grinning at the others when he saw it. It was a massive, white-walled building, with neon light fixtures that would flash on when night time fell. On their way to the large double doors, the group of five walked through a cloud that had formed on the platform. It was the fifth cloud they'd either walked or flown through that day.

"All right, all right," Carlo said, the instant they had stepped through the automatic, almost invisible, glass doors.

They stood in a large red-carpeted space, the surrounding walls fixed with digital movie posters. These posters consisted of actors or cartoon characters moving within the image. The group approached a glowing red counter in the center of the room, two blue suited girls standing behind two clear glass computer screen.

Carlo used the app on his palm-phone to pay for the tickets, just like he had done inside the convenience store. An embedded scanner was present and the female employee on the left tapped twice on the screen in front of her, making the screen on Carlo's palm to brighten then dim as the system accepted the payment.

"Have a good day," the female employee said with a broad smile.

"Snacks everyone," Carlo said, glancing around at everybody. "Snacks?"

His friends shook their heads.

"Don't forget," Carlo said to Alexis. "You're paying for everything next week."

“Don’t I know it?”

The group strolled down a wide hall to the left, heading toward the screening room. More movie posters flashed by on either side of them, actors doing anything from firing a laser gun, to jumping off a cliff. They reached the viewing room a minute later.

For the next two and a half hours they watched the movie.

## 6

“Quantum-59 is kind of a weak name,” Carlo said, “let’s be real about it. Probably some random technical term that has no significance when it comes to what this planet actually is.”

“A lack of creativity, I’ll say that much,” Alexis chimed in.

“Oh, like Earth or Mars is much better. I’m sure there’s some more complicated name that they came up with at first,” said Maxis. “But they switched it just to satisfy the people.”

They sat near the front of the room, the screens of this theater like the old IMAX screens that Carlo had heard about. Many years ago everything had been upgraded, the theater screens changed to IMAX screens and the IMAX screens changed into something more advanced. The end result was a film with a sound quality and an utterly vast screen that allowed for a complete immersive experience.

Everyone in the group had previously been to what served as *today’s* standard IMAX for twenty-five units apiece—an amount swiped in from a palm-phone or from the more physical version for the more particular, the *glass card*—and had had their minds thoroughly blown. As great as the theater was they sat in now, it didn’t come close to the experience.

Carlo took another sip of beer from a black, plastic bottle. Everyone in the room had one, with the exception of the twins. Both sat one row back, escaping the immediate light that washed over Carlo, Alexis, and Maxis.

“Stephen?” Carlo said, looking over his shoulder. Stephen was the other twin, not to be mistaken with Steve.

“Yes Carlo?”

“Didn’t you say your dad showed you what the old theater looked like at a virtual museum?”

“Yeah. The quality wasn’t anything like the quality on this screen.”

“A lot smaller, too, right,” Carlo said, looking back toward the 3D screen as the credits climbed to the top.

“Yeah. A lot smaller. Actually sat and watched fifteen minute of a short film. It showed us a ton of stuff about the old theaters. Back then you could use your phone in the theater so they would have to put promos on the screen to ask the guests to keep them off.”

“Yeah,” Alexis said. “And now you can’t even answer a call unless you step out into the hall. Your phone won’t let you.” Alexis sighed. “Locked into the system.”

Carlo looked at her. “You act like you don’t like being locked into the system.”

“Do you really like having to own a glass card or palm phone and having a warrant put out for your arrest if you lose or break it?”

“They only arrest you if you break it on purpose and if it’s accidental they give you a week to get a new one.”

“Takes no time at all for them to come get you, though.”

“She’s right,” Maxis said, sipping from his black plastic bottle. His eyes drooped, showing that he had reached the point of a decent buzz. Carlo noticed this and smiled, realizing that he’d have to drink at least two more before he felt the same way.

Maxis, who sat to the right of him, handed Carlo his empty bottle and Carlo accepted it and handed Maxis a fresh one. Maxis twisted the top free with one quick turn and upturned the bottle to his lips.

“Man, I need to stop,” Maxis said, after letting out a loud burp. “I’m on the fast track to becoming an alcoholic.”

“Then give that shit back, son,” Carlo said, making a grab for the bottle.

Maxis held it away. Chuckled. “Hell nah, nigga.” He took another drink.

“It’s going to be dark when we get out.”

“Or at least getting dark,” Alexis said.

“Really good movie, by the way right?”

Everyone nodded and murmured in assent. Carlo left out the part about enjoying right now more than he’d enjoyed the film. “Yeah, really good movie,” Carlo repeated quietly, nodding. He grabbed another bottle of beer from his backpack. “All right folks, let me finish another one and we’ll be out.”

Silence resumed. Each took slow, contemplative sips of their beer. Right before the credits ended and the various promos preceding the next show popped up on the screen, Alexis spoke up.

“You guys hear about the three people that fell from this spot without their gliders? It was on the news.”

A chill ran up Carlo's spine then, and once again that feeling of foreboding overcame him. He didn't know if it was connected to what Alexis had just said or something random. But he felt it just the same.

No one responded to Alexis's question for a moment, all eyes on the 3D display in front of them.

"What makes you think they didn't have their gliders," Maxis slurred, his beer held loosely in one hand. Carlo reached out and took it, finishing it for him. He put the bottle in the backpack along with his own empty one, and accepted and put away Alexis's empty as well.

"Of course they didn't have their gliders," Alexis said. "Every glider is set to take you automatically to the nearest platform if something goes wrong."

"How do they do that with the un-motorized ones?"

"Those are about to be obsolete. You almost never see people with one. But the newer ones have automatic override, which is a program that won't allow you to use your glider until you get to the platform."

"Our great-great grandfathers would probably think that shit is pretty amazing, huh?"

"Pretty sure," Alexis said. She spoke with the tone of someone who thought this fact should be fairly obvious. "If our ancestors saw this they'd shit themselves. Back in their day hovercrafts were only something that you saw in the movies. It was special effects back then, and now it's nothing but recording an actual vehicle in action."

"You know what, Alexis," Maxis said, as the group of five stood up to head out of the theater. "Sounds like you're pulling shit out of your ass."

As they stepped out into the hall that ran along the edge of the viewing room, Alexis shoved Maxis into one of the glowing blue walls.



“Shit’s all that comes out my ass, genius,” she said.

“Cut that shit out,” Carlo said, as Maxis made a move to shove her. “They’re going to know we’ve been drinking.”

Outside night had started to fall, but a small arch of blue light remained in the sky. On Quantum-59 the sun set in the east, unlike Earth, and Carlo looked around to see if he could get a clear view. For whatever reason he couldn’t see it.

“Come on,” Carlo said, directing the group eastward. “Maybe they have the whole set up for the sunset and everything over here.”

“All right,” Alexis said. “Don’t forget that the twins have a curfew though.”

“They’ll be fine. Isn’t that right twins?”

“Certainly,” they both answered in their familiar, solemn manner. Carlo smiled. He and Maxis thought the way the twins sometimes answered questions together was funny. Alexis found it creepy.

“Come on then, let’s go,” Carlo told the group.

The platform had emptied considerably since the group had first landed. It left them the free space to run uninhibited down the platform. And run they did, all half-racing, their reinforced, self-cooling and warming shoes clapping on the smooth, flawless concrete pavement.

The twins, who were the tallest of the group, easily distanced themselves from the other three, laughing over their shoulders as they glimpsed their fruitless efforts to catch up.

Each group grabbed a hover-cart along the way—the rental price twenty units apiece. The race continued, each group driving what was essentially a vastly updated version of the golf-carts that people had once used back on Earth, absent the wheels.

A few people watched the hover-carts zoom past, some with amused smiles and others with looks of annoyance, as the bright, red pieces of machinery raced along the platform.

“Drive better,” Alexis told Carlo, from the seat behind him. Maxis sat in the passenger seat to his right. “I’m driving as *fast* as I can,” Carlo shouted back, both hands clutching the steering wheel.

People, shops and businesses flashed by, and as daylight continued to decline buildings began to light up, and the platform slowly turned into a bright display of blinking, and moving lights. Most sections lit up. What caught Carlo’s attention, and sent a sliver of unease up his spine, was that some didn’t.

*Foreshadowing*, Carlo thought, and a vision of his parents warning him not to venture onto platforms with darkened sections came back to him.

*But it’s still daylight*, he thought. *So it can’t mean anything. Not yet, anyway.*

“Come on” Carlo shouted at the twins, still trying to beat them despite the thought. He finally pulled ahead of them. Steve, in his car two feet to the right, glanced repeatedly at Carlo, his foot shoved down on the gas.

“Damn, we’re going to miss the sunset,” Carlo said. “The night lights are coming on.”

“You can do it,” Alexis said, putting her hands on his shoulders and squeezing. “Come on, you can catch the tail end of it. We still have time.”

*Yeah, you still have time*, Carlo thought. *Just like you have time for all the lights to flash on.*

“Man, I really wanted to see this too,” said Carlo.

The hover-carts zoomed past a skate park, the various twists and rises of the ramps, now glowing structures in the diminishing light. They passed by more businesses. Carlo caught a

whiff of marijuana smoke from the left and smiled, thinking of the last time he'd gotten high. It hadn't been something to smile about when it had happened. For Carlo weed had always been too potent for him. The last time he had smoked had been a bad experience, plain and simple. Alexis and Maxis had had to carry him out of the room, and according to them, he hadn't woken up for a day.

Groups of people flashed by every few seconds or so, and every couple of moments they sped by a few blocks or so without seeing a single soul. Carlo didn't like it.

"All right," he said, when they had finally reached the east end of the platform and exited their vehicles. "We need to be on our way home in thirty minutes and no less. That's without exception."

"Oh come on, Carlo-sweetie, we can stay longer than that," Alexis said, approaching the heavily guarded border of the platform. Automatons stood in a line along the edge, each separated by about ten feet. These automatons would remain still when embedded sensors detected a glider approaching from the platform or the air. If not they came alive and used one of several non-lethal methods to get the person to stop. Attempts at destroying one of these tall pieces of machinery usually meant automatic death from the beam-blasters bolted to their titanium arms. Those were seldom ever used, but when fired usually fired at criminals that had been deemed as such and who had already been provided a list of no-fly zones that they were to stay away from. This list had also been stored into G.A.R.D (Global Automaton Records Drive) and depending on the gravity of the person's last conviction the automaton may or may not be warranted to blow a hole through the ex-felon's head before they arrived within half a mile of the platform. Not all platforms had these automatons.

“Go ahead,” Alexis said, putting a hand on Maxis’s back and shoving him forward. “Why don’t you try to make a run for it?”

“Screw you,” said Maxis, moving behind her and shoving her in the same direction.

To the right were several metal framed, leather-cushioned chairs, the legs fixed into the tarmac. Behind a thick drifts of clouds, was the large red ball of fire they had come to see, disappearing behind the ocean. Carlo had heard about this spot. It was one of the few platforms low enough where you could see the water.

Much of the ocean was obscured by the clouds, but they had a decent view of the sun.

The group watched silently, Carlo, Maxis, and Alexis standing in the front with their arms at their sides. None of the five took a seat in one of the available chairs.

“I love this, man,” Carlo said. “I could watch this every night.”

Maxis nodded, considering. “Carlo,” he said quietly.

“Yeah?”

“Is there something you want to tell me?”

Carlo looked at him, his brow furrowed. “Huh?”

“I mean is there something you want to tell me about all of this?”

Carlo’s eyebrows went up, still not understanding. “Man, what are you talking about?”

“He’s saying that you’re gay,” Alexis said. Maxis and the twins burst out in laughter.

Carlo shook his head, smiling. “Hey, don’t act like you’re not enjoying it too, asshole.”

“You down to go check out the skate park after this,” asked Maxis. “You remember the last time we went to a skate park? They were doing some pretty sick shit, you have to admit.”

“Yeah, but I watch that kind of stuff all the time on the Uni-net. Honestly, I’m ready to get out of here.”

When the sun had set the group turned away from the edge of the platform and returned to their hover-carts. Everyone strapped in, Maxis now in the back seat behind Carlo and Alexis.

“So wait, wait, wait,” Alexis said, loud enough for everybody to hear.

Carlo looked at her impatiently, one hand on the wheel. “What?”

“You guys didn’t hear about the case? The people falling off the edge of the platform?”

Carlo said nothing, his expression suddenly grave.

“You trying to scare us, Alexis,” Steve said from the driver seat of his vehicle. He laughed. “You’ll do a better job of that with your driving.” Everyone chuckled at this, including Alexis.

“I’m not trying to scare anybody, Steve. Really, I’m serious. You guys didn’t hear about the story. My mom’s been telling me to watch out and to call me if something makes me uncomfortable. I’m her only daughter so of course she’s protective, but lately—”

“Uncomfortable with what?” Maxis said.

“I don’t know.” She looked at Carlo. “You tell them Carlo. It must be one of the reasons that you want to leave early, right?”

“Well...” he started.

“No one’s getting pushed off any platforms,” Maxis said. “Do you have any idea how hard it is to do that? If anyone even starts to get close to the automatons they zap you with like fifty thousand volts or something, and too close and they blow your fucking head off with their big ass beam blasters. Those guns are attached to their motherfuckin’ arms.”

“It swear I heard it on the news,” Alexis said. “And what made it even scarier is that my mom wouldn’t stop talking about it, on and on and on. Like an epidemic.”

That ominous feeling had found its way to Carlo once again, and he didn't think that Alexis telling him this story was a coincidence. Better to get home before dark. Much better.

"Yeah," Maxis said. "But everyone's family talks about a bunch of stuff that isn't true. It's just something that's done to pass the time. It's fun to just sit back, you know, and trade some bullshit stories about how we're destined to die horrible deaths."

"Okay, wait, wait, wait," Carlo said, putting his hand up. "Let me get in on this. There *is* some truth to what she's saying. Trust me, I don't like the idea any more than you guys. But believe it or not, she isn't just letting her emotions run away with her."

Maxis said nothing. His eyes were fixed on him, as if trying to detect any sign that he was fibbing.

"Yeah." Carlo said, noticing this. He rested his elbow on the back of his seat, which he typically did when he was going to settle in for a talk. The approaching night hadn't been forgotten so he'd have to give his friends the short version so he could get the heck out of here.

The twins sighed and Steve drove the hover-cart closer to Carlo's so that they could hear more clearly. After Steve parked he and his brother leaned back in their seats.

"Anyway, as far as I heard these platforms got built quickly," Carlo said. "Because it was a necessity. Man, isn't that the way big things get done throughout human history, through necessity? No surprise there. That's the thing my mom and dad told me about world history, whatever the country. When it becomes necessary we do what we have to do. Because of overpopulation—as you all well know of if you paid attention in history—we had to hurry up and get to another planet and lucky us, we are the third generation of inhabitants on planet Quantum-59. And the name, according to the text, was a more complicated name before that.

They don't talk about it, but the original name is well known on Earth. This planet was supposed to be called *Quantro Paris 235469*. Yeah, can you believe that? Isn't Quantum-59 better?"

Everyone nodded.

"They should've just called it Quantum," Alexis said. "I already don't know what the word means. Why add the meaningless numbers."

Carlo smiled at her. "I'm pretty sure the number's not meaningless, Alexis."

"Anyway, like I said, all of this was built quickly. The platforms, the automatons, the whole nine. You've never seen so much manpower—or should I say manmade power—at work. The robots worked around the clock. They have nothing on the robots of today, but they were effective. The construction was all over the news back on Earth, and it was the story of the millennium. Hell, the story of all mankind. Think about being a part of the generation that got to witness it. They—"

"And they witness this on TV or in person," Steve asked.

"TV man. Why not, people back on Earth wanted nothing more than to see platforms get built on this planet. Seeing the inside of a livable planet was mind-blowing in itself. You don't think that everyone one who existed back on regular Earth was watching? Man, the population was approaching close to twelve billion back then. Think about that. We only have a billion here. There were issues with food shortages, housing, pollution—I'm talking about a list of issues that extended up to the clouds, despite countless efforts—efforts that weren't all in vain I got to add, because we'd achieved world peace and a one world government. Because everyone had to work together the survival of our species. Legislation was hammered out globally, with leaders from China to Pakistan to Africa to Russia, and of course the good ole U.S. of A.

Freaking language translators present up the wazoo while even the most oppressive leaders had to deal, come hell or high water.” Carlo sighed. Looked up at the darkening sky.

“All issues were brought to the table. Centuries of history, all socioeconomic, and moral issues. Everything goddamn thing. Because we needed to come to an agreement to have the best minds, the best technology, and the right amount of capital available. Because of money, money, money. Certain people still had to get paid. Ah, the one world government.”

“It was just like a way to work quicker, right,” Maxis said. “With the one world government and everything. Because China and the U.S were at war with each other at the time. Slowed shit down.”

“Why were they at war,” Stephen asked.

Carlo sighed.

“You know we can blow ourselves up an infinite amount of times guys. If we had gone to war with China that would have pretty much been it. Let me get back to what I was saying, though. We’d achieved a lot back on Earth, but inhabiting this planet, after it was decided that Mars was uninhabitable, was the next best thing. The progress was on TV twenty-four seven. But I bet you didn’t know mistakes were made.”

“Hey, I knew it,” Alexis said.

“Yeah, thanks for interrupting me, cutie.” Carlo looked at her and smiled. “Anyway, all of this was built very fast, because without these platforms none of us would have a place to live. Men, women and robots were constantly at work. As I said, robots most of all. Parts were transported from old Earth, along with all that manpower I just mentioned. The robots did most of the heavy lifting and even some complex tasks. The men and women directed them. Could



you imagine the days when you *couldn't* have a robot do everything for you. Even back then they had a shitty version of them.

“Yeah, we have the technology to build civilizations on water and would've, and *probably* still will at some point. But there are problems, at least for now. For one thing, *all* that sick life that exists in the oceans, you couldn't even find in the most contaminated areas on original Earth. Scientists think that the water, tens of thousands of years before we arrived, got contaminated by a visitors from some other planet, or it may have been something environmental. Whatever the case, what I heard is the situation in the ocean is *bad*. Which is why—all of us being on the living on the lower platforms and all—that were have to wear these fine uniforms.” Carlo popped his collar. He regarded every one of his friends, one by one, to make sure that they all were listening. There was a hint of fright in their eyes, and Carlo took that as a good sign. He continued. “I hear they tried it once, building a civilization on the ocean. Didn't go too well.”

“What happened,” Maxis said, leaning forward.

“Ah,” Carlo said, waving his question off with one hand. “We don't need to get into that shit now. Anyway, it turned out the most expedient thing to do was to build platforms in the air, because from what they knew, there was nothing in the air that could be seen as, well...imminently hazardous, to use a term I've never used. Even though, considering what would happen to us if we didn't wear these uniforms kind of makes that danger imminent.”

Carlo opened his arms as if in anticipation of an embrace. He looked around at everything. “And now we have all of this. Because it was built as fast as it was things couldn't be perfect, you know. There were going to be problems, obviously, but the situation was desperate and we had to come here. The first generation here dealt with more than a fair share of accidental

deaths. And guys, I mean all the fucking time. You remember that class we took on hackers?” Carlo looked at the twins, both with similar expressions as they leaned toward him now, listening. He had to give them this, they knew how to pay attention to a story. “You guys are probably taking it now. It’s a senior class.

“Hackers back on Earth cost people a lot of money. Hackers today, few and far between, can use that skill to kill. And considerably technology’s exponential growth over the last hundred or so years, a premium hacker today is an extremely rare find. Most of them work with the government, but there are a few...and they can get rich doing what they do. And during the age of the first generation to live on this planet, they had run amok. My grandpa and grandma had talked about it before they passed. Some of them, these hacker motherfuckers, were out there just to make money, and at the end of the day, most of them are. But there were hackers out there that just wanted to disrupt the system. Some did it because the shit was fun to them, but most because they believe we’re headed in a dangerous direction with the robots. They liked to say it was to deliver that message. You know, to bring this world back to what it was supposed to be. They claimed to believe we weren’t supposed to have all this technology. And I’m thinking, *idiots*. If we didn’t have it here on Quantum and—”

“Quantum-59—”Alexis interjected with a grin.

“Yeah, whatever. Anyway, these guys were crazy. Hearing about them and what they did scared the hell out of me.”

Carlo stopped talking then. He looked quietly out ahead, his elbow back on the top of the seat.

“What did they do,” Alexis asked.

“Well, a ton of things, really. They outplayed law enforcement—usually hackers do in the beginning—but this generation seemed far more advanced at first, and to be blunt, they were fucking law enforcement up. Making the novices working for the government look like amateurs. They would mess with central control systems, develop complex, mutating computers viruses that took on lives of their own. It was like what AIDS had been before they developed a vaccine. Once a system was taken over the cops were useless. Either the virus would allow the hackers to control the system or it would work on its own, causing blackouts on the platforms, or shutting off automatons, or even taking over automatons and playing them like a video game. Four times they shut off the platforms’ hover capability—” a unified gasp erupted from the group “—which was something that took them a couple of months to learn, but when they did...oh, what was a mess.”

Carlo was nodding, looking at each of his friends. He raised his hand, and brought it down slowly as he continued to speak. “Yeah, imagine an entire civilization falling from the sky. Hospitals, restaurants, theaters, kids, grandmas, fathers, mothers. And they were the bottom level ones too, these platforms, so it didn’t just crash into another platform, but instead went straight to the water. Most on the platform died, but what about the ones that held on to life, like enough to touch that infected shit. Could you imagine what happened to them? Could you *imagine*?”

“Jesus,” Maxis said, shaking his head, his brow furrowed.

“Now, I assume everyone died on impact, and I feel sorry for them if they didn’t, man. Because you were eaten or if you weren’t wearing a uniform were immediately infected. I’d rather be eaten. At least then you’re dead and don’t have to feel yourself transform into a monster that can live in the sea.”

“I’ve always wondered about the things down there,” Alexis said.

“Get on the net girl, you’ll find stuff. I was searching it one night with I-connect.”

“I hate using that, it always hurts my eyes.”

“Hey, sometimes you just want to use the net without have to thumb a palm-phone or glass card. I like to just use the net in my head sometimes. Don’t have to worry anyone creeping in and catching you looking at...you know—”

“No I don’t, what?” Alexis’s smile told Carlo that she knew exactly what he was talking about.

“But I was surfing the net, and found this website and blog. And there were people who had theories about what was down there and drawings and pictures that may or may not have been fake, and all this—”Carlo rubbed at his eyes, getting tired—“man all this shit. I don’t want to even get into it.”

“Oh, come on,” Steve said.

“Another time,” Carlo said, stretching his arms. “Seriously, let’s get the hell out of here.”

“Yeah, I’m with that,” said Maxis. “It’s getting cold out.” Maxis extracted the blue gloves that matched his uniform and put them on. Everyone else did the same.

“All right,” Carlo said, looking up at the sky. He knew that other platforms were up there, but it was too dark and obstructed by clouds to see. “Let’s go home. We’re not familiar with this platform, anyway.”

Alexis nodded. “Yeah.”

“So we’re not doing the club,” Maxis said, looking somehow grateful and disappointed at the same time. “We’re going to just go home because of your story?”

“It’s late man—at least for here. If we were on our home platforms we could do something. They have more police and automatons. I can tell just by looking around.”

“That’s true,” Alexis said, looking at Maxis.

“We’ve been fine the whole day,” said Maxis. “What makes you think something is going to happen now?”

“Notice the parts of the platform that aren’t lighting up,” Carlo said. “There are a lot of those areas. It’s only the second time I’ve seen it on a platform. And the sun has set and sections of lights are still off. Something like that usually doesn’t happen because of a glitch. Not this day and age.”

Everyone looked around to see the section to the North that Carlo was talking about. Buildings and businesses were only visible as dark, distant outlines. In every other direction it was lit up, the warm and comforting visual of lights on display.

“Can we go now?” Steve asked.

“Yeah, we’re going now,” Carlo said, and started up his hover-cart and drove back toward the glider tubes, Steve and Stephen following behind.

“You know,” Alexis said, “just because the lights are out over there doesn’t mean that it’s dangerous. It could have nothing to do with hackers. I mean, the chances of that are probably close to zero.”

“You could be right,” Carlo said, shrugging with both gloved hands on the wheel. His tone remained somber. “But let’s say that you’re wrong, and you have some sick fucks over there that just want to mess up a dude’s day.”

“We’re in a group,” Maxis said. “I wish someone would, man. Shit, I’d get my hands on my dad’s blaster.”

Carlo chuckled. He was nineteen years old and the oldest of the group. Maxis was just a few months younger than Alexis, but older than Steve and Stephen.

“Tell me,” Carlo said. “How are you going to have that blaster if they get you tonight?”

Maxis said nothing for a moment, seeming to turn this idea over in his head. “Well that was assuming I make it back home and they try to mess with me there.”

“Yeah, I’ll be you would” Alexis said, her long black hair blowing in the breeze. She reached out and grabbed Maxis’s ear and pulled. He smacked her away.

“So you sure we can’t go somewhere else,” Maxis asked. “Man, I still feel drunk.”

“You’re probably going to feel drunk for a while,” said Alexis. “Just don’t do anything stupid.” Alexis only stared at Maxis after that, apparently waiting for a reaction.

“The only stupid thing I’ve done is allowed you to be part of this clique.”

Alexis gave a merry chuckle. “You act like you’re the one that made me part of this clique.”

“If you didn’t know me you wouldn’t know Carlo.”

“And if you didn’t know *me* you wouldn’t have known the twins.”

“All right,” Carlo said. “Enough with the history lessons. We all know how everyone met up. So the both of you just relax. I’d say have a drink, but what kind of example would I be setting if I have to carry your asses home?”

“Don’t make me come back there,” Alexis told Maxis, completely ignoring Carlo.

Maxis laughed. “Anytime you want, girl.”

Alexis puckered her lips and made a kissing sound. Maxis did the same. Carlo couldn’t help but chuckle.

“Man, you two are stupid,” he said, and his two friends burst out in laughter.

They arrived at the glider tubes a few minutes later on foot, the hover-carts returned to the location where they had been rented. Nighttime had officially made its entrance and Carlo, irritated by it by now, felt that familiar sense of foreboding.

“We’ll do the club on Saturday,” Carlo said, approaching his tube looking at his palm-phone. Maxis, a little quicker on the draw had already pulled out his glass-card to check messages. Done with his palm-phone, Carlo had taken out his glider and was using the metal straps to strap himself into the blue-winged contraption. These gliders, which were a smaller, much improved version of the hang-gliders at the turn of the century, were nearly weightless and easy to walk with on your back. Sizes varied according to a person’s height and weight and desired aesthetic customization. The end result was a set of wings that looked to be almost one with its wearer.

“I’m automating this bitch,” Maxis said, setting the coordinates on his glass-card. “And I’m going to sleep on the way. No one crash into me.”

“Well—” Carlo started, and stopped when all the lights on the platform abruptly went out. Suddenly everyone near Carlo was an outline, blue light spots in front of his eyes. He rubbed at them with the back of one hand.

He looked up, and saw nothing but a dark sky, the stars obscured by dark clouds. It was a world of near perfect blackness.

“What the fuck,” Alexis and Maxis both exclaimed. They were the same words that Carlo had been thinking but hadn’t said, yet he only felt increasing unease with the fact that the situation could cause both of his friends to say it at once. He didn’t want to think the worst, but...

Three seconds later Maxis and Alexis used the light app on their glass cards to light up the vicinity, the combined lights bright enough to illuminate a two hundred foot radius.

“Damn dude,” Carlo said, his eyes touching on Maxis and Alexis, who both faced the area where the lights had first gone out, then touching on the twins, who looked rather expressionless by comparison. They were staring past the automatons that border the platform.

“What do you think we should do, Carlo,” Steve said. His face was almost ghostlike against the potent white glow.

“I’m going to assume everyone has a full charge with their palm-phones and glass cards, right?” Carlo scanned everyone within the well-lit circle. “We don’t need our phones running out right now.”

“Are you serious?” Alexis said. “How could we run out?”

Maxis chuckled.

“Don’t laugh,” Carlo said. “It can happen man. You can forget to charge it for a few weeks and boom, you’re screwed. It’s not impossible.”

“Well that’s a very hard thing to do,” Alexis said. “Especially considering that all some need are just sun.”

“Mine uses a cod,” Steve said.

“Mine too,” said his brother.

“Well that’s the same for me,” Carlo said.

Maxis didn’t reply. He was holding his light up and looking longingly past the automatons toward the edge of the platform.

Carlo looked at him. “Maxis?”

He looked toward Carlo.



“You can go on, man.” Carlo smiled. “We’ll catch you back at—”

“Oh shut the fuck up man,” Maxis told him. “You know I’m not going anywhere. Let’s just do whatever we have to do so we can all go...*together*.”

“Than hang tight brother,” Carlo said, and strolled back over to his tube to try to open it. The scanner did nothing when he tried to swipe his palm-phone; it remained unresponsive.

Carlo, having taken a knee, just stared at the tube’s scanner, speechless. What did it all mean?

“I never dealt with this before,” Carlo said quietly, the fingertips of his right hand touching his bottom lip. He looked over his shoulder at the group. “What the fuck is this?”

He hadn’t been frightened when he spoke his question, though. He only became frightened when he saw the response his words brought out of the others. Everyone’s face developed into an expression of fear. Carlo immediately made a concerted effort to look calm, knowing that looking frightened in this moment would do the group no good.

“Well, we have to get our gliders out,” Carlo said. “If we call our parents to get us and leave they’ll be gone by tomorrow.” A strong gust of cold wind brushed over him then, but with the temperature of his temp-control suit it only chilled his face. His gloves kept his hands warm.

“So you think these will get jacked,” Alexis said casually, unaware that she had asked the question that everyone had probably had on their minds. “Really?”

“No,” Carlo said, irritated. “It says gliders left overnight get thrown out. That includes all of ours. Read the fine print.”

“Can’t. The screen with the message is off.”

Carlo made no comment on this.

Maxis chuckled. “Damn,” he said. “Y’all should have been a little faster getting your shit out, huh?”

“Oh shut up Maxis,” Alexis answered at once. “Really.”

“I’m just messing around. Someone here needs to lighten the mood. Everyone here’s acting like it’s the end of the world, damn.”

“Well you heard the story I just told you all,” Carlo said, and stood up and kicked the encasing around his glider. “The lights going out is probably not a coincidence.”

“We leave gliders then,” Steve said. “Everyone calls their parents. We just get picked up and take the risk of losing them.”

“Everyone in my family has gliders,” Carlo said. “No shuttles.”

“Same here,” said Alexis.

“Same here,” Maxis said.

“Well my dad has a shuttle,” Steve said.

“All right,” Alexis said. “Well that’s good.”

“Good deal,” said Maxis.

“So he will pick us all up, right?” Steve said. He took his glass-card off flashlight mode and began dialing the number. Five seconds later: “Shit!”

Carlo looked at him, his eyebrows raised. “What?”

“I have no signal.”

Everyone else checked their phones. Carlo looked at the signal, which was normally perfect, and said that he had no bars. Everyone else, he guessed, must have done the same because a huge groan ran throughout the roughly formed circle as if it had been on cue.

“Well fuck, fuck, *fuck!*” Maxis shouted.

“Well, go home Maxis,” Carlo said. “Doesn’t make sense to keep you here. You *have* your glider.”

“You know I’m not going anywhere,” Maxis said coolly, and reactivated his flashlight, returning light to the area. “So don’t say that shit again.”

Everyone laughed, and Stephen said jokingly,

“Yeah, *Carlo*, don’t say that shit again!”

More laughter followed and Carlo, smiling, said,

“Well we need to brainstorm and figure this out. Maxis, you keep your light on. We need to at least have one light on for the area.”

Maxis nodded. “Yeah.”

“Now I have my laser knife, but...” His blade was a knife with a laser outline, suitable for cutting through almost anything. It was a blade he brought everywhere. He’d purchased it at the flea market three years back only after the salesman had decreased the price by thirty percent after Carlo’s numerous, but reluctant refusals to buy.

“But what?” asked Maxis.

“This tube is tamperproof. I’ll get shocked out my uniform if—” Carlo suddenly snorted laughter.

“What,” Alexis said.

“The power’s off,” Carlo said, taking a knee and opening his backpack. He moved aside empty and full beer bottles, a couple of packs of sunflower seeds and candy in biodegradable bags, and found a metal object. It was his laser blade, currently concealed in the hilt, the word laser engraved neatly in the center it. Perfectly carved circles made up the design as well, and through them you could see the blade that was yet to be activated.

“If everything’s off,” Carlo said and tilted his head in the direction of the tubes. “Then these tubes are no longer tamper-proof.”

Alexis gave a squeal of excitement and clapped her hands together three quick times. “Now that’s thinking!”

Carlo freed the blade and activated the laser around edges with the single touch of a very small button. He went to Stephen’s glider first, trying to decide where he wanted to cut and how big the opening would have to be. Did he have to create an opening as tall as the glider itself or could he make one smaller and find a way to slide it out?

Maxis and Alexis stood on either side of him, a step or two back, Alexis’s palm-phone light on and contributing to the light Maxis currently provided with his glass-card. Carlo only needed help from one of them though. As bright as these lights were, he could probably get by with only a tenth of one.

The black blade, outlined in red laser, did its work almost soundlessly (the only sound was an almost inaudible sizzling that only Carlo was close enough to hear) as Carlo slid it into what, under ordinary circumstances, would have been impenetrable glass. The other four watched in silence as he carved away, their expressions apprehensive. After roughly four minutes of work, Carlo put the knife into his pocket, one hand against the eight foot tube of glass.

“All right, everyone,” Carlo said, looking over his shoulder. “Step back. The shit’s about to fall.”

Everyone stepped back and Carlo leapt out of the way last, as a section of glass, four feet wide and seven feet tall, fell back, and smacked onto the cement, with a loud *thwaapp!* Surprisingly, it didn’t break, but when Carlo thought about it, it made sense. It was supposed to

be impenetrable when turned on with its force field. It should at least have the strength of bulletproof glass when off.

Stephen broke into a wide grin and moved toward the tube.

“I owe you Carlo,” he said.

“Want to pay me back,” Carlo said. “Cut open the next one.”

Stephen accepted the task with a smile, taking the blade and, unsurprisingly, starting on his brother’s first. When he’d opened the glass container he handed the blade to Steve and Steve started on Alexis’s.

“You are a genius,” Alexis said, punching him gently on the shoulder.

Carlo grinned. “Common sense, Alexis. Nothing more.”

“I need to buy one of these, finally,” Steve said, handing Carlo back his laser blade, after he cut Carlo’s tube open. “These are handy in tight situations, huh?”

“You’re right about that,” Carlo agreed, pushing a small button to flip the knife closed, and shoving it into his pocket. He approached his tube to retrieve his glider, his backpack slung back over his shoulder.

Everyone was laughing now, the darkness surrounding them nearly forgotten. They could have been walking on the streets of their local platform on a beautiful July day for how relaxed the mood was. It only took a couple of moments for everyone to strap in—most setting their autopilot like Maxis. They moved toward the edge of the platform to take off, Carlo and Maxis out in front.

Carlo looked over his shoulder to make sure everyone was accounted for, this a habit that had been ingrained in him from early on, and something that had made everyone in his tight-knit circle, bestow him with the unofficial title of *group leader*. He could see that all of the friends

that he had come with were here, everyone wearing expressions of either immense relief or happiness. They were all accounted for and ready to head home.

Then Stephen's head exploded.

7

*See, and I didn't even want to come to this theater. I just wanted to go to the theater. Everyone else wanted to go to this particular theater, and since I was the one that wanted to go to the movies I figured I could at least give them this much. Figured I could at least go to the newer theater on a new platform.*

These thoughts managed to run through Carlo's head in the split second following the disappearance of Stephen Kocher's head behind a spray of blood and bone, the color and detail of the scene mercifully obscured by the lack of light on the scene. Still, he'd seen it.

Carlo acted instinctively, grabbing the person closest to him and shoving them toward the edge of the platform. That person, who stood right behind him, turned out to be Alexis. Her eyes were wide, the small but full lips of her mouth trembled.

"RUN!" he screamed, a mere second before a laser as thick as a baton flashed past his face, blinding him. He fell back, his sleeved forearm shielding his eyes. When he looked up from where he lay he saw Steve kneeling over his brother, sobbing...*screaming*.

Alexis ran for the platform's edge, through the line of malfunctioning automatons, leapt off, and disappeared. Maxis ran over to Steve, slowed by the extra weight of his wings, and grabbed him under his shoulders to pull him off his brother.

"*Come on!*" he screamed. Steve resisted, another laser passing inches from his ear.

“Get off me!” he shouted, and shoved Maxis back with both hands, as hard as if Maxis had been the devil himself. Maxis twirled his arms for balance, the added weight of the glider almost forcing him to keel over. He managed, just barely, to stay on his feet. He bent down. A red laser, bright as lightning and as long as a forearm, flashed out from the darkness and tore half the glider clean from Steve’s back. He didn’t notice this, didn’t even flinch, and only leaned closer to his brother. It was as if he meant to shield him. As if now was his chance to redeem himself for being unable to keep his twin alive. More lasers, now at a faster rate, flew out from the darkness.

Carlo, back on his feet and hunched over, assumed this meant whoever was firing was closer now, or that whoever was with them had caught up.

“Steve,” Carlo shouted, taking a knee next to Maxis. “We have to go man! You’re going to have to—”

“No!”

“—you’re going to have to take your brother’s glider off him before they get here! I’m sorry man! Really, I’m very sorry but we *have to get the fuck out of here!* Steve!”

“No!”

“I can’t see who’s firing!” Maxis bellowed.

More lasers flew above and Carlo could feel the heat from each. In the light given off by the glow of the lasers he could see snot running from Steve’s nose, tears streaming from his eyes. His face looked older somehow, beaten down.

*But how,* Carlo thought wildly. *You haven’t even really had time for this death to have its accumulative effect, for it to break you down internally, bit by bit.*

Carlo pushed the thought out of his mind then grabbed Maxis’s shoulder.

“Grab him,” he told Maxis.

Maxis nodded, and they moved to grab Steve’s arms, each clutching onto one.

Steve resisted, twisting and turning. He acted like a mad man, snot and drool and tears flying off his face as if utter messiness was his priority. One of the lasers zipped out from the dark and hit Maxis in the leg, tearing a fragment off his uniform pants along with some of the flesh of his right leg. He lost his hold on Steve, screaming in agony. Carlo made an aggressive move to tear Steve away from his brother then, and was met with an abrupt explosion of pain when Steve’s fist flashed out in a twisting right hook and cracked him in the upper half of his lip. Carlo’s head snapped backward and he fell down on his own glider, hard. Steve moved back toward his brother’s body, and lost half his neck behind a laser ten seconds later.

“WHO THE FUCK IS SHOOTING AT US!” Maxis screamed, still clutching his leg.

Carlo spit up blood, pushing himself up on his forearms. “Maxis,” he grunted, blood trickling from his mouth. “Steve is dead! Get out of here!”

Maxis groaned.

“You still got your leg,” Carlo asked.

“Yeah!”

He sucked in air. “THEN RUN FOR THE END OF THE FUCKING *PLATFORM!*”

Maxis got up, and as the lasers flew overhead he came over and helped Carlo to his feet.

Maxis was limping, but it was good to see that he was at least able to do that much.

“Don’t worry about me man, just—”

“Shut up Carlo.”

And Carlo said nothing more.



They ran for the cliff together and the second before the jump, Carlo's glider, still undamaged from hitting the concrete, was torn apart by a laser, and he went over.

## 8

He'd never free fallen before, though he had read that on Earth there were many that paid to jump out of airplanes with parachutes instead of gliders, for the classic thrill. Now he wished he had, for the experience. Because the sensation of falling freely when you hadn't wanted to jump in the first place was terrifying. His heart seemed to do more than just try to beat its way out of his chest, it seemed to be trying to ram itself free from the chest cavity with the force of a bulldozer. Clouds flashed by almost unseen in the dark and cold air rushed against his face, chilling it. It somehow felt like he'd been inside—despite the clear evidence to the contrary—and when he'd fallen he'd actually encountered outside's weather for the first time. Now, as he fell, he had a fuller more intense sense of the wind. And what he noticed, as distracted as he was by the sheer force of the wind against his face, was that what had seemed like a bottomless drop had become more like a feeling of being pushed upward. Almost as if he'd been thrown against the wind of a massive, upward facing propeller. Falling suddenly didn't feel like falling anymore. But this did nothing to ease his terror.

*I'm going to hit a platform or the water! Shit, I'm going to hit the platform or the motherfucking water!*

He hoped that he smacked into a platform, for the sake of sparing him the experience of splashing into the water and possibly surviving the fall only to meet one of the monstrosities that inhabited the sea.

“Fuck!” he groaned, the mental image of the water and all that resided within it growing in detail by the second. “FUU—”

He felt a sudden jerk on his right wrist then, and was yanked upward. He looked up, and in the dark saw the outline of Maxis’s face, looking out ahead. The second Maxis had grabbed his arm, he’d faced forward and the glider had evened out, and was now gliding at roughly fifty miles an hour toward another platform. Carlo used his free hand to grab onto the same wrist Maxis used to hold him up. Carlo was grateful enough to be on the verge of tears.

Maxis said something, but Carlo couldn’t hear it over the burn of the jets.

“What?”

“I’m lightheaded,” he repeated a little louder.

“You think you could make it all the way!”

“I hope so!”

“For the sake of my life I do too!”

Ten minutes later Maxis and Carlo came to a rough landing at the next platform, tumbling to a rough stop in front of an all-night diner. They were washed instantly by bright light thrown by the diner’s overhead neon sign and the night lights that flanked the street.

Carlo withheld the urge to let out a sob of gratitude, the solid surface below him the most beautiful thing he’d ever felt. He kept his eyes closed for a couple of minutes.

*I’m alive, Carlo thought. Oh shit, I’m actually alive.*

But Stephen and Steve weren’t, the life swatted from their bodies like flies on a wall.

He opened his eyes and saw Maxis, the friend who had saved his life, lying several feet away, the jets on his glider off, his eyes closed. Blood was running from his lower left calve.

Carlo, the pain in his mouth forgotten, crawled over to him, new pain flaring up in his left wrist as he did. He must've sprained it in the landing.

"Maxis!" Carlo said, reaching out and shaking Maxis's shoulder with his right hand. Maxis didn't respond, only lay still. His mouth was half open as if he was snoring or was about to, but Carlo heard nothing.

He shook him harder, thinking that he'd lose his mind if Maxis had died. But Maxis eventually stirred, his face twisting in a grimace. Carlo smiled and pressed his forehead against his friend's.

"You're going to be okay, man," he said. As Maxis remained unresponsive, Carlo looked at the few people that had gathered around them. An older man, in a blue uniform like Maxis's, stood the closest. A long beard extended down to where his collar bone would have been. It was pointed at the end, almost like an arrow.

The man opened his mouth, hesitated, then said, uncertainly, "We can take him to the hospital." It was more of a question than a statement. He scratched at the back of his head with one paisley, wrinkled hand. "But the signal is gone so none of our phones work. So we can't call an ambulance."

Beside him, Carlo heard Maxis groan.

**9**

When Alexis showed up on the platform, Maxis was seated inside the back of one of the carts. Carlo had removed what was left of his own glider and helped Maxis removed his. This time he didn't place his—or Maxis's—into one of the security tubes.

He had been seated in the front seat of the hover-cart when Alexis called his name. Carlo and Maxis turned—Maxis more slowly—to look over their shoulders.

Her hair was a mess, her face flushed. Carlo thought he had never seen her so scared. Strangely, the level of her beauty hit him as well, stronger than it ever had before. He pushed the thought away and hopped out of the driver's seat, telling Maxis to stay where he was.

“What the hell's going on,” Alexis asked, wrapping her arms around him when they reached each other.

“How the hell did you know we were here,” Carlo asked.

“I saw you two leap. I saw *you* fall. Now what the hell's going on, Carlo?”

“We were shot at, that's all I know,” he said. “You saw about as much as I did. Or at least what mattered.” He looked around nervously, checking for a power outage anywhere on the platform. It wasn't until Alexis had asked him what's going on that he had thought to do so. For now the business lights and streetlights were on. When he noticed this he let out a breath he didn't realize he'd been holding.

“My fucking phone doesn't work,” Alexis said. She put her head against his chest and began to cry. Carlo touched her hair with one gloved hand. “Stephen's dead.”

Carlo felt the same pain that she was feeling, and didn't know how he was going to tell her that Steve had also died moments after she'd jumped. Instead, he just held her for a while and tried to figure out what the hell was going on. Why in the world would some random group shoot at them? He hadn't been able to get a clear look at them, so he didn't know who had bombarded them with lasers.

*It might have not been people,* Carlo thought. This thought made things worse.

“We need to take Maxis to the hospital,” Carlo said, letting go of a still sobbing Alexis and heading to the hover-cart. “Come on.”

People watched as they drove away, and the old man—who Carlo had found out was named McKay before Alexis arrived—waved as they left. He shouted for them to come to the diner anytime, which was his establishment.

“Nobody wants your food you crinkly ass old man,” Maxis muttered when Carlo had driven out of earshot. Carlo wasn’t sure, but he thought he had heard tears in Maxis’s voice. Alexis was still crying, wiping at her eyes repeatedly with a partially closed fist.

They had tied the gliders to the top of the vehicle with the help of people from the diner, Carlo hoping that they didn’t fall off or that a laser from some unseen darker region didn’t obliterate them.

“We have to get home,” Carlo said, trying to remember the directions that McKay had given him. “We can’t stay here. This place doesn’t have security like home and if we’re not careful we’ll find ourselves without a glider and nowhere to go.”

*“Who the hell was shooting at us,”* Alexis suddenly screamed, her small hands clenched into fists in front of her. “We weren’t bothering anybody! Who the hell would want to shoot at us!”

Carlo and Maxis didn’t say anything, and when Carlo glanced over his shoulder he could see that Maxis had closed his eyes.

“Shake him,” he told Alexis. “And make sure he’s okay.”

Alexis wiped at her eyes again and reached back and shook Maxis. He opened his eyes easily enough, and she told him to stay awake.

“I can go to sleep,” he said. “Nothing’s going to happen to me. I don’t even feel that way.”

“But you’ve been tired ever since your leg was shot,” Carlo told him. “So you have to be careful not to go to sleep until we get you to a hospital.”

Maxis nodded.

“Just keep it together, all right,” Carlo said, passing by a blindingly bright casino on his right. “They’ll have Maxis fixed up in no time. Laser stitching and immediate release. As soon as you’re good Maxis, tired or not, we all need to take our asses home. Whatever the hell it takes. I’d rather spend a week in jail than to be anywhere near an unfamiliar platform again.”

“Yeah, I’m cool with that.”

The drive was supposed to be fifteen minutes away, and Carlo used some of the time to think about what had happened. He replayed the scene. Everything from the moment they realized that they couldn’t get their gliders out, to when Steve had handed Carlo’s knife back. They’d been attacked out of nowhere, so suddenly. By who though?

“Oh shit,” Carlo said, as the answer hit him like a ton of bricks. It made perfect sense. After all, before they had been shot at they hadn’t seen anyone following them, and then out of nowhere lasers had zipped by.

“What,” Alexis said.

“Remember what I said about hackers getting into the system and messing with everything. About them being more advanced than law enforcement, at least in the beginning?”

“What about?”

“Don’t you see? We weren’t shot at by people. We were shot at by goddamn automatons. And robots don’t aim to kill unless you aim to kill them. It’s a virus making the system act up. It has to be.”

“They went rogue is what you’re saying?”

“All those automatons have guns, Alexis. All of them. Think of every robot that stands by the end of the platform. They all have huge guns. What those lasers did to—” he stopped himself from saying *the twins*, hoping that she got the point without hearing it. “You remember what they did? Do you see where I’m coming from?”

“Yeah, but none of us saw anything so how would we know? And how the hell could you figure all that out from a bunch of reckless lasers?”

“Because guns are hard to come by Alexis, that’s why. And why would people want to just shoot up a bunch of random individuals? Us out of everyone. *A bunch of teenagers*. Yeah, there’s some sickos out there, but *we* have nothing to do with the way the world is run. Why would we be a target? It makes more sense to hotwire robots to send a message that people are not safe with them. What better way than to corrupt robots with guns.”

Alexis took a moment to digest everything he was saying, then said, “And you’re sure about this?”

“As sure as I can be. It’s a major part of it. This isn’t far from what you’ve always believed about technology and the way the world is headed. Consider the types of people that fight against it, the ones who don’t care about sacrificing innocent humans for the cause. When hackers were running amuck last time this was the kind of shit that they were doing.”

“Yeah, I hear you,” she responded. “So what do we do?”

*Get our asses out of here*, was the first thought that came to Carlo's mind but that had been said to death. His reply was,

"We make sure that Maxis doesn't bleed out. We've never been on this platform, but I think we'll figure out our way home just fine. We'll put our money together, hop on a shuttle, and leave."

"Why is this all happening now?" She stopped and put her face into her open palms, crying again. Carlo did not want to tell her about Steve, but knew that he'd eventually be forced to do so. Still, it was something she might've already figured out on her own. After all, Steve wasn't with them, so what was the natural conclusion?

The hospital was a vast glass structure that spilled bright white light spilling out onto the cement. An arch of driveway ran in front of the entrance and beneath an eave, and Carlo parked and hopped out, Alexis jumping out on the other side. They pushed the passenger seat forward and helped Maxis out, who had begun to mutter nonsense about all of this possibly being avoided if they'd all just eaten their Wheaties.

"All right, we're here," Carlo said, and when he stepped toward the entrance the set of double doors slid open in a soundless flash.

They went inside.

Maxis was escorted away in a wheelchair by two robots who donned white nurse uniforms. Carlo had always thought that robots in nurses' clothes were silly. The lobby was a complete interior of white made up of rows of long white leather pews embedded into the floor,



each seat wide enough to seat at least ten people. The last one was bolted into the wall like a booth at a restaurant. Carlo and Alexis sat in the fourth row.

The lobby was completely empty. The brightness of it all was enough to almost drive Carlo out of his mind. For some reason everything seemed a little too still. And the surroundings irritated his eyes. Still though, it was better than being outside. This seemed like the only place he didn't feel vulnerable. Alexis watched him as his brow curved in thought.

"Carlo," she said, after the first three minutes passed in silence. Carlo leaned forward.

"Yeah?"

He didn't think he was going to cry, but part of him wanted to just to let it out. Part of him couldn't take what had happened and thought if he replayed the event too many times in his head that he might crack. But cracking simply wasn't an option right now.

"You all right?"

He looked at Alexis and could see that her eyes were still red. She was strong, no doubt. He didn't just think that because of the distinctly dark color of her eyes either. There was something about her; he could sense its presence in the same way that a person could sometimes detect when someone wasn't being honest.

"I'm good," he said, rubbing his hands together. He shook his head. "Something's not right here Alexis. That must seem beyond the point now, huh?"

She smiled.

"We need to get home," he went on. "And home is a long way from here. I guess we're all fortunate to live on the same platform, huh?"

"Yeah. But that platform is over an hour's flight away."

"Yeah, no shit. Like I said, *a long way from here.*"

Alexis sighed. "Steve didn't make it, did he," she said suddenly. When she had said this he had been actively thinking about how he was going to tell her, trying to put the words together in his mind. The way she said it though, the steadiness in her voice, the sheer certainty, almost broke him. But when he didn't cry, he knew that he wouldn't either.

"I already knew," Alexis said, looking down at the floor, the small fingers of her hands interlaced. "When I didn't see him with you two on the platform I already knew." Her fingernails were distinct on her pale fingers. She'd painted them black, the only color he'd ever seen her use on her fingernails. It was a darker color than the color of her personality.

"I don't even know how to process this," Carlo said. "What makes it worse is that I don't know how the parents are going to take it." He put his head in his hands. "Jesus-*motherfucking*-Christ, man. Is this shit really happening? Is it happening for real?"

Breaking him from the darkness his palms had put him in, was Alexis's hand, taking hold of one of his. He looked at her.

"We'll get through this Carlo," Alexis said. She closed her free hand over the hand she currently held and squeezed. "Now everyone's phones are out. Maybe it means nothing. Whatever the case, like you said, we need to get out of here. As far as why this is happening, and how horrible it is, don't let it get in the way of keeping your head together. We need your mind intact if we hope to live to see home again.

Carlo nodded, helpless to keep a small smile from developing on his face. Alexis smiled back, and for a few seconds their eyes locked. Alexis was the one to break the gaze, looking down shyly.

"What's the story with you and Maxis," Carlo said. "I've never quite understood that."

Alexis chuckled, and let go of his hand. She brushed a lock of hair back behind her ear.

“We like each other,” she said. “But we’re not, you know. I mean...I love both you guys, and I couldn’t, well you know...relationships can turn things to shit.”

“Yeah, maybe.” Carlo left it at that, and leaned back in his seat.

“Like you said, something is wrong,” said Alexis, returning to the original subject. “And if you think you feel it, think about a woman’s intuition, and imagine how I’m feeling.” She gave a nervous chuckle.

Carlo regarded his backpack from where it laid on the floor.

“Man, I could really use a drink.”

“No one better jack those gliders is all I can say,” Alexis said, looking through the double doors at the emergency entrance. It was against hospital protocol, but Carlo had been allowed to park his hover-cart out front along the arc when he told hospital security (in his area, hospital security consisted of a half a staff of humans and robots) about his situation. Unfortunately, there wasn’t a single cop on the scene security could tell him about, and the nearest police station was located over eight miles away.

“People don’t steal gliders for the most part,” Carlo said. “Everyone has a GIN for a reason Alexis. They could find out the exact location in seconds with that and the tracker.”

“Yeah, but I’d rather not have to go through that,” she said, sounding a bit irritated. “*Glider Identification Numbers* don’t keep gliders from getting jacked. Just like the VIN numbers on hovercrafts don’t keep them from getting stolen.”

Carlo sighed. “That’s a bad comparison, sweetheart. Hovercrafts are valued differently after all. You’re not talking about a hover-cart here, which also has a lot a value. Hovercrafts are full-vehicles.”

“Yeah, you say that until it’s your glider that gets jacked.”

“Whatever man, we’re wasting time with all of this. Just do your part and pay attention to what’s going on around you. We don’t need to be caught off guard like we were on the other platform.”

“Okay. But ask yourself this Carlo, how the hell could all the palm-phones and glass-cards have gone off like this? Think about it, we’ve never dealt with even that before. *Never*. We used to laugh at the idea of people who had cell phones that could fail to work for even a few minutes. Because for us there wasn’t a such thing as a dropped call. The last few generations have been known as the generations with the ‘perfect cell phones’. You remember when Apple first coined the term ‘perfect phone’.”

Carlo was shaking his head. “Yeah, but there could never be such a thing.”

“They meant as far as the service provided.”

“Still.”

“Since, people didn’t read about a phone having a dropped call. Anywhere. Under any circumstance unless someone had stomped on it. And even the stuff it’s made out of is very hard to break, both the wristband phones and the glass ones. Known as our beloved palm-phones and glass-cards today. For either it’s like stepping on pure rubber. Nothing would happen.”

“Yeah, phones have been nearly unbreakable for the last fifty some years. I think—”

Carlo spotted Maxis as he came out on the far side of a hall to his left, looking drastically renewed and refreshed. He strolled with a slight limp, the leg he had been shot in wrapped in a small white bandage. The wound would heal quickly Carlo knew, he had no doubt about that. Even life threatening wounds could be healed in a matter of minutes these days. Maxis probably didn’t even need his bandage. The drugs that were given for most injuries were nothing short of

incredible, and the methods for blood transfusion in cases that involved significant blood loss were quite efficient. Chances were his limp would be gone soon, as well.

Maxis was moving at a faster than normal pace, his expression one of urgency. Alexis was on her feet, approaching him.

“Can we get the fuck home,” he said. “I want to—”

Alexis leapt into his arms, wrapped her legs around his waist and her arms around his neck, then planted a wet kiss smack on his mouth. Carlo stood up, his hands shoved into his pockets, watching with a small smile as Alexis remained in Maxis’s arms, allowing him to kiss her back. This went on for about five seconds, Carlo wanting them to hurry it up, but deciding to give them time.

*So much for clear signals,* Carlo thought.

Then the lights cut out.

## 7

Carlo wasted no time, and switched his palm-phone to flashlight mode, and lifted his hand to allow the bright screen on his palm to light the entire space. A second later the backup lights kicked in, and the interior lit up partially, still dim, but visible when Carlo shut his light back off.

“You think we should wait in here,” Alexis asked, standing next to Maxis.

“You need a glider,” Maxis told Carlo.

“Don’t I know it,” he replied.

“We can always get creative and find a way to strap you in with one of us.” She looked at Maxis.

“Hey, I already saved this dude’s life. You take him.” Then randomly: “What the hell are we going to tell their parents?”

Carlo and Alexis looked at him then regarded each other grimly.

“We can’t worry about that now,” Carlo answered. “We have to either wait for the phone signals to start working again or get out of here. Pure and simple.”

“We can stay here,” Alexis said. “We wait until there’s power or until there’s light out.”

Carlo and Maxis were both shaking their heads, Carlo unwilling to remain on any platform that could plummet from the sky in the blink of an eye. But everyone had the right to their say.

“Why not?”

“Just remember what I told you guys during the sunset. “Enough talk. We need to get the hell out of here, because if the automatons start shooting up this platform we might not be so lucky this time. Not that we were very lucky the first time.” He stopped and studied both of them. “So are we going?”

Alexis and Maxis nodded.

“Good, let’s go.”

They left the hospital and stepped into a world almost completely devoid of light. The power was off in every building, the street lights off on every street. The moonlight was all they had. Carlo felt like he was in a ghost town, a world as foreign to him as this planet would’ve been to the unlucky people still living on Earth. Buildings were now nothing but hulking shadows, shadows that—strangely—seemed to be closing in on them. Carlo wanted to head back

into the hospital then, thinking that Alexis may have been right in her suggestion to stay inside. At least in the hospital there was light. If the automatons went nuts at least they wouldn't be visible when they did. Unless, of course, the automatons, for whatever reason, suddenly made their way into the hospital. Or the ones currently in the hospital, even without any guns, suddenly turned homicidal. The thought sent a chill up Carlo's spine.

He could see the outline of the hover-cart, levitating a few inches above the ground, and the gliders on the roof. A hundred or so feet away he could see people gathering outside, nothing but dark outlines, leaving the safety of their buildings to look around. This gave Carlo some comfort, knowing that he and his friends weren't alone in this. But still, they didn't belong here. They belonged on Julius, their home platform, and right now it seemed as far away as ever.

"Guys, we have to be the unluckiest three in the world," Alexis said. "Don't you think?"

"Sure," said Carlo. "If you forget Steve and Stephen and anybody who was unlucky enough to be on a platform the last time one plummeted."

"What I wouldn't do for some solid ground. Ground that doesn't float."

Carlo chuckled. "Yeah." He looked at her. "You know, I've never experienced it." He chuckled.

Alexis shared in his laughter. "Yeah."

"All right, into the hover-cart," Carlo said, and the three of them hopped in, Maxis getting in the passenger seat beside Carlo and Alexis hopping in the back.

"And I'm tired too," Alexis said.

Carlo ignored her, part of him wanting to scream that he was tired as well, and that she wasn't alone in this. But he said nothing. That was energy that he didn't want to waste. If he

could get home he thought that he wouldn't leave the platform for a year. Maybe longer. But the key was getting home first.

The headlights to the hover-cart flashed on automatically as Carlo used his fingerprint to take the cart of idle. The vehicle lifted another couple of inches off the ground, and then they were off, moving slowly down the street, past the people that were gathering. People moved out of the way of the hover-cart like parting water, not giving more than a glance in the vehicle's direction and reforming when the hover-cart passed.

"Good thing everything is off if you think about it," Alexis said. "The automatons wouldn't let us jump off the edge with two people strapped into one glider."

"Yeah, but the automatons were turned on at the other platform despite the lights being off there, so the power being out might not matter," Carlo responded.

"It might be illegal, but in this situation we could just take off from anywhere on the platform," Maxis said.

Carlo glanced at him. "Gliders don't work like that Maxis, you know that. You need to jump off for the wind resistance. The burner is only there to assist just enough to get to the platform you're aiming for. At the end of the day it depends on the air. These aren't rocket-packs."

"Yeah, I'd like to get one of those. There'd be no limits to what platforms I could get to. I hate paying for a ride on the public shuttle just to get to the higher levels. I never understood why they couldn't adjust gliders to ascend higher faster. With a rocket-pack I could go straight up instead of slightly up depending on the wind, linear or down. I could move about however the hell I want."

"Well, you're right about that. So when you can afford it, go right on ahead."



Carlo had wanted a rocket pack too, but they were quite expensive and took a number of lessons to get used to. Gliders were given at a discount to everyone and cost considerably less than rocket packs even without the discount. Carlo's mom had never wanted him to have one. They could move at speeds of up to four hundred miles an hour, and you had to be eighteen and receive three months' worth of lessons to even be licensed. Gliders required only an hour's worth of lessons. And the test—one a written exam and one with physical use of the glider—was considered quite easy.

Carlo knew where to find rocket-packs though, which weren't as mainstream as gliders—and with all the power off Carlo thought he could get past the security apparatus to get his hands on one if he needed. They had gone down a few levels with the gliders. Inevitably, they'd have to get to a public shuttle to get home. If not on this platform, one nearby. They'd—

Something hot suddenly zipped by Carlo's ear, breaking his train of thought. He glanced over his shoulder.

Blue and red lasers zipped by, erupting against a number of solid objects fifty so feet out. People screamed and ran in all directions, and Carlo, unable to turn the vehicle around with the number of people now blocking him, knew they had to exit .

“OUT!” he bellowed. They leapt out and two seconds later the hover-cart was lit up, punctured from top to bottom with red and blue lasers.

As he landed on the smooth gravel, he saw bits and pieces of the gliders that had been strapped to the top of the cart fall all around him—burnt pieces of metal and the fabric that made up the wings smoldering as they floated to the ground. The smell of burning hit his nostrils.

Maxis groaned from the other side of the hover-cart, witnessing the same destruction of the gliders that Carlo had. There was no time to waste.

“FOLLOW ME!” Carlo shouted, and scrambled to his feet and dashed around the vehicle and past his friends, praying that they would listen. They were right on his heels, and he led them to cover behind the side of a large restaurant. From there they watched as the hover-cart, with its black exterior, continued to be shot apart by a relentless onslaught of lasers. They watched as it ceased to levitate and fell to the ground. Alexis and Maxis both watched this from behind Carlo, Alexis with a hand on his left shoulder and Maxis with a hand on his right.

“So about your story,” Maxis said, taking his hand off Carlo’s shoulder to wipe his mouth. “If this platform falls we’re dead. Pure and simple, right? We’re fuck—”

Then for the first time in the less than two decades they’d been alive, they saw the automatons—or cyborgs—march forward with rapt, mechanical movements, all looking considerably bigger than when they were at the border, motionless. Each stood taller than the average walking automaton at approximately seven feet, and somehow their firearms looked larger than Carlo remembered.

“Someone’s fucking with these machines man,” Maxis almost whimpered. “Someone’s—”

Alexis clapped a hand over Maxis’s mouth, putting a finger to her lips with the other. He looked at her, his eyes wide, then after a moment, nodded quickly, and she took her hand away.

“We need to go,” Alexis whispered, and Carlo nodded and led them away from the cart, which was now little more than a burning heap on the wide cement walkway.

Carlo decided to lead them back to the diner he had seen when he’d first arrived, hoping to get a chance to talk to McKay. McKay seemed like he knew the town well, and if anyone could tell him where the nearest hovercraft dealership was it was him. In the showroom, which

was usually on the upper floor of these places, Carlo should be able to find a selection of premium gliders and rocket-packs on display.

All around dark buildings towered over them like sentinels. Through the spaces between the buildings to his left, he could see automatons moving around, looking for people to shoot.

“So are these hacker assholes trying to destroy the world or something,” Maxis asked.

“Usually, they’re just trying to send a message,” Carlo said. “They don’t like machines, and believe that machines will one day destroy the world all on their own. Then again, there are some people that only do this shit for fun. They like to terrorize societies, and they usually target the smaller platforms. At least that was what they did when it was happening in our ancestor’s days.”

“I swear if I get out of this alive...oh, it’s on!”

The trio ran between two buildings.

“Why? What do you plan to do if you do?”

Maxis said nothing, but Carlo was sure that he had irked him. He didn’t care though. He had bigger things to worry about.

Carlo heard more laser bursts and the sounds of screams nearby. The sound of something hard, hitting something metal—probably the robot—was audible. The trio strolled deeper down the alley, Carlo hoping to lead them behind the robots, and off the path that the robots were headed. When they made it to the end of the alley, they could see that out on the main street a man was hitting an abnormally huge cyborg with what looked like a metal bat. This robot was easily nine feet, wider, and had two firearms bolted to his arms that were bigger than the rest. Carlo, Alexis and Maxis watched as the cyborg, pivoted (at this point the trio brought their heads slightly back to avoid being seen) took an abrupt step forward, lifted a foot roughly the size of a

coffee table, and smashed it down on him. A slight tremble ran through the cement. Then more lasers flew and the outlines of the surrounding residents scattered. Carlo signaled Alexis and Maxis to follow him in the opposite direction.

“Where are we going,” Alexis asked.

“To go talk to McKay. He’s the guy that helped me and Maxis when we first landed on this platform. I have to ask the dude some questions. He might know something useful.”

“And I thought I’d never have a reason to go into the diner,” Maxis said.

“Well you do. Now, we’re going to have to head there a different way. The way I was taking you doesn’t look like it’ll work very well for us.”

The walk seemed to last forever, but an hour later they arrived back at McKay’s diner. Like Carlo had predicted, Maxis’s limp was gone. From the looks of it the diner had back-up lights running off generators like the hospital—assuming that’s what the hospital used—and though it wasn’t as bright as it was earlier and more like the cool, eerie light in the ER, it was better than nothing.

They stepped into the diner and under the cool white light, nodding at a few of the customers sitting on stools along the bar. Maxis and Alexis remained close behind Carlo, looking curiously around the restaurant. Carlo looked for old man McKay. In a situation like this, the first thing he wanted to do was talk to an older person. He knew if he told him about the cyborgs he’d likely flip out, but McKay’s comfort level was the least of his worries.

The crowd in the diner looked scared, but seemed to be trying to keep it to themselves with hushed conversation and failed attempts to look calm. Laughter was one of the ways that they tried to do this.

*You guys just think something's wrong with the power, Carlo though. Scary this day and age but not that bad compared to what's really going on.*

Carlo didn't see McKay at the moment, but the restaurant was full. It didn't look like there was a single seat to sit in. There were many tables with steel surfaces, those were full as well. Eyes that had dismissed the trio as irrelevant found them again, seemingly curious about who these younger three could be looking for, this trio of teenagers that didn't match the typical makeup of the diner's clientele.

"Shit man," Carlo muttered, having strolled to one end of the diner. He looked around at everyone. Asked if anyone knew a guy named McKay. The middle and older aged crowd looked at him blankly and Carlo, feeling that McKay may have left for the night, began to think it was hopeless.

"Well, let's get out of here," Carlo said. "I guess—"

"Carlo and friends," a calm, raspy voice spoke up from behind. "Good to see you here. Interested in today's special?"

## 8

Maxis jumped, Alexis laughed at him, and Carlo gave no reaction at all, except to turn around and face McKay. McKay's blue eyes scanned each of them briefly and settled on Carlo. He had a white dishtowel in his hands, damp with food spots.

"You wanted us to come back to the diner and now we're back," Carlo said, and forced a chuckle.

“You’re not here for the food I’m guessing,” he said, smiling a smile that didn’t quite reach his eyes.

“Yeah, if it was up to me we would be far away from here, that’s for sure. If you don’t know already the power’s out because someone’s trying to mess up the system. Trying to send a message maybe.” There wasn’t time to slow it down, he could only give it to McKay straight.

A few people at the bar turned to look over their shoulders at Carlo. He could almost feel the stares from the tables surrounding him.

“What are you talking about kiddo?”

“You’ll know soon enough,” Carlo replied. He looked at Maxis, who was staring out into the night, probably looking out for the cyborgs. Alexis was looking at the guests, her eyes moving from one to other.

“Look,” Carlo continued. “We’re trying to get off this platform. We don’t live here. We lost our gliders and we’re trying to get a hold of some new ones.” He didn’t plan to say anything to McKay about possibly checking out the rocket packs.

The elderly man chuckled. “Well that’s too bad. The dealership done closed over two hours ago. Around six o’clock.”

“Yeah, I know. I was hoping I could get the address anyway and head over there and pick up something in the morning.”

Alexis tapped Carlo on the shoulder and whispered in his ear, “Ask him if he knows any private sellers selling a glider with all the papers.”

“You end up with a glider that’s shit that way,” Carlo said.

“No, not always.”

Carlo ignored her and kept his eyes on McKay, whose own eyes had left the trio and had followed Maxis's gaze outside.

"Is something out there," McKay asked, working the dishtowel over hands that looked like they no longer needed to be wiped.

Carlo had planned to tell McKay what was out there, but he didn't want to tell him before getting the information that he needed. If his palm-phone had a signal he would have used the GPS and have already been on his way.

"There's a dealership down about two and a half miles from here," one of the guests at the bar said. It was a large man that sat on a stool by an equally large woman. Though there was no evidence to suggest it, Carlo assumed that this large woman, wearing a large blue suit, was this red-uniformed man's wife. Carlo wondered how they could become big in a world where food was far healthier and cheaper.

"Okay," Carlo said.

"Fourth and AC. I believe that those are the cross streets."

"Put that into your phones," Carlo said, snapping his fingers to get the attention of Alexis and Maxis. He glanced back at them and saw that the screen of Alexis's palm-phone was on. She spoke the words into the wristband. "Better safe than sorry, Fourth and AC. Can you give us directions? Signal is out, as I'm sure you already know."

The large man gave the trio directions, while McKay kept his eyes outside.

"Is something out there," he repeated.

Carlo waited a few moments to answer, turned toward Alexis and waited for her to give the nod that she'd put the number into her palm phone.

“All good,” she said, holding up her palm, and showing him a white screen with black text. The screen vanished the next second and the palm-phone was, once again, was nothing more than a high-sensory, image projecting, wristband.

“All right everybody,” Carlo said aloud. “You should probably lock these doors and get out of sight. Your robots are out killing everybody.”

What followed was silence and dozens of assessing eyes, settling on Carlo. Some brows furrowed, apparently bothered by even the suggestion of such a thing. McKay’s eyes had found their way back to Carlo too. Then staring seemed to go on forever. Then came a sudden, loud scoff from somewhere far in the back of the restaurant, and if Carlo were to guess it was probably someone old. What followed was the same person yelling for him to go cause trouble somewhere else.

“What do you mean the robots are loose,” McKay asked, his expression clearly one of incredulity. Carlo didn’t have time to take it personal and he didn’t have time to explain. But he repeated it nonetheless.

“There’s robots on the loose out there,” he told McKay. “I don’t have time to get into detail, but some underground group set all of this up. They are out on the streets destroying the town. Everyone needs to take cover. Hide yourselves.”

A moment more of silence. Then the diner burst into great big gales of laughter, multiple clenched fists slamming on the counter and table tops, rocking the glasses and plates in their places. You would’ve thought that Carlo was a standup comedian. What made all of this worse was that McKay was laughing right along with them, his open mouth seeming to swallow his whole face.



“All right, you can go young man,” he said, wiping tears from his eyes. “You’re going to...you’re going to scare my goddamn customers.” He bent over and placed his hands on his knees, continuing to snort laughter. His face was red. To Carlo he resembled a bearded tomato.

“Really,” Carlo said, feeling himself becoming particularly angry. “Really? You guys think I would come here to make that shit up? Do you think this blackout is about nothing?” Carlo turned toward the window and pointed outside. “When was the last time you’ve had a blackout, huh? You asked me what’s going on out there and I told you. Some group got into the central control system and the automatons are loose!”

More laughter erupted like a flame that had been freshly doused with a pint of gasoline. Maxis and Alexis exchanged uneasy looks. Carlo continued to watch the diner’s guests in stunned disbelief, his eyes as wide as golf balls.

“Come on,” Alexis said, grabbing his wrist. “They’re not going to believe you. Look at them, most of them are senior citizens. Nothing you can do Carlo. There’s nothing you can do. Let’s get down to the dealership. We have to go.”

Carlo snatched his wrist from her and stormed over to old man McKay and grabbed the collar of his blue uniform. The old man stood at least a foot shorter than him, but had a pair of penetrating eyes which were, perhaps, what falsely led him into thinking he could trust telling him, if not purely out of desperation. Still, even with Carlo in his face, clenching his collar as he did, the man went on laughing with the rest.

*“The fucking robots are loose assholes!”* He snatched a glance around the room, his eyes stretched to capacity, thinking that he probably looked as crazy as the situation occurring on the platform. *“You all are some dumb ass mothefuckers!”* With his attention back on McKay he screamed, “Either turn your fucking lights off and hide or they’re going to burst in here!”

Then McKay suddenly shoved Carlo back, his face still red. Carlo nearly fell to the floor. “Go,” McKay demanded, pointing one long, pasty finger toward the door. He struggled to talk through his laughter, now a bit winded. “Take your buddies with you. Crazy son of a...son of a bitch you!”

“Come on,” Alexis said, grabbing his wrist again and pulling him. “We’re making too much noise in here.” At this point the room looked like a common room with psych patients that had forgone their last dosage. Everyone inside seemed to be trembling with laughter. To actually be rocking with it.

*Fuck being a comedian, Carlo thought. Even a comedian couldn't have brought down the house like this.*

*Senior citizens, Alexis had said. That must've been it. He was dealing with a bunch of people that were really from the old school. They just didn't get it, which didn't make sense. Did they know the stories about the old school, what the throw back days of Quantum-59 had been like?*

“Assholes,” Carlo said, resisting Alexis’s pull, but not yanking his wrist completely away. “I’m trying to save your lives! They are *killing* people out there and you guys are just an easy target if you don’t turn *these* damn lights off! You think I’m playing! Two of my friends got killed on platform *Arka* by these goddamn things!”

Maxis grabbed Carlo’s free wrist and helped Alexis pull him toward the exit. One of the younger men at a table near the bar, wearing a red uniform suit, fell off his chair and began rolling on the floor, holding his stomach tightly as if trying to suppress his gorge, his laughter the loudest of all. When Carlo saw this he felt betrayed, expecting someone that was younger to see

things from his point of view. The guy rolling on the floor was no more than a few years older than Carlo.

“Seriously,” McKay said, still pointing and laughing. “Go!”

And Carlo and his friends left.

“I don’t get it,” Carlo said.

“You don’t have to,” Maxis said. “People are crazy sometimes.”

“But they’re acting like I’m telling them a joke.”

“We have to go,” Alexis said. “We don’t have weapons or anything. We’re sitting geese out here.”

“Sitting ducks.”

“Same thing. Now we have to go guys.”

“Yeah.”

Carlo led them off the main street, his fury still fresh, and as they made their way around one of the dark buildings, they came face to face with three beam blasters the size of surfboards, pointed directly at them.

*Well what do you know,* Carlo said, feeling a sick urge to chuckle.

Maxis gulped. Everyone put their hands up. On the other side of the guns, there were three tall figures, not much more than shadows in the absence of light. The dark figures shoved the barrels of the beam blasters against their chests, and forced them backward, back toward the diner.

While one of the men—Carlo could tell it was a man with the light filtering from the diner—held a gun toward the three of them, two men strolled into the diner and forced everyone out onto the street. Fifty or so people filed out the front, their hands up. Seven cyborgs joined the ranks of the soldiers, their blasters no longer aimed and their mechanical strides less rapt and intentioned. They approached the front of the diner and stood side by side in front of it, creating a wall similar to the wall created by the robots at the border of the platform.

“Keep your temper under control,” Alexis whispered to Carlo, her voice shaky.

“I’m good,” Carlo said, slightly irked that she had even bothered to mention it. He wasn’t a five year old kid that she was talking to after all. But his eyes locked on old man McKay as he exited the restaurant, waiting for the old man to look his direction, so he could fix him with a cold stare. The old man didn’t look his way. The crowd of people from the diner soon joined Carlo, Alexis, and Maxis, all with guns drawn on them as well.

“My fucking arms are tired,” Maxis said. “I wish they could hurry up with this. Wish that they—”

Alexis smacked Maxis hard on the back of the head and Maxis, his face fixing into a pained grimace, shut up instantly.

The three armed men organized everyone with shouts and fervent waves of their hands so that everyone backs faced the diner. The apparent leader of the group, a tall, bearded, dark skinned man—he would be consider Middle-Eastern back on Earth—seemed to appear from nowhere, apparently having emerged from the shadows cast along the dark street.

Carlo wondered if he’d been standing still, watching his troops the entire time.

“I’m led here by a tip,” the man stated, rubbing at his right eye with one long finger. “And I tell you, leadership is unkind to sleep. I’ve been up for some time friends.” Carlo wasn’t surprised. The man looked irritated about something.

“All right,” the man said, observing the crowd, his hands now clasped behind his back. He scanned everyone from left to right. Carlo hoped that he and his friends weren’t noticed, hoped that they were just enough out of his immediate view.

“My name is Mehdi,” said the man. “Not *Meh-dee like gee* but *Mehd-I like I*. Please, please, don’t fuck it up if you can help it. I wouldn’t like it...no, I wouldn’t like it very much if you did. Now...I need some recruits, and that’s the reason that you’re all not already dead.” He paused as if for effect. “There is a virus that needs to be eradicated and this very platform that we stand on is one of the breeding grounds for it. Before I eliminate the threat I need to get some recruits. So I’m going to need some volunteers. If you are interested you can simply raise your hand and you will become a part of our team, the name of which cannot be disclosed to this group because the majority of you will not be coming with us.”

*Recruits, Carlo thought. Does he actually want recruits? Really? This high tech group?*

When no one responded to Mehdi’s offer, Mehdi went on.

“Listen ladies and gentlemen,” he said, his hands clasped behind his back, a hint of aggravation in his voice. “Our work is just about done here, you hear me. And if you want us to go I’m going to need volunteers. At least ten of you.” He clapped his hands together three quick times, and a smile unexpectedly appeared on his square face. His dark eyes gleamed in the light thrown by the diner windows. “Listen, there’s no point in staying silent. I always—*always*—get my recruits. And when I get my recruits, I leave.”

*It's happening all over again,* Carlo thought, a growing sense of panic growing in his stomach. *What my ancestors went through. It's happening again.*

“Now, I’d like some younger volunteers and just a few of you older gentlemen and ladies. Yes.” He pressed his palms together in front of him and began rubbing them together, making a swishing sound. He put a hand to his chin, narrowed his eyes. “All right, now I’m going to take a look around, and point out who I like. Unless of course some of you brave souls here want to step forward and save me the trouble... maybe even save someone that you love.”

No one responded. Carlo kept his head slightly down and Alexis and Maxis did the same, apparently on the same page. The trouble was that there were mostly old people in this crowd, and Carlo and his friends would stand out because of that. He hoped to God that Alexis and Maxis didn’t say anything.

Mehdi smiled, his hand still on his chin. “Okay,” he said. “Well that is just about what I had expected, so I will do all of you a favor and I will make this quick, then get right out of here.”

“*Shiiii—*” Maxis began to hiss and Alexis elbowed him hard in the gut, silencing him once again. Maxis went to a knee, a hand on his stomach. Alexis fixed him with a dark look, and when he regained his breath he stood up and regarded her with a cold stare.

Mehdi looked at the mass of blue and red uniformed people before him, his head turning first to the right and then to the left. In the brief time his eyes touched on many people, seeming to do a thorough mental scan, almost as if he mentally plugged into their minds and was reading their thoughts, picking up all of their inherent strengths and weaknesses. His right index finger moved to his bottom lip and touched gently on the center of it, his mouth slightly parted. Carlo knew that this gesture meant he must’ve been close to a decision.

“You, the long beard, Santa Claus man.”

*McKay! Jesus Christ he chose McKay!*

Carlo was surprised Mehdi had been able to spot him. Then he thought about it further and realized that he shouldn't feel any sympathy. Not for this man. This short, dwarf like, close-minded, fraudulent motherfucker. Like Maxis would've probably said—

*“Fuck that nigga,”* Maxis muttered, taking the words right out of his head.

There were screams that followed the announcement of McKay. A few people cursed and McKay refused to come forward, and remained just out of sight to Carlo as he remained buried in the crowd. Mehdi however, had a perfect view, and put one long finger up and beckoned to him. The smile remained on his face. His expression remained calm. His eyes however, were as cold as ice chips.

“You son of a bitch,” a woman yelled from the crowd, and Carlo noticed out of the corner of his eye that Alexis had rolled her eyes, probably feeling the same thing that Carlo did.

*Stupid woman.*

The two men that stood on either side of Mehdi, one black and one white, strolled into the crowd. The sound of a struggle ensued, and with the attention taken off the rest of the crowd for the moment, Carlo stood up on his tip-toes to get a better look at the action. A blonde woman, in a blue suit the same color of McKay's, was trying to keep the men away from McKay, but they shoved her aside with ease and forced McKay out of the crowd. McKay kicked wildly, red-faced, his false toothed mouth frothing. Carlo held back a chuckle, feeling sick that he could even have the urge to laugh in a situation such as this.

“Should have listened to me you senile old asshole,” Carlo murmured. He was unable to deny a gradual sense of unease that was swelling up inside him. Nine more had to be chosen and

he and his friends were one of the very few young people in the crowd. Mehdi would surely want mostly young people.

*Why here, Carlo thought. Out of all the areas for them to get recruits why the hell did they have to do it here? Why not at a club or a bar? And why the hell couldn't we have been gone long before they closed in on the diner?*

He tried to think back to the stories his parents had told him when he had been younger, and especially receptive to a good tale before bedtime. His mom and dad had gone into detail too, telling him how this whole thing had gone down. They had spoken about the recruits. They had spoken about the weapons, the reactions of the people, the resistance. They spoke about the fear and how humans on some level had been afraid of the potential for machines to take over since the dawn of the first computers. His parents had mentioned the utter bloodbaths as a result of fighting back, telling the story as clearly as if from experience. But Carlo hadn't thought to mention it to his friends. For the most part. He and Alexis, however, had had an interesting conversation from time to time.

*How the hell could I have predicted that this was going to happen to us, Carlo thought. That our clique, out of the countless cliques our age, would be in this position?*

*They say the world of the hackers is appealing to some, his mom had told him as she sat next to him on the living room sofa. Carlo could remember the easy glow of the recessed lighting, and how comfortable he had felt despite the swelling—yet manageable—unease he felt as a result of the story. He had been ten at the time. Some take right to it like glue to paper. To most it is the worst thing ever. They hold you like prisoners and they kill those that don't comply. Throw them into the sea.*



His mom and dad hadn't been afraid to scare the daylights out of him with these tales, because they seemed to know that Carlo liked the scary tales the best. The truer the better. Besides, it was ancient history, his parents had claimed.

The men cuffed McKay's wrists behind his back and forced him to his knees in front of the crowd of people.

"Make one sudden move Santa Claus and you're going to be in for a motherfuck of a shock," Mehdi told him. "Trust me, you'll do much worse than just shit and piss yourself." Mehdi chuckled. When his associates returned to his side Mehdi, his smile broadening, looked toward the blonde girl.

"Who is this man to you," he asked her.

She said nothing at first. When this went on for a minute or so, Mehdi approached the Santa Clause man, lifted the beam blaster hanging on a strap on his right shoulder, and turned to aim it toward the female. The barrel of this firearm was massive, the opening a seemingly infinite black hole. The surrounding hostages jumped out of the way, giving him a wide berth to shoot.

"Okay! Okay!" the blonde girl screamed, her hands shooting out in front of her. "That's my grandpa. It's my grandpa, okay!"

Mehdi nodded curtly. "Okay," he said. He chuckled again. "Okay." He let go of his beam blaster (this particular model a very illegal and almost impossible weapon to get, Carlo thought) and let it continue to hang on his shoulder. He looked thoughtfully at her.

A man had the side of his body pressed against Carlo's, still wary and trying to stay out of the way of the weapon that Mehdi had pointed. Carlo shoved the man off of him, surprising aggravated by this.

“So do you want to take his spot and I let this man go home?” Mehdi asked, raising his thick eyebrows. He looked expectantly at her, waiting for an answer.

The girl, who had worn a staunch expression of defiance just moments before, remained that way for a moment or two, then was reduced to a posture of defeat, her features softening and her body slumping as her head tilted down. A smirk curved the corner of Mehdi’s mouth as the girl shook her head and spoke in a tear-choked voice.

“No.” Tears fell from her eyes and she shook her head. “*No I don’t.*”

“Okay then,” he said, and refocused on his search for recruits. He looked around the crowd once again, his hands behind his back. One by one, his eyes touched on the mostly older folks before him, doing his best to read them.

*If he’s been doing this for a while than choosing the right recruits must be like second nature to him by now, Carlo thought. Instant reads on physicality, mental acuity, and obedience can probably be assessed in just a few seconds. Then again, maybe I’m just paranoid.*

He chose two more middle-aged recruits—one a fat man with a bald head and another a man with a black beard with hints of gray in it; a beard that was thicker but shorter than McKay’s. They were cuffed like McKay, lined up by him and ordered down to their knees. They complied with no fuss, and that willingness to just concede frightened Carlo more than anything.

The fourth man, young and muscular and wearing a red uniform, resisted mightily, decking one of the associates square in the face as he approached. The associate’s head was rocked back, almost like a boxer in one of the virtual games Carlo used to play. Blood sprayed as the soldier fell and landed on the ground with a clump. When they wrestled the muscular man down to the ground they forced him over to the front of the crowd and put him on his knees. They cuffed him and the associates stepped back as Mehdi approached him, his expression grim

yet somehow strangely curious. It was as if the muscular man was an unusual specimen he was seeing for the first time. Mehdi extracted a glass-card then, one that looked similar to what Maxis had, yet somehow different. It lit up with the touch of Mehdi's finger and after a moment of scrolling through the phone he found what he was looking for and put it to the man's ear. The glass device went dark briefly, and when it turned a bright blue Mehdi pulled it away. It vanished into his pocket a second later. Carlo, Alexis, and Maxis, along with the rest of the crowd, watched in apprehension as the muscular man, looked around, puzzled, wondering what had just happened. What had this guy done to him?

Mehdi watched the man with a keen interest of his own, his hands, once again, clasped behind his back. The muscular man continued to look around, his pale face now lined with fear. He looked at the crowd, then looked at Mehdi. A scared, shaky half-smile developed on the man's face.

“What did you do to me, man? What did you do?”

Mehdi said nothing, only stood off to the side, his expression darkening. His mouth parted in a sinister, half smile of his own.

“Did you put something in me motherfucker,” the man shouted, looking left and right. One vein was pulsing violently in his forehead. “Did you—did you put something in me you sick motherfucker!”

No one said a thing. The area was as silent as a dreamless sleep.

“Did you—”

He put his head down suddenly then, and let out a grunt that came from the very back of his throat, like a gorge about to be let loose. Suddenly all the veins in his forehead stood out, sickly, nightmarishly, and when he looked back up at the crowd his eyes were as wide as ping-

pong balls and his skin as red as freshly spilled blood. Blood that looked almost black spurted from his nose as he let out a snort. He grunted again, slowly leaned to his side, and fell over like a tilted cup.

“Oh God,” he groaned, the words almost indiscernible.

The crowd let out a gasp. Carlo, Maxis and Alexis watched in horror, Alexis with a hand to her mouth.

“*God no,*” the muscular man screeched, and kicked one leg out and then kept kicking it, like he was aiming for a soccer ball that no one but him could see.

“*Dad,*” he screamed. “*My stomach! Ahh! My stomach! PAAAAA!*”

He fell into a violent spasm of coughs, his body twisting and contorting. Thick globs of blood spilled from his mouth. Alexis wiped tears from her eyes with the back of her hand.

The man became silent, lying on his side, still kicking his legs and mouthing the word *papa* again and again, his eyes still open. Then his mouth, half open, stopped, and his body stilled, as tense as if being pumped with fifty-thousand volts of electricity. The silence that followed, for Carlo, was unbearable. The man’s body finally relaxed.

Sniffles ran throughout the crowd. For Carlo the laughter in the diner was forgotten. He was now pissed only at Mehdi and his crew. Pissed at—

The muscular man’s head and stomach exploded, and thick globs of warm blood, bones and guts splashed the hostages closest to the front of the crowd. They screamed in disgust, jumping to the side and throwing their hands up, trying to shield themselves. Mehdi and his associates had already moved casually out of range so they couldn’t get hit. It seemed that the crowd—Carlo and his friends included—simply hadn’t noticed.

“Come on,” Mehdi said, directing everyone to the right. “Let’s move a little bit this way. Get away from the mess, huh?” He chuckled then and in that brief space of time, Carlo glimpsed the coldness within him, as frozen as nitrogen. This man didn’t care. Carlo knew he’d slaughter everyone on the platform one by one to get what he wanted if he felt he had to, and if he didn’t get what he wanted would probably venture to the next platform to do the same thing.

The crowd did as they were asked and moved to the right, away from the bloody remains of the dead man. The cyborgs that had been flanking the street behind the crowd moved along with them and stopped where they stopped. One cyborg however, was given orders by the white soldier beside Mehdi and stood back. It aimed the barrel of a gun at the remains of the man, and covered the remains in a white hot flood of fire, incinerating him. The stench that followed was thick, potent...nauseating.

Carlo thought that it had been done purely for effect.

Someone in the crowd—a woman—let out a long, agonized sob, and became silent.

The process continued like before, seven more recruits left for Mehdi to choose.

*Where the hell are the cops, Carlo thought, panic building in him again. Where the hell are the fucking police in all of this? How the hell could shit like this happen in 2150?*

The next person that was chosen gave no fuss. This person, like the man that had been killed, was buff as well, but Hispanic and Carlo guessed ten years older.

*People would just disappear, Carlo’s father had told him. It was pretty much an underground cult, this thing, and when you became part of it you vanished and weren’t seen again. Technology made it possible for hackers to take whoever they wanted and make them disappear.*

Numbers five, six, and seven were chosen, two of them elderly and one young. Carlo, Maxis, and Alexis were still in the crowd, still safe. On the horizon, down the main street, a shuttle emerged from the dark clouds, its headlights bright and blinding. It was massive. It was only the third time he'd seen a ship that big—the first time was when he'd been on a field trip in middle school to a museum, and the tour guide had shown the class the advancement in modes of transportation over the last three hundred years. The ship started to descend and as Mehdi made his next choice, it landed, a burst of white smoke ejecting from its undercarriage. When number eight was chosen—this the first girl of the group—a door slid open, a ramp extended, and seven to ten shadows emerged, running toward the group. Based on Mehdi's lack of reaction Carlo knew that these guys were with him.

Mehdi looked for number nine, hand back on his chin, his gaze once again studious. Carlo closed his eyes, and prayed that no one from his crew was chosen. A scream erupted from the crowd then, and three people dashed away, from the back of the crowd, all miraculously bypassing the cyborgs and disappearing into a nearby alley. The cyborgs didn't move, but the two associates on either side of Mehdi did, rushing through the crowd and into the alley they had fled in.

Then the next person was chosen and Carlo, distracted by the incident, hadn't heard who it was.

"No!" Maxis screamed, and his hand shot out and grabbed Alexis's. Then they were gone, speeding past Mehdi, past the diner, turning a corner and disappearing into the depths of the night. Four of the new arrivals followed.

Gunshots erupted from behind Carlo, in the direction the first few escapees had gone. Screams followed, then the sound of more lasers.

Carlo, who had frozen up in a moment of distress, looked to his right. The soldiers that had exited the shuttle had made it to the group.

He couldn't outrun them all. But Maxis and Alexis were going to locate a hover-cart. And they were going to use it to get to the dealership, there was no doubt about that. Hopefully they had enough sense to go for the rocket packs and not the gliders.

He had no choice but to wait and pray (he wasn't a religious man by nature but he still believed in God). He knew if he'd broken into a run and had at least a few second head start he would have a good chance to make it to a hover-cart. Unlike everything else, the hover-carts need the power in the city to be on in order to be rented. You simply slipped in, pressed your finger print to the dash touchscreen, and if the necessary funds were in your account you were good to go. Alexis and Maxis didn't have his guidance, yet they weren't dumb. Yeah, Maxis sometimes didn't think before he spoke, but he was still one of the smartest people Carlo knew, and Alexis was easily the smartest girl around Carlo's age group. Hell, Alexis might be smarter than him. Still, Carlo knew and she knew that he tended to see things that she missed. Things that Maxis missed.

He remembered the address and the directions. If an opportunity presented itself he would make a break for it. But Mehdi's soldiers were lining up, all brandishing massive, illegal beam blasters at the crowd. And if they had bothered to go through what must've been an incredible hell to retrieve those weapons, each soldier's trigger finger was probably a bit itchy. There wasn't going to be a chance to run.

Mehdi chose another person and stopped, not bothering to make up for Alexis. If the soldiers caught up with Maxis and Alexis they'd probably shoot Maxis and bring Alexis back.

That was probably what Mehdi was counting on. And unless Alexis fought back she was probably going to be taken with them.

Mehdi and his soldiers—five on each side of him—waited patiently, Mehdi with his hands behind his back.

When five minutes passed Mehdi looked down at his watch. Five minutes later Mehdi touched his ear, and spoke quietly into the earpiece embedded there. A few minutes after that a flash of anger passed over his face, and a second later it returned to an expression of utmost calm.

Thirty minutes later Mehdi and his soldiers were still waiting, Mehdi pacing back and forth, cursing into the earpiece. Mehdi had seemed to abandon trying to look composed. The level of commitment Mehdi was showing frightened Carlo badly, but still, Carlo could see no sign from Mehdi that his friends had been found. If Carlo saw his friends again he felt like he could kiss each one of them.

When a total of forty-five minutes had passed, Mehdi, who had already abandoned trying to exhibit calm, broke into a fury, cursing into the earpiece and storming back and forth in front of his soldiers.

“You’re done,” Mehdi spoke into the earpiece. “You’re done! Come back! We don’t have time!”

Mehdi, looked down, closed his eyes tightly, and sighed.

He beckoned to Carlo then, with one finger. “All right. You then. The friend. Come on.”

If this had been minutes before, he would have dashed off. Right now, he couldn’t. And with Mehdi especially pissed he’d likely have no qualms at directing one of his soldiers to send the laser of one of their beam blasters through Carlo’s chest.



Carlo stepped forward and when he reached Mehdi, his arms shot out and grabbed the collar of his uniform. Carlo felt his heart skip a beat. He could smell coffee on Mehdi's breath. Could almost feel the anger simmering off him like steam from boiling water.

"Where did they go young man?"

Carlo put his hands up in an expression of surrender. Softening his voice to sound more childlike and shaking his head, he said, "I don't know sir. *Honestly.*" Carlo thought those words alone should've qualified him to be nominated for an Academy Award.

"It's not hard to find out if you're lying friend. You want me to test you?"

Carlo's response was automatic. "Test me all you want. Whatever you want sir, the last thing I would want to do is lie to you." Carlo felt the urge to let his bladder go, but held it. Something told him that this guy might have the ability to detect if he was being untruthful. But Mehdi simply asked one of the soldiers for a pair of electric-cuffs.

The soldier grabbed at the pair of cuffs inside of his dark pants then paused and looked up, his eyes widening. The crowd did the same, as did the rest of the soldiers. Then Carlo saw his shot, likely his only shot before the electric-cuffs would be put on and set to shock him to death if he tried to make a run for it. Mehdi had looked up at a bright flame, shooting up toward the sky. Before Carlo made his move he looked up as well and knew without question, that this flame that had captured the attention of the crowd was a rocket pack, with no one attached to it.

*That was meant for me,* Carlo thought, pivoted on one foot and sent his fist hurling into Mehdi's deep into his solar plexus. Mehdi gasped, doubled over, and Carlo darted away, mindful of the soldiers making their way back. Hopefully Mehdi was breathless long enough for Carlo to get his head start. None one besides Mehdi seemed to be aware of what had happened. Carlo would have to take a different route than the ones he believed they'd be on.

Behind him, ten seconds later, he heard Mehdi scream in stunned indignation. The sound was followed seconds later by rapid footfalls, machines and humans. He knew they had probably had night goggles for the darkest areas, and working on instinct, he ran across the street, a red laser zipping right over his head, and ducked inside of an alley. Seconds later he came out of the alley on the other side, turned and yanked open the door of the first building he came to. The door was unlocked, thankfully, but like the rest of the buildings on the platform the power was out. He didn't know the name of the business, but if he were to guess it he would've said it was a bar, judging by the fact that the door had been unlocked.

"I'm not an intruder!" Carlo called out, running blindly to the far side of the room. His shin ran into something hard, and he tripped and fell, causing what sounded like a number of chairs to fall over. "Don't attack! I'm just trying to—"

*"Okay! Okay,"* a voice hissed. *"Just shut the fuck up!"*

He did as the man asked. A few seconds later he heard the soldiers speed by outside, and only lay there in the dark, rubbing at his leg. The pain was enormous, and if he was right, he was probably going to be limping badly when he started to walk again. He lay in silence for the next fifteen or so minutes, knowing that if he made his move at the wrong time he was going to be killed, plain and simple. Of course, it was almost unbearable to remain this way. He had to find his friends. Had to get to them, help them. He couldn't believe what they had done. That rocket pack...that empty rocket pack had *actually* been for him, not to use but to give him an opportunity to run.

*Or was it nothing more than a failed attempt at an escape,* a sinister voice spoke up in the back of his mind. And suddenly he could see Maxis and Alexis, trying to strap into a rocket pack and being shot in the act then one of them accidentally hitting a button on the rocket pack

as they fell to the ground. He could see the rocket pack soaring up by mistake, heading toward Carlo, where it would be seen in clear view of Mehdi, his soldiers, and the crowd.

But he knew that wasn't the case. Knew that it couldn't be.

Carlo waited for more fifteen minutes, checking his palm-phone periodically to make sure that the time passed before he headed out. The minutes seemed to drag on forever. When he stood up, his shin still hurt and he *did*, in fact, limp. He could tell it would only be temporary though. He opened the door slowly, peered out into the near darkness and glanced in both directions.

"Go!" the same voice hissed from behind him, almost making him jump, and he went. He limped across the street into the nearest alley and ducked behind a dumpster. He sat there for a couple of moments, catching his breath and rubbing his hurt leg.

*Okay think, he thought. Where do I find a hover-cart rental station? If those rogue cyborgs were let loose and I run into them this night will end prematurely.*

Maybe he'd wait another five minutes or so.

You *don't have time*, a voice in his head whispered at him, and he got to his feet. His friends wouldn't look for him forever, and if he didn't hurry up and find them it would be too late.

Now he knew that they had made it to the rocket packs, that much was obvious. And Mehdi may have known a lot, but chances were that he knew nothing about the dealership, or Alexis and Maxis's plan to go there. But that could have easily changed. After all, one of his friends had sent that rocket pack into the air and that had been a clear indication that they either had rocket packs of their own or that they had gone to the dealership to get some. The question is would Mehdi know that they had been responsible for the distraction.

Carlo rose back to his feet and left the alley in search of a hover-cart, still limping.

## 10

He knew something was wrong when he saw three empty rocket packs inside of the dealership, lying among broken glass, in front of a display of gliders. Countless gliders of various colors, all lined up from one end of the hall to the other. Carlo stepped inside the building, his palm-pilot in use and on flashlight mode. He examined the three rocket packs, two of them black, and one blue, each the size of a full backpack. Each rocket pack had two burners on the underside.

“I’ll be damned,” Carlo said, standing still and staring down at the packs. “They actually made it here. They actually did.”

It was one thing to think it. It was another thing to know it. He bent down. Carlo started to wonder again if the last rocket pack had been shot off by accident.

*If that were the case why did they bring three packs to this spot instead of two? They had clearly sent one pack off into the sky. Two of the ones here were for them, and the last for Carlo.*

He removed his gloves, shoved them into his pocket. He picked up the black pack, a pack that turned out to have the weight of a backpack full of books. In 2150 almost everything ran off of water, air, or solar power. This pack ran off all three forms.

Carlo figured that Maxis was probably dead, or was going to be soon, and this brought a great pain to his heart. He didn’t know what was going to happen to Alexis, but if she was taken by Mehdi and his crew she’d be essentially gone to the world. That was a certainty.

*There's no time*, he'd heard Mehdi saying, and once again, considered what that meant, both for Mehdi and himself. The most obvious thing—the thing he wanted to deny—was that it meant this platform was going to plummet, and everyone with it. And Carlo knew nothing about stopping that. He could do nothing for the people that lived here, and that hurt almost as bad as the thought of Maxis possibly being dead. There was only time to save himself, and if Maxis and Alexis were still alive and on the platform, them as well.

But looking at the rocket pack in his hands, he knew that he *could* leave. *Thank God he could leave!* He could at least make it home. He loved his friends but the option to go was standing right here in front of him, practically gleaming in neon lights.

That wasn't an option though—at least not for now—and he pushed the thought forcefully away. He knelt down, and examined the pack. He'd heard about these many times before. These packs were highly sensitive pieces of machinery. If he had his fingers too close to the burners when examining them and how they issued fire, the fire wouldn't shoot out, and would indicate on the touchscreen to move his fingers away. He touched a screen the size of his phone on the pack's side, and the pack suddenly hummed in his hands, the screen lighting up.

*Porsche*, appeared on a digital black screen in white letters, then faded and was completely gone three seconds later. Next, Carlo was able to read the fuel level on the screen, and could see by the blue bar that didn't quite make it up to a tenth, that the fuel was nearly empty. He bit his bottom lip, considering.

He'd either get water from somewhere else or he'd risk falling out of the sky, much like the platform was bound to do itself. He put the pack down, stood up and ran deeper into the building.

The platform could fall now or it could fall a couple of hours from now, he didn't know. Sooner than later is what he guessed, so he had to hurry up.

He found an empty jug in a room down a hallway, the name on the open door reading **EMPLOYEE AREA**. After filling it at a nearby sink he went back to the room, emptied it into the pack, and repeated the process four times. Then he checked the other packs. They were also nearly empty.

*No wonder they didn't get out of here in time, Carlo thought.*

He looked down at his rocket pack and sighed. If he didn't go now he knew he'd miss his shot. Plus, he needed to steer. With the glider he could strap things in with him. He'd be able to take the rocket-packs and still strap into his glider. But with a rocket-pack he was a newbie, and though rocket-packs were advanced to the point of being able to be steered without handlebars, and instead by sensors that picked up the muscle movements and electrical signals in your spine, he could still end up running into a wall with his level of inexperience.

"Up to four hundred miles an hour," he whispered to the empty room. He was not certified to fly one of these things. And as badly as he had wanted to buy one, he understood why there were classes for them.

Still, he decided to give it a try.

## 11

Carlo decided that he'd have to start slow. He ran a hundred or so feet away from the building and into a courtyard, wearing the pack and setting the flexible, cushioned, metal straps just right, before turning the machine back on.

*Okay, Carlo thought. What was I told about these?*

He remembered hearing some guy talk about the rocket-pack on a commercial a year ago. Recalled something about moving your feet down to go faster and moving them up to go slower. The commercial stated that the rocket pack would pick up the signals running down your back, and translate the signals into the proper function. Carlo set the pack to **IDLE** on the touchscreen, and a light blue flame appeared from the two openings bottom openings.

“I’m going to die,” Carlo muttered, hating the way that those words sounded coming out of his mouth. They tasted like dirt. But still, he repeated it. “I’m going to fucking die tonight.”

Carlo started to move slightly up on his toes, and barely feeling the pack, was lifted off the ground. Just three inches or so. He exhaled air, his heart beating like a hammer in his chest.

“Oh man,” he gasped. “Oh man!”

For a couple of moments he did nothing, looking at his feet in awe as they were suspended beneath him. It was amazing, far better than owning a glider.

“You don’t even know yet,” Carlo whispered to himself. “You’ve barely even started.” He looked at the screen, and now it read **HOVER**.

Carlo tilted his feet further downward, ever so slightly, and went up another foot. He let his feet even out, and remained up in the air, feeling like a substantially taller person.

“All right,” Carlo said, and leaned slightly forward, and tilted his feet slightly back again. It didn’t need a flame to hover in the air, but needed it to accelerate and ascend. He looked at the screen as he went forward, and saw that it read **FLIGHT**.

*Fuck, I should have worn a helmet,* he thought. Crashing head on with a rocket-pack would be vastly worse without a helmet than say a hover-bike, or a hover-board. But there

wasn't a thing he could do about that now. Besides, shooting headfirst into anything at four hundred miles an hour meant death, helmet or not.

Still in the air, in the same spot, Carlo tilted his feet slightly back again and began to move forward. He kept his eyes cautiously down on the ground as it moved back like a treadmill beneath him. He was still scared out of his mind, able to feel the potential power of this piece of high-tech machinery. It's gentle hum, it's nearly undetectable vibrations, let him know that this baby could rip through the sky like lightning against wind. He—

There was a sudden shout, the sound of a shot being fired from a beam blaster, and a split second later a laser, painfully hot and bright, flashed past him, over his head and close enough to scrape the back of the rocket-pack. Carlo leaned back then, hearing more shouts from the troops as he did. When he was facing skyward he snapped his feet down with a speed like the hammer on a pistol, and disappeared an instant later, gone in a plume of smoke so light that it was nearly invisible to the naked eye.

## 12

The wind pushed against his face hard enough to dry his eyes out, and in what seemed like seconds, he was beneath another platform, at a level he had never been at before. He had flown under it, and if he had tried to stop even five seconds later he would've crashed head first into the bottom.

"Fuck," Carlo said, tilted downward and went back down, at a fraction of the speed he had come up. If he wasn't careful he would get lost. Unless, of course, his GPS started working again. Straight down was the only way he knew to go. He sped downward, and picked up speed



when he felt comfortable enough to do so. Even with the unfamiliarity, he had never, in his wildest imagination, thought that piloting one of these could be so effortless. It was more about moderation than the technical aspects of flight.

When he could make out the outline of the platform he looked for the light of the diner, looking from what he guessed to be over three hundred feet up. He could hardly see a thing. He looked left and right, and couldn't spot the diner's glow. Thanks to the blackout it was nothing more than a vast radius of darkness. The only choice he had was to go lower.

He zoomed down, the cool night time wind pressing hard enough against his face to nearly freeze it. Carlo spotted the diner's light while in motion and picked up speed, preparing to stop much earlier than necessary to be safe. At this level, if he was speeding ahead, instead of stagnant, the flame would be more prominent. Either way, they were going to spot him. He was certain of that.

Carlo decided to fly back down and land instead. When he was lower he moved along at an easy pace, just several feet above the rooftops. He could make the space vessel out ahead and to the left—a large, dark, daunting thing, with numerous blue lights and an oval shape—and saw what he believed to be a crowd forming behind it, near the edge of the cliff. Carlo banked to the right and went slowly down to the street. He straightened up then tilted his feet upward to lower himself to the ground, and when he landed, he landed hard, twisting his ankle. He fell to the cement, scraping the pack and his hand as he landed on his side. The sting rushed up his palm like lemon juice to an open wound. Carlo grunted in pain. He wondered when he had removed his gloves and realized he'd done it while he waited for Maxis in the hospital.

Carlo set the rocket pack on *idle* after two minutes of hastily touching the side screen, scrambled to his feet and ran along the street parallel to the street the spaceship was on. He knew

he'd have to be quick if the soldiers or automatons showed up, and if he wasn't he'd be a corpse, and Alexis and Maxis would essentially become the same thing if they weren't already.

His feet clapped against the cement, making a sound that would've been distinct if not for the drone of the shuttle in the distance. He hoped it was enough to drown out the sound of his footfalls; there was a good chance that the soldiers and Mehdi were still out looking for him. Flashes of people, not much more than outlines to him, were briefly visible on the parallel street when he passed each break between the buildings. Soon, he was breathless.

Carlo turned left in another alley and approached a crowd of people that were busy watching the space vessel. The scene was illuminated by cool light emanating from the shuttle's headlights. The almond-shaped spacecraft was hovering six or so feet above the cement, the pointed end facing the crowd. The ramp was still rolled out, extending from an interior with a purple glow that was transfixing and hard for Carlo to pull his eyes away from. Though he had an urge to stroll straight ahead, step onto the ramp, and go inside just for the experience, he took his eyes off it, and focused past it. He continued forward at a jog, taking frequent glances over his shoulder for any person—or machine—that might try to sneak up on him. As he came closer to the ship and closer to the steady, ceaseless drone of its engine he could hear what he thought to be conversation. Soon he could hear enough to know someone was giving a speech, and he thought he had an idea just who that speech-giver might be.

The ship was to his right now, above him. He prayed that the pilot was either not in the ship or hadn't been looking out the window before he passed beneath it. Carlo, unconsciously touched the exterior of the vessel with one bare hand as he stepped closer. The metal was cool and its vibrations seemed to run through him.

Carlo was soon able to make out the soldiers, what looked like half of them, crowding together behind Mehdi as he spoke. Mehdi and the soldiers' backs were facing Carlo. None of them knew he was here. Carlo stopped where he was, his hand no longer on the side of the ship. The automatons near the platforms edge had been removed—  
More likely removed themselves—apparently also undisturbed by his presence. Evidently, Mehdi hadn't set those ones to rogue. That was an immediate relief for Carlo.

“All right,” Mehdi was saying, his posture as calm from behind as it had been when Carlo had first seen him. He seemed happy again. “We're done here.” Carlo heard the sound of a struggle, and a scream (Alexis!) and the sound of a long, diminishing bellow which followed. Alexis began to shriek, cursing the soldiers and Mehdi as the group broke up. That was when Carlo saw her, her perfect dark hair disheveled, her face red. Two soldiers each held one of her arms, dragging her back to the shuttle. She fought, she struggled, she writhed against them, exerting what seemed to be all of her energy.

Then all eyes, almost at once, fixed on Carlo.

What happened next, all seemed to play out in slow motion, though in reality it played out in just a few seconds. Alexis spotted Carlo, and she began to buck and kick harder against the men holding her.

“*They threw him off,*” she screamed at him, pulling left and right, and gritting her teeth.  
“*CARLO! THEY THREW HIM OFF!*”

The nearby soldiers all aimed their guns, and Carlo, in a fraction of a second, realized this and was gone, leaving a heavy rush of wind in his wake, as he shot upward.

*Hold on man,* Carlo thought three seconds into the air, and formed an arch high in the sky, as he switched directions and shot downward at full speed, well aware that he was going to

reach four hundred miles an hour. His heart rammed in his chest as if it wanted out, water was forced violently out of the corners of his eyes, and he broke through countless bunches of clouds in his descent. So much so that his face became damp. The wind whistled harshly against his ears, his eyes fluttered against the wind.

*Ah, if I had just grabbed some goddamn goggles!*

*Shit*, Carlo thought, realizing that he was going to have trouble spotting Maxis without light.

*Or you might just zip by him if you don't slow down.*

Carlo stopped in midair and lifted his hand, intending to use the bright light on his palm-phone to light the area. A blue screen—a picture of the sky with four moons in the background—greeted him.

“Light,” he spoke, and the wristband responsible for the screen on his palm suddenly made the screen radiate with blinding white light.

*How far to the bottom, he thought. How far down until I reach that freak infested water?*

He knew that he'd have to catch Maxis before he hit the surface of the sea, not necessarily because of the creatures that he was told inhabited its depths, but because if Maxis made contact with the water the force alone would probably kill him.

Suddenly he heard what sounded like a distant bellow overhead and looked up as the sound grew rapidly louder. Then something flashed by him to his right, and he knew the voice he'd heard had been Maxis, and the sound which had grown to a deafening pitch diminished as Maxis plunged farther down. Carlo had actually descended so fast he'd passed Maxis in a couple of moments.

“*Maxis!*” Carlo bellowed, and shot downward at a reduced speed. The feeling of dampness similar to what he had experienced as he had zipped through the clouds increased suddenly, and he knew that they were close to the sea. Close to whatever lied beneath.

Maxis, who had been yelling, but was hard to hear over the rush of the wind, looked toward Carlo, toward the light emanating from his palm.

“CARLOOOOOOO!” he cried when he noticed his friend, and Carlo could see that his face was bloodied as he moved closer to grab him. Maxis extended his gloved hand and Carlo grabbed it with both of his. Then Maxis grabbed on with his other hand, and the light from the palm-phone was temporarily blocked out. Carlo lifted himself upward with a grunt, tilted his feet down, and shot back up.

“Oh shit,” Maxis exclaimed, clenching onto Carlo’s hands with a painful grip. “Oh shit! I can see the water! I can see—”

Carlo didn’t get the chance to see what had caused Maxis to stop mid-sentence. But when he was hit hard from the side, he knew, and was forced violently sideways, speeding at a downward diagonal back toward the ocean. The water cleared, both boys drenched, and in the briefest of moments Carlo saw it all. Gargantuan waves splashed with a sound like roaring monstrosities, up against the massive black cliffs that Carlo had only before heard about in stories, in digital school books. He could see the dark sea, its vast expanse laid out in all directions, could see waves as tall as skyscrapers roaring all around him. And he could see that he was too close the sea’s surface. Much too close and moving much to fast.

“FUUUUUUCK!” Maxis screamed.

Carlo tried desperately to keep a hold onto Maxis. If he lost his grip he wouldn’t be able to catch up soon enough to get him before he hit the surface of the water. And one of the

surrounding waves would probably lift Maxis instantly and slam him into the nearest cliff with near disintegrating force.

“Wrap your arms around me,” Carlo screamed, realizing that very next second that they were about to collide head on with another wall of water.

Maxis managed to get his arms around Carlo’s upper chest a split second before a rush of heart stopping cold, flooded over them. Freezing water flooded Carlo’s mouth, nose and eyes, and certain that his lack of control over the rocket pack was only going to take him deeper, he felt undeniable panic start to swell inside him. It came over him the same way the shakes did when it was really cold out and he had been exposed more than a few minutes.

*You’re supposed to be the leader, the brave one Carlo. Keep it together man. Keep your shit together.*

Then the air hit his face, and before he could feel relief he saw another wave, bigger than the last, heading right toward him and Maxis.

Maxis, struggling to speak as he coughed up water, screamed, “UP NIGGAA! UUUPPP!”

“*I’m trying,*” Carlo shouted back, half choked as he coughed up water as well, then they were hit hard by another rush of water. The hand with the palm-phone light was exposed long enough to illuminate something when they were under, something that wiped Carlo’s fear of drowning away completely. Something green, with shifting plantlike skin skirted past them. Numerous gray, deformed, moving faces, embedded like moles, were visible along its alien flesh. They were seemingly human, undeniably monstrous. Then Carlo and Maxis were out of the water again.

“*NO!*” Carlo screamed, panicked, his stomach in knots. “NO...NO!”

He forced himself to calm down just long enough to tilt upward with all his strength, breathless and frightened nearly out of his wits. He could hear Maxis crying. Wanted to cry right along with him. It was the fear alone that allowed him the strength to tilt upward, even with the added weight of Maxis, and get back into the air, away from the waves. He sped blindly toward a cliff, water obscuring his vision. Maxis struggled to catch his breath, apparently trying to scream for him to turn, but couldn't speak through the water that had forced its way down his throat. He gagged, he puked. But he ultimately said nothing.

A moment later, Carlo and Maxis were swallowed by darkness.

## 13

"I lost my wristband," Carlo grunted, and threw up a large glob of salty, slimy liquid. It splashed audibly. "I don't know what happened but I lost it."

Maxis said nothing, but Carlo could hear him several feet away, coughing, and puking what sounded like his guts out. Carlo could hear the sea, very close, and a sound similar to wind blowing over an open bottle, only greatly amplified.

"I need my fucking light," Carlo grunted, on his knees. "I don't know how I lost it but I need my fucking light!"

He didn't think he could get on his feet and look for it if he wanted to. His throat hurt, his eyes hurt, and the hand he had scraped absolutely screamed. But most of all he was exhausted. It was as if some malevolent force had sucked everything out of him.

Maxis still didn't speak, and only continued to throw up, wherever he was.

The waves continued their deafening roars and collisions with the black cliffs. For Carlo the sound was unsettling, and far louder than it had been when he had been speeding aimlessly with the rocket-pack.

Still on his knees, breathless and dry heaving, Carlo looked toward the sound. He could see nothing. Maxis, who'd seemed to be on an endless coughing and puking binge, finally spoke up.

"I have *my* glass-card," he said breathlessly. He dry heaved violently then, the sound similar to one you'd expect to hear from someone that was past the stages of puking up food and bile and had moved onto blood. "I'm surprised your rocket pack...I'm surprised it worked under water."

"It hovers," Carlo told him. His eyes didn't just hurt, they were absolutely burning. "Besides, we were moving fast and weren't under long." He rubbed at his eyes.

*Christ, I got that fucking water in them!* The thought of what would be happening if he had chosen to leave without his protective uniform chilled him to the deepest depths of his soul.

"I'm just saying—" Maxis started and inhaled heavily. Carlo could hear the sound of Maxis's glass-card hit the ground, and could imagine him having fished it out of his pocket and being too tired to even keep it in his hand. Maxis, just a crawling silhouette now, picked it up. "Just saying we're lucky," he finally finished.

He didn't bother to talk to it and instead scrolled for the light option.

The light came on moments later, revealing the inside of a cave made up of black, roughly formed walls. Carlo looked toward the sound of waves again and could see the ocean through a wide opening. Maxis suddenly screamed, his attention focused in the exact opposite direction.



The cave was large and far to the left, in the direction that Maxis was staring, Carlo could see something moving. It was so far back that Carlo couldn't quite make it out. But he suddenly—and conveniently remembered his knife—and reached in his pocket and extracted it. He flipped it open and the edges of the blade lit up with the red laser along its sharp edges. Carlo stood up quickly and Maxis followed suit.

Maxis held the light closer. Carlo watched as what looked like several people, covered with gray mud from head to toe, stepped toward them. These people varied in size, some heavy and some thin.

“Carlo,” Maxis said, and held back another dry heave. “Tell me your rocket pack still works.”

Carlo looked at the screen, and saw no sign that anything was wrong. It was on standby. A simple wrong motion could force him up head first into the ceiling. But Maxis must have seen something that Carlo didn't, because though the sight of the people was unsettling, they were still just people.

One of the people, this one a little girl—at least from what Carlo could see—stepped forward.

“Who are... who are y-you,” Carlo said. “How did you get here?” His uniform was trying to warm him up, but for the moment he was still chilly. He would have to struggle not to stutter from the cold

The little girl didn't answer. Her face and hair was so thick with mud that Carlo couldn't even see her flesh. Not a single spot of it, anywhere. Carlo wondered how far the cave extended, and where the mud had come from.

“Shit,” Carlo said. “What the hell should we do?” Maxis said nothing, and Carlo realized, feeling silly, that Maxis had probably expected him to answer that. “I guess we have to...we have save Alexis first. And...and...”

“We’re going to have to come back for these people is what you want to say?”

“We don’t have a choice. We can’t do anything for them now. And we need to get back to Alexis before it’s too late. We’ve already been gone too damn long man.” He sighed. “Too damn long.”

The small girl—Carlo could see that her eyes were blue now—took another step toward them. The girl looked frightened, Carlo thought, but curious, though it was hard to tell for sure through the thick black globs of mud. He wanted to help her, but he needed to hear something, if not from her, from one of the others. And he didn’t have time to wait, either.

“You want to tell us your name, little girl,” Maxis said, but took a step back, anyway. Like Carlo, he wasn’t going to take any chances.

The girl slowly turned her head and looked at Maxis. She stepped forward. Behind her, what had been five or more people, turned into fifteen almost instantly, as more of them stepped out of the shadows and into the glass-card’s powerful radius of light.

“Who are you?” Carlo repeated. “I need one of you to speak to me so I can help you. I need one of you to say something.”

Every single one of these people, of differing heights, sizes, and ages, were completely covered in mud. The heights and sizes were the only thing that clued Carlo into the ages. There were presently no other discernible signs.

“We need to go,” Maxis said, looking at him. “We need to—”

The girl took another step forward then, and stuck one small, thumb into her tiny mouth. Her eyes were still on Maxis, still wide, blue, and wondering.

Maxis, despite all this, took another step back. He didn't seem to care that she was a kid, or that she looked as helpless as the rest. Carlo heard more movement toward the back of the cave, though barely, over the sound of the waves. Then more people appeared, all covered in mud from head to toe like the little girl. More women, more men, little girls and boys, some of them fat and some thin. All had expressions similar to the little girl's. All were covered with dark mud, from their chests, breasts, to their private regions, all the way down to their feet. And suddenly—regrettably—he could smell them, the accumulated scent that wafted from all of their bodies. They smelled like a pile of carcasses left decomposing in the sun. Though Carlo wasn't sure what that actually smelled like he was certain it would've been just like this, if not less than this. Because nothing could be this bad. The smell was sour, rotten, unnatural, and somehow oily.

Maxis seemed to smell it too, and took another step backward, so that he was standing beside Carlo, a hand over his nose and his face scrunched.

*"Hungry,"* the girl suddenly muttered, removing her thumb from her mouth. Her voice was soft, almost melodious. It was as innocent and pretty as any other girl her age.

Carlo had started to hold his breath because of the smell and when the girl had finally spoken, he let it out, feeling relief immediately wash over him. Was this who he had been afraid of? This little girl, who was hungry?

"What's up with the fucking mud, little girl," Maxis asked her.

Carlo reached out and put his free hand on Maxis's shoulder. "Relax brother."

“I am relaxed man,” Maxis said, and took, yet, another step back anyway, so he was behind Carlo. After all, Carlo was the one with the laser rimmed knife.

“I’m sorry little girl,” Carlo said. “But we don’t have any food. If you and your—your friends just wait, we’ll try to get some food back here for you all. Okay? I would take you with me now if I could.”

“*Hungry*,” a thin guy further back in the crowd of mud people said, not as sweetly as the girl. Then he took a step forward, and the thirty five or so people around him did the same.

“I’m sorry,” Carlo said, thinking about Alexis, and realizing every moment he remained here, the chances that Alexis would be gone when they made it back increased. “I can’t do anything for you. Not right now. But I swear to God I will.”

The girl took three quick steps forward then, so abruptly that Carlo and Maxis both recoiled at once. The little girl—Carlo guessed she was seven—said nothing. She didn’t repeat that she was hungry or describe what kind of food she wanted. What she did do was smile, a broad, black, glimmering, jagged toothed smile that was anything but benign, anything but human.

*Her mouth can’t be that large! Carlo’s mind screamed. It can’t be!*

The others did the same, breaking into wide grins that displayed the same large, jagged, perfectly black teeth. And oh how they glimmered. Like roughly cut pieces of black diamonds.

Maxis let out a whimper that seemed to sum up the full extent of disgust and fear that the situation warranted, and a second later the stench of urine hit Carlo’s nose, potent and distinct, as Maxis’s bladder let go. Then the girl dashed forward and leapt at his best friend.

Maxis let out a terrified shriek, moments before the muddied seven year old clamped down on his right arm, the same arm that held the glass-card. The glass-card clattered to the

ground. The light remained on. Maxis fell back with the girl on top of him, screaming in agony as dark blood began to spurt from his arm in thick red rivulets. The girl was growling, the sound seeming to emanate from deep in her throat. Carlo could hear it distinctly, like an animal that hadn't eaten in days. Strangely, none of the mud on the girl seemed to be dirtying Maxis, Carlo realized faintly.

The remaining mud people dashed forward, and Carlo instinctively brought the laser rimmed knife down into the girl's neck. Warm gray liquid spurted out, covering his hand like wet paint. The smell of it was eye-watering, like decay and mildew, like burning feces. The girl's hold on Maxis's arm let up immediately, and Maxis, in shock and anger, instinctively snatched his arm away, scrambled to his feet and swung a fist directly at her mouth. It turned out to be a mistake. The girl's jaw opened up and clamped down on half his hand and swiftly tore off four of his left fingers. This was immediately followed by a crunching and suckling sound as his digits went through the sickening process of finding their way to the girl's stomach. Maxis, staring dumbfounded at the bleeding stumps left behind, fainted. He fell onto the ground with a thud, and an instant later the seven year old was back on him, tearing through the blue uniform at his shoulder. Carlo brought the knife down again, this time into her head, pulled it out, pivoted, cocked back, and plunged it straight into the eye of the nearest advancing mud-person. It turned out to be a man, and the man fell back with a scream, his mouth opening wider than even the girl's jaw had managed to stretch.

More mud-people approached, moving cautiously. Carlo backed up, flipping the blade closed and shoving it into his pocket. He grabbed Maxis's arm with both hands and pulled him back.

“WAKE UP!” he screamed. Three mud-people—two teenage boys and one a chubby woman with muddy hair that extended past her shoulders—leapt forward, arms outstretched. Their mouths opened wide, their black teeth shone like crystals, and their eyes turned suddenly black. The tips of their finger nails snapped off as black claws, the size of switch blades, jutted out.

“*WAKE UP MOTHERFUCKER!*” Carlo screamed at the top of his lungs, hurting his throat.

The chubby female went down on all fours, and leapt forward, landing down right in front of Carlo, and over Maxis.

“No,” Carlo gasped.

She glanced up at Carlo with her wide black eyes, her head upturned in a diagonal almost like asking a question, the edges of her mouth downturned. *She'll go for me now*, he thought.

Maxis mumbled something, and let out a senseless chuckle as he remained in whatever dream he was having. It was last time Carlo saw Maxis smile.

The lady-thing's head cocked back and came down like a battle ax, her mouth extended fully, and half of Maxis's face disappeared into her gaping mouth. She clamped down and ripped the skin off his face with a single, hard jerk, and chomped down on the freed flesh like a dog chewing jerky. Blood spurted from her carnivorous jowls and the remains of his friend's skinless face like waterworks. One of the teenage boys jumped on Maxis's midsection next and tore at his torso and another clamped down on his ankle. The rest of the mud people were fast approaching, their eyes on Carlo. Carlo let his friend's hand go with a choked sob, and began to back up. Then the woman clamped back down on the remains of Maxis's face, the points of her teeth audibly

scraping his skull with a sound like fingernails against a blackboard. The sound of crunching, loud and prominent, followed.

Carlo stumbled and fell hard onto his tailbone. He grimaced in pain as a jolt of pain shot up his lower back. Three little mud-boys, probably five-years old, ran at Carlo, growling and transforming into monsters before him. One jumped on his ankle and bit down. Sharp daggers of pain erupted, and Carlo pulled his knife back out, freed the blade and swung it in a sideways arch at a kid rushing toward his face. It slid smoothly through the kids flesh, creating a new smile from ear to ear. The kid screeched, and fell to the side away from Carlo, claws over the wound. Carlo stuck the kid on his ankle in the mouth with the blade next and what looked like twenty black daggers trailed by stringy globs of black blood broke loose from its black gums. He scrambled to his feet, the last mud kid running after him. Ten or more of the remaining mud people tore at Maxis's body now, and the others followed behind the kid in hot pursuit of the last piece of fresh meat. Carlo limped speedily toward the cave's exit, the enormous waves splashing against the cliff and over the opening before him. The exit was seven feet away. The mud people, girls and boys of all ages, were charging at full speed behind him. He looked over his shoulder, and in the light emanating from what had been Maxis's glass-card, he could see them all mutating, some remaining on two feet and some resorting to running on all fours.

*I'm in hell*, Carlo thought wildly, his eyes practically jumping out of his skull. *I'm in hell*.

Carlo made it to the edge of the cliff and jumped—more like fell. The little boy leapt the next instant, as Carlo pointed his feet downward, and latched onto his leg with his teeth and claws as Carlo sped away from the cliff.

***“GET THE FUCK OFF,”*** Carlo roared, the rocket-pack lurching up and down as he tried to kick the boy off his leg. The pack's burner intensified and decreased as he did this. The laser

knife was still in his hand, and as the boy sunk his teeth into his calf, clenched down and got ready to tear out a nice meaty chunk, Carlo plunged the laser blade into his head four hard times and the thing's efforts ceased. Carlo kicked and kicked then, descending low enough to come perilously close to falling back into the relentless waves of the sea. He could barely see any of the waves, but could hear and feel the remnants of each as they reached the peak of their ascension. He wiped the water from his face with his free hand, and continued to kick desperately at the boy to get him off. The boy's teeth, cold and serrated, were deeply embedded in his skin. Carlo kicked. Went down a notch. Kicked again and went down another notch. The top half of a wave slammed into him and knocked him sideways, frightening him badly. But he didn't go under. With the boy now dead, but his teeth still fixed firmly onto his calf, Carlo tilted his feet downward and shot upward fifty more feet. Thoughts of the wave that had swallowed him when he had first grabbed Maxis came to mind. He continued to kicked at the boy's head, afraid to touch it with his hands for fear that the boy would suddenly come alive and rip it off.

Something caught his eye then, fifty or so feet out, toward the cave he'd just escaped. The light from Maxis's phone still illuminated from the inside of the cave with its strong light, and Carlo could see the mud people leaping into the ocean. His jaw dropped. Still in proximity of the light, Carlo noticed one of the mud people (God, that's not mud he thought. It's their skin) leap up from the water fifty or so feet into the air. Seconds later he saw four more mud people do the same thing, all at varying heights. Then two leapt into the air in an arch, like dolphins, one hundred feet up. If they had been directly under him Carlo would have five or more of these things attached to him.

"This isn't possible," Carlo groaned, still kicking. "There's no *goddamn* way, man." As hard as it was to believe, with all the horrible things his parents had told him, they had held back



a considerable amount. Or hadn't truly known how bad it really was. Soon Carlo wouldn't be able to see the creatures. Soon they would be out of the light. Then they would reach him. Carlo flew higher, his speed slightly slowed by the additional weight. He reached three hundred feet. He grabbed his knife then, clenched his bottom lip as he braced himself for the pain, and cut around the thing's mouth, slicing the boy free from him, but incinerating areas of his uniform and own flesh as well.

He gasped in simultaneous pain and relief as he freed himself, his face wet and his black hair hanging just above his eyes. He shot upward as the dead mud thing plummeted to the ocean to join his family. Most of its teeth remained in Carlo's leg.

*I couldn't save you Maxis, man. I am so sorry.* It was a sudden thought, but even under his level of duress it was no less potent.

He wiped tears from his face as they streamed helplessly from his eyes.

He saw more mud things leap from the water with the same dolphin like arch while he ascended, but they didn't come close, and soon they weren't visible. It surprised him. Because at this point it seemed like anything was possible.

## 14

GPS was commonplace for most vehicles, and at one point Carlo had stopped in the air, and as he hovered had scrolled on the rocket pack's side-screen hoping he could at least read the directions before he reached the platform and the GPS ceased to work. Hopefully the GPS would work here. It did and he read the directions carefully, then looked up, pointed his feet downward

and soared into the dark, praying he'd be able to see enough to spot the platform and avoid crashing into it.

Maxis was gone, that was a done deal. But still, Alexis was alive. And if he made it back in time maybe he could save her.

## 15

He arrived back at the platform in less than four minutes, the diner's lights still on, and the only identifiable thing among all the buildings with the exception of the hospital. He landed near the border, going right to his knees when his feet touched the pavement.

"FUCK!" he groaned, holding his leg.

The shuttle had left, which didn't surprise him. He had to go after it, wherever it had gone. If he didn't Alexis would be as good as dead. She'd become one of them, and would cause terror to other platforms, all the work done behind the scenes. He scrambled to his feet, his calf screaming in hot protest, then limped to the diner. The customers had gone back inside, and from what he could see, they were all seated. When he reached the door, breathless and drenched in seawater, he tried to open it and found it locked. The customers looked at him, all obviously pissed off. One man by the window had his hand clenched hard enough around a cup of Joe to push his veins against his flesh.

"Where did they go," Carlo asked, his hands flat on the glass.

Either none of them were able to hear him or they were ignoring him because no one answered. They kept their eyes on him though. Every single one inside old man McKay's diner

looked at him, even the most disheveled. Some looked like they were in shock, their eyes wide, staring through Carlo, unblinking.

Carlo slapped his palms on the glass, shaking its foundation. "Please! Please! Help me! I can save them! *I can save all of them!*"

"What, do you think you're a fucking hero or something," McKay's granddaughter suddenly shouted. She was sitting at a table near the window. Her face was red and matched the color of her eyes. It seemed that she hadn't stopped crying since they took her grandpa.

"How long ago did they leave," Carlo asked, completely ignoring her question.

"What does it matter? You can't take on a bunch of guys with your fists kiddo. They have beam blasters. Whoever *you* want to save is gone. You'll never see them again."

The pain in Carlo's calf was absolutely torturous, and if the teeth were infected in some way that the suit couldn't protect him against he was probably dead anyway.

*There's the hospital,* a voice spoke up in his head.

"What the hell do you know about who I will or won't see again?" Carlo bellowed in response and slammed his hands on the glass again. "*What do you know, huh?*"

"When they take people they don't come back!" she shouted. "They're professionals. Why do you think I didn't go with my grandpa? I knew if I went I'd become one of them or a prisoner. I'd be gone forever! And I have many years left in case you didn't notice."

The pain in his leg seemed to be growing with his anger.

"I can get them! Look! Maybe I can't take down the whole damn thing, but whatever this is, whatever faction of their organization, I can get to them! I can! Tell me when they left! Just do that, please! Tell me what direction the shuttle went." Carlo took a seat on the ground then, not waiting for her answer before doing so. He extracted his knife, released the laser blade and

stuck the red hot tip into his calf. Using the light from the diner, he cut each tooth out one by one.

“Aw fuck,” he half sobbed, as he pulled out the fifth black tooth. He couldn’t keep the tears from rushing down his face. The pain rushing through his leg was something he thought the world had moved beyond, with all the safety measures, incredible fast-acting pain remedies, and rules drilled into him both in school and by his parents—God he missed them—pain was seldom ever a serious issue for anyone. Anywhere.

“What are you doing,” the girl said, standing up and putting her hands on the window. Her voice had changed from bitterness and frustration to genuine concern.

“Why didn’t you stand up for me bitch!” Carlo shouted, his eyes on his calf. “You let the whole diner laugh at me and you were there the whole time! You knew about this!”

“I was in the bathroom!”

He cut out several more teeth. “Well you didn’t hear them laugh at me! Your fucking dumbass grandpa and all those ASSHOLES sitting in there with you! I told them what was happening! Told them about the robots! They laughed at me, and now look! Everything’s so...*God...damned...fucked!*”

He let out a loud, trembling groan as he cut the twelfth tooth out, his hands soaked in warm blood. It gurgled from his leg like water through a crack of an underground reservoir. The world started to spin before him. The sharpness of thought was starting to dwindle.

“Ah, fuck me man,” he sobbed, the red laser cutting smoothly through more of the soft meat under his flesh. He wiped more tears with his sleeve, and proceeded to slice. The blade made a gentle sizzling sound as it incinerated its way through tendon and meat. Finally he pulled the final tooth, and let it clatter on the cement.

“You need to go to a hospital,” the girl told him.

*“You need to tell me what direction they fucking went!”* As more warm blood spurted from his calf, Carlo became suddenly lightheaded. His eyelids drooped and he forced them back up. Then his head, starting to feel like a lead balloon, drooped as well.

“Whoever you lost is gone,” the girl repeated. “I’m sorry.”

“Not as sorry as...as I am...that I...that I couldn’t save my...my...couldn’t save my...*friend.*”

The words in his mind were stretching out now. He was finding it hard to think.

Carlo was starting to think that this girl, the granddaughter of that asshole McKay, sounded like the most pessimistic person in the world.

He yanked up his pant-leg, tore off a piece and bit down on it. Then he used the laser knife to cauterize the wounds. He grunted, spit bubbling on his lips. His face was a rictus of pain. Then seconds later, exhausted, he put the blade away and laid back. His leg was still bleeding and he realized that he cared anymore.

“Oh fuck,” Carlo breathed. “Oh man. Where are the cops when you need them?”

“Huh?”

*“Where are the cops when you need them!”* he bellowed.

“They don’t know what the hell is going on,” she said, matter-of-factly. “Most of the city likely doesn’t. This is shit that keeps the FBI up nights.”

“Please tell me where they went,” Carlo said, and emitted three quick, choked sobs. He crawled to the glass and on his knees, put his hands back on it. *“Please.”*

The mask of resistance on her face softened. She sighed.

“They left over ten minutes ago,” she yelled through the window, and approached the door. She opened it and stepped outside. “The ship vanished five seconds into its flight. You know, used the cloaking mechanism. So I can’t tell you where they went.”

*“I’m...so...so goddamn tired,”* Carlo said, took his hands slowly off the glass and laid down on the ground with his arms under his head like a pillow. He closed his eyes. The thoughts of Alexis and his other lost friends began to drift.

From what seemed a far place, the girl continued to speak to him. Her voice rose and before he could make out what she was saying the same voice began to fade. Blood continued to spurt from his leg, but all the teeth were finally out, scattered on the ground around him.

He went to sleep.

## 16

A headache was the first thing that he felt. The second thing that he became aware of was that he had been near the ocean for the first time in his life. He wasn’t sure why he had been there or when, but he knew that he had been there. He could recall the sensation of negative degree water, splashing against his face, and obscuring his vision. The memory left him when he opened his eyes and saw the ceiling, when he saw the white surroundings. He saw a cool white light that was somehow familiar to him above. Just right.

*All right...okay...where am I?*

A skinless face suddenly flashed into his mind and vanished before he even begin to figure out what it meant.

He shot up with a gasp and saw that he was on a full sized mattress and under a thin blue cover. He saw a holographic TV screen displaying the news in the corner of the room. The picture was so clear, so precise, that it seemed other people were in the room with him. Smaller people.

*My leg*, Carlo thought suddenly and removed the thin blue blanket lying over his calf. His uniform had been removed and was folded in a small, white, cushioned chair to his left, the seat of the chair, pushed under a small table of the same color. He examined the injured leg. He lifted the bandage and unsurprisingly, it was no longer injured. The lighting in the room was too low to know for sure, however.

Everything started to come back to him in bits and pieces. First came the memory of landing on *Arka* with his friends. He saw the blue sky, everybody out and about. Then he remembered the movie, and how he had drunk beer with them. Maybe if he hadn't been drinking he would have been better prepared for what was coming. That sense that something had happened was overwhelming. But he couldn't recall what it had been.

He recalled the sound of someone chuckling. Someone...

*The sound of Maxis chuckling. Chuckling at what?* He couldn't make sense of it so soon and pushed the thought away. He continued to reconstruct everything from the beginning.

He remembered the robots and the robots were where his mind stuck. What had happened with the damn robots? He could remember what he had felt at the time. The sense of confusion and fear. He recalled someone beating on the robots with a large metal instrument.

Carlo stopped thinking then, having realized that everything was coming back to him out of order. Most of the story was missing, and something deep inside him told him that he didn't want to remember.

*But where is everyone, he thought helplessly. Where the hell is everyone!*

He could hear Maxis chuckle again. It was a sleepy chuckle.

“What the hell man,” Carlo muttered, rubbing his eyes with the palms of his hands.

“What is going on?”

He became silent and waited. It didn’t take long. Sitting up in his bed, his eyes on the holographic screen, he could feel the memory coming back to him. All of it, this time for certain and this time in order. Creeping into his head like smoke through an open vent. With these kinds of things you were never given a warning.

As it all came back he kept his palms over his face and cried, hating himself for allowing them to go to the theater. It hadn’t even been his idea. It had been Alexis’s. Steve and Steven had agreed and Carlo had gone along with it just so he would have something to do. Something *new*. And if anyone could’ve changed the course of things, it was him. But he hadn’t. He finally knew where the chuckling had come from too. Maxis had chuckled as he lay passed out—or asleep, whatever it was—moments before...before...

For the next half hour Carlo sobbed, his body shaking violently as the tears fell. He mourned the loss of his friends. All four of them. Wiped snot with the back of his hands, and swiped it carelessly on his shirt as he let the pain wash over him like a mist. Damn. *Damn, damn, damn*. He had lost all four of them in a single day. *Four friends in a single day*. How does that happen? How does that happen to a kid of only nineteen? This day and age how—

*But Alexis isn’t dead*, he thought. He hiccupped, cleared his throat, and hiccupped again.

*How do you know that?*

Well of course he didn’t know for sure, but he at least knew that she had been alive when he last saw her. The image of the last time he had seen her popped into his head. Once it came



back to him it went nowhere. It only stuck there, imprinting itself like a particularly bad memory (ha ha, it really *was* a bad memory!) He didn't think that it would ever go away. And the fact was that he didn't want it to. She was the last of the friends he had left, a friend that was every bit as important to him as Maxis had been. Alexis Sanchez, part of his clique from the very beginning. Caring, brave, sweet... gone and possibly dead.

*"Fuck!"* Carlo shouted, and pushed the thought away.

Of course, Mehdi, the one that had led that terrorist group, was imprinted on his memory too. He and the henchmen that had helped carry this out. They had accomplished so much in one day. They had come in, got what they wanted, and there had been no casualties of their own in the process. The worst Mehdi had had to deal with was a getting punched in the stomach and the buff guy who had decked one of his soldiers in the face. And what had Mehdi done in return? Put some type of signal into his head. Some kind of malignant signal.

*It's not done,* a grim voice spoke up in his head.

The sudden thought didn't mean anything to him and he began to think about how long he had been here at this hospital. He looked at the TV, under the 3D people displayed before him. It was just past ten o'clock and if Carlo was right, he had been here for a little over half an hour. He didn't need to think hard to figure out how he had gotten here. Even though he didn't have a memory of being transported to this room, he remembered with perfect clarity, who he had last talked with. Had he passed out or something? Passed out in front of the diner?

He remembered the black teeth on the sidewalk and was overcome with a sudden urge to throw up. It was overwhelming. So bad that he had to put a hand to his mouth to ensure that nothing prematurely spilled out. There was a bathroom across from him, and he was on the verge

of leaping from the bed when a moment later, the feeling of nausea passed. He lay back, resting his head on his pillow.

Carlo turned his head to the right and noticed the rocket pack on the floor, up against the wall. Despite the situation, he smiled, thinking that he and the rocket pack had a history together.

*We go back like fans on a hovercraft.* The smile soon faded from his face, however.

*I should probably get up and go to a police station,* he considered, and he became certain that someone already had. The people at the diner were probably being questioned and given descriptions of who they had seen. Giving the police many useful details.

*Or maybe nothing had happened at all.*

After all no one had even gone to the police station after the incident. Yeah, the power and the GPS had somehow been knocked out, but everyone had gone back into the diner and just sort of given up. It was like they had accepted the idea that they were overmatched. Or maybe they believed that police were just as corrupt as the people that had terrorized them

Carlo felt the familiar pressure of a full bladder and scooted to the edge of the bed and sat there a moment, preparing himself to stand up. He was bracing for a jolt of pain to shoot up his leg, but when he put his weight on it he felt no discomfort. When he was up he strolled into the bathroom, the dim light flicking on automatically as he did, and urinated into the self-flushing toilet. As he stood at the sink washing his hands he thought about the girl that he had spoken to and realized that he hadn't gotten her name. If he hadn't been so pissed off and desperate to save the one friend that he had left he would have. In the meantime he would have to think of her as Ms. McKay. Assuming that her last name was, in fact, McKay.

He owed her thanks, because without a doubt she had saved his life. That was unquestionable. Ms. McKay was in the same situation that he was, to what he thought was a

considerably lesser extent. Yeah, she had lost her grandpa, but he had lost his only friends. Mr. McKay was an older man, anyway. He had lived most of his life already. Presumably, anyway. Some of the richest people could live close to two centuries these days.

Carlo stared at himself in the mirror for a while, taking in the young, light brown, nineteen-year old face that had been through so much in the last few hours. The man, looking back at him in the mirror, was the last man standing. Carlo almost wished that he wasn't. If Alexis was alive now, still breathing wherever she was being held captive, he wondered what she might be thinking about. Wondered if she had a plan.

*She can't do shit with a plan, a cold voice spoke up in the back of his mind. Mehdi and his people aren't in a rush now, probably, and they'll have plenty of time to beat her senseless, fuck her, and leave her half dead somewhere.*

Carlo didn't think it was beyond them.

He thought he knew what Alexis was probably thinking about. She was thinking about, maybe one day, seeing her family again, maybe her friends too. Thinking of seeing Carlo and Maxis again.

*It's not over, the same grim voice from earlier spoke up. The man looking back at Carlo through the mirror furrowed his brow.*

"Of course it's not," his reflection muttered. "It's not serious for you and your people yet Mehdi. But I'm coming, and so are the casualties."

He could hear the sound of the holographic TV in the other room, but the volume was turned too low to be able to make out what the voices were saying.

*That's not what I mean and you know it, the voice in his head spoke back up. It's not over Carlo! They haven't—*

The building suddenly jarred, violently, and Carlo gripped the metal sink, a gasp escaping him.

*Imagine an entire civilization falling from the sky*, he heard the past version of himself telling his friends.

*Imagine an entire civilization... falling.*

Carlo, clad in only a T-shirt and boxer shorts, raced out the bathroom, reached for his clothes on the chair, and tripped over his foot and fell forward, hard. His nose smashed onto the floor, and broke with a single, audible snap. The pain hit like a sledgehammer. But he didn't have time to acknowledge it.

*"No!"* he said breathlessly, scrambling back up on his bare feet, the bottoms of them slipping in the blood that had spilled from his nostrils. He extracted his knife from the right pocket of his folded uniform—thank God it was still there—and left his clothes and shoes on the chair, and instead rushed for the rocket pack. He snatched it up as the building jarred again, and this time, canted slightly to the left. Carlo flew sideways into the wall, the side of his head connecting hard enough to daze him. The building straightened and he fell forward again, landing awkwardly on his left hand and sprained it.

He let out a pained growl and proceeded forward, his nose running.

He had maintained his hold on the strap of the rocket-pack and raced out the door with it in one hand, immediately greeted in the hall by the emerging faces of countless patients, young and old, peeking out of their rooms from a position on the floor or some while they stood unsteadily on their feet, clutching the doorway for balance. Some had gashes that leaked blood on their foreheads. Some of their noses were as bloody as his. He could hear the sobs of children, loud and frantic, spilling out into the halls from all directions.

*“The world’s Godless,”* someone screamed from a room down the hall. *“And that’s why the devil’s gonna take all you tech savvy sinners to hell! TO HELL!”*

Carlo raced down the dimly-lit hall at full speed, his bare feet clapping painfully against the cold floor. Faces slid by on either side of him, many following his progress with expressions of weary confusion, or outright panic.

*“It’s going down!”* Carlo roared, his throat tearing harshly with the sheer volume of his voice. *“GO! GET OU—”*

The building didn’t just jar this time, but dropped half a foot. Carlo’s feet left the ground, and he was suddenly airborne, feeling like he was part of some sadistic rollercoaster. The building balanced out and Carlo came down hard on the ground once again, smacking on the floor, but skidding painfully forward on his bare knees as he did. The pain was exquisite. Skin was erased from his knees at once. Still, it barely registered.

Carlo got hastily back to his feet and continued forward, pumping his arms, then came to a skidding, barefooted halt, as he realized the rocket-pack lay on the floor behind him. He turned back around, and rushed back toward the pack, snatching it up one-handed, and whirling back around and making his way back down the wide expanse of hall. It seemed endless, and with the number of people present it was hard to proceed forward at full speed. More people were emerging from their rooms, their faces alive with panic. They knew something was wrong, but didn’t know what.

*“RUUUN!”* Carlo screamed, as blood spilled from his nose and mouth. He imagined that he looked like a madman, and felt like one too. Carlo forced his arms through the straps of the rocket-pack as he turned a corner. He knew it would be useless inside the building. Completely

useless. What was more frightening was that he didn't know what floor he was on. He didn't even know if he was going the right way.

Patients started to burst into the hall at an alarming rate, and Carlo suddenly found himself having to force his way past men and women in hospital gowns. It wasn't long before patients were starting to look at him with desperate eyes, as if they understood, as if they saw that—

*Don't get too close to any of them, Carlo thought. You can't trust any of them.*

In the increasing chaos Carlo noticed a large black sticker on the wall and his heart nearly stopped.

He was on floor number five. Floor *goddamn five!* The idea was so frightening that at first, it didn't completely register. And he didn't see so much as a single elevator or a door leading to a staircase. Had he missed an exit sign or the elevator in his haste? When he turned the next corner he saw a window at the end of the hall, past twenty or thirty patients. The building dropped again, five feet this time, lifting everyone to the ceiling coming to a jarring halt. It resulted in a cacophony of thuds, crunches and exclamations of pain. When Carlo landed the laser blade flew from his hand, landed on the floor and sliding several feet. He wasn't sure, but he thought that he may have broken his right hand with the landing.

Yet again, he scrambled back to his feet, tripping and stumbling over sprawled bodies as he made his way forward. His knife lay closed against wall to his right, a sprawled out, large old woman lying next to it. The woman lay on her stomach, her white curls a mess, sobbing. Carlo made his way over to her, climbing over four bodies, and nearly tripping over the last one, to get there. He retrieved his knife, took a giant step forward, and fell forward hard on top of another

body as the lady clenched his bare ankle with both hands. The feel of her palms were ice cold, like she had just taken her hands off a baggie full of ice chips.

*“Noooooo,”* she moaned, the veins under her pale white hands standing out in stark relief.

The building trembled, the cool white lighting flickered. A chorus of screams ran from one end of the hall to the other, pieces of the ceiling falling from above. Some pieces landed and broke apart on people’s heads, and some on the floor.

“He’s got a rocket-pack,” someone screamed from down the hall. “The goddamn kid’s got a *rocket-pack!* Asshole’s going to try to fly out of here through the window.”

*Why am I the asshole,* Carlo thought.

“Let go!” Carlo screamed at the lady, forced to put his hands on the set of bare thighs he lay on and push himself up. The person groaned under Carlo’s weight.

*“Pleeeeaassee!”* the woman moaned, and pulled.

Carlo fell back on his stomach, his face falling against the bare ass of the man under him. He turned over on his back, cocked back his right leg, and slammed his foot forward. It hit on the first shot, connecting with the woman’s temple just above her right eye. She let go, her head thudding to the floor. Carlo scrambled back up, snatched up his knife, and dashed forward, leaping over people and moving left and right to dodge people lying down or running in the other direction. The window, clear, and mockingly big, stood twenty feet ahead at a dead end.

*“Come on, let’s get this guy! He has a FUCKING rocket pack!”*

A commotion was building behind him.

The building canted back half a foot and Carlo struggled to stay on his feet as patients started to slide back toward him. His feet caught traction, lost it, caught it again. It was like running on a treadmill. The window was ten feet away, sickeningly close now.

*“God, where are you,”* a man screamed, from somewhere behind Carlo. *“I need you to show me where you are God! I need you to show me right now!”*

Carlo was suddenly tackled from behind, and went forward hard.

Still at a cant, the building jarred. More screams and falling debris followed. Carlo could smell the bits of broken ceiling, taste its crumbs on his tongue. The interior of the building was turning into a construction site of horrors.

*“Give it to me,”* a man shouted breathlessly into his ear, his voice thick with panic. *“Give it to me now kid, or by God I’ll murder you where you lay!”*

“No!” Carlo shouted, struggling to get up under his weight.

They were sliding back slowly, at the mercy of the slanted floor.

He was fifteen feet away from the window, saw a number of people standing inside of the leaning doorways of their rooms.

Carlo’s hair was grasped by a strong hand, and pulled hard forcing his head back. Then it was slammed into the floor.

Everything went black, becoming suddenly like that peaceful time he’d experienced in between digging monster teeth out his calf and waking up in the hospital bed. This blackness didn’t last as long though, and when he came to, what must’ve been fifteen men and women were clawing and biting at each other, throwing wild haymakers and slaps, as they battled each other for a chance to take the rocket pack off Carlo’s back.



The lights stopped flickering for three to five seconds, and went into another series of flickers. Somewhere from above Carlo, came the sound of gurgling, about five or six breathless grunts, then a loud splash of liquid and a thud seconds after. Someone had just been killed. Carlo was sure of it.

*Don't get up too fast man, he thought. Don't get up too fast now man! Be smart about—*

There was no time for that shit. Carlo, no longer weighed down by whoever had been on top of him, leapt back to his feet, swayed to the side from the unexpected rush of dizziness that hit his head, and fell back onto his ass, and slid back on the sliding floor. He still held his laser blade in his left hand.

*"Get him,"* a buff, red-faced, middle aged, white man shouted, white specks of spittle on his lips.

It had been him that had been on top of Carlo, he thought, grabbing onto the doorway of a nearby room to stop his descent, now behind the man instead of in front of him. The man had a crowd of fifteen people around him, all bleeding, all wearing clear expressions of utter desperation. The buff man held an old fashioned switch blade in his hand. It and his hand was covered with blood. The building rumbled a canted another inch and a bleeding body slid down the hall, a streak of blood trailing behind it. That was the man that had been killed.

Bodies slid past Carlo like kids going down a slow moving water slide. A good many of them were dead. The buff man and the people with him were across the hall, and carefully moving in Carlo's direction, some in hospital gowns and some not. Some slipped and fell sideways as they approached, having to get back up, and fight against whatever had been hurt, sprained, or broken. Then the building, its interior lights still flickering madly, canted the other direction and evened out. The buff man and the people with him stumbled and fell, and Carlo,

who had been, luckily, using the doorway for balance managed to stay on his feet. He broke into a run, heading for the window, the laser knife still clutched tightly in his hand. Two seconds later, a man from a doorway to his right, tackled him yet again, and brought him hard to the floor.

He grunted, forced the person off him and got back to his feet, his nose being cracked again by a fist an instant later. He hadn't even seen who had thrown it, all he knew was the pain. Everything was a temporary blur, the sound of people gathering around him clear, their words vulgar, and their hatred palpable. Carlo was hit again, dead in the mouth and stumbled back, was kept on his feet by what felt like a large pair of hands, shoved forward, and felt his head rock back with the force of another, brutal blow. His left eye would soon be closed, that was a certainty. More punches from the crowd around him were thrown, some busting him in the lip and some getting him in the nose and some right above the temple. The punches hit like rush of bullets, connecting at all angles. He felt his neck pop as a particular punch forced his head hard to the right. The breathless grunts, and angry outbursts that punctuated the flurry of punches only grew.

"Kill him," someone breathed.

Someone now held Carlo from behind, his body slumped helplessly in the person's arms. He was breathless and beaten. Too tired and hurt to try to resist anymore, and barely able to remain on his feet. His chest rose and fell slowly with his breaths, and blood appeared on his lips in spit bubbles, generated by the exhaled air. The man with the knife approached. And the building abruptly dropped two feet. Everyone went up into the air and came back down, and this time when Carlo did his right ankle broke cleanly and audibly, sending a monstrous flare of pain up his lower leg. He screamed in agony, his lips swollen and cut in numerous places, and his left

eye now completely swollen and closed. He was suddenly leapt upon, and pressed into the ground, immediately finding it hard to breathe. Another person jumped on top of the person that had just leapt on him, and the wind was knocked out of Carlo. Then came the sudden weight of a third person. A sickening wave of faintness overcame him, and everything went black again. So sweet. So peaceful.

When he re-awoke, it was just the buff man on top of him, breathing his hot breath into his ear and jabbing his knife into Carlo's thigh again and again, causing him great pain but in his haste neglecting to see that he wasn't hitting any vital organs. Carlo, breathless, nauseous, and a grotesque mess, reached toward the side screen on the rocket pack, touched it, and turned it on. Its hum was drowned out by the surrounding noise.

There was another jab of the knife, as the buff man began to free the left strap of the rocket pack.

It took a moment to load and Carlo used his memory to the best of his ability to navigate the screen with his finger.

*Another jab of the buff man's knife, this time puncturing Carlo's kidney, his hot breath wafting over his nose. In moments Carlo tasted fresh blood as it swelled into his mouth. The left strap came down to his elbow.*

"Mine motherfucker," the buff man hissed. "*Mine.....*"

Carlo chose idle by pure luck.

*"Miiinne—"*

The crowd, now down to roughly ten, didn't get the rocket pack from Carlo. Because the next instant Carlo disappeared, and so did the man on top of him. Nothing was left of him but his blood and smoke from the rocket-pack burners. Carlo shot backward, the buff man holding on

and his knife in Carlo's side. Carlo watched as the window out in front of him shrunk, the doorways and dead and injured people flashing past him as he flew backwards, now blessedly airborne. Carlo went back...back...back, a cool wind rushing against his face. When he felt it was right, he flicked his feet the other way and shot abruptly back in the other direction, launching the large man off of him, and sending him crashing into the elevator—what Carlo had been looking for just minutes ago—at close to two hundred and fifty miles an hour. The man broke almost every bone in his body when he hit and fell from the metal door with a rough impression of his shape. He slid down to the floor and lay dead, his head cocked crudely in Carlo direction as he sped toward the window, past the crowd of people that had fought so desperately to get his rocket pack off him.

*Hell, I could've just flown out the cave, Carlo thought wildly. I could've save myself this God-forsaken visit.*

Carlo hit the switch on his knife and the laser blade flipped out from the handle. The building abruptly canted three feet and everyone who had attacked Carlo became airborne as the building launched them back toward the paralyzed body of the buff man. Carlo continued forward, the blade out, and its tip pointed at the window. The lights flickered, more debris fell and broke apart and slid down the slanted floor. Carlo directed the rocket pack right up to the window, shoving the laser blade into the reinforced glass when he made contact. The building canted further. Outside the window Carlo could see hovercrafts—the faster more expensive version of a hover-cart—gliders, automatons and people and pieces of buildings tumbling down the surface of the slanted platform like objects falling down the stairs. He watched as something erupted outside, miles off to the right, and what looked like several bodies were launched into the air, silhouetted against a massive red ball of fire. A split second later the sound of the explosion

ripped through his ears like a ship breaking the sound-barrier. Carlo's jaw tightened as he worked frantically to cut an opening into the window. He spit out more blood. His kidney was a burning and agonizing horror.

As the platform canted even further, large objects and countless people tumbled faster down the gravel like a sadistic amusement park ride. Inside, sobs ran through the hall like water through a faucet. The building, still tilting, fissuring, creaking, and breaking, started to tremble. At the end of the hall, where Carlo had left the buff man, a pile of roughly forty or so people were piled on top of him. A dark-skinned black girl to Carlo's right, balancing inside the doorway as the building proceeded to tilt downward, was trying to reach out for him, her face a flawless portrait of fear. Tears ran from her eyes, and made trails on her dark skin. She wore a white hospital gown.

The lights flicked out. The screams and moans—already deafening—swelled. In the blue glow of the rocket's flames Carlo saw the girl leap out the corner of his eye, while he proceeded to cut an opening. She latched onto his right ankle with both hands, and the sudden pain and weight brought Carlo down a foot. He pointed his feet downward and guided the rocket pack back up to the window. Carlo continued to cut, grimacing as the girl's nails dug into his skin.

“You bitch!” he grunted. He could barely see anything, but he knew he was making progress.

The building was now still, turned comically on its side, the platform it had been built on in an identical position. As Carlo worked on cutting the last three feet he needed to fit through with his rocket-pack, he realized that it wasn't going to balance out this time. The central hover system was giving its final breath, and Carlo could feel it. It trembled slightly. Unseen beams and supports continued to snap and break from within the walls all around him. From outside

came another eruption—this one closer—and the glow of its ensuing flame briefly washed the hospital interior with bright orange light. The force shook the foundation like a giant set of hands, and a male, somewhere off in the distance, let out shriek that rose above all the others and stretched out for what seemed years. Then he went silent.

As the building proceeded to shiver, a large white man with a jutting gut on Carlo's left, who was clad only in boxer shorts, positioned himself to leap from his doorway, apparently to grab onto him as well. He was crouched down, unable to stand all the way up inside of sideways facing doorframe.

“No!” the girl screamed at him, trying to climb further up Carlo's leg. “*You 'll fucking kill us!*” Her young, sharp fingers tore fruitlessly at Carlo's lower leg, only causing him pain instead of helping her gain any new purchase. Carlo cut the final length of glass with a hard sizzling swipe, shoved it hastily out the building, and caught his pinky on the window's edge, cutting it down to the bone. Blood gurgled from the wound, and ran down the side of his wrist.

Carlo let out a wet, exhausted sigh.

The foundation began to shake violently. Light fixtures and more large chunks of ceiling fell. The fat man leaned forward. Leapt. The young girl's nails dug deeper into Carlo. And the building plunged abruptly downward, the central hover system now dead. The bodies at the bottom of the hall that were all living, broken or dead, shot upward as if propelled by rocket-packs of their own.

And at 11:40pm, Andreas77, much like the hacked platforms before it, fell out of the sky.

Miles away on another platform, a boy of ten, who stood observing the distant display of fireworks that was the collapse of Andreas77, watched a blue flame extend from the plummeting

wreckage and ascend high up into the black sky. The boy watched its progress as it climbed toward the stars, watched as the blue flame faded...and faded...then eventually went out.

Within a minute a cold rain began to fall onto his own home platform, and with his brow furrowed, and his curiosity peaked, the boy turned and walked back into his house.

**PLEASE REVIEW**

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