

CITY OF INVENTION

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CITY OF INVENTION

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Thesis

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CHAPTER I

A PLACE TO CALL HOME

I took the skytram uptown one evening, looking for a nice place in town. A nice, social place, with good people — you know — a classy joint. I got off at the station and took the glass escalator down to the street. It was a late night, but the flashing lights of the big city shone brilliant as ever. I walked down the half-empty streets, feeling small amongst the towering buildings surrounding me. The cities back home were a lot like this.

Shop signs flashed with bright letters and digital pictures, lighting up the path along the street. Looking out from under the brim of my hood, I pulled a pipe-cigar from the inside pocket of my hoodcoat, sampling its bitter-sweetness with the tip of my tongue before placing it between my teeth. I stopped at a corner to light it and took a few puffs as a night patrol drone drifted quietly down the street. It shined its scanner on me briefly as it floated by.

I crossed the intersection into the Late-Night District on Fifth Street. At the middle of the block, two lovers embraced on one of the benches in front of the Earth Museum. The lights from a sparkling fountain nearby illuminated their contented faces.

Everyone seemed so happy here. But still, I missed home.

At the corner of Fifth and Goodport, lights from a nightclub glimmered on a display up above. Through the open door drifted the laid back sounds of a saxophone

playing tunes of a smooth jazz number. I passed by the club. There was another right next to it. Its doors were closed, and bass and techno sounds thudded within. I recognized the song and halfway cracked a smile. I wear my sunglasses at night. The song was describing me.

Across the street was a sign that read, "The Milky Way Bar and Cafe." It looked inviting, so I headed over. Bells jangled above as I pushed the door open. I felt welcome as soon as I walked inside. The doorman gave me a cordial smile — told me to come on in. The rows of green and red colored glasses behind the bar twinkled under the dim light. I took a seat at the end of the bar, near the piano at the back. A sharp fellow in a black tuxedo sat at the keys playing out the end of a soft, peaceful song. An absolutely stunning beauty in a red dress sat on top of the piano, looking at the lucky fellow with blissful eyes and a warm, infatuated smile. Of course, they were only holograms — but they were so lifelike, it was hard not to feel like the famous pianist and his dreamy songstress were sitting right there in front of you.

"What'll it be, sir?" the bartender asked me.

"I'll have a Wicked Twister — a dark bourbon and some Old Scotch over dry ice. Make it strong for me buddy, will ya?"

"Sure thing."

The song ended, and a guy got up to put a coin into the slot on top of the piano. The pianist began playing softly at the keys again, and the lady with the starry eyes started to sing this beautiful melody. It was so familiar to me.

"That song," I said. "I know it. My mother used to sing it to me back home."

"That so?" said the bartender. "Hmm. It's funny. Never heard the machine play

that one before. Sure is a pretty song, though."

"That it is, my friend."

I turned my stool to lean back against the bar, sipping from my shiny green glass, and watched the beautiful woman on the piano sing that song — letting her voice take me away. The sweet melody put me back in those days of my childhood. Ah, those sweet days.

Maybe this place ain't so bad after all, I thought.

The bells above the door chimed again. A couple of armed patrolmen came into the bar. Maybe I spoke too soon. I turned back around in my stool, hovering over my glass, like I was working hard on my drink, took the last sip and motioned for the bartender.

"Need another one?" he asked. I nodded. He reached beneath the counter, grabbing the two bottles and pouring them simultaneously. The liquid steamed the ice. He slid the smoking glass to me, glancing over my shoulder, then leaned in discreetly and started whispering.

"Hey, buddy. Don't look now, but I think them guards are staring at you." I nodded again. Moments later, a hand grasped my shoulder lightly.

"Excuse me, sir. I need to see some identification, please," the voice behind me said.

"What's that?" I said without turning around. I took a sizable swig from my glass.

"I said I need to see identification," he said, noticeably louder this time. He tugged my shoulder, turning me around slightly. I craned my neck to look at him. He was an older guy, probably late forties. "Let's see some I.D.," he repeated. I reached inside my

coat, looking for my wallet.

“Is there some problem?” I asked.

“A patrol drone in the area reported a random I.D. scan that came up blank. No I.D. means suspicious character. We got an upload of a snap shot from it, and guess what — it was your picture.”

Of course, I knew what the problem was. My fake ID hadn’t scanned. It was the second time I’d had this problem.

I reached into the opposite side of my coat and found my wallet in the inner pocket, took it out and opened it for them to see. The one in front of me, the older of the two, took a small laser scanner from his belt.

“Just need to make sure it checks out and we’ll be on our way.” He scanned it. This time, it worked like it was supposed to. He paused, probably reading information displayed on his visor. He gave a quick nod and handed the I.D. back to me. “Look’s like he’s clean. Sorry to bother you, sir. Enjoy the rest of your evening.”

“James, what the hell are you thinking?” his younger partner asked. “How can you tell that’s his I.D.? You can hardly see his face. Sir, can you remove those glasses, please?”

I didn’t move. This clearly angered him.

“Did you hear what I said, man? Take off those damn glasses. Am I speaking a foreign language?”

I just sat there, staring at him.

“I don’t have time for this. Let’s not do this tonight, pal.” He snatched the glasses off of my face. “Who the hell wears sunglasses at night?”

“I heard that song playing on my way over here,” I said. “You know the one, right? You can’t hear that song and not put your sunglasses on. I heard it’s against the law.”

“You think you’re entertaining? Listen. You’d better watch what...” He stopped, staring in my face, a bewildered look on his. “Those are some freakish eyes you’ve got, pal. I’ve never...”

“Paul, wait,” said his partner. “You don’t think...”

“Holy shit!” was Paul’s reply. “He’s...he’s modified. He’s one of them...”

They both reached for their weapons. I smashed my pretty glass into shiny shards against patrolman Paul’s face as I slid off the stool. He fell back against the railing separating the bar from the small section of tables. I reached back and grabbed the older guy’s gun with one hand, gripping his uniform collar with my other and slamming his head into the bar. I threw the weapon against the far wall and pushed him to the ground. They both lay there stunned, but not seriously injured.

“I don’t want to fight,” I told them, picking my shades up off the floor and putting them back on. I quickly reached into my wallet and laid a generous tip at the bar counter. “Sorry about this,” I said. I was. The bartender shook his head.

“Don’t worry, ‘bout it,” he said. “Everyone’s welcome at the Milky Way.” I nodded, then stepped over the older guard and made haste for the door. The younger one was crawling toward his gun.

“Paul, let him go. He’s leaving,” the older one muttered. “What are you doing? You got a death wish, kid?”

“Let him go, my ass!” the young man said. “One of those fucking things killed

my cousin. Did you forget? You think I'd just let him run off like that?" He picked up his gun and fired three rounds just as I ducked out the door, hoping to slip away before they called for backup, but Lady Luck wasn't always on my side. I sometimes wonder if she's bitter about all the times I took her for granted in the old life, but that's another story.

Just outside the door was another guard, armed with Sentinel. Perfect, I thought. He must have been there the whole time, waiting, in case something like this went down. As soon as I spotted the pulse cannon strapped to his shoulder, I took off in full sprint down the block. The guy had a dead aim. He fired once, and a well-placed blast exploded against my shoulder, knocking me clear off my feet. I skidded and tumbled across the concrete for at least ten yards. Intense pain throbbed in my shoulder as I lay there. I looked over and saw my arm had been blown completely off. I was bleeding out onto the pavement. Some people nearby were yelling hysterically — others stood frozen in silent fear. I leapt to my feet and ran down the block, not letting the sharp throbbing slow me down. The blood was already beginning to clot anyway.

A siren blared somewhere close by as I rounded the corner at Sixth Street. The first building was a large chapel facing the street, with two stone griffins on haunches at either side of the doors atop the stairs like mythic guardians. After hurtling the gate, I rushed around to the side of the chapel and managed to scale the wall using the one arm, but it wasn't easy. I crawled up to a small, stained glass window on an upper floor and grabbed onto the ledge above it, then kicked through, shattering the colorful glass and landing inside. I leaned my head out the window, looking toward the street. Four patrolmen and two drones rushed by.

"He turned down this street," one said. "I saw him. He was so damn fast. But I

shot the bastard.”

“What happened to the blood trail?” another one asked.

“Who the fuck knows? That freak stopped bleeding right after I shot him. There was only that big puddle by the corner where the blast hit him.”

A third one said, “Jesus Christ.” Seconds later, their voices faded from earshot. They hadn’t seen me.

I looked around the small room. It was like a dusty attic. There were only a few antique pianos and an organ against the wall, all of them caked with dust. The room obviously hadn’t been used for years. It was a good place to lay low for a few days while my arm regenerated. I sat down on one of the dusty piano benches, looking out through the busted window at a starlit sky. Both moons were visible that night. I imagined Earth was up there somewhere, wondered what it looked like, a luminous, colorful star, maybe. Yeah, I missed the old days — but I could never go back. Must have been by some miracle that I even made it onto this rock. Maybe Lady Luck still cared. I was still alive, and at that moment, I decided I would make the most of it. Thank God I was always an optimist. Everyday would be a test of resiliency, but I'd find a way to survive, somehow. Besides, I was starting to get used to this place. It was a place I'd come to call home.

Streams Extracted

Log-I

The virus spread via the Network® — some anomaly that seeded from nowhere in the system, like how the fruit fly spawns from the decay it feeds on. The bug invaded systems that ran several factories owned by Zahncorp Pharmaceuticals, infecting the bots that processed their drugs, causing them to create high concentrations of the drugs in small doses. A lot of people died that way.

They're calling it The Beautiful Death. Few of those infected survive, but one man whose internal respirator was invaded by the virus told biotechnicians he saw iridescent colors flittering down from the sky, like loose strands of a rainbow. Others reported similar symptoms. On the NeoRegime's main data feed this morning, a woman on Mars said she saw winged angels revealed in rays of sunlight, walking amongst people.

I wonder if Griffin saw them. The data files from his ThinkCap®, the one Anna bought him for Leap Day four years ago, are on the ROM drive. It's sitting here on my Starboard module, right next to the navigator orb. I thought it was a silly toy when he got it. Then, he showed me how it could record any of his logical thought processes; he even altered the coding so that it played them back in a computerized voice. He was wearing it when he tried to kill himself. I'm too afraid to listen to it.

Beanie in the Cryogenics department pulled some strings so I could keep Griffin in a vacant icing cell at the south end of the labs. That way, the poison he inhaled won't

continue to spread. The medics say he didn't make it; I believe he's alive still, but barely. His brain won't tell his body to eliminate the toxins.

Things look hopeful. The challenge for us is creating an anticode that mimics the cure for the ailment the virus simulates before the subject dies. How do we get a code to behave like the physical elements? It's not as radical a notion as one might think, but we're still working on it.

Griffin's case is different. He was infected through a software update for his ThinkCap®, and his mind was altered. As far as we could tell, his A-conscious was nulled, his C-conscious enhanced. But I still can't see how that would cause him to lose his mind and try to kill himself. Maybe I should check the ROM data...tomorrow. I've been daydreaming too long now — but dreams invade the consciousness when you haven't slept in days. . . .

SLUMBERING SIREN

I'd been newly stationed on one of Earth's orbiting military satellite bases when the warning signal was sent out. At exactly 24:03, a large unidentified vessel was picked up on the radar, slowly approaching the moon. The control center at the main space station there had attempted to make contact with the approaching vessel, but no one responded to the call. Since it was closest to our orbit, we went to investigate. We had to take the stealth pod and board the thing ourselves. The pod only fit four soldiers, so Smiley, Hickson, Loverboy, and I were assigned to the task. We carried the new high-caliber pulse rifles with us, special issue — our first real mission.

We sat with chins touching our knees due to the limited space, but the pod got us there quick. We saw the foreign craft through the window below, constructed of eccentric shapes and angles, an architectural style I'd never seen.

"Land us at a good spot," I said to Loverboy at the controls. "See that hatch down there?" I pointed. He eased us down, hovering above the hatch. The vacuum tunnel extended out and attached itself to the craft.

"We're on solid," said Loverboy. "Go for it, Cap."

I climbed out of my seat, crawling over Smiley and Hickson to the back of the pod and turning the wheel to open the pod hatch. When I climbed in the vacuum tunnel and closed the hatch behind me, I was weightless. I floated to the smooth side of the craft; with the heat drill in my helmet I cut my way through the strange metal and kicked it in.

It clattered against metal somewhere in the darkness beyond. I turned on my visor flashlight as I held to the edge of the hole and looked down into the dark, eerily empty ship. I dropped to the walkway not far below, then buzzed in with the comm. link on my visor. "I'm in," I said into the headset.

Hickson, Smiley and Loverboy followed, one at a time. Once we were all in, I went ahead with caution, my rifle tightly at my side as I led us through a shadowy corridor. The walls arched to one side, creating an odd sense of walking diagonally. The hall was more like a tunnel, narrow and curvy. We meandered through the vessel like cells, turning so many rights and lefts it felt like a maze.

Before we knew it, we'd reached the end. We had entered a large open space — a wide chamber further into the ship. Looking out from where we stood, we saw her: perfection. The most beautiful creature I'd ever seen, captured from a fairy tale, it seemed — her naked body elevated above us, locked in a sealed transparent capsule against the wall.

All along the floor in front of her, along the walls around her, writing in an obscure foreign hand was visible in the faint light, and though the markings were unfamiliar, it was clear what they were. Numbers and equations, scrawled sporadically, as if the hand that had written them was toying with endless ratios.

The three of us stared in awe, speechless. The pale beauty floated in a glowing liquid beyond the glass, eyes closed, sleeping peacefully. Loverboy broke our silent gaze.

"I have to touch her. She's so fucking beautiful."

He walked further into the chamber, closer to the beauty, like one entranced. None of us said a word. We all wanted to touch her. We all watched as Loverboy clung

onto a beam jutting randomly from the wall and started climbing, grabbing onto jagged beams that stuck out almost vulgarly here and there in no discernible pattern. The wall was like jagged stones at the bottom of a cliff. He pulled himself onto the platform in front of the capsule and slowly touched both hands against the glass as he stared into it at the beauty, and at his own reflection inside her. He touched the glass as if he could feel on the other side.

The capsule must have been heat sensitive. His touch made its console above light up, a soft bluish gently pulsating light. The liquid in the capsule drained rapidly. Her black hair fluttered down upon her shoulders like tangled wet vines as the solution around her receded. Soon she stood in an empty vial, glistening with a supernatural glow, the liquid dripping off of her naked, perfect body.

Loverboy had removed his hands from the glass, but was too close to perfection to move away. The glass slid apart, opening horizontally. He paused, stiff for a moment, then inched forward. He reached out his hand, hesitant, as if trying to pull it back. He couldn't. His hand touched a stiff wet breast.

A shudder of envious rage rushed through me — a strange moment. I glanced over to see Smiley and Hickson each biting their bottom lips. We all looked at each other, then looked away. A pair of eyes had opened, gorgeous eyes, the color of a star spontaneously combusting. The eyes peered through Loverboy like he wasn't even there.

By the time I realized it was happening, it was too late. Not that it would've mattered. When I tried to yell, my voice caught in my throat, trapped. I watched a slender arm lift Loverboy up by his polymer suit. His feet dangled. The other arm impaled him through the chest like he was nothing more than dough. Guts leaked from

the back of the wound. The hand reached through the hole in Loverboy's back, clutching a bloody mass that was his heart. Then, the arm was removed, bloody now, a shocking contrast of blackish red and pale white.

Someone pissed their pants. I couldn't tell which one of us it was.

Loverboy hurtled violently to the deck, bouncing like a rubber doll. A childish laugh echoed through the dark chamber as the monstrosity leapt onto the deck near us with a heavy thud, much heavier than a human body could make. The floor shook beneath us. She turned her head mechanically, staring at us for a moment.

Her beauty was oddly grotesque — more frightening than death. The word Anna was finely etched in the groove between her neck and collarbone. I looked closely at her radiant eyes looking back at me. They were like a child's eyes. She laughed again, childishly — maniacally — then came for us.

We fired repeatedly. Bullets and concussive shells ripped off pieces of skin from her jaw and neck, but she kept laughing — walking toward us. We kept firing and sparks showered us as they struck her.

She lifted Hickson by his rifle — he wouldn't let go — and slammed him to the ground, loudly breaking one of his legs. Quickly, she whirled, struck me across the face, and sent me flying back several yards. I lay there, believing my jaw had been broken for sure. I'd never been hit so hard. As I faded, all I could hear was Hickson's screaming, and that cackling girlish laughter, the laugh of a brainless killer.

When I awoke, trails of blood led from where my men last stood. Loverboy's body lay sprawled dead yards away. The murderous beauty was nowhere in sight.

I pulled myself to my feet, using my rifle for support. Gunfire sounded beyond the

chamber entrance, deep in the corridors. Faintly, I could hear men screaming.

Then, all was silent.

Streams Extracted

Log-II

The NeoRegime wants to confiscate Griffin's body for testing. A load of space waste if I've ever heard any. Like those Nietzsche freaks in their labs could create anything that doesn't destroy life. I knew the Regime was behind that virus, the whole damned thing. They have to be. This proves it. How else could a virus appear from nowhere within the system? All be damned if I let them take him. I'll die first. Damn it; get your bearings, Tom. Think. I'll need a plan Y, in case plan X fails. If we can't find the anticode before they take his body, I'll need another mode of operation — a new wheel.

That reminds me — on my way home this afternoon, as I came up the walk path toward my front stairs, there was a StarGazer®, one of those clanky old fortune telling machines, wheeling along down the path. I was a kid when those things were manufactured. The head with its bulging white eyes, rubbery pinkish face and grey wizard's beard, attached to the intricate wiring that coiled down its neck gave me the jeebs. I always made an effort to avoid them. Haven't seen one since my younger years. I thought they'd been done away with once the public lost interest in them. The thing still creeps me out, to be honest, but I'll try anything at this point if it means finding answers.

I slid the two ten-byte coins it was asking for into the slot at the side of its rusted, cylindrical frame, right next to a chipped and faded number seven. There were several clacks and clicks as the coins rolled along the inner workings. A slot in its middle thrust open, and inside was something coiled up. I took hold of it, pulling it out. It was a head-

unit with a visor lens, connected to the machine by a mesh of cords. When I strapped the unit onto my head, the world was shaded in red. The sky overhead was a maroon hue, the clouds magenta, lazily drifting over the tips of iridescent cloud scrapers that towered above the heights.

An orangeish light was forming itself into an image at the center of my vision. Slowly it took shape, and the features etched themselves out, spritely creating the perfect face. It was Anna's face. The wizard spoke, its eyes alive, infused through the visor lens over mine. It told me I'd lost something precious in the recent past, and that I'd possibly lose something else just as valuable. Before the image flickered away, the wizard spoke something about sticking to my path to find what I seek.

I can't remember the sound of the voice for some reason. Maybe there was no sound. The headpiece had gotten quite warm on my head, and I could feel the heat flowing through me. Don't know if the sensation was real or just brain signals, but I think my soul's been touched. . . .

CHAPTER II

A PLACE TO CALL HOME

On Odin's night, I walked along the crimson steel pipes that snake their way along the port for miles before they plunge into the sea. The pipes run along the seawall that shields the walk next to the street from high tides. At the end of the wall, I slipped into a familiar hollow recess. I noticed a young man strolling along the port past the rows of solar rigs bobbing gently on the calm sea. He cast a suspicious gaze when he saw me crawling into the mesh of pipes and gaps beneath the walk. Still, there was no law against a homeless person living in the wall. I kept an eye tuned for guards though. After the other day, they were probably on high alert for suspicious characters.

Lucky for me it was pouring rain. The pipes behind the wall were slick underneath. I ducked and twisted my way into the maze, dodging the water trickling from the walk up above. There was a squared space of concrete once I made it through the jumble of pipes. Tangerine beams of light from a dockside café on the street above leaked in through a storm drain. Passing through it, I could see another light from a narrow pass up ahead. I squeezed through and rounded a corner to the left. A chain gate was in front of me, pulled taught around pipes in the concrete. The light came from the other side of the gate. I shook the chain softly; Hawkeye peeked timidly around a corner, his dreds partially covering his one eye, his lens trained on me.

"You?" He cackled dryly, stopped abruptly. He unlocked the gate. "What happened to your hand?" He pressed down on the end of my overcoat sleeve.

“It’s nothing.”

“I’ll say. The hell you do?”

“You don’t want to know.”

“You ain’t go uptown, did you? Told you not to. Be wise to steer from trouble, or you end up a mutilated freak like me.”

“You don’t know the half.”

“That’s what I mean,” he said, pointing a bandaged finger toward the low ceiling, under the street. “Them folks up there, they don’t like half and half’s. Don’t want you to show your face.”

There was that itching, burning sensation at the end of my wrist. I thought back two days prior.

“I need a new ID badge,” I told him. “Could you tell me where to find Hodge? His shop was ransacked.”

“Hodge got the hell out of Dodge. You ain’t hear? NeoRegime squashed some underground terrorists that attacked the labs at the university. It was on the holos at every tram station. The weapons they used got traced back to Hodge. He had to disappear.”

“Unfortunate.”

“He got a spot on the north end of the wall. Sector Four-one-nine. I bet they found that place too, though. Don’t too much get past them.”

“Four-one-nine?”

“Better find him quick. You won’t last long without a badge. They’ll be after you.”

“Too late now.”

“Say what? The hell you come here for? Got enough problems.” He rolled up a dingy sleeve of his urban fatigue jacket, clicked on a small screen on his robot forearm. I looked closely at the screen. It was a news stream showing an armed man on camera robbing a store.

“That psycho Han’s got the public eye out for quasi-humans. Ain’t seen my wife and kid in over a month. I tell you about them killing machines they started building when I was in the Regime? Bet he’s looking for parts.”

A message flashed on the screen summoning all quasi-humans in city limits to the City Guard post.

“I’m leaving. Just needed to know where to look.”

“Come back when you’re clean. I’m picking up some cigars tomorrow. I’ll give you some.

“Sure.”

A large naval freighter was out at sea, its massive searchlight piercing through the gray of night, skimming the waters surface. Not searching for me. Of course not. The rain had slowed to a drizzle now as I walked along the aqua blue lights beneath the glass circles carved along the wood on the pier, passing a long row of docked private steamboats. Near the end of the pier, I rounded the bend up to the windy street. Carts wisped by, creatures shimmering in motion and light, their tires churning raindrops that splashed the road. People rushed by along the walk, some with shirts or jackets lifted over their head; others strolled leisurely along beneath umbrellas. A wide cloudscraper stood before me, an immense glass cylinder of digital screens and balconies, facing the

curving street.

Nobody could ride the tram without a clean ID, so I caught an autobus heading north from the South Main station, taking a seat beneath the rain canopy on the top deck near the steps. On my seat panel, I punched in coordinates for West Sector Four-one-nine. No other passengers had programmed this stop. I looked at the glowing face of the digital clock tower at the corner down the street. It would take at least two revs to reach the edge of the city, so I leaned against the rail, my hood covering most of my face, and for the first time in four days, I dozed off.

A hand on my shoulder startled me awake.

“This your stop, sir?”

I reached out by reflex, pushing away the arm and trying to grab the sleeve, but I hadn't a full hand to grab with, just a growing bulge, its growth unperceivable, like a flower unfolding — an illusion.

“My lapse, miss. Bad dream,” I said.

“No worries. You should get that worked on. I know an amazing specialist.”

“This? Don't worry. I'll get along.”

The woman smiled in an odd, understanding sort of way.

“Still.” She handed me a pale green card. “A pretty cheap procedure, to get a hand made. Dr. Marlo's the name.”

“You? Thanks.”

The auto left me on the curb of an empty street. The rain had ceased. To my right were the cloudscrapers that lined the city limits; to my left, clean white concrete extended

to the steel wall that encompassed the entire city. About half a mile down, before the wall curved and vanished behind the tall buildings, the number four-one-nine was painted in large, slightly fading gray.

Citizens couldn't reach the top of the wall unless via the skytram, and only a small percentage of those living on the wall had legal clearance to ride the trams — those who weren't diseased or accidentally mutated, or mechanically altered, or alleged murderers who survived citizen justice. At least that's what I gathered from the data casts I'd seen on the streets since I'd been living here. Hodge said it's because they're too close to the ether shield.

I moved toward the wall, still looking out for guards. The raindrops on the rustic steel reflected the glare of the city's neon lights. I slid my hands across the smooth wet surface, looked up. It was probably half as tall as the cloud scrapers across from it.

Quite a climb.

I was out of breath when I finally neared the top, the micro hairs in my palms and fingertips losing a bit of grip with sweat sweat. A tall wire fence lined this section of the wall. I gripped the fence and pulled, lifted a tired leg and caught my canvas shoe through a gap in the bottom. I pushed my unfolding hand through an open space, wedged my arm through the fence to lift myself up. A scrawny, beautiful little girl in a dingy wool cap stood next to an oversized, wolf-like canine to my right; they were looking toward the city through the fence, watching the ads flashing on the multiple screens. A cartoonish face was sewn onto the girl's pink hat, and strands of long florescent hair poked out from beneath it, falling down into the thick furry collar of her purple shortcoat. The big dog's furry ears pricked up as I hurled myself over. I leaned back against the fence, catching

my breath.

“You climb all the way up here?” the girl asked. The dog was curious too, cocking its head at me.

“Sure.” I found a cigar in my pocket and lit it between my lips.

“Can you teach Augie to do that? He don’t listen to me. I tried teaching him to fly like Zero from the holo show, but alls he does is lick stuff.” As she said this, the dog approached, lowering its massive head and sniffing my shoe, his thick tongue licking the front of it.

“Sorry,” I said, standing and using the inside of my hoodcoat to wipe the rain from my shades. Augie wagged his thick tail. “I’m looking for someone.”

“The wizard?”

“Huh? No. Just a man.” I began walking along the fence. The girl and the dog followed, walking alongside me. The dog on all fours was nearly my height.

"What kind of man?" she asked. "A tin man?"

I shook my head.

"A brown man?"

“He is a brown man, actually.”

"What's he look like?"

"Never mind. I think he's hiding."

“Hiding? Maybe he’s in the secret club.” I asked what she meant. “My Pap’s in a secret club. He goes there at night.”

“Really?” I stopped, looking at her. "Is he there tonight?" She nodded. “I think I’d like to join,” I say. “Do you know where the secret club meets?”

“No. It’s a secret.”

“Oh right. Of course.” I walked on.

“I bet Augie knows.”

“Yeah?” I stopped once again.

“Show him, Augie.” She knelt down in front of the dog, ruffling his ears. “Can you find Daddy?” Augie barked twice, sniffed the ground, then scampered off, the girl skipping behind him. Reluctantly, I trailed after them.

I passed by some grubby housing units, single and multiple living complexes built of tin and brick, a few stone or iron chimneys emitting smoke. A smell light and savory lingered in the air, salt and lemon — fish singed in a kettle maybe. Up ahead, the girl trailed her dog, weaving through stands of vendors selling dusty fruit; oranges, pears, melons; processed packaged food rations, clothing items, mostly thrift, random novelties etc. I weaved through people strolling about as if it were midday.

Not wanting to lose them, I quickened my pace.

Past the vendors’ stands were more housing units, some of these larger. In front of a two-story brick complex, I caught up to the girl and the dog, who had slowed down. Augie sniffed the dark grass growing up through cracks in the cement surface. There was a gap between homes on the right side, and there at the edge, a large chunk of the concrete was chipped away. What happened to the wall here? I wondered.

“A missile smashed it, Pap said.”

“Missile? From where?”

“Look, Augie found something. What is it, Augie?” Augie seemed restless, hopping around near the edge of the broken concrete. He sounded three short barks.

“Down there?” The girl pointed. I walked to the edge of the wall, looking down as the rain picked up again, coming down heavily.

“Uh oh,” she said, looking up at the black clouds. “Pap said not to get you wet, Augie. Better get back.” She promptly turned and ran off, Augie darting out ahead of her.

“Bye, mister.”

I watched them merge into a crowd and disappear,

I leaned over the edge of the chipped wall, and seeing nothing, knelt down to take a closer look. There was a small gape leading into the wall between the steel and broken concrete. Glancing around first, I slipped down over the edge and crawled into the hole. With one arm, I hung down over an open space inside, taking off my shades and drying my face on the back of my sleeve. There was a ledge directly beneath me, and a soft jade light coming from below. It seemed like a spot Hawkeye would find. His nook inside the seawall was just one of several similar spots he’d frequented since I’d known him.

I eased along the narrow ledge of broken concrete and dropped down to a cylindrical, steel pillar attached to it. I hung down, slid my way around a ledge to an opening where the light came from. I leaned inside the opening. To my surprise, three men were seated on crates and rusted oil drums resting on the uneven surface beneath them. A highly detailed digital map of Holo City lit up back wall via a small holo projector. The man on my right aimed a gun at me as I stepped into the light. My eye met Hodge’s directly across from me. He was seated next to the map.

“Better pray to God,” the gunman said coldly. “Trespassers can’t be spared, I’m afraid.”

“Cap? The hell? Hey, he’s alright.” Hodge waved an arm at the gunman.

“You know him?”

“Aye. Put it down, Ike.” Hodge stood in the small space, his head nearly touching the uneven ceiling. “How the hell’d you find me?”

I took off my hood. “A four-legged friend.”

“Jesus,” he said, scratching nervously at the kinks in his hair between the magnetic rods of his ThinkCap.” The cloaked man next to him was silent, his head lowered.

“I wouldn’t worry too much,” I told him, stepping in further. “Just a little girl’s dog. Hear you’re in a tight spot anyway.”

“God damn right,” he said, scowling. “Those cock suckers.”

“Hodge. Language, friend,” said the cloaked man, his head still bowed.

“Sorry, Bishop. You see, Cap, I sell these off-market weapons, to freelance hunters mostly. But these jerk offs — well, you’ve heard about them — they buy some artillery off me and attack a blessed government facility. And here we are, smack dab in Holo City, a fucking urban empire. What were these dickbrains thinking?”

“Hodge,” the cloaked man insisted.

“Sorry. Shit. I’m trying. Seriously, the university labs? Besides, if you’re that bold, wouldn’t you go after those labs they have on that base up in the mountains? That’s where shit really goes down. Anyhow, so now, they’re after me, to make a long one short. What about you? How’s your luck these days, Cap?”

“I need a new badge,” I told him. “Mine was compromised.”

“Again?” I nodded.

“Your screwed,” said the gunman.

“Shut up, Ike. Sorry, man. Not much I can do. Can’t show my face on the surface.”

I’d figured as much when I saw a hurricane had run through his pawn shop. Hodge kept talking.

“There’s this other guy I’ve heard about. Heinz or Heinrich or something, I don’t know. He’s like a ghost, though. Impossible to find.”

“That helps.”

“Or, wait. Maybe, you can help me. I’ve got to clear my name. Ike here just suggested we frame somebody. I’ve been trying to figure how to pull this off. I’ll need a fast plan for this one.”

“Seriously?”

“I just need some time to think.” He closed his eyes, his head down, fingers on his temples. I watched him, waiting to see what he’d say.

“He might be a while,” said Ike, scratching the back of his neck with the butt of the gun. “Guess you’re alright — boss’s friend and all. Wait till you see what we found inside this place.” He walked to the corner of the tiny room and slid away a wooden crate. There was a hole in the floor there. He slipped through. I looked at Hodge, who sat in silence. The bishop stood, looked up at me. He was an older man, with a thin face, wrinkles at the corners of his slender, nut brown eyes.

“I’ll join you,” he said. “I could use a walk.” I let him pass me in the shadows.

I followed them with curiosity, easing down an exposed iron pipe. On the wide pillar below, I watched Ike fumble blindly for a box in front of him. He found it, reached in and pulled three flashlights, handed one to the bishop, held one out for me.

“I don’t need one.”

“You shittin me?” said Ike. “It’s pitch dark down here.”

“It’s fine, really. Is this the way?” I walked ahead of him, on top of another broken pillar, which sloped down. At the end of it was a gap leading a very long way down, and a railing across it that ran alongside a slotted metal balcony floor. The two men leapt from the pillar onto the floor of the top level. I copied them. In darkness, everything was shades of grey. I could see several identical metal floors many levels beneath us, each floor stretching along for the length of the steel wall, as far as I could see. Ike cast his light along the wall. The electronic doors were rusted.

“This wall used to be a base, we think,” Ike told me. “There’s a subtram station down there too.”

“Regime soldiers were stationed here?”

“Negative,” he returned. “Regime doesn’t even know about this place.”

“You’re not serious.” I couldn’t see how it was possible.

“This steel wall was here before the city was built,” the bishop cut in. “You know it only took thirty years to build this entire city? When Han’s army found the place, they wrecked the stone gate on the south end and put that steel one with the dragonhead in its place. They never thought something might be inside the wall.”

“We didn’t know until recently,” said Ike. “Been living right on top of it all these years.”

“Why would someone build a base in a huge circle like this?” I asked them.

“Something inside the circle maybe,” the bishop said, “Something precious. Makes me think maybe this place was holy land to somebody.”

“Maybe it was a big Mega generator,” Ace suggested. I’d wondered about Mega energy. It powered everything in this huge city, Hodge had told me, and had no adverse effects on the environment. This kind of energy didn’t exist in the world I came from.

“How’d you get inside this place?” I thought about what the little girl had said.

“Used to be houses where that chunk of the wall is missing,” Ike answered.

“Debris from a Harmony missile smashed it. A return strike against the Regime — thirty years ago, I think it was. Most got deflected by the defense system, but one of them got through.” The word “Harmony” struck a chord somewhere inside me, and my heart thumped. It was the name of Earth’s capital, the fortress city on the moon, where I’d been trained as a soldier.

Ike passed me on the top level, forced the lock on one of the iron doors nearby.

“The public didn’t even care enough to have it repaired,” he said. “They couldn’t give half a slice about the folks on the wall.” He pushed the door open. There were three bunks inside, and wooden crates stacked against the back wall.

“But that missile was a blessing in disguise,” said the bishop. “Folks living in the houses that got destroyed weren’t even home. And look what else.” He shined the light on one of the open crates toward the front of the stack. He reached in and took out an old fashioned machine gun, tossed it to me. I caught it in both arms. It was loaded.

“Tons of weapons,” he said.

“There’s some battery carts down there at the bottom, too,” said Ike. “Wanna check it out?”

"Sure."

I followed him along the top level as he aimed the flashlight, leading me to an

open lift car not far down. The control stand was rusted over, the buttons covered in cobwebs.

“Doesn’t look like it works,” I said.

“All this stuff is battery powered. Just needs a jolt.” From the back of his flashlight, something like a screwdriver had extended. He touched it to a spot on a panel where the cover had been removed, pressing down a button on one side. There was a spark. The bishop flipped a lever behind us and the cars lights flicked on. Mechanical whirring sounded lowly, gradually crescendoed. We stepped on. Ike flipped down another lever and we were jostled about, then eased down smoothly. Sparks popped and white currents rippled along the rods and cables in the wall behind us where the lift slid along.

We reached the bottom. I followed them, looking up at the balcony levels we’d passed on the way down. On the lower level, there were numerous consoles with screens and panels, none with power.

“If we could build a big mega generator down here, we could power all this stuff,” said the bishop.

“Why is there so much energy to go around?” I asked him. “I can’t figure it out.”

“It’s supposedly indepletable,” he answered. “Somehow the generator converts the gravity into energy. Gravity’s always constant. I think strong magnetic fields are involved too, but I couldn’t tell you how it works.”

“Hodge built a tiny one in his pawn shop,” said Ike. “That guy’s a genius.”

“I knew a guy like that once,” I said. Back home.

We passed several rooms with large industrial doors, large terrain maps along the

wall between them. Beyond, rows of open-roof battery carts were lined side by side, some built for two passengers and others larger, all with gun mounts. Passing the end carts, we reached the old subtram station. Two wide, gated tunnels on each side of the wall led beneath the ground in opposite directions, and antique-style trams with jointed cars sat on rows of tracks running along the wall and curving down into the tunnels. The trains were rusty and faded, covered in grime and dust, and the tracks were quite rusted also.

“Where do these tunnels go?” I wondered.

“This one goes beneath the city,” Ike said, pointing to left one. “You can break into the sewer system through there. This other one goes on forever. Who knows where it leads.”

When we climbed back up the pillar into the hideout, Hodge was speaking into a comm. link clipped to his collar. He held his hand up to us. Once he finished talking, he flipped the off switch.

“That was Ace McCoy, a friend of my cousin’s. He had a great idea. Thomas Hurst, you know the guy?”

I didn’t.

“That famous biotechnologist. Ace lives in Harrisburg Heights, by Hurst’s estate. He can sneak us up there tomorrow night. By us I mean you and the bishop here. I gotta sit this out.”

Obviously. The City Guard dug up Hodge’s name easy. But there was no info on me to dig up, except the fake ID I’d tossed.

“The bishop says you can crash at his place for the night.” I looked at the father; we both looked at Hodge.

“Don’t want to impose,” I said.

“He doesn’t mind,” said Hodge. “He owes me. That kid of his could have got me burned today. Thank God it was you, Cap.”

The bishop smiled and placed his hand on my shoulder. “Come, friend,” he said. I followed him back up the pillar of concrete, climbed the ledges and pipes, through the hole to the outer wall.

It was still raining when we reached the topped of the wall. We walked swiftly, entering a small brick unit not far down, where ivy stretched up the walls. We walked up the small flight of stairs in front of us, and the father punched a key code at the iron door. He flipped a light switch inside. There was a flowerpot on a round stone table and two wooden chairs. Plastic shelves above the small battery stove along the left wall held a few large pots and bowls. At the back of the room was a ladder next to a curtained doorway.

The bishop opened a large wooden chest near the door, took out a wide, long-necked bottle and two tin cups, poured two drinks.

“My daughter Veronica sleeps on the cot in the back,” he said, handing me a cup. “The floor isn’t bad.”

I was expecting wine for some reason, and the powerful sting of the liquor nearly choked me. There was a bitter aftertaste, like tart berries. The bishop chuckled as I coughed, patting my back. “That’s the blue moonshine,” he said.

Handing me the bottle, he closed the chest and made his way up the ladder on the back wall. Balancing his cup on the top rung, he opened the pad lock on the ceiling hatch

and pushed it open with his free hand. He told me to come on up.

I climbed onto the flat tin roof to find the bishop sitting at the edge next to Augie, the big dog I'd seen earlier, who must have climbed up from the outside. I sat down next to them, placing the bottle next to the father and looking toward the city with him. There were several screens on the buildings in front of us, all flashing different ads. Some flashed ads so quickly I couldn't decipher what the products were. Another one higher up flashed the message, "Purchase Network® Shares," while a list of Network links rolled up the screen.

"If you look at those too long," they start to program your thoughts," said the bishop. "There's a science to it. Something with images and light. Hodge could tell you about it."

I reached into my pocket, fingered the plastic pack inside for the wrapped cigars. Two left. I took one out and lit it.

"You don't have an extra one, do you?"

"Sure," I said and reached for the other cigar. "Last one."

I lit the cigar for him. He took a deep puff and exhaled, looking toward the city again. A weight in the air seemed lifted. Augie lay down next to him, his bushy tail curled, his head resting on his dusty paws. His eyes were open, looking at the buildings.

"We're getting out of this city, friend," he said, "When this stuff with Hodge blows over. My daughter isn't allowed off this wall, because of overexposure to the ether shield. And I'm the reason. It's because I was outcast from society."

"For what?" I asked.

"Preaching what I believe," he answered. "Following the Good Book. You

familiar?”

“Yeah. Never imagined people from different worlds could believe in the same thing. How does that happen?”

“You’re a believer then?” he asked me.

“Can’t say I am,” I answer, “Although sometimes I think, maybe...who knows?”

“It’s not easy to believe in anything,” he admitted, looking away. “And my wife, she just couldn’t...” he stopped, and after a pause, faced me, taking another puff. “What about you, friend? What will you do?” The screens on the nearest building stopped running ads momentarily, all flashing a sequence of orange and blue.

Frame a renowned biotechnologist, I thought. It was the second job I’d pull for Hodge. Hawkeye was there the first time. We’d accompanied Hodge to Neo University, where he secretly hacked into their systems and extracted what he said was valuable data. We watched for security, since the location of the hack could be traced. But that was small time. This was a byte more serious.

Still, it was Hawkeye who’d given me a place to hide when I broke out of that lab, and Hodge had given me clothes and food, a badge so I could walk the streets. Hodge considered himself a survivalist junkie, but the public saw him as a criminal. He wasn’t a bad guy, in my opinion. Just a misfit like me. So was Hawkeye. If there was a side to be on, I was on theirs. I had to clear Hodge’s name. He took me in like a guardian; and this guy, the bishop — adequately named — there was sincerity in his voice, a glint of hope in his eyes, that rare sort of optimistic hope for the good in mankind — the kind that makes you want to keep on living, no matter what.

“Exploring the world, huh?” I said.

“That’s right,” said the bishop. “Just a few more jobs.”

What did I have to lose? The military I’d once served was in another world, unaware that I even existed. In this world, in this city, scientists working for the Regime wanted me hunted down.

I clenched the fist of my newly formed hand. There was more strength in the arm than before. The muscle and bone felt heftier, more sturdy. I could almost feel the father’s hope, like an energy, rubbing off on me.

Streams Extracted

Log-III

A couple years back, when Anna died, I started plans for a project to build a new kind of cyborg. I called it Project Anna II, and we designed the prototype in her image; it was my way of honoring her. She was my light, even though I hardly told her as much — but I'm sure she knew. My colleagues showed a lot of support for me then. I hoped the prototype would help find a cure for the disease that claimed Anna's life; but when Newstream Weekly did a report on the project, they made me out to be some heartsick maniac, even suggested I was secretly creating a sex cyborg that looked like Anna. After that, Regime officials showed up at the collegiate doors and ordered us to abort the project. It mattered naught that the cyborg was a breakthrough in Bioresearch — a humanoid designed to gather data from those regions of the wilds where radiation is too great for any human or even partially human body to withstand. Anna was just the model for the design.

A new prototype, Anna III, sits on a sliding stand in my pad lab, in the large storage cabinet down here in the basement. I plan to continue my work alone once we figure out how to control this virus — screw the Regime. They'll know once they see the innovation — I'll make them pay attention.

The only thing she needs now is a program to operate the C-Net that runs her. We used the human brain as a base model to design the cerebral functions. I wonder how that StarGazer© is programmed. No one's fascinated by them anymore, but the design seems

ingenious, if you truly consider it. There's something mystical about it. "I bet it's still in the neighborhood." Ah, thinking out loud now. . . .

CHILDREN OF STARS

From the mast we gazed at the concave celestial ocean in the moon's waning dusk. Behind the ship's ether shield, the airship deck below us was full of lively citizens. Though we'd voyaged beyond skies that day, I was in low spirits. Two years prior, Love had struck me with a laser arrow. His vantage point was this woman whose name spelled heaven backwards — a mahogany, long-haired goddess with two jade molars near the back of her mouth that glinted when she smiled. She'd just told me her unit was being deployed earth side, to the spaceport city of Silo, where the newly waged war against the Han the Fourth's NeoRegime was flickering aflame. I was just a cadet then, yet to earn his first Stella.

Her slender arm loosely wrapped the small of my back as I held mine around her shoulders. We watched an iridescent flame arch across the dimming sky — a defense missile being tested in the desert fields beyond the base where we were about to land. I fancied it a shooting star, pretending for an instant we were lost in time, frozen forever in that moment, a rendition in colored ink under a painted sky.

"When I was still a kid," I told her, "I asked my tutor about comets — what they were. She said they were the souls of gods traveling through time."

"You believe that?" She wanted to know.

"Not sure. But if a god's soul does float across the void, what happens to a human's soul, when it leaves?"

"Maybe it doesn't leave," she said quietly. "Maybe it's stuck here — liberated

from flesh, but still needing to find its way.”

Her answer reminded me of times after we’d met, of days when we could sit for hours discussing God and the nature of things. Those days were gone, like the harmony our holy nation was named after. “Or maybe,” she went on. “The soul is God, synthesizing the elements into forms that animate the landscape — reflections of heaven.”

Her words left me with little to say. We were silent a moment. The Milky Way on Harmony's flag fluttered into view at the right as the Lumina shifted direction.

“Do you think I’ll ever see you again?” I spoke quietly as the flame sank toward the horizon.

“Let's hope the Maker wills it so.”

I closed my eyes; her sad words echoed in my thoughts. She believed whatever transpired in her life was due an energy she called providence, perhaps the reason she lived so whimsically, never dwelling on misfortune.

She turned and smiled, leaning toward me. I met her halfway and our lips embraced, hers cool, delicate. Leaning away, I returned her smile, though I knew my eyes confessed my sorrow. I ran a hand through the ebony hair that fell down her back like frizzled flames. As she hummed a familiar song, I recalled our own history and how it wove into the web of history shifting around us. She and I met at the Lunar Academy in a session on world religions.

As fate saw fit, we’d been partnered together, and the first time I met her in the courtyard to study, she was singing words to the same song — singing to herself. She couldn’t see me approach, and I had paused to listen; her voice was sublime.

Exalted beyond light of morn,
soul's key opens Heaven's door.
Casts burdens to earth, spills unto multiverse,
rainfall on Heaven's shore.

They were the only words she sang. She had turned to me then, with a smile, like she knew I was there. When I asked about the song, she said she'd heard it just once in a recurring dream she had of dying and couldn't remember the rest of the words.

I'd been shocked to learn she was an alien from Neon, an Earth-like planet on the other side of a wormhole hole Han the First's life bomb had ripped through space a century before; she was, in fact, General Han the Fourth's only daughter — born from a sample of his ether-enriched blood, she'd said.

We talked about things she'd seen in her own world. She told me once how some theists believe when someone dies, their soul wanders the void in search of a new purpose — not at all what I'd been taught about souls traveling through time. She spoke of her own beliefs about truth, how truth is what souls conceive — even physical truth. We made love on the open balcony of the theatre hall in secret, the cyan moon casting its ghostly light on us. Afterwards, she said our souls had touched.”

She came to Harmony to learn Earth's history at its most prized academy. She'd been taught that humans were originally from Earth, but after learning in the academy other details of human history, she was appalled. She knew her great-great grandfather had developed the life bomb the century before, setting off the first one on the moon. By design, the atomic-scale explosion of the life bomb, composed of gasses and enhanced genetic strands and raw minerals, spontaneously created an atmosphere on the moon and

birthed rapidly evolving life forms that created an ecosystem. Han became famous for his success, which became widely known as the “Little Bang.” Then he became Earth’s wealthiest man when the world government purchased the technology from him, later setting off a variation of Han’s bomb that drastically altered the chemical makeup on Mars, creating a livable atmosphere and spawning life forms, and man’s expansion into the cosmos began.

She even knew about how Han’s first life bomb ripped a wormhole into space when it exploded above the moon, and how he discovered the planet Neon by bravely flying his ship through the hole. What she hadn’t been told was that Neon was already inhabited by people, when Han set off a new life bomb on the planet. The explosion killed most of the planet’s inhabitants, and many of the life forms that spawned evolved into vicious creatures. Han landed on Neon, then, with his private army, and trekked through blossoming wilderness, stopping at empty cities and towns to find survivors. He claimed to be God’s messenger, and promised them paradise in the magical city he would build, leaving those who didn’t follow willingly to die in the planet’s harsh wilderness — and killing off any resistance.

Every scholar on Harmony knew of Han’s conquest; it was in Earth’s history books.

Nevaeh was infuriated, thinking of the lies she’d been taught — the lies her father told the people. She denounced her home, and later enlisted into our military as an Armed Servant, a soldier of Harmony, hoping to eventually become a citizen of Earth. Now, being sent to fight against her own people, I could only imagine what she felt.

Turning to face me, she straightened the button on my slate-grey flex collar shirt.

“You can see me off in the morning,” she promised. I considered the time in between — the empty space — after which I might not see her again.

“As long as you’re not going to tell me goodbye,” I returned.

Captain Lem’s voice cut in on the PA. “All cadets, units, K7 through K12, report to the engine room promptly. All citizens on the airdeck, recede to your cabins and prepare for docking at Fort Harmony. Thank you all for flying aboard the Lumina. I trust you were well accommodated during your tour of the warship.”

“I should get down there,” I said, looking down at the citizens slowly beginning to file into their cabins below.

“Tomorrow then?” Her violet eyes reflected the waxing earth in the sky beyond the shield.

“Tomorrow it is.”

The Lumina was one of the older warships and had to be landed manually. I was among the unlucky, the cadets assigned with the back-straining task of unloading the ether cylinders from the engine. As Klein and I gripped the round handle of one of the cell housings with gloved hands, I constructed a meta-image of my love’s face, etching out every detail of the beauty I might only lay eyes on once more. I wanted to burn it in memory.

“Fuck wrong with you, Paxton?” Klein grunted as we slid the cylinder from its thrust chamber. Its weight collapsed downward, a physical burden. We turned and carefully lowered it into the open space below, down into the heating bay.

“What?” I looked at him as we moved to the next cell.

“You look like somebody punch your madre.”

“Nothing’s wrong. The hell are you talking about?”

“You get in fight with girly-friend? She smack you cross face?”

“She’s leaving, you twit. Being deployed.”

We slid out the next cylinder.

“That blows fatty,” he said through clenched teeth. “Sorry to hear...”

A violent crash severed the end of his sentence, splitting my ears and rocking the ship. I was hurled backwards. We dropped the cylinder, and I smashed into the rail behind me. Klein lost his balance and tumbled onto the deck. The Lumina must have struck something.

“What in Sam Hell?” I heard Klein as I steadied myself, trying to shake off the shock. Then, I saw Sergeant Mason barking from across the engine room, his head bouncing on his thin neck; in those blurred seconds he looked to me like a marionette.

“God’s blessing. We just took a hit. Get those cylinders back in the chambers. We need that ether shield up, now. Vamanos. Move, move your asses.”

Klein and I obeyed, mechanically rushing to the large round handle and hoisting the cylinder. He lifted the fitted end up, turning it forward while I guided it into the thrust chamber with the handle on the other end. I pushed hard, sliding it back in, twisting the handle until it locked and the maroon lights on the engine console above it faded to indigo. The dial turned as the pressure gauge filled quickly.

“You think it’s the Regime?” Klein asked, as if I was any less baffled than he. We hurried to lift the next cell. In a short time, all cylinders were on full power.

The ships computer came in on the speaker.

“Ether shield is at ninety-five percent. All Armed Servants, man your defense stations. All citizens, remain calm. Armed Servants will assist you.”

“Get on those launchers,” Sergeant Mason was rushing about now. “Multiple ships in the air. Cadet units, guard the entry doors. Protect Earth’s citizens at all costs.” Klein and I obeyed, bolted toward the door at the far end of the engine room.

“So it is the Regime then.” Klein insisted.

“How?” I said, gripping the handle of the revolver cannon at my waist. “The war’s not even...”

There was a second blast that shook me from my senses. I felt myself slamming against metal, heard my bones cracking against fiberglass.

After what seemed eternity, the quaking stopped. I lay there with vertigo, sharp pains running through every micrometer of me, unable to move as I watched flames and the roof collapsing on us. It was a hazy dream in slow motion, until the haze clouded over, enveloping everything in whiteness. Then all was dark.

When light returned to me, the engine room was a heap of wreckage. Icy steam hissed from ruptures in the ether engine. Much of the glass floor had shattered, and anything flammable — signs, pillars, parts of the wall, gases in midair — smoldered in flame. Cadet soldiers lay strewn about, some blackened by the flames, other singed to a dry, ashen gray. Klein was draped upside down against the engine, his foot in a thrust chamber, the skin melted from his face, revealing parts of a smashed iron-plated skull beneath.

Was she alive? I heard the voice. The question was almost spoken to me. It overwhelmed me. I rose in a dream state, stumbling through broken pillars, misshapen railings. As I stepped over dead cadets, the vulgar irony of the scene hit me hard. They were casualties, without even having a chance to fight as soldiers.

Woozy, I headed for the electronic door that kept opening and closing involuntarily. I slipped through. On the PA, I could hear orders shouted over gunfire. I veered left, down the corridor where light beams flickered along the ceiling. Darkness flashed. Further down the hall, the light beams had fallen into darkness, and beyond, a room where light spilled in.

I entered the lounge in the ship's west wing. A large hole had been ripped in the domed ceiling and dawn's light flooded onto empty cushioned benches that formed squares down the center of the lounge, others along the wall, all still intact. Through the hole, beyond flames at the edges of the metal, thick pink clouds drifted across the sky. Something appeared through the hole, a Hellion of the lunar planes, I presumed, hunched beyond the opening, staring down with ravenous black eyes. It dove into the lobby, a few meters in front of me. A tall winged creature with a mouthless human face and a woman's chest on an animal's body. It had a head of long tangled white hair. Unlike any Hellion I'd seen, there was nothing proportionally distorted about it. The thing seemed naturally horrifying, as if by design. If it was a Hellion, the cells had mutated perfectly. Still staring at me as if to suck me into those black holes, a mouth stretched open above its chin, a round hole revealing nothing but darkness, and I'm certain I heard the faintest scream coming from somewhere inside. When I looked down, I was holding a serrated dagger. I circled to keep the beast before me.

I lashed out with the blade as it descended, gashing its plastic-like black skin. Pale steam spurted from the wound, sizzled into nothingness. The creature rewarded my efforts with wild swipes of its fore claws, slicing my torso through my shirt. I didn't bleed. It touched its hooved feet to the floor, lunged for me too quickly, pinning me to the wall, claws clamping my arms and shoulders and digging in. Its putrid breath would have made my stomach turn, but my insides felt empty, though I was getting dizzy. Then, its head was blown asunder, and the steam gushed forth like a geyser, its heat passing through me. I released a scream I couldn't suppress. The creature's remains dissipated into the vanishing steam like deleted pixels.

The mist cleared, and there she was standing beneath the gape where the dawn poured in. Light pulsed through the wide chrome-crystalline barrel of the strange weapon fitted over her hand like a glove—a weapon I'd never seen her carry. The weapon dissolved away, like it was never real.

“I was looking for you — for so long,” her voice said.

“I came for you as soon as I was conscious. What's happened? Your unit — are they all...?”

“We need to get off the ship. They'll be here soon.”

“Who?”

“Devourers.”

Before I could ask, she'd disappeared down the corridor on the opposite end. I followed, confused. She was vanishing around corners at every turn, just as I caught glimpses of her. I tailed her moving quickly through the ship. Something shrieked behind me, like a woman's scream. I moved faster, trying to catch Nevaeh's shadow.

Finally, the corridor led me to the ship's bay. All the armored vehicles had emptied. The bay was open, its wide ramp extending down into the sand outside. She stood before me, looking out. Beyond the ramp, several tanks and armored vehicles of the Lumina fleet lay in burning shambles. There seemed to be little fighting now. Rows of steel droids with Sentinel pulse cannons attached to each arm, manned by soldiers inside, and armored rigs of the Regime were lined outside the Lumina's bay, awaiting orders.

The same shriek I'd heard before came from the corridor, following us.

"Let's hurry," she said without turning around.

"We can't go out that way," I said, "The Regime army." Not heeding my warning, she headed down the ramp quickly. "What are you doing? You'll be killed."

She didn't listen. I supposed she figured being captured was better than death; then, I supposed she was right. Once I sensed the presence near the bay entrance behind me, I didn't hesitate. I followed her down the ramp, into the arms of anxious soldiers clad in shining black steel suits, black visors on the headpieces. Holding up my hands to show surrender, I hurried after Nevaeh. As I passed into their ranks, one soldier standing in front of an eight-wheeled rig with an auto turret mounted on top turned to a soldier next to him. His voice was quiet through the speaker on his helmet.

"Check Harmony's media feed. The command center in Silo just launched a missile attack on Neon City." The other sleek soldier tapped the side of his visor.

"Think they'll get through?" The first soldier asked.

"Of course not. The defense system will stop them."

I stepped past them. They didn't look my way. Nevaeh walked ahead of me, fearlessly. I was icy with fear, walking, watching, waiting. She hurried across the desert

sand, right up to a massive, fully armored droid. She walked past him. I froze, watching her stroll through their lines of defense. Not one of them noticed her.

My mind tried to piece together what was happening as I heard footsteps in the bay, claws scratching against the floor's metal surface. I hurried to catch up with Nevaeh, running now, through rows of soldiers.

Several hundred meters beyond their unit, the Harmony airbase was also under siege by NeoSoldiers. They stood guard about the gate, but she somehow slipped through without alerting them. In the next instant, I stood beside her, staring at the convex window of a Firefly, one of our haloed warfighters, the curves of its smooth surface bending the amber glow of the sky.

“We should be able to get there with this.”

“Get where?” I wondered.

A shadow fell, and we both whirled to see another winged creature swooping upon us from above. We ducked, dodged its claws. Nevaeh raised her arm, and the gleaming weapon quickly materialized around her hand, onto it, from thin air. There were two explosions; fire and light burst from the barrel, beaming toward the sky, the first barely missing the creature, the second skimming its wing as it swooped once more. The wounded wing sprayed steam where the beam struck as the creature spun off its course, regaining aerodynamic balance as it lunged into the sky again, twirling around. She fired a third time. The blast radiated a round hole through the left side of its chest. The hole expanded, and I saw the sky through the other side. Then there was just the sky.

“Quickly,” I heard her say. She was already inside the open cockpit. When I made up my mind to follow, I was sitting next to her at the co-pilot's turret, and the roof was

closing. White electric currents rose up from the console, absorbing into her outstretched hands. The lights in the cockpit flickered, and sparks shot from the controls. There was a blinding flash like lightning inside, and the Firefly's four halos began spinning with a roar. Now, the soldiers noticed. They hurried about, pointing, confused, like some spell had been broken.

She touched the control handle and the Firefly rose, poised at an angle, and whisked us diagonally into the sky. We picked up speed.

Her eyes gleamed unnaturally. Creamy light from the rising sun reflected her every delicate feature, shone through her, until she was semi transparent. I began to understand then, that it was a phantasm I'd followed — the perfective, the idea of her. I reveled in her every bright feature, treasuring it, cherishing it. Her image glowed brighter as she smiled.

“You think we'll make it to Heaven's shore?”

The answer was clear.

“If the Maker wills it so,” I said.

I heard the warning beacon buzz on the Firefly's missile tracker. That no longer mattered. All that existed was her perfect image.

When the missile exploded into the tail and the Firefly spiraled out of control, we were engulfed in flames and light. I could only stare at her still, her image persisting through fire, even beyond it, until there were feathery white clouds all around us beneath the ocean of sky.

“Your eyes are beautiful,” I heard her say. “Like two moons, the way they shine in the sun's light.” Her voice filled my being. Then it sang her melody, the one she'd

hummed so many times before, and I knew we'd exist for eternity.

Exalted beyond light of morn,

soul's key opens Heaven's door.

Casts burdens to earth, spills unto multiverse,

rainfall on Heaven's shore.

In that moment, our last moment in time, we were a shooting star.

Streams Extracted

Log-IV

I may be in some trouble. Not sure if I'm thinking clearly — or maybe I'm seeing clearer than ever. I took my microsaw set and stalked down that StarGazer© a little after dusk, sabotaged it after luring it behind the Harrisburg Communal Center, between some air rigs lined up in the lot. I stripped it down, dragging the headpiece and several components connected to it, sticking to the shadows on my way back to the pad. The scraps are sitting on my desk. As far as I can tell, the engineer used the standard Genesis model for the robotics, with some modifications to the scheme. I need to study these modifications and see if I can't figure out what makes this thing work. The kepris anticode can wait. There's something here — something I haven't considered before. . . .

COINCIDENCE

I remember being wired about the idea of becoming a NeoPilot. On the day I left, the day after the festival for the Eve of Waking Dead, I was walking through West Sector One-nine-one to return the wallet of the masked woman I'd slept with that previous night. This was before I realized who she was. I ran into Randy in front of the building. Luckily, I hadn't gone in yet. He said, "Whip some ass over there, Ace."

I told him I would, but I never gave the actual process much consideration. It didn't take long for me to realize I'd stepped into hell.

Training alone was grisly enough, at a secret camp in the icy regions of the Argo Mountains, with recruits from every military branch. We were up every morn before the sun gods wake the flowers, getting our "cans reprimanded," as the drill captains like to call it. These "reprimands" were often physical, and usually without reason.

Technically, we were permitted to fight back, but really we couldn't. Once, on a three-mile grunge course we often footed through snow across the mountain slopes, I saw three male recruits lash out at Captain Sykes when he kicked the sixty-kilo missile sphere they had carried for almost two miles, more than half the course, and it toppled over. I could comprehend their anger, as I was carrying an identical sphere on my back while two others, Reeves and my bunkmate, Ingram, supported it to keep me from collapsing under weight and fatigue. If the missile sphere touched the ground, we had to start over.

Retaliation turned out to be an unfortunate mishap on their part, as the recruits together succumbed to the most efficient physical thrashing I'd ever witnessed. In a small

span of time, multiple bones were broken, and in another instant, I was watching them writhe around on the ground, screaming in pain. I made a mental note:

“Do not engage in combat with drills captains. They enjoy this immensely for sport.”

Before we were transported here from the Nebula base in West Sector One-nine-one, they confiscated everything we owned. High in the mountain camp, we had no contact with the outside world and were entirely at their mercy.

There were several grueling months of this, all merely to condition us for what came next. We were extracted from the mountain camp in small teams and carted out into the wilds, armed with nothing more than sabers.

For Han’s sake.

In my recruit squad, there were nine of us, an air rig full. “Head west,” the pilot yelled, standing next to the open door in front of us. “Report to Han’s Gate when you reach Neon City.” I looked up at Gaines to my right. He was adjusting his parachute pack, trying to get it to fit over his long, skinny arms. There were beads of sweat on his squarish forehead, above his bushy, blond eyebrows. He was nervous about the jump.

To my left, Nix, the oldest in the squad, turned to me and flashed a grin. All of his upper teeth were metallic silver. One of his incisors was missing. His bottom teeth were yellowed and crooked.

“See you groundside, McCoy,” he said, then leapt out the bay door. The rest of us followed. We parachuted right through trees of the overgrown forest swamp

The first night was the worst, drifting through a dark world, threatening and unknown. Our orders were simple enough, but we didn’t realize we were so many miles

from the city, and less than an hour into our hike through tall, dark grass of the muggy swamp, we encountered something gruesome. I clutched my saber's grooved handle tight, nearly losing my bowels at the sight of it — a lipless, skinless freak that crept out from a cluster of brush that glowed faintly yellow in the dark — a bloody upright figure, glaring with eyeless sockets, dry strands of hair dangling from its head. More hair sprouted randomly in other spots on its decay-ridden body — a furry rotting corpse of sorts. But there was something else strange. It seemed to partially exist, its extremities fading out and reappearing at times, like those old-fashioned holos when the batteries run low.

Ingrim was closest; it went for him first. He wasn't a big guy, but like me, was athletically built. Working together most of the time, we'd held our own at camp. But now, he was too spooked to even move, and the thing cocked its three jointed arm and sliced through his gray fatigue vest with the gritty claws on its long human fingers. Ingrim held his arms to his stomach, his dark eyes wide in shock, his mouth hanging open. The blood dripped down as he dropped to his knees.

“Ingrim!”

Without realizing, I'd yelled his name. The walking corpse turned its head, turned its black sockets on me, peering deep inside me; then I watched the blade of Nix's saber plunge into the side of its neck. There was something like a scream as he whipped the blade free, spilling the blood, and dust puffed out from the wound in dispersing clouds. The sight of this vulnerability set something off in us. We attacked like hyenas, clutching and stabbing at it, hacking it to shreds. Our fear turned us savage.

By the third day, we were less shocked by what we saw. We made jokes. Lee pointed toward the path we were walking, shielding his eyes from the fiery sun blaring on us above the horizon in the western sky. We all stopped.

“Look,” he said. I looked ahead to where he was pointing, squinting my eyes. Something large and rotund was scuttling toward us across the mud — a swine-like, sweltering freak with welts on its pinkish skin. “It’s Nix’s mom.” His tone was dry, his expression under the long dark hair covering most of his face unchanging. We all laughed.

It was upon us then, and in our skirmish with the vicious creature, we lost Lizecky and were down to seven. By then, we’d killed nearly a dozen freaks, all quite unlike the first, which had dissolved into the dust once it was dead. The rest just lay still, bleeding out.

The following day, we came across a significantly larger monstrosity. My first thought was carnivorous dinosaur — an Earthian creature, long extinct — when I saw the sharpness and size of the teeth. Nix insisted it was best we take cover in the thick leaves of the trees or the long grass and sneak by when it came searchingly down the wide path we’d been roaming down haggardly. Once it was much closer, I saw it was actually a behemoth swamp lizard. Crawling on all fours and shaking the ground, the beast was half the height of the trees.

The last apparition we encountered, like the first, was essentially humanoid. We had climbed down from an overhang at the edge of the forest and into a cove at the edge of the sea. Crystal-clear water rushed out from various cracks and openings in the rock, spilling down the ridge into the inlet. I stood in the pebbled sand, gazing at the birds with

plumages of reds and yellows, oranges and greens. There were at least a dozen of them, pecking in the white sand or perched on the smooth rocks sticking up out of the shimmering water. It was the most beautiful place I'd ever seen. I didn't even notice the freak standing there at the mouth of a cave in the rocks, until Gaines said, "What the fuck?" not in surprise, but inquiringly. I looked to where he was staring. This creature was severely deformed with its three legs, its two extra unformed arms hanging from its right side, just extra stubs that hang loose. There was volition in its milky white eyes.

"You rotting scum."

It actually spoke these words, dryly, through pale and blistered lips in a sexless voice. Then, it came for us. I aimed my blade tip for the soft spot at its neck, which wasn't so soft, it turned out. The whole body was tough and leathery, inside and out, and the jab made only a minor wound. But the mutant was slow, and we overpowered it by sheer numbers, our seven-man squad quite efficient by this point. Nix and Wiliker were the only two willing to get within arm's length of this thing; it was probably an arm's length taller than all of us. They'd distract it while the rest of us struck from behind, systematically wounding the tough flesh in its legs to the point of immobility. My energy was thoroughly expended when Wiliker paused, hands on his knees, sweat dripping off the ends of his long, tangled black hair and into the mud, like the black blood dripping off his saber, and suggested, "Let's just leave it there. Let it bleed to death."

The thing just wouldn't die.

Freaks and wild beasts were only one sort of enemy. We battled hunger, afraid to eat anything blossoming on some of the wild, colorful trees — until around day seven,

when I could last it no longer; I plucked a round yellow fruit from a vine covering large rocks near a river we'd followed from the waterfall beyond the sea cove. The skin was furry and thick, and when I bit into it, the red juice inside was sweet and abundant. The others did the same, and we consumed several of these, fruit after fruit from the vine, bits of yellow skin sticking to our palms and fingers, the red dripping constantly from our chins, spilling off our elbows.

After eating our fill, we camped out near the river.

With the coming of night, I felt a growing discomfort, and by midnight I was sweating in droves. Moments later, I was shivering, as cold as ice. I touched a hand to my sore neck and it was hot with fever. Soon, there was violent retching in my bowels and stomach, followed by unfathomable bouts of vomiting and diarrhea. The others experienced these symptoms soon after me, and before long, I was sure we were all dying from this sickness. This lasted at least fifteen spins if not more, over a quarter rev. After that, my immune system was adapting; I could actually feel the effects in my body gradually reversing themselves. In time, the sickness subsided. All but one of us made it. Mims died, apparently of strangulation, the vomit spotting his dry lips and reddish beard.

"I'm sure it's the shots we got before training." Austin said this as he slipped the fatigue vest over his thick, pale white arms and zipped it up over his hairy chest after immersing it in the river, trying to scrub away the red stains. This was morn of the eighth day. I kept track of days compulsively. In a way, I think it helped me stay sane.

We'd all been silently contemplating how we could have survived the dire sickness. I remembered the shots — hydra resin injections, "meticulously engineered,"

the white haired military doc at the med station had assured me. This was just after we were sworn in.

At Lee's request, Austin, Nix and I had waded into the river, pulling Mims between us while Lee prayed over him; then, we released him, sending him off with the swift current. Afterward, I sat next to Lee along the riverbank. He was staring blankly over the water. Mims had been his bunkmate back at camp.

"May his body dissolve into the salt of the sea, which gives life," he said, slightly louder than a whisper. "May his weightless soul rise into the waters of the great deep." He was sitting cross-legged and silent now. The hum of insects and the mallards splashing through the water were the loudest sounds heard.

I felt as if I should have something to add.

"I'm not very schooled in Han's thought," I decided to say. "Never paid much attention in Philosophy session. I was more of a Warfare Science guy."

"Probably a load of crap," said Lee, standing. I looked up at him, wondering what he meant. He skipped a flattened stone across the water. "I can't believe they sent us out here to die, without telling us. This is the worst kind of betrayal." We listened to the ebb of the river lapping at the rocks and fallen twigs and branches of the trees leaning over the water's edge.

"I betrayed a friend once," I said. "Took something that meant the world to him. What kind could be worse than that?"

"You didn't send your friend off to die."

We finally neared Han's Gate at the southernmost end of the steel wall surrounding Holo City just after dawn of day nine. Together, we stood at the comm. box, a console levitating magnetically in front of the glimmering ether shield that arched toward the sky and formed a transparent dome over the city, the crystal haze reflecting rainbow colors in the sun. I tapped the green button on the touch-screen, dried blood and dirt covering my hands and arms, oily grime caked under my fingernails and wedged into the crevices and cuts on my hands. The other five recruits looked the same. Standing next to each other, it was hard to tell, between Austin and Wiliker, who was the darker race and who the lighter; I knew Wiliker was an even darker shade of brown than me.

"State your name and ID number," a female voice demanded through the speaker.

Nix gave his data. Moments later, a minute portion of the clear shield was lit, becoming plainly visible, a square panel. This single panel glowed fuchsia, the color of a sunset, and vanished, forming a narrow path through the field of crystal mist.

Reaching Han's Gate through the other end of the shield, I could see the tips of scrap houses just over the top of the steel wall around the city. Nix punched in at the code panel and the gate slid open just barely, the steeled dragon head on top splitting in half, its jeweled eyes turning in on us. We walked through, beneath the gate bridge and across several yards of pavement and gridded metal toward a large glass and steel complex in front of us. To the right was a metal door large enough to dispense military vehicles and hunter's rigs that scouted the wilds; on the left was a clear door, and an escalator inside leading up.

The escalator conveyed us to another electronic door.

"Please place your ID tag before the scan ray," the door speaker voiced jovially.

Gaines was first, holding up the military barcode in his forearm to the scanner. The door opened. We followed suit.

A decontamination chamber was on the other side. Following the graphic instructions displayed on the wall, we removed our blood-soaked uniforms and placed them in a chute labeled “apparel,” dropped our sabers into the “weapons/equipment” chute.

There were at least a hundred of these decontaminant cells. Naked and bloody, I climbed into one, a steel sarcophagus with contraptions stemming from its sides and glass doors spread open. I lay back in it, switched the lever near my right hand like the directions on the arm indicated, and the glass folded in over me as restraints slid into place over my limbs, locking me in. Dozens of mechanical arms curled up from the sides like tentacles with stingers; the long needles on the ends of these pricked into my arms and legs, my groin, several in my face and neck, through thin slots in the large restraints. I held my breath as the cell filled with a warm liquid. Coldness rushed through me entirely, an odd sensation, gradually intensifying in my veins, until the cold became excruciating. It was unbearable. My jaw was set tight, and I felt my teeth would shatter.

Then, there was the warmth, the heat flowing into me, the feeling of release, like I was pissing uncontrollably.

The needles painlessly removed themselves from me, and the fluid flushed out through tubes under the cell. The light on its control module was a blurred green coming into focus. It took some time to orient myself mechanically, to know whether I was backwards or upside down, and to figure out how to maneuver my numb legs and arms.

With difficulty, I climbed out and I walked toward the opposite door where

Austin and Nix were already waiting. Their faces were asleep. Bright white beams emitting from the low ceiling in front of this door were scanning Austin over from head to toe. They flashed green sequentially. I fell in behind Nix to be scanned. Wiliker slid in groggily behind me, followed by Lee, then Gaines.

Rows of glass cabinets lined the walls in the next room; inside there were long robes of tanned hide, which we wrapped around ourselves to cover up. We exited through another clearance door and were outside again, at the City Guard's post inside the gate. NeoPilots in full attire were waiting for us, cheering as we approached the post. We penetrated the crowd of men and women standing along the walk. Some of them reached a hand out to jostle us about the shoulders, or removed the shroud on our robes to tussle our hair, swearing, shouting words of encouragement and praise. Some of us couldn't help smiling. We'd made it through.

Wiliker and I were sent to Nebula Base. The others were shipped elsewhere. We were restricted to cadet training quarters for several weeks, but we'd earned some of our freedom back. We had comm. links inserted into our forearms and could use them freely on our downtime. When I synched mine to the Network and logged on, tons of mail was backed up in my inbox. There were hundreds of advertisements, and several feeds from soliciting corporations. One of these I opened and read, "Zahncorp Pharmaceuticals is delighted to offer you a management position on our staff at the conclusion of your two-year service term." I suddenly realized what it meant to join the fleet. A soldier was like a celebrity, someone who'd seen the wilds and lived to tell.

There was a feed from Randy too. After more than a week of fending for my

survival out there, the holiday incident had slipped my mind. I opened the feed:

Ace,

How's things? Thought I'd send a kite to c if ur still alive. Its been months. Forgot how long u said u'd be gone. Hope ur making it alright.

Have u seen Melia? She works at the base. Got a job there last yr doing data work, office stuff. Anyhow, if u do c her, tell her I'm thru with her. Can u tell her that? She knows why. See you when you get back. We'll crack a bottle of Luna's©, the blue moonshine.

Randy

I hadn't even been outside the cadet quarters. It bothered me that I might see Melia on base. Randy's message bothered me even more — its ambiguity. "She knows why."

Of course I wondered if he meant that night, but there was no way to tell. I knew it would eat at me.

One day after virtual flight sims at the wargame arcade, I was sitting in one of the rec rooms having a ration break, and Melia came and sat on the bench right across from me at the long table.

"Hi stranger."

There was a curious look in her brown eyes as she said this. For a few ticks, she didn't seem real. When I'd pictured this chance meeting before, I saw myself getting angry, hurling accusations, demanding an explanation. But in the actual moment, no anger was there. Contrarily, there was something pleasant about her presence across from me, a reminder of my former life, perhaps, before I was became fully aware of life's fragility. Or maybe it was because I hadn't seen a woman out of uniform in months.

“Hey,” I returned uncertainly. I flashed back to that night, to the meeting of the masks. I could feel her warm breath on my ear, blowing through slits in the silver spike mask she wore that night. “Randy told me you worked here or something.” I scratched the back of my neck, forgetting I’d been eating with my hands. Some strings of noodle and bits of corn stuck to me. I brushed at it, and corn tumbled down my neck, inside my collar. I left it there.

“I’m a file decoder,” she tells me. “I weed out unreadable data on the Network consoles and surf the interplanetary web for programs to decode it.”

Silence followed. She looked out the window, then back at me. “So, congrats on making it through.”

There was another flashback, this time to Ingram having his insides sliced open by that ungodly creation. I blocked this image out.

“Why didn’t you say anything?” I asked her. “That night, at the Gamma?” Again, she looked away.

“You knew it was me,” she said.

“I swear I didn’t,” I replied truthfully. “But you knew.”

“What? I was sure you knew. I thought when I said I lived by the base...well, you said you knew some people who lived over there. I assumed you meant me.”

“What about Randy?”

“We were never right for each other. Everyone knows that, Ace. Don’t be stupid.”

She was right. In our small group of friends, everyone knew. Randy’s cousin Hodge had said it best, the night he and Randy and I were leaving the Multiverse arcade, a few years back.

“Yeah, opposites attract,” Hodge was saying, repeating Randy’s words. “But you and Melia are too far apart on the spectrum. You’ll never come together, to a middle ground — not in this lifetime.” It sounded cruel, but it turned out to be the truth, I guess. Randy was far too reserved. Melia always wanted more excitement from life than he could supply.

Men and women weren’t supposed to be seen together outside the work area, and on free days, we weren’t permitted to leave the sector. But Melia lived right off base, so it was easy for us. On the three days a month I had free, we’d meet at the resident bar on the thirtieth floor of her building, then go back to her unit for some energy shots. Each time, thoughts of the holiday night invaded my mind. Thoughts of physical contact between us. With each meeting, these thoughts became more vivid, and my imagination took over, supplying fantasies. At these times, not once did I think of Randy. Somehow, the whole experience had changed who I was.

Eventually, I needed to act on these thoughts, and Melia obliged. The first time lasted all of thirty ticks. There was a total loss of control. I was surprised when she laughed, thoroughly amused at this. The subsequent times were better.

We saw each other for months this way, and I grew attached to this contact, to the intimacy between bodies, needing it most when we were apart. Couldn’t tell if it was love or lust. Maybe it was all the chemicals and hormones they injected into me. Whatever it was, I couldn’t stop.

After the education, I was inserted as an Operant for the missile defense systems,

an entry-level pilot duty. Everyday of this was monotonous, checking and quadruple checking the launch parameters, making sure everything was in working order, that all strike ratios were in synch with the starmap coordinates. An uneventful job, with no room for slacking off. The Head Ops took their task gravely serious; but I knew no one would dream of firing anything at Han's Capitol.

On one day, Corporal Rigley, a Head Op with six wings aligned on the rounded collar of his tan uniform, informed me that pilots of the "revered Conquest Fleet," as he called them, had maneuvered their way into Earth's satellite field. The fleet opened fire over Harmony, the governing city-state on Earth's moon, bringing some of their starships down in an attempt to demonstrate the might of the Regime, "to bend them to our will," he had added. There was a gleam of pride in his eyes as he relayed this to me. I simply nodded, pretending to be as pleased about it as he was. Never having been on a ship, I didn't know the first thing about space combat. The Regime kept their soldiers on a need-to-know basis.

Other than this, it was a typically boring day.

That eve, I was putting my rug sack together, getting ready for a night off duty. I was supposed to be meeting Wiliker at the Shallow Bay Casino. Then, I got an urgent voice feed from Melia. She sounded distressed, said she needed to see me. I sent a kite telling Wiliker, I had to take a rain check until our next time off. The message he sent back was almost incoherent, but conveyed something about him having a "live" time. Some woman was giggling into his ear speaker. He was already drunk.

I met Melia at the Café Shack down by the port, next to the South Main station. She was sitting at the outside bar on the patio next to the street.

“Randy’s gone missing,” she told me. The soft orange light of the holo sign above the door showed the concern on her smooth, freckled brown face.

“What do you mean?”

“He left a feed in my box saying he was leaving the city, going on about how he was through with it all.”

“Leaving?” I asked. “Out into the wilds?” The thought horrified me. She nodded. “So he knows, then?”

She nodded again, burying her face in her thin hands. Randy was as good as dead out there, I knew. In no way was he prepared for that outer world, not without training.

I put my arm around Melia on the barstool next to me. In spite of it all, she loved him, I guess. They loved each other. Wasn’t that all that mattered? My God, what was I thinking?

She pleaded with me to bring him back.

The day after, I was doing an atmospheric pressure check with a team of Ops at a skywatch console above the landing towers of the starship field when alarms sounded off through the base. I was seated among several consoles and other Ops, our space enclosed by the windows atop the tower, and I was drinking a Twinkle Soda I got from the credit machine on the bottom floor, when the comm. speaker came on.

“Attention all stationed units. The Earthian city of Silo has deployed a return missile strike on Holo City. All Ops, man a nearby launch console at once. This is not a simulation.”

Before Corporal Rigley started snipping out his orders, I had already clicked the

flashing icon at the bottom of the image. There were multiple missiles on the starmap. But we had plenty of Ops. All I had to do was click on an unassigned defense missile to activate it, lock onto a Harmony missile that wasn't already targeted, and engage just as the enemy missile crossed into the critical strike zone flashing red on the map. This would be a slice of pie. I looked over at Barnes sitting next to me.

"Let's whip some ass," I told her.

Randy's words had stuck with me the whole time I'd been there, and naturally, as I watched their missiles drifting across the star ocean on the holograph, my thoughts drifted to him. I was thinking about the words I'd said to Melia when I saw her in the rec room, and now, I couldn't help asking myself the same question I'd asked her. What about Randy?

I wondered what he'd said when Melia told him. I had no idea what I'd say to him if I saw him, but chances were, I'd never see him again.

The beacon must have flashed for at least eight seconds before I finally noticed, thought, "oh shit," and clicked "engage." Corporal Rigley was screaming my name.

"McCoy...McCoy. You missed the fucking mark. You missed it..."

My heart skipped beats as I watched the screen. The Harmony missile, an orange dot, inched closer to the planet. The defense missile I'd fired, a flashing blue dot, traveled at centimeters per second, closing in on the orange one — and skimming right past it, no detonation flash.

It arched back and pursued again, closing the distance once more as the orange dot penetrated Neon's outer spheres, colliding at the very edge. Both dots flashed white light and disappeared. By now, no other dots were left. I waited for a damage report, like

an impending doom I couldn't escape. A voice came in on the comm.

“An interplanetary missile explosion has breached Neon's thermosphere. Holo City will possibly sustain minor damage from falling debris. No citizen casualties are expected.”

The corporal was standing over me.

“Minor damage my ass. Nothing should have gotten through there. We can do this in our sleep, McCoy. Have you got your prick in your hand over here?”

“No sir.”

“Then what the hell happened?”

“Lost focus, sir.”

“You're relieved of your position until further notice. Do you understand?”

“Yes sir.”

“Report to the hangar, yesterday, or so help me God...”

And just like that, my tour was over. I never even got to fly an aircart, let alone travel the cosmos.

I could have reenlisted into the fleet after a full cycle if I wanted. They'd have to put me through “corrective programming,” they said, whatever that was. I never found out. After being back home for a little over a month, I'd already found a niche. Freelance hunting. I had to look for Randy out there, even if I never found him. I'd been calling in to apply for any job that came up in the media posts. “The Suicide Hunter,” is what the datacasts were calling me. But it was the only way my mind found peace.

I wasn't only searching for Randy. There's was something about the outside world, a world where horror and beauty existed intermittently — an allure substantially greater than the everydayism of city life. I wished I could have been with Randy out there, experienced it with him. If I could find him out there, maybe in hiding, I could teach him the arts of survival. Then he'd see that none of it ever mattered, that it was all just petty details. I was sure he'd understood this already, trapped in the wilderness. I only hoped by some miracle it wasn't too late.

For one campaign, I was signed to a team of four hunters; some scientist was paying mega bytes for an untainted breed of any species. We rented one of the hefty 8-wheelers, the ones painted in shiny black, with the turret on the front. After four days of scouting, we hadn't trapped a single thing of value, nothing but mutants, stupid and hideous.

That fourth night, we came across three humanoids standing in the darkness, overlooking a marshy creek bed. As we approached from behind, they turned to us. There were no shrieks, no teeth flashed or claws drawn. They just stared, their faces warped and distorted, like masks. The tallest of the three stared directly at me. Its elongated face and drooping "O" of a mouth instantly reminded me of the sorrow mask Randy had worn that night. Like the creature I'd first seen out here, it was fading in and out of reality. The thing reached a hand out to us, and Mike, the dark man in retro shades next to me, promptly wasted it. The others fled.

"You see that?" I wondered. "That was fucking weird."

"They're all weird, Ace," Mike replied. "Monsters."

“I’ll wager that one tried to get through the Ether Shield,” Marcus said through his smiley-face mask. “See how it was glowing? Spooky.”

The image of that face remains stuck in my head to this day. Always, it’s fading, but it never completely goes away. A warped human, an outstretched hand. I’ve had a different nightmare each night ever since. I pray it doesn’t haunt me forever.

Streams Extracted

Log-V

Not sure who could believe this. I can't find a data chip anywhere in the main components. It's been three weeks now that I've been tinkering with this thing. I found the power circuit, so I ran it to my Starboard's power source. After that, I removed several circuits from one of the plug-in extensions on my input console and reordered them to correspond to the circuitry connected to the StarGazer© headpiece (It reminds me of Griffin's ThinkCap©). I put it on to test my wild hypothesis once I finally had it synched to the Starboard.

Right now, the 3d image on the desktop is zipping through a virtual cosmos, and a caption in the background reads “Data feed detected”....The Starboard is phishing through the Network's® universal databanks for a program that can decode the data. I've been waiting several phases at this point. Can't believe it's taking this long to locate one in interplanetary cyberspace.

Finally, a crystalline cube appears. I maximize the cube. The logo of a corp. called Dreams Deterred lights up the top left corner; the colorful letters swirl like autumn leaves in the wind around the silver silhouette of a tree that extends from Earth to the stars. There's no other info about the corp. but there's a queer passage beneath the logo:

Ideas supersede light's speed, traveling the void
back and forth through time. Unravel mysteries
of the mind —

Experience Simultaneity.

A new message flashes, telling me the data feed is being decoded; another cube pops up in front of the one with the logo. My name is scripted across the cube—my barcode. Beneath that, various information about me—age, height, occupation—is listing off at random. As the list gets longer, a third cube appears in front of it. Another message. It says, “Beneath that random information about me..” Wait, that's my — that's me thinking... “Wait, that's me thinking...” What? Christ, this is too much. . . .

DEAD ZONE

It was nightfall of day six, and I was starting to wonder if leaving the city was a bad idea. They warned citizens against leaving, but I'd had all I could stand of the city life. I'd driven my cart straight through Han's Gate and was now carting down this ancient dirt road through deciduous woods. For hours, I'd been driving through thick fog, unable to see far ahead.

Cautiously, I made my way along the winding road. My cart jerked and began stuttering, then the generator shut down. I pressed hard on the foot pedal, trying to feed it energy, but the cart kept decelerating. It slowed to a stop. I struggled with the damned thing, trying to restart the engine, but it was useless. It was an old generator and didn't retain as much sun as it used to — and there wasn't much light through the fog.

I hadn't seen an army scout rig in three days; so I'd gone beyond even the hunting grounds. Still, I grabbed my communicator from the passenger seat to see if there was a signal from a rig in the area, but when I looked at the screen. It read "no service."

"Marvelous," I whispered.

I couldn't just sit there. I'd have to walk until I could find some help. If the sun didn't show tomorrow, the generator wouldn't kick. Opening the door, I stepped out into the moist, dense fog and began to walk along the road. The black trees on either side seemed as if they might swallow me in darkness. They say only children should fear the dark, but an inkling of fear rising within me. We pretend not to be, but we're all afraid of darkness. Children are more transparent creatures than adults.

I longed to see the friendly head beams of an approaching cart, a town — a sign of human life somewhere. There was nothing. I flicked the light on my wristwatch. Several spins of walking had slowly become an hour's rev on that dreary road.

Again, I checked my comm. screen for a signal — still in a dead zone. With the endless fog and expanse of road and dark trees, it seemed I was fated to walk eternally.

At some point that night, the enshrouding fog began to lift, and I could see further ahead. The ominous burden cast over me felt lighter, and my pace quickened.

I soon reached a point where most of the road had sunk into the ground, perhaps from some impact — certainly impossible to drive across. From where I stood, I noticed a tall fence running alongside the road, tattered and rusted through. I wondered who might have put it there, and what was on the other side.

With some effort, I climbed over and found myself standing in a lot with sparse grass. I crossed the field, and came to a narrower dirt road on the other end. To my surprise, there were several small huts built of wooden boards and aluminum scraps against either side of the dirt road; dim lights glowed beneath a few of the doors. It was like Sector Four-one-nine on Holo City's wall, where the unfortunate scrounged for their living.

There was a figure standing near the road in front of one of the huts. I let out a sigh of relief.

Civilization.

I approached this man to ask assistance, but his disposition gave me pause, stopping me dead in my tracks. He was standing still, hunched over and facing the

ground, as if weighed down by some force. His body wavered, like it was holding itself up while the mind was unconscious. Forgetting about my own predicament for a spin, I wondered if this man was in need of help.

"Excuse me...sir?"

At the sound of my voice, the man's body jerked itself erect, and the eyes snapped open. My heart dropped from my chest at the awful sight as I started back. His irises were clouded over. They were black as death. Before I could react, the man charged for me, pounced on me. Up close, I could see small round growths all over his face, incandescent yellow-greenish puffs poking through the skin of his cheeks and neck, his nose and across his forehead.

Forced to the ground, I struggled with the deranged man clawing at my face. He opened his mouth, spewing saliva on me. There was this horrid squishing noise as he distended his jaw, stretching the growths around the edges of his lips.

"What the devil?" I yelled, fighting with him, trying to grab his arms. He wrapped his hands around my neck, digging his fingers in.

"Randal!"

I was horrified at the sound of my own name spoken from his lips. It was a voice not of this world — one suitable only for nightmares.

"We know your fear, Randal." The hands squeezed tighter around my throat. I glared helplessly into the black glossy eyes. A damp wind was picking up, fluttering his long, tangled grayish hair, making a dry rustling.

As life was being strangled from me, I managed to grip around the wrists, and with adrenal strength, released his hold on my throat and rolled him off me. Gasping and

coughing, I stood and ran hard down the dirt road, past more huts, screaming for someone to help. The demented man got up to run after me. There was a split in the road to the right, and a strange light glowed from somewhere in that direction. A woman stood there near the road next to a bent-up signpost. I looked into her face and was again horrified. She had the same black eyes as the man, the same growths, like puffs of boiled egg almost. She reached her arm out to me, and it wasn't an arm at all, but a thin stalk of some sort, slowly forming a head. It was curling toward me.

"We will make your fear go away." It was the same voice that seemed to speak in several voices at once, sounding as if it echoed inside my brain.

I ran past the woman, shoved her out of the way. She fell to the ground, making that disgusting squishing sound. Thinking of it even now makes my skin crawl.

I headed for the source of the light, constantly looking back. The man was still after me, and the woman got up and came too. Running into a wide clearing surrounded by huts at the end of the road, I noticed a whole crowd coming toward me then, coming from everywhere. It was like they sprouted from the ground. They all had the same cloudy eyes and skin growths. They were all speaking.

"Randal. You can live forever."

The ghastly figures all spoke of their own accord, but the voice was the same. Some of them made that same terrible sound, stretching their mouths, making them wider. The crowd and the noise closed in on me. The voice, coming from the mouth of each person, was all jumbled together now. I couldn't make out words anymore.

There was a small vendor's stand with a wooden shelf a few yards away. I jerked at the shelf in savage panic, then, kicked it with the solid heel of my brown hiking shoes.

A thick piece of wood split from the handle, and I ripped it off as the crowd was upon me. In a violent swinging rage, I smashed the crooked slab against heads, faces, shoulders — whatever I could reach — pushing through them, their hands gripping me, their nails pinching and scratching into my skin. With great effort, I made an opening, freeing myself from the deranged mob. I charged through and found the source of the light, directly in my path; a grand, leafless tree sat in the center of the clearing, a wide circle of trenched stones surrounding the massive trunk. Luminous mushroom caps, pale green and yellow, stretched their way up the tall trunk, like a garment, extending along the lower portions of some of the thick black branches. I steered around this and down a curving dirt path on the other side of the clearing, then cut from the path, heading straight for the deep woods behind the nearest huts.

The mob followed after me, still calling in that horrific voice, which now sounded enraged.

“This is your eternity.”

My heart felt like it might burst as I fled into the midst of the black trees. The voices were behind me — calling for me. I’d run forever if I had to — anything to get away from the awful sound.

The forest was pitch dark, and as I struggled to keep running, my foot tangled in a root and I slammed to the ground, knocking the wind from me, and badly twisting my ankle. I tried standing to put weight on it, but the pain was real, and I collapsed. The pursuers were still behind me in the distance, the puffs on their faces glowing in the absence of light, casting gray shadows over the trunks of black trees. They were moving closer.

Dead leaves and twigs rustled as my exhausted body slid across that clammy forest floor. I managed to reach the hollow of a tree and crawled inside. Beyond frightened, I waited, watching, those glowing specters coming closer.

Dear God. Is this Hell? I wondered

Cowering in fear, I waited, subjected to my fate, knowing they would be upon me. I couldn't run any longer.

“Randal...Randal.”

They were very close now. I covered my head like a frightened child, closed my eyes and listened to the voice and dozens of footsteps disturbing the ground just outside the thick tree.

They found me, I thought pitifully. I'm dead!

The footsteps ceased. There was a brief silence, then I heard the dreadful sound again. When I looked up, there were hands at the edges of the tree hollow, and a woman's sickly face peeked in. Choked with fear, I lunged out of the tree hollow into a sea of lurid faces. As I tried to run through, the ground moved beneath me, throwing me off balance, and arms grabbed hold of me, pulling and throwing me to the ground. They were on me then, clutching and scraping. I tried to crawl away, but they dragged me back, pulling at my clothes, tearing out patches of my hair. They pressed me to the ground; I couldn't breathe from their weight on me. Something cold and wet was spilling onto my back. A splintering sounded loudly in my ears, and I was sure it was me. They were splitting me in half, I thought in agony.

Then, all at once, the pulling stopped; gradually, the pain subsided. At first, I assumed I was dead. But the splintering sound was gone, the weight lifted from my back.

My lips and teeth were pressed deep into the dirt. Slowly, I raised my head, daring my eyes to look. Thin rays of light shone through the thick limbs of the dead trees, touching the floor of the forest.

It was dawn.

I saw the murderous crowd, the closest of them standing at arms length. The puffy growths were withering in the light, crumbling apart.

There were grunts of wonder as they looked around at each other, some of them scratching their heads. One by one, they turned away, heading back toward their village, speaking not a word to each other.

Fearful of the trees, I rushed through the dead woods, away from the village, down a winding trail which led to a stream. There was a bed of large rocks down at the water's edge, where I sat down to rest. Must have passed out from exhaustion soon after.

When I awoke, it seemed close to midday. Gripped immediately by fear, I leapt up, hobbled down the path along the stream. This led to another trail, into green woods. In a short distance, the forest cut off at a wide dirt road, the same one I'd walked along the night before, I imagined. As I started down the road, an antique pickup truck approached from behind me. I waved my arms as the truck came closer. The driver stopped in front of me. He sported a worn-out billed cap and a faded brown collared shirt with three white buttons. There was a bandage under his left eye, a long scar at the corner of his mouth.

"What seems to be the problem, stranger?" His voice was friendly. I breathed a sigh of relief and thanked the stars.

"I...my cart shut down, miles down the road here. I was hoping to find some help

up this way, but...”

“Hop on in,” he said. I walked around, opened the door and pulled myself into the truck.

“You alright?” he asked, looking over at me with concern. Seeing the man's face up close under the brim of his cap, I was again choked with fear. It was the man from the night before, the same one standing in the dirt road, the one who had wrapped his hands around my throat — who spoke with the voice of evil itself. Now, his voice was normal, full of genuine concern. Seeing the bandage again, I realized I must have struck him with the wooden slab when fighting my way through that swarming crowd. I looked down to see that I still clutched it tightly in my scratched and dirty hand. The man followed my gaze, looking at the weapon in my lap — then he looked away.

We rode for nearly a mile in silence before I recognized my abandoned cart up ahead.

“Is this you?” he asked, looking over at me. I was still unable to speak. He stopped the truck. I climbed out, turning back to look at him. “Can you start her up? Never seen a model like that one. What make is it?”

I tried speaking but made only a squeak. I cleared my throat, tried again.

“Neomahn,” I croaked. “The Regime’s brand. They make all carts where I’m from.”

“Never heard of them.”

I opened the door, mechanically slid into the driver's seat. He got out and stood next to his truck. I pressed the startup button and the generator hissed and sparked to life. It reminded me of the horrible squishing sound the man had made, and I jerked my hand

away.

“Sounds like you’re good to go,” he said as he leaned against his door, his elbow resting in the window. “I’ve got a flare charge you can have.” He limped to the back of the truck, pulled a metal box from his truck bed by a handle. The casing was rusted, caked with dust. He handed it to me, and he brushed his hands onto his dingy slacks.

“Case you run out of sun,” he said, then added, “It’s the least I can do.”

I watched him get back into his truck. He pulled up next to me, his driver’s side door next to mine.

“You might want to head the other way. The road ends a little further up this way. Take care of yourself, mister.” It was said with sincerity. He tipped his cap. I nodded, still in dumb shock. There was sadness in his eyes, hidden until that moment. He turned around and drove the way we’d come.

Through the convex windshield, I could see the fence I’d climbed over. Up above was a bent highway sign I hadn’t seen in the fog. The name of some town was blotted out by thick red scrawl. For they shall inherit the earth. I turned from the sign, not daring to look in the direction of that place up ahead. On the other side of the road was something else hidden in the previous night’s fog; droves of mushrooms populated the ground among the vigorous trees, thousands of them, clustered thickly together and covering much of the ground, like grass almost. Some of these rested in the shade of the thick branches, others were shriveling under the warm morning sun.

I shuddered, cutting the wheel of my cart sharply and turning away.

I headed back down the winding road.

Streams Extracted

Log-VI

The mind is like the universe. No, it is the universe. I see it now. With that headpiece around my head, my present-most thoughts appeared at the center of the text cube, and thoughts previous to that began spelling out down the cube. At the same time, new thoughts listed themselves up the cube, and at some point, I couldn't tell if the thoughts were my own, or if something was putting them in my head.

I could have scrolled up and down the cube with the navigator, reading any thoughts I wanted to, and rethinking them, I guess, but I must admit to being frightened. I yanked the damned thing off my head. It's one thing to be able to play your thoughts back from the day; it's another thing entirely to read them as they're created from nothing.

Anyhow, I think I know how I can save Griffin. The anticode isn't the answer. I just need more time now.

CHAPTER III

A PLACE TO CALL HOME

Bishop Jones followed the digital map in his arm watch as he sped us through the complex web of shallow waterways and tunnels of the sewers. The battery cart was faster than it looked, and I gripped the handrail tight to keep from being thrown from the seat as it cut through sharp turns. Flying down a long wide tunnel, I noticed an armed droid up ahead of us, patrolling the corridors beneath the city. The bishop saw it too.

“Take the wheel,” he told me. He lifted the automatic rifle slung over his back and took aim as I tried to keep the cart steadily. As we came closer, the blast of rapid fire splintered my ears, echoing through the dark tunnels. Bullets sparked off the base of the droid’s cylindrical neck. It aimed its shoulder gun as we whizzed by it. Bishop Jones spun around in his seat, firing more rounds. I heard something explode, and turned quickly to see sparks popping from the headless droid’s neck as it erratically fired blind rounds into the sewer wall. I was in the driver’s seat now, and the Bishop, hanging onto the side of the cart, climbed into the backseat.

“Cut a left up there where the path splits,” he said, pointing ahead. I maneuvered my way into this much narrower tunnel and up the steep slope. The end of this tunnel opened to a wide space.

“We’ll stop here,” he said. “The red lever’s the brake. Just ease it down.” I did, slowing the cart to a stop. Bishop Jones hopped out and flipped the off switch behind the wheel, then led me through the large room along the wall. There was a tall ladder leading

to a ledge high up near the ceiling. I followed him up the ladder, onto the ledge, and we walked along this until we reached iron bars of a sewer cover. We slipped through the bars and into the gray shadows of an alley outside. There were a few lit windows facing the alley near the dead end. The opposite end opened up to a bright street.

“This is University Way,” said the bishop, stepping out into the light. The street was alive with pedestrians and people in carts driving by. A few blocks ahead of us was a platform elevated high above the street, nested between two cloudscrapers. I could see the tops of trees and houses at the edge of the platform. Angled steel pillars held the platform in place, the bases of them blending in discreetly with the cityscape below. A sign on the outer wall of the platform read Harrisburg Heights.

“Ace lives up in the heights,” Bishop Jones said. “He can show us to Hurst’s place.”

We crossed the intersection to the third block. The heights were up above.

“Let’s make a stop first,” said the bishop. He led me across the street, into Hal’s Spirits. He found two bottles of moonshine on one of the shelves and handed them to me. Then he grabbed some pretzels and chips, some party packs of Mars bars, some plastic cups. We waited at the checkout while a humanoid hastily bagged up the items. The father paid with a currency card.

We left the store and headed down the block, walked into the small office building connected to the Harrisburg Heights lift tower. Inside, the bishop pressed one of the numbered buttons on the wall panel next to the lift door. The office manager eyed us with interest — or suspicion.

After an awkward stretch of time, the lift door slid open, and a man with dark

brown skin and a thin, dark mustache stepped off. He looked familiar.

“Hey hey,” he said, grinning. “Ah, brought the stuff, yah? Party’s just starting.”

We followed him onto the lift. The man shook my hand, then the bishop’s.

“I hear Hodge is wanted by the Regime. I told him I’d do what I could to help.

Hodge is my man.”

I could see shadowy clouds moving swiftly across the night sky through the glass tower as we reached the top. The doors opened to the heights, and we followed Ace down a path lined by exotic flowers and evergreen bushes. The path led to a cobblestone walkway, lush green grass growing on either side of us and over the edges of the stones. Shortly ahead was a small wooden bridge that arched over a canal. I heard a few splashes below and looked over the edge into the crystal-clear water reflecting the city lights above. I could see colorful fish, maroon and gold, swimming across pink and white pebbles at the bottom. The canal curved its way into the heights, disappearing behind rows of trees. Flowers flourished among the blades of grass along the water’s edge.

Past the bridge, the stone walk led us into the neighborhood of lavish homes. Acacia trees dotted the lawns along the walk. At the third house down, Ace led us across the lawn to the wide front porch, framed by willow trees on each side. People were crowded on the porch, most of them holding wine glasses or mugs filled with ale, the foam bubbling over the edges. A table was set up in front of the porch where three men with leather hats pulled down and a woman in pink shades sat in beige canvas chairs playing cards.

“Let’s head to the back, where we can talk,” Ace said.

He took us through the crowded front room, down a long, stained wooden hallway floor

and beneath a rounded stairway to an empty guest room at the back, shutting the door behind us.

“I checked out this guy Hurst’s place last night after I talked to Hodge,” he said. “Looks like somebody already decoded the door. It’s open. Apparently, he hasn’t been there in five years. Works for the military.”

“What’s the house number?” the bishop asked.

“It’s the third one down from the Harrisburg Communal Center. You’ll pass it on the walk.”

We crept through the front door into the house. Crystal lamps sitting on glass tables in the leisure room cast a faint glow onto old-fashioned framed photographs. There were digital art paintings along the wall in the hallway that curved under the stairs. The bishop opened the door to the basement at the end of the hall.

“Maybe we can find something in his lab.”

Lights flickered on as we headed down the last few steps. The lab was messy. There was a round glass desk with a small projector in the middle and a curved keypad fitted down into the glass. Sitting on the table was some contraption that looked like an antique television, some of its wires connected to a power device on the floor, others hanging loose. One had a glowing orb attached to the end it.

“What’s on his Starboard?” the bishop wondered. He sat down at the desk and nudged a round orb in the center of the keypad. The projector lit up, displaying a holo of icons suspended in virtual space. As he rolled the orb, a sprite moved through the holo, lighting icons as it passed through them.

I looked toward the back of the lab. There were sinks and cabinets. One of the doors was peculiarly large. I walked back there, slid the door open. When I saw what was inside, I stumbled back, frightened, tripping over a canister and falling to the ground.

“What? What is it?” the bishop asked nervously. He pulled his gun and shined its flashlight onto the open cabinet. I stared up at the human replica, lifelike and beautiful. I’d seen the face before. In a nightmare? Then I remembered — from the time before. A scouting mission in space, in my old life. They sent us to investigate that mysterious spacecraft, and that’s when we found her. She slaughtered my crew. She slaughtered us all.”

“Cap, what’s the matter?”

“I’ve seen this before?”

“This thing? It’s one of those household droids, I think. My mother has one of these. You just plug it into your Starboard. They can be programmed to do all sorts of things.”

I stared at it still, afraid to move.

“Here, I’ll show you. I’m sure Hurst has a program on here for it.” He walked around and wheeled the apparatus over to the Starboard.

“Maybe not a good idea.”

“Relax, friend. No one’s been here for five years.”

“But the door was unlocked,” I protested, though I wasn’t really afraid of someone showing up. I was afraid of this cyborg.

I stood next to him as he moved the sprite on the Starboard.

“There’s a program set up for this thing he has connected. Looks like it’s already

running. What was he doing with this?" He opened the folder for the program. A cube read "download complete." There were undecipherable characters in the box. Father scrolled down. The characters seemed to go on infinitely.

"Jesus. What kind of program is this? Maybe we've found something. Let's hook it up."

"I'm not so sure," I said, my mind racing now, thinking backwards. I knew I came from Earth, but until that moment, I couldn't remember how I'd ended up here. Now the memories were flooding back. Memories from before I became whatever I am. The mission. The flight from the space station to the foreign craft, the childish laughter of that beautiful monster that killed us. After that, I could only remember waking up in the module. Waking up to this new life.

The bishop pulled a cord from the module and lifted up the fine hair hanging down the replica's back. "It's usually on the neck, I think." He found a panel of skin and peeled it open, exposing the tiny socket beneath.

"What the hell are you doing here?"

We both spun around at the voice. Someone stood on the other end of the lab, near the stairs. A young guy in a short-sleeved Regime jacket. He was staring at us coldly. His green eyes were glowing. He took a step toward us, and the bishop lifted his rifle. Before he could even aim, the guy had dashed from the other end of the room, and there was metallic flash as something sharp whipped through the rifle and snapped in half. This happened in the blink of an eye. With one arm, he hurled the bishop backward. He bounced hard off the cabinet doors and hit the floor, unconscious. In the next tick, I was tacked into the adjacent wall, the guy pressing me up against it with a powerful grip.

“Who are you?” His voice was artificial, like it came from a speaker.

“Me? I’m nobody,” I choked out.

“Yeah, so am I,” he said. “What the fuck are you doing in my dad’s lab?”

I tried to speak, but the increasing pressure from his arm was cutting off my breath. The humanoid released me and I collapsed to one knee, catching my breath.

“Your dad?” I breathed. “Hurst? I don’t get it.”

“Wait, I know you,” he said, peering into my face. “You’re the fugitive lab specimen.”

This is it, I thought. The end of my run.

“I’m not going back there,” I said. “So you’ll just have to kill me now.”

“I never liked killing,” he said, supporting me by the arm to help me up. “It was me who set you free. I saw what they did to the others. Those other men they found on that ship. It wasn’t right.”

I tried to remember what happened in that lab. I’d been sedated most of the time. Everything was such a blur. I only remembered waking up now and then, in a cold, clear liquid behind glass, struggling to breath through something stuck down my throat and wrapping my face. Then one day, the glass was broken and I climbed out. Every door was unlocked. I ran for my life.

The bishop was starting to come to. I went to give him a hand.

“What happened? He said, rubbing the back of his head.

“Got a bit of a thrashing there,” I said. We stood, and the father paused when he saw the cyborg, staring at the lifeless replica of the woman, touching its face.

“You still haven’t told me what you’re doing here,” he said without looking at us.

“This is my dad’s house. I can’t let you steal anything.”

“Your dad?” the bishop said. “Wait, are you Griffin Hurst.”

“Griffin Hurst is dead,” he said, turning to us then. “It’s just Griff.”

“So Hurst never found the cure? I remember it was big news in the datacasts.

They said Hurst transferred to the military labs to work on the cure for your disease.”

“He found the cure. But Han stole it from him. Dad’s just a prisoner there. I have to get him out.”

“But he used the cure on you, right? You’re alive.”

Griff looked at the bishop. He held out his right arm. The arm quickly folded in on itself at the elbow with a snap. A long blade extended from a slot in the middle, a wide metallic rod attached to a ball joint behind it. Fully extended, it was a robotic arm with a wrist joint and a sword on the end of it.

“As you can see, this isn’t my body.”

“It’s a machine,” I said, bewildered. “You’re inside a machine?”

“It’s a murder weapon,” he said. There was something in those pulsing eyes like hate. “You haven’t answered my question,” he demanded.

The bishop and I exchanged nervous glances.

“We, uh...” he began.

“We were trying to frame your father,” I finished. I thought lying was probably a bad idea.

“A friend of ours was wrongly accused of a crime,” the bishop added. “The terrorist attack at the university. We’re trying to clear his name. And Hurst, he has ties to the university, so we thought..”

“It was just a sort of logical approach,” I said, hoping to smooth things over. “We don’t have a personal vendetta against him or anything. We’ve never even met your dad.”

“You’re wasting your time anyway. That attack was staged. I know how they work. The regime just needed an excuse to take control of the university labs. People believe anything on those ridiculous datacasts.”

“You’re saying the Regime framed Hodge? Why? He owns a bar and a pawn shop.”

“But he sells weapons, doesn’t he? He was an easy target.”

Griff decided he was coming with us. We didn’t object. He stood outside while I went in to grab Ace. He came out to see Griff.

“You’re that alpha human,” said Ace. “I know a few nut jobs that want to get their hands on that reward Han has out for you.

“Is that what you’re after,” Griff asked, looking at him. Ace held his hands up defensively.

“Hey, I don’t do it for the credits,” he said. “I’ve got my own reasons.” There was silence as Griff stared at him a bit longer. Then Griff looked away. The tension in the air lifted.

“I’ll get you guys out of here. Come inside. I’ll get you some clothes. You can’t go around in that dusty uniform. Folks get curious around here.

Inside, Ace found a long hoodcoat, a gray one, similar to mine. Griff put it on over his uniform and zipped it up.

“Thanks,” Griff said, looking at himself in the mirror.

Ace led us to the lift tower and down to the office, where the security guard still sat behind the counter.

“Thanks for coming by, guys,” Ace said to us. “Thanks for the booze too. Always appreciated.” We left him, walking out into the living street.

“We’ll split up,” said the bishop. “I’m guessing neither of you have clearance for the tram. I’ll get back to the wall.”

“We should lay low a bit,” I said. “Just to be sure we didn’t attract any attention. I know a spot.” Father Jones headed for the tram interval down the street, and Griff and I caught an auto back toward the port.

I led Griff to the end of the peer, where the ends of the steel pipes go down. We climbed onto them and ducked behind the seawall, walking beneath the street. When I reached the back I saw the chain gate Hawkeye had tied up was broken through, the chain split in half and hanging to the concrete floor.

“Damn,” I said. “Someone must have come looking for him. Or maybe they found him.

“Friend of yours,” asked Griff. I nodded.

Griff stood at the entranceway he’d formed, looking down into the wall complex. “This is an entire base,” he said.

“Told you,” said Hodge.

“You say there are tunnels down there?”

“Yeah. One goes beneath the city, the other goes God knows where. The never-ending...” He stopped as Griff leapt over the ledge, falling through the air multiple levels

to the ground below, landing hard, the sound echoing. He walked among the machinery. We took the lift down to join him, Hodge sparking it with a charge rod. Griff stood between the old subtrams, looking down the dark, endless tunnel.

“Can’t see where it goes,” he said. “We’ll have to find out.”

He turned and walked past us to a gray control box next to the train on the edge of the tracks. He reached behind the box, gripping a fistful of the dusty wires. There was a bright spark, and something popped. The box lit up, and I could hear the electric current running through the iron track.

“Holy holiday,” said Hodge.

Griff walked through the rest of the complex then, fiddling with the consoles and machinery, the battery rigs, sparking them all to life.

“You could use this place as a stronghold,” said Griff.

“For what?”

“To fight the regime.”

“You out of your mind?”

“You have plenty of artillery here. Recruit residents and train them. I can power all this equipment for you.”

“Why would we want to fight the Regime?”

“Cap told me you want to leave the city. This is your chance.” Hodge scratched his head.

“I need to bust my dad out, somehow,” Griff went on. “And, I need to see Jada.”

“Who?”

“An alpha human, like me. She’s all I’ve thought of these three cycles I’ve been

gone, the only one I feel connected to.” He walked back to the trams. “Let’s see what’s through this tunnel.”

Griff fiddled with the track controls, Griff, climbed into one of the trams, powering up its battery engine and pulling it up a few yards. It creaked along the tracks. Hodge ran toward the tram, hitting me on the arm. “This is it, Cap,” he said. “Let’s go.”

I wanted to go, but I was worried about Hawkeye. I told Hodge so. He said to go look for him, gave me the address to his wife’s place.

“Let’s meet back here,” he said. He and Griff got onto the tram, and I headed back to the surface.

Streams Extracted

Log-VII

Michelle's face popped up in the dialogue box while I was sitting at my Starboard, daydreaming again. Still haven't slept much. When I linked to her vidfeed she looked flustered. Those pretty diamond studs along her left brow were scrunched in a curve. She told me Regime officials had come to obtain Griffin's body. I told her to stall them anyway she could, placing a burden on her that was a little unfair, I'm afraid. In any other circumstance, I wouldn't have asked. She stood by me in the hailstorm the datacasts rained upon me — the rest of them turned their backs on me. Even now, they treat me like I'm crazy, when they supported me at first, those spineless....never mind them.

When I got there, I found her joking with the two swindlers in the lobby. They were laughing at something she'd said that I couldn't hear. I ducked behind the two white sofas at the edge of the bright blue carpet, the ones facing the tall windows the three of them were looking out of — crept past so they couldn't see me. Then, I slipped down the hall and through the entrance to the walkway. I could see the tops of the trees in the courtyard below through the glass. A lone girl sat in a tall chair at one of the round tables along the wall, the late day sun beaming off the silver clips that held up most of her black hair, though stray strands curled loosely down the right side of her face, which was intently focused on the notepad screen propped on the table in front of her. She didn't look up as I passed.

The walkway led me to the Cryogenics division. I'd visited the place periodically

to see Griffin, resting there against the mechanical arm in the cell. To be honest, he looked peaceful in his frozen state.

The thermo suits required to go in weren't available at that hour — but I figured I could last for at least a few minutes without freezing. I had to chance it. I slipped into the frigid room and hurried along the rows of icing cells along the wall. I usually didn't let my eyes wander to the other cells, but as I struggled to breathe in the freezing air, I found myself staring at some mutated monstrosity in a tube across the room. One of its legs was remotely human, but the other was just a bulge of an appendage that looked like it had been growing on its own. The face was indescribable. I still have trouble shaking it from memory.

When I flipped the tiny the lever on the module beneath Griffin's cell, it slid open, and a cloud of cold air rushed out as the mechanical arm inside lifted him out and carefully placed him face-up on a gurney that slid out from the shelf in front of me. I zipped the plastic cover over him, then struggled to slide the gurney off the shelf, as I couldn't feel my hands any longer — or my face. The wheels extended, and I rushed for the door, pain in my fingers now, desperate for warmth.

It was nerve wracking trying to make my way out the building. Anyone might have seen me and figured out what was happening. But everyone I passed by looked busy, or tired. Even Miss Zee, the building supervisor, just nodded her head when she passed me in the hall, yawning. I was nearly a nervous disaster by the time I made it back out to Saul's cart in the parking bay. The plan wasn't going the way I'd pictured it in my head — or maybe it was; anyhow, it was going. I held out my digital recorder and played back Saul's voice from the conversation we'd had on his doorstep. He sure looked

surprised when I showed up at his door. Of course, I haven't talked to him since Anna died.

The voice activated lock on his 2158 Del Sol opened up, and I carefully slid the gurney into the load space after collapsing the back seats. The solar dial was still at half charge when I pulled off.

When I got back to the heights parking bay down below, Saul was there in his house robe and slippers, looking more surprised than before, and angry. I tried to explain that I had a good reason for taking his cart — that it was for my son, and that I didn't own one, which he knew — but who would listen at that point? He looked spooked when I pulled out the gurney with Griffin hidden under the cloth. No matter, though. I made it back. Griffin's here now. All I have to do is put the StarGazer© headpiece onto his head. This can't possibly work, can it? What if it won't work on someone who's been frozen? I should just do it and stop hesitating.

I can hear someone knocking at the door. I'm not here right now, whoever it Damn. My door's being decoded. The City Guard. Saul must have called them. But, I'm not finished yet. Doesn't matter; they've already opened the door. Can't hesitate any longer. There's no more time. I need to put this on Griffin's head. They're coming down the stairs.

"You can't barge in here. I'm not through yet." They aren't listening to me. I've got no way out, it seems. They've backed me into a corner. "Look." I point to the Starboard image emitting from the light source on the module. "The code is synched to the conscious stream, somewhere out there in space. I can bring my son back." The guard

closest to me doesn't even look to where I'm pointing. Instead, he turns to his partner.

"They were right, Singh," he says to him. "This guy's a wacko."

The nerve of this idiot, mocking me like that. He gets what he's paid for. My grafted fist makes a loud tink as it smashes into the visor of his sleek silver helmet. I spin him around and slam him into the wall. Caught the guard off guard; he's squirming to get loose.

"Shoot this husky son of a bitch, Singh." I hear his voice through the monitor in front of his mouth. The other one, Singh, laughs. He says something I don't quite catch. .

. . .

SOMETHING ELSE

“This is supposed to be Holo City. There’s nothing here,” Griff said to Jada, looking up the grassy hillside sloping toward the dense forest where they’d just been extracted. He could hear the halocraft that dropped them off fading to the north. “Did they give us the right coordinates?”

“Apparently not,” Jada answered after a moment’s pause. “Holo City’s roughly eighty miles east of here.” The pupil in her left eye dilated inside its violet iris as she widened her retinal display of the satellite map only she could see. Griff found it curious how the one pupil was wider than the other, a warpage of some kind. Viewing the world from the eye in the sky, she seemed adrift in a far-off place.

As she viewed the display, a grayish blur sprung from the trees behind Jada. Griff dashed around her, one mech arm quickly drawn, the Shockblade attached to the ball joint at the end of it hacking through a thick neck. A head flipped, and a four-limbed body twisted, thudding heavily into the soft dirt. Griff glanced at the head looking up at him from the ground with snarling teeth. It was a double-muscle hellhound. He’d seen them on the weekly “Hunter’s Bulletin” feeds. The rage was leaving its eyes, like a flame extinguished.

Three more mammoth hounds came bolting down the hillside toward them. Jada’s Hexgun snapped through the top of her forearm as she dashed laterally, spraying bursts of shrapnel that ripped through mounds of thick muscle. Two of the beasts collapsed. The third became a projectile, lunging for her. Planting her feet, she thrust her head and left

shoulder squarely into the hound, sliding back slightly from the force as it staggered on its hind legs. Jada closed the space, thrusting the harpoon head in the center of her weapon deep into the underside of the stunned beast. A furious yelp of pain, low-pitched, escaped through its jaws. Jada ripped the harpoon free, smashed her left arm against the side of its skull, full force. The beast toppled sidelong, rolled twice, skidded across the grass yards away. It stood again, panting heavily, desperation in its eyes. Two blasts from her shotgun extension quickly ended its misery.

“Look sharp,” she said calmly. “Multiple heat signals on the scan. They’re coming from everywhere.”

Griff could see a whole swarm now, racing down the hillside. More flooded out in packs from the trees beside them. He shifted to overdrive, both mech arms drawn, both blades whirling with calculate precision as he moved at inhuman speeds, dodging the swift beasts lunging at him and snapping their strong jaws shut micrometers from his neck. Without fear, he laid waste to them, one after another, until only a few near him were left alive. These fled, receding into the thick of the trees — but Griff could sense them there, still lurking.

He stood now in a clearing at the bottom of the hillside, the felled beasts lying motionless around him. The grass here was a full, dark green, and the ground quite soft. Across the clearing was a river and endless trees lining the bank on the other side. A narrow waterfall spilled into it over pearl-white rocks of an adjacent cliff above. Jada was walking toward him, white smoke swirling from the two extensions she’d used. Three shrapnel cartridges dropped simultaneously from slots on the back of her outstretched arm and clattered in the grass. Griff heard her shoulder blade flap click open as three

more clips slid into position. It clamped shut, snapping the cartridges in place. She ejected shrapnel rounds aimed slightly to his left. He watched blue sparks and casings from emptied rounds shoot through the top of her shoulder and shower the grass around her. After several loud bursts, she ceased fire. The living silence of wilderness resonated in Griff's ears. The carnage he'd left behind moments before seemed unreal to him now, like it happened in a dream, or some alternate existence. But the evidence of his destruction was there — the bodies lying dead still in the grass, their dark blood still wet on his Shockblades and the metal limbs that spun them, the same dark blood that speckled Jada's face and the sleek, colorful uniform fitted tightly to her feminine frame.

"There's something they didn't mention," Griff said.

"It's a test of some sort, logically," said Jada. She turned and walked toward the easy-flowing water of the shallow river, her weapon hidden now, her arm a human's arm again.

"Han and his stupid tests," Griff said. He retracted his mech arms with several rapid clacks, and the lower half of his human arms unfolded, snapped and sealed shut at the elbow. He moved to the water's edge, watching Jada wade into the flowing stream. It covered most of her thighs in the center.

"What are you doing?" he asked her.

"Won't do to be covered in hellhound blood if we're going to Holo City. We should wash it out."

"Right. The soldiers think we're blood savages. Can't have citizens thinking that too." He followed her, wading in as she cut effortlessly against the current to the waterfall. He stopped to watch as she walked beneath it, the water cascading down over

her. Raising her head, she let the water wash over her face, and with her small, diligent fingers, she wrung blood and grime out of her long, pitch-dark hair. She ran her hands across her face, brushed them over her arms, scrubbing away death's stains. Then, she turned, facing Griff again. The glistening water dripped from her olive skin. Staring at her, Griff thought he felt a vague sense of longing. It was gone before he could grasp what it was.

"Your turn," she said. Griff nodded, wading past her. His skin felt cooled beneath the flowing water, his body alive with sensation. His lit green eyes were open wide as the water poured into them and through his short silver. He felt Jada's hands running across his shoulders and down his back, wiping away the blood.

"Hard to wash it from the nylon in your jacket," she said. "But it rinses free from the rubber and steel."

Griff faced Jada at the foot of the waterfall. He blinked twice, clearing droplets of water from his lenses. His vision was crystal clear. Jada eyes were radiant, and behind the bright violet, beneath the small numbers etched there, he saw a ring of faint whitish light.

They bolted across lush terrain of the wilds at blinding speed, Griff tailing close behind Jada, who navigated via her satellite map, moving headlong for Holo City. They crossed miles of the exotic landscape where trees flourished, and plants of myriad colors grew wild. His retinal scanner identified countless recognizable plant and animal species. Jada ignored the heat signals of the animals he saw racing at them from different directions, creatures of the wilds, seemingly drawn to their energy.

In less than two revs, they reached the ether shield surrounding the city. The

shield was illumined, a faint orange grid in his vision. Jada approached, sticking her slender arm into the field, and the orange vanished around her.

Creatures behind them gathered in great numbers now but kept at a distance. Ignoring them, Griff followed Jada into the shield. He felt its intense energy coursing through his circuitry, mingling with the energy inside him. The bounds of this energy felt limitless.

Several of the creatures decided to dart into the field after them, and there were shrieks and howls as the energy burned through them, disintegrating them steadily into dissipating mist. Griff watched over his shoulder as their flesh and bone dissolved away, and they soon became mere ghosts of light, quickly fading.

Cloudscrapers at the edge of the city inside the wall stretched into the sky.

“We’re at the west end,” said Jada. “Han’s Gate’s to the south.”

Griff was looking up the wall. He bent his knees and rocket hopped, his leg strength and the blast under his feet vaulting him over the wall’s edge high above. He landed heavily on its surface amidst a crowd of startled wanderers. Jada landed next to him. There were astonished sounds from the crowd.

“There’s a tram interval up here. Just around that bend, I think, behind those houses.” Griff motioned toward scrap houses up ahead. Ivy grew over the brick and aluminum of the one beside them.

“That’s affirmed,” said Jada. “How could you know that? This is our first time here.”

“I lived in this city. Remember when I said we had flesh bodies once?”

“I know what you said. It’s illogical. We’re just simulated brain data. We’re not the people whose brains were copied. That’s not how it works.”

Beyond the scrap homes he could see the crowded skytram interval ahead; west skytram Seventeen sat idle on the track as anxious passengers filed into its open doors. Near a fence along the wall, a man in a gray hoodcloak stood on a crate, preaching aloud, his back to the brilliant city.

“But we shall all be changed,” Griff heard the man saying. He was ignored by most of the passersby, but a few wanderers had gathered near, listening intently to his sermon.

“I could show you how to get to any landmark in this city,” Griff said to Jada. “How do you explain it?” He wanted to tell her everything.

“It isn’t possible,” she said after a moment’s pause, “Unless,”

“They copied my memory,” he said. “I’m the same person from before.”

Jada paused.

“But Hurst said we were all blank slates. Why would he give you memories? No one else knows of this?”

“Han knows.”

“The general? But what’s the purpose? It seems dangerous. Besides, even with those memories, you’re still not that person.”

There was a slight incline of pitch in her voice. Griff wasn’t sure why. They stopped at the crowded tram interval, and the realization hit him something like a shock.

Jada was right. He wasn’t the same person at all. He was something else entirely.

Everything about him was artificial. His sensations were all mechanical. He

couldn't remember what it meant to actually "feel" something inside. Between human awareness and his mechanical body, there was a disconnect. Something was lost in artificial translation — something he vaguely remembered as human. They drifted onto the crowded tram and were zipping along the skyline.

In the alpha barracks underground, back on base, it was time to dream.

Griff was plugged to the brain scatterer in his quarters, next to Nicholai, his bunkmate. With their brains connected to the same Netspace, the alphas humans could drift into each other's dreams.

Scattered conscious streams raced through his cerebral network at random, interspersing his present and his past. He remembered joys of childhood, the love of his mother, the sorrow of losing her. Strangely, in his dreams, he could feel these things. He was full of emotions. He unplugged himself from the module, trying to retain these feelings. But in his waking moments, his mind grasped only concepts, the magic of his dreams intangible.

Perturbed, he rose from his rest module, exited the metal room and walked the length of the corridor. He took the lift up to ground level, walked out the bunker door and was met by the whirling snow of a mountain blizzard. He felt cold sensation from the thick snow swirling against him, but there was no discomfort, just a noticeable shift in temperature. He would have been no more affected by a mild summer day.

He walked through the blizzard in the deep snow, down the mountain side. As much as he disliked being a hand tool of Han's NeoRegime, the emptiness he now felt was worst of all.

Through the blankets of falling snow, he could see the green and orange lights along the side of the rail car sitting on the track below.

He stepped into the car, and its interior lights glowed softly. Gazing through the windows into the whiteness of the storm, the world seemed empty to him. Except for his reflection in the window, he was alone. He touched the lever on the manual controller and the car shoved off down the track.

He was still staring at his face in the glass. It was not the face he'd always known. "Who the fuck am I?" he thought. "Hi, I'm nobody."

He let the rail car stop at the Neuro Research complex.

The entranceway and main lobby were empty when he came in from the blizzard, tracking snow in his steel boots onto the soft, synthetic rug. It was past working hours, and the employees had retired to their rooms on the upper floors for the night. Beyond the lobby, Griff took the lift to the sixty-third floor. He moved toward the end of the hall, stopped in front of Hurst's door. He'd been thinking Hurst might be the one to shed some light, to help fill the empty void. He raised his hand to knock, but hesitated.

Hurst couldn't change anything. Griff didn't even see him as a father anymore. Not in the human sense. He was merely Hurst and Han's creation, like all the others.

Unsettled, he continued down the hall, around the corner and through the entrance to the Biochem units, where he'd been awakened just two cycles before. Passing two more doors, he stood in front of the workroom.

The last time he was here was biology session, seven days ago, he remembered. He and Jada had studied the Rebirth project, uploading data to their brains. They had to compile a document describing the project in their own words, explaining why all but one

of the experiments was unsuccessful.

He walked through the circular doors, past the workstation and down three wide rounded stairs. The modified humans, supposedly dormant, floated in containment cells along the back wall. Like him, they'd been human once, had died, and now were something else entirely.

He hopped onto the ledge and stood in front of cell number six, peering into the glass. Unlike the other specimens, this one looked unmistakably human. Whatever modifications it had undergone, there was no visible evidence of it.

The man floated unconsciously, eyes closed, breathing through an air tube strapped to his face with a muzzle. As Griff watched the specimen, its eyes slowly opened, and he saw the evidence. The eyes weren't human eyes. They were a lambent amber hue, the black pupils inside them widening and constricting, like owl's eyes.

Before he understood what was happening, Griff had extended his right mech arm, charged his Shockblade and slashed into the fiberglass cell. The blade sparked bright, and the glowing liquid inside the cell sloshed out through the long gash. With more strikes, he mutilated the glass and watched the body slide past his feet and onto the white lab floor. The specimen twitched in minute spasms.

Griff charged headfirst into the next cell, forming a dent with thousands of intricate cracks in the glass. Drawing his second Shockblade, he swung both at full charge, and the liquid exploded through the shattered glass.

He destroyed the other five cells, releasing the other dormant specimens. As the liquid oozed out across the floor, Griff left the lab through the round doors and stalked down the hall. Alarms screamed, and a soldier stepped warily out of a room down the

hall. The soldier pointed, yelling something to him. Griff ignored him, walking in his direction, then hurled himself through one of the hallway windows.

His knee shattered concrete through the snow sixty-three floors down. He broke into full sprint toward steeper inclines of the mountain behind the research center, swiftly climbing toward the mountaintop.

Not once did he look back, feeling he should get as far away as possible — not because he was afraid. He needed to leave his false existence — leave it all behind. He would venture far out into the wilds, deep into the unknown. To himself, he was something unknown. He held fast to the hope that perhaps, in discovering the strange world without, he might somehow discover something of his new self — something tangible, something he could embrace.

REBIRTH

Hurst sat at the desk in the workroom of Biochem Unit C, tinkering with an image on the Starboard of an alpha human's internal frame. The lights were dimmed for afterhours. Hurst hadn't bothered to turn them up. The room was barely lit by the white diagram, and by the bluish light emitting from the fluorescent liquid in the long capsules along the rear wall, which contained the live specimens of the Rebirth Project. At the sound of footsteps, Hurst swiveled in his chair, visibly surprised to see Han standing there.

"General?"

"Ling told me I could find you here," he said through the audio speaker on his chest. His ochre-tan face was ancient behind the clear polymer mask that covered his head. But his aged body was neurally fused to the machina shell that enclosed it, and this shell was fully operational.

"What are you doing here?" he asked Hurst. "Uploads aren't until tomorrow."

"I'm working on a weapon for one of Griff's arms."

"The Warfare Division can handle that." Hurst turned from him, looking again at the alpha skeleton on the holo.

"Griff found this toy on the beach when he was a kid," he said. "A little female action figure with silver hair, missing a right arm. In her other hand she had a weapon that looked like a sword at first glance. But when you looked again, you'd see there was a trigger on the handle, and a gun barrel extending along the lower end of the blade."

Han looked at the weapon blueprint turning in 3d.

“His friends made fun of him for playing with a girl action figure, but he didn’t care much, I guess. It was his favorite toy.”

“I’ve actually come to discuss Griff. Come, take a walk with me.”

Hurst stood, looking up at Han and walking at his side, through the circular doors into the hall with dim lights along the floor. They passed by several darkened labs.

“Do you know the magnitude of the work you’ve done since I brought you here?” Han asked.

Hurst didn’t answer right away.

“It’s not the first groundbreaking research I’ve been involved in,” he finally said.

“There was Project Anna II. But you know all about that, though, don’t you?”

Han smiled.

“It’s no surprise to that I’ve kept an eye on you for some twenty years now. You’re a brilliant man, Tom. Your work can help the greater good in ways you perhaps don’t see.”

“What happened to my prototype?” Hurst asked. It was Han’s turn to pause now.

“An unsuccessful test run,” he said. “We tried sending her to Earth. She was programmed simply to collect living data. But the ship was nudged off course by something. We didn’t know what it was.”

Han stopped at the end of the hall and called the elevator.

“We found bodies of Harmony Soldiers on board, and she killed four of our pilots. Luckily a neurotech was there to shut her brain down with a Network override. She would have torn my city apart.”

The yellow doors opened, and they stepped into the white light of the elevator. Han keyed in seventy-six on the touch panel. They ascended swiftly.

“A programming glitch. But your alpha brain can duplicate conscious streams. We don’t even have to design the programs now.”

Hurst watched himself in the gold-tinted door.

“That’s exactly why you brought me here,” he said. “I’m not sure what your point is.”

“What do you know about the soul, Tom?”

There was an awkward pause. Hurst cleared his throat.

“Don’t think much about it, honestly,” he said. “Not a spiritual man, I admit.”

“Oh, but you are, Tom,” Han said. “You believe in science, so you believe in God.”

They stopped abruptly at the top floor, stepping onto the roof of the complex, into the freezing mountain air. Hurst dug his hands into his trench pockets, tucked his chin to his chest as his breath steamed thickly and vanished. The silver frames of his specs reflected glints of starlight cast from the sky above, over mountain peaks on the horizon. He walked in stride with the taller man, toward a walkbridge at the edge of the roof, which curved around a mountain rift, connecting to the Warfare Science compound on the other side.

“You believe in discovery,” Han went on, “and that mysteries unravel through discovery.” He put a cloaked, arm of solid carbide around Hurst’s shoulders, raised a withered hand sticking through the end of his machina limb toward the sky.

“They’re infinite, Tom, these mysteries,” he uttered. “The universe has no end.”

Hurst shivered in the cold silence as Han gazed into the clear night, his blue eyes glazed in moonlight. A lone cloud drifts over the one visible moon.

“What does this have to do with Griff?” Hurst asked.

“The consciousness isn’t just data you can copy. It’s energy. The soul is energy, Tom, with a capacity for construction and destruction. With control of such energy, you can accomplish things unfathomable.”

“Not sure what ‘things’ you refer to,” said Hurst. His teeth were chattering now. “It’s dreadful out here. Couldn’t we go inside?”

Han smiled again, touched the ID panel on the steel door and walked Hurst into the heated walkway. The lights were dim; they could still see stars through the domed glass.

“I used to wonder what purpose these capacities served, but could never come to an answer — perhaps because the answer is so simple.”

Hurst rubbed his numb hands together; he noticed Han was undisturbed by the cold.

“Let’s hear it then,” Hurst said, blowing heat into his hands, rubbing them together again.

“Perfection. Energy seeks perfection. Hence, an endless cycle of construction and destruction.”

“There’s an abstract concept. You can’t give evidence for such ideas.”

“Energy makes quite an investment in the humanoid races, don’t you think? At least at this end of the cosmos. It’s because we’re destined to be a perfect race.” He stared at the mountaintops illumined in a sea of darkness.

“But a perfect race is self sustaining,” he continued. “And the self can sometimes overshadow sustaining, becoming self destructive. Only the whole of something achieves perfection. The parts themselves are imperfect.”

It was clear from Hurst’s sigh that he was getting impatient. He wasn’t interested in theorizing at the moment. He wanted to know what this was about. Han faced him.

“Over these past two cycles since their inception, Griff has exhibited a very individualized kind of existence. I’ve seen him in combat sims. Not once has he sacrificed himself for the whole. He feels he’s superior to them. That’s why his team is usually the victor. Physically, the alphas are interchangeable.

“Maybe he remembers what it’s like to die,” Hurst argued. “So he fights for his life.”

“That’s what I’m getting at. His memory.” Again he faced the glass again. “I’m afraid it has to be erased. It’s the only way. He operates with a different sense of purpose than the others, which I simply can’t have.”

“What the hell are you saying? You promised me I could bring him back to life if I helped you build your precious super soldiers.”

“But you have brought him back,” returned Han.

“Without memories, he won’t be Griff. He’ll be...he won’t even know who he is, or who I am for that matter. The bond I have with my son will be broken.”

“You’ll form a new bond.”

“This isn’t fair,” said Hurst, tears of anger burning behind his eyes now. “You said...” he trailed off.

“Yes, I know,” Han said gently. “I truly am sorry, Tom. But I must do what’s

necessary.”

“I heard your blood daughter was killed because of your attack on Harmony. I guess you feel that was necessary too.”

“She’d sided with the enemy. They couldn’t have known that.”

“You’re Nietzsche’s dog,” he said, turning away, his fists clenched. “That’s all you’ll ever be.”

“Come, Tom. Don’t be brash. You misunderstand. I’m not out to erase man, or destroy the weak or any such nonsense. The strong should help the weak. We can all live harmoniously. Happiness is merely a state of mind.”

Lying in bed, Hurst stared into a mirrored ceiling, asking the silence, “What was it all for?” Griff would be just like the others, human in theory — another copy of unintelligent conscious data inside a machine, ready to be programmed thoroughly in Han’s Institute.

An alarm screeched outside his door. He sat up in bed, startled.

“Emergency. All armed personnel, report to Biochem Unit C immediately. Repeat...”

“What the hell’s going on,” he wondered. He’d just left unit C not a rev before. He slipped his lab trench over his pajamas and touched the fingerprint scanner on his door. Yellow lights flashed down the length of the hall both ways. He rounded the corner past his room, touched the handprint scanner on the double doors to the Biochem units.

Passing lab Five, he activated a second sliding door; a grotesque specimen slithered toward him. A Rebirth specimen, one of the men killed by the Anna prototype

on the ship, no longer resembling the man it had once been, before it was modified.

It hurled its serpent-like body onto Hurst, slamming him against the locked door behind him. Its contorted face spewed saliva, and two tongue-like limbs squeezed Hurst tightly. With his strong arms, Hurst managed to hold the ferocious creature inches back from his face, but he was trapped against the door. A smaller, identical face protruded from its unshapely head, and thin razor teeth snapped at him.

Gunfire percussed loudly down the hall. The heavy body convulsed in his grip and collapsed to the floor. Hurst jumped back, stumbled, not taking his eyes off of it.

“Jesus,” he shrieked.

“Nope. Just building security,” said the soldier through his visor speaker. “You alright, Professor?” He looked Hurst over, touched him on the shoulder. “You don’t look injured.”

“I’m fine.” Hurst wiped the slick wetness from his face onto the white sleeve of his trench.

He gasped.

The specimen had slithered stealthily behind the soldier. It lunged up again swung a limb violently and tackled him down. His visor helmet snapped off the neck of his combat suit and smacked loudly against the white tiled wall. His gun trapped under the specimen’s weight, the soldier unsheathed a long knife strapped to his leg and plunged it into a fleshy side. A webbed end of an appendage tightly cupped the soldiers face, and a finger forced its way into his eye, pushing back into the socket. The soldier fluttered helplessly, his mouth open wide, a scream stuck in his throat. Hurst fell back, shrieking and swearing. The back of his head hit the wall. There was a barrage of gunfire then, and

bullets ripped into the thing from both ends through open doors, jolting it like electricity. The firing ceased and the thing went limp. It was certainly dead now.

For a moment the hallway spun around Hurst. He staggered, held himself up on the wall, regaining his composure as soldiers rushed to their comrade to see the damage done. Hurst made his way through the next door toward the workroom in unit C, where more soldiers gathered. Beyond the labs, another group ran after something moving fast down the other end of the hall.

Hurst wandered into the workroom. Lights flashed above the doorway; inside was an absolute wreck. The containment cells were all shattered, and sheets of glass drifted in the glimmering liquid flooding the floor. Every one of the specimens was gone.

Hurst turned back, joined the soldiers outside. He saw Han approaching. He stopped, looking in at the disaster. Rage flickered in his eyes and quickly passed.

“We have a situation,” he said to his soldiers. “Someone care to explain what happened here?”

“It was that alpha with the arm blades,” said the soldier directly in front of him. “I saw it jump out the window, right after the alarm went off.”

“Griff?” Hurst uttered in disbelief. Han turned his gaze on him, seeing him for the first time. It was a knowing look he gave.

“And the devil appears,” Han said quietly. He turned away without another word, made his way back up the hallway.

By midday, everyone working in the complex had seen the footage on one of the hall screens. Hurst stood in the lounge on the tenth floor, watching it again on a screen in

the glass table before him. Griff tore apart the workroom in what appeared to be a manic rage, shredding the fiberglass cells, setting all the specimens free.

And now, he was nowhere to be found, had taken off, heading God knows which way over the Argo mountains.

A message streamed across the bottom of the screen. Several modified humans had escaped from the complex, it said. Han was handing out generous rewards for anyone who could detain them.

Over the next week, the specimen's were singly tracked down. NeoSoldiers managed to capture or kill most of them in the mountains, and freelance hunters reported killing a few just outside Holo City. After Regime scientists had confirmed the bodies, all but one of the Rebirth specimens were accounted for. The only successful result of the project had disappeared. Han spiked the currency reward for this one.

He posted an even greater reward for Griff — but soldiers knew what the alphas were capable of, and news travelled quick to hunters, since commercial scout rigs could access restricted feeds. No soul had been brave enough to take on the task.

Hurst touched the print scanner and walked into his unit carrying his lunch in a bag under his arm. The door slid shut.

"I've sent the alphas after him." Hurst heard the voice and spun around. Han was in the corner, sitting in a chair with thick cushions.

"Only one way that ends," said Hurst. "He's certainly not equipped to combat them all." He placed his lunch on the counter, grabbed the bottle of bourbon on his cooler

and poured himself a shot. “But of course it’s necessary. It doesn’t jive with your plans to rule the universe.”

Han seemed to sigh.

“There’s nothing else I can do. It was a mistake giving you free reign of his recreation. I’m correcting that mistake.” He stood then, turning toward the door.

“It’s curious, they haven’t traced him yet, with their capabilities. Perhaps he’s already affected them in some way. That will need to be addressed.”

Hurst was looking at the floor. He never expected Griff would do something so extreme. People had died because of his actions. This wasn’t the Griff he knew.

“It’s not your fault, I guess,” said Han, facing the door. “I can only blame myself.” He punched an access code on the panel beneath the door scanner and exited, leaving Hurst alone.

Unable to find sleep that night, Hurst got out of bed, wrapped himself in his fleece overcoat, and took the elevator down the hall to the roof level. He stood alone in the cold. Clouds lay thick on the mountains beyond, obscuring the landscape to something unrecognizable. He wondered where Griff would think to go. He knew why he’d gone. He’d expressed his conflict with Regime ideology privately to Hurst, on several occasions. He didn’t believe in using the lives of others for the sake of some “greater good,” he’d said. Even as a boy, he’d always had a mind of his own.

Hurst remembered trying to reason with him, trying to persuade him to accept his new life, or to cope at the very least. It was the only way Han would allow him to live.

He looked into the thick clouds covering the sloping plains below enshrouding,

the peaks of mountains far in the distance. The world beyond was expansive and uncharted — untamed.

Where had Griff gone?

If the alphas found him, they were more than capable of destroying him as a unit. Maybe, in the end, it was for the better. If he'd stayed, Han would have erased who he was, supplanting a new identity. He'd be a blank slate.

A slight drizzled began to fall. Hurst lifted his face to the rain. He found himself praying now, praying that Griff would go somewhere far away — praying he'd never come back. Maybe he'd never see his son again, but at least he was still alive, and he was still Griff. His son still existed in this world. Even though they were apart, as long as he lived, their bond could never be broken.

Streams Extracted

Log-VIII

I was being dragged into a holding cell when I woke up. A sharp pain throbbed between the back of my head and neck, and for the moment, I couldn't move. I was trying to figure where I was when these bars slid shut and locked. It all rushed back to me then. The StarGazer©, the guards, Griffin. They got what they were after. As I understand, they haven't figured out what to do with me. Michelle told me as much when she came to visit me a couple days ago. She said the datacasts are labeling me a dangerous man. Imagine that. The public is calling for the harshest sentence I can be given. Michelle said she doesn't know what that is, but it looked like maybe she had an idea, but was afraid to say. I'm allowed a public hearing to make my case, but what's the use? I see how the Regime wanted to silence me. They never wanted me to find the anticode, nor did they want me to save Griffin. Some good it'll do me addressing the public. They'll twist my words, and I'll look even more psychotic.

I gave Michelle the code to my front door. She said she'd see what she could find. They won't allow me another visit until Friday, so I'll have to wait until then to see what they took from me.

INHUMAN NATURE

Data streams across Jada's right peripheral display as she checks her task file. In these brief moments, the memories of Griff fade. Since he's gone missing, these memories have been floating near the surface, and recently, even shading over her consciousness.

On the skytram's cushioned bench across from her, Nicholai's chiseled face is statuesque, shifting a stone like gaze, his grey eyes softly affuse. Through the window behind him, red and maroon lights glow at Cloud Nine, a tavern on the airwalk above Seola Street, the colors reflecting in the glass floor at their feet, against the darkness of the night beneath them. Several people are lined along the building waiting to get into the tavern. Their silhouettes blur with the tavern lights as the tram glides past.

"A decommissioned NeoSoldier known only as 'Hawkeye' is hiding out in West Sector Four-one-eight, a residential sector," Jada silently reads on her display. This man is said to be a threat to the Regime. Her squad's orders are to detain him and bring him back to the base.

As the tram eases to a halt, she blinks the display from her retina. She stands, glances at Rayne, whose waxen coral strands of hair flutter in the wind that flows in through the opening door between them. Rayne nods once as Nicholai steps past them and waits by the tram door on the platform of Macro Plaza, high above Munich Street. Jada steps out after him, walking out front, her steeled boots clanging rhythmically against the platform's metal surface. Rayne follows. People sitting on benches near the

glass wall or leaned against the railings on the opposite side take little notice of them, but a few in Jada's path scan her, veering clear.

At the end of the Macro platform, a narrow vector connects to a larger platform wedged between three more cloudscrapers across from the plaza. A green illumined sign marks North Sector Four-one-eight at the end of the vector.

The three of them cross into the sector limits, passing by Hodge's Dive, where several people sip drinks in rose colored light beneath umbrellas inside a gated-off patio. Jada spots a hooded man stepping out the metal door of Hodges Pawn Shop next door, his right sleeve rolled up to the elbow where his arm has been severed. He strolls across their path and into the neon night, his face hidden in the shade of his hood.

At the end of the building is Supermarket Six O'one, where a few citizens push their full shopping bins out through the wide open doors. As they pass the end of the supermarket, Jada looks up at the building in front of them, then at the label spelled down the corner of the wall.

"Twenty-one E," she says aloud. "The next one's twenty-two E." She nods toward the third building in the distance to her left. "Our target's there."

They continue down the walk. Several small children run up and down the stairs of the building entrance as Jada passes by it, their laughter charged with energy. Older people sit at lounge tables outside along the wall, or on the flat ends of the large flowerpots running the length of the building, where magnolias grow amidst assorted green plants. Between benches of two long flower pots, on the concrete surface attaching the housing unit to the platform, three men are arguing, crouched over a game of cards spread out before them around piles of paper currency stacked in crisscross patterns.

Jada remembers this game; she's played it with Griff, Rayne, and other alpha humans on base — though they'd had no currency to gamble, only data chips with hard drive space. For a fraction of time, the memory becomes vivid, as if she's in that very moment. It clouds her vision, the black metal wall in Griff and Nicholai's quarters in the underground barracks at arms length; and Griff sitting directly across from her, his green eyes aglow like Nicholai's grey eyes next to him, except infused with something more profound, more alive than any other eyes she's seen.

“The object of the game is survival,” Nicholai was saying. “But the strategy isn't to save the highest cards. That's like running and hiding. The best approach to Face-up War is discernable force, to systematically obliterate the enemy. It's the same in live warfare.”

“I wouldn't say it's exactly the same,” said Griff. “In real life, an entity with power holds the card of diplomacy. Force isn't always the best tactic.”

“He's speaking in terms of actual combat situations,” said Rayne, leaning against the doorway. “Once you're engaged, the most logical strategy is a lot like the one in Face-up War. I see his point.”

“Live warfare isn't a game,” Griff returns. “Even in combat situations, there are humans involved. There are myriad consequences.” Humans have emotions. They remember things.

Quickly, this vision recedes, the idea of it vaguely lingering now in Jada's C-conscious.

Inevitably, she'll have to forget, she knows. She's made no mention of it to the neurotechs, but eventually they'll notice the abnormality in her C-conscious, and the

memories will be deleted. Three cycles have passed since he's vanished, she recalls.

Twelve subtle shifts in the seasons. He isn't coming back. She'll lose him forever.

Perhaps she should get it over with.

The gambling men pause in silence over lit pipes or cigs. Jada's slim physique is an illusion as she clanks past them along the platform walkway. She shifts her eyes back and forth, scanning them, analyzing the surroundings. Her eyes latch onto a street peddler approaching in a wrinkled brown cotton hat.

"Spare some currency? Just a couple bits?" he asks, removing the hat from his thick, matted gray hair and holding it open to them. They ignore him, continuing along the platform's perimeter toward the third building.

A man stands in the doorway of building twenty-two E. The outer door to the housing complex has apparently been torn off, with rusted metal shards still jutting from the frame. The man is hunched slightly, smoking a black clove. The soldiers stop in front of him. With the projector in her retina, Jada displays the six-by-four centimeter digital image she downloaded of the fugitive, a quasi-human, a red scan lens in place of his left eye. She enlarges the image for the man to see.

"You, citizen," she says dryly. "Have you seen this man?" The man doesn't look up from his cloud of smoke.

"Who wants to know?"

"Withholding information is deemed inadvisable for citizens. If you know of this person's whereabouts, it is to your benefit to procure this data."

"I ain't got to tell you shit, lady, or whatever you are." He looks up, raising his voice. Jada raises her arm, releases the Hexgun housed in her forearm, equipping the

shotgun function. In less than a tick, the barrel extends past her wrist and stares the man in the face.

“I will not repeat the inquiry,” she says, her tone unwavering. The man tries to hide his nervous shaking.

“You subhuman sack of...” His last word is cut off by the exploding of half his head when Jada pulls the trigger. The man's legs still hold his body upright. She kicks him out of the way; his body bounces and crumples on the linoleum floor of the entranceway, blood pooling from the crescent-shaped remainder of his skull.

They move through the open doorway, stepping over the lifeless body. Inside, a boy wearing an oversized yellow poncho sits on the stairwell staring at them, frozen silent. They approach him. Jada displays the holograph.

“Boy, have you seen this person?”

The frightened boy begins crying and hides his face in the long sleeves covering his hands. “I will not repeat the inquiry,” Jada warns, pointing her Hexgun. When he doesn't respond, she sets to fire, but then sees the boy nodding.

“He...he lives upstairs,” the boy chokes out. “Fifty-one forty-nine. Please don't shoot me.” Jada lowers her weapon.

“Thank you for your assistance. Stand aside, please.” The boy runs up the stairs and down the hall, still crying. Jada leads the others down several flights of stairs to the fifty-first floor. Shortly down the hall from the stairwell is unit fifty-one forty-nine, next to a large window at the end. Approaching the door, Jada can see west skytram Seventeen gliding along in the distance through the window, descending toward North Sector Four-one-nine on the steel wall at the outer edge of Neon City. An azure display on a tall wire

fence at the edge of the wall twenty stories below reads, “Mega is clean energy, for a cleaner tomorrow. Jeaneen Ray, 2139.” Through the fence, she can see the clusters of small tin and stone houses and decaying brick apartment units on the wall’s surface. All that separates this from the wilds beyond is the ever present ether shield, a crystalline haze arching into the sky, forming a protective dome over the city.

Standing in front of the door, Jada turns to her squad. “Our best course of action is forced entry,” she says.

“Yes. No room for diplomacy here,” says Nicholai. “Can’t allow the target time to escape.”

“So we agree. Ready your weapons.” She kicks the thick wooden door, which bursts off its hinges and smacks into the wall across the room. They flood through the doorway like a force of nature. A woman on the sofa screams in fright; a man leaps up from a cushy chair and darts into a back room.

“That’s the target,” Jada confirms.

“I’m on it,” says Nicholai. He dashes across the room after the man. The woman on the sofa grabs a firearm from a nearby desk and aims it at him. Jada locks on to her target, starts to fire, but stops when she looks at the woman’s pale, terror-stricken face. She recognizes her.

The woman fires a concussive blast that almost sends her backwards over the sofa, the shell barely missing Nicholai and blowing a massive hole through the wall as he darts into the bedroom. Standing behind and to the right of Jada, Rayne fires a close-quarter cannon blast that all but obliterates the woman. Jada feels the mist of blood droplets speckle her face. Rayne turns to her.

“What the hell’s your problem?” she asks her. “You see that weapon she’s holding?” She points to a severed arm covered in blood at the edge of the sofa, the weapon clutched in its hand. “That’s a military issue Z16 rifle. The heat rounds in those can substantially damage our internal frames. Maybe even permanently.”

“You’re right, Rayne. I’m not sure what happened. But that woman. I’ve seen that woman before.”

“That doesn’t alter your judgment. I’d dislike having to tell Captain Sykes that you’re an unfit leader.”

“I understand your concern.”

Nicholai returns to the room carrying a limp body over his shoulder. He tosses the man onto the mangy carpet — the man from the holograph, his human eye closed, the red lens in his left eye socket diffuse, staring blankly. The skin around his right cheekbone is swelling blackish purple.

“He tried to get out through the window,” says Nicholai. “I hit him with a tranquilizer blow, right to his jaw, the flesh one. Knocked him out cold. Organic humans are more fragile than I imagined.”

As Nicholai examines his clenched fist, fascinated by his own strength, a young boy in a blue night suit appears from another room down the short hallway. In the leisure room, he pauses stiffly at the gory remains of his mother. His small hands begin to shiver, and soon, the rest of his body. He screams at the top of his lungs.

“No. Look what you did to her,” he wails. “You...you killed her. You killed her!” In the midst of sobs and screams, he pulls the bloody weapon from his mother’s hand. It’s heavy for him to lift, but he looks to know how to use it. He turns the barrel toward Jada.

“I’ll kill you!” he screams, shrill and deafening. “I’ll kill you for what you did to her!”

Inside Jada’s C-conscious, another memory jogs.

At the Cathedral of Saints, Griff had picked up an old book on Harmony, Earth’s military super power, orbiting the planet’s lunar region on its opaque moon. “Look at the symbol on their flag,” he said, showing her the colored picture on the worn page. “I’ve seen it before.” At that time, they hadn’t learned about the place in session, so she wondered when he would have seen it. She wondered many things about Griff, found his strangeness alluring in some unknown, unexplainable sense.

The boy walked up to them, staring. Griff closed the book.

“Lady, are you a cyborg?” the boy asked.

“Give me a break,” Griff muttered. He turned and walked away, between the rows of books on the tall shelves.

“Very observant. That is precisely what I am,” Jada answered.

“Shiny,” the boy exclaimed. His mother appeared behind him, grabbed him by the arm.

“Didn’t I say it’s not polite to talk to strangers? Get over here — I’m sorry, miss.”

“No apology is needed,” Jada assured her.

The woman seemed hesitant.

“So, are you really a...cybernetic being?” she asked.

“That’s correct.”

“My husband, he used to be a soldier. He says the Regime’s crafting humanoid weapons. Says they’re heartless war machina. But you don’t look like one of them. You

seem...rather friendly.”

“Friendly?” Jada considered the word, trying to figure out where it fit logically.

“I told my husband, all of them can’t be bad — let’s go, junior. It was good to meet you.”

“Yes. Good to meet you,” Jada repeated. The woman hurried off, pulling the boy behind her; he was still looking back at them.

“Killing machines,” Griff said, standing next to her. “See what they think about us? Can’t they tell we’re human inside, exact copies of their data? Or that we’re programmed to kill for them, so they can be safe?”

“Perhaps not,” Jada replied simplistically. It wasn’t the strangest thing he’d ever said. Once he told her he had a body of flesh and blood locked away somewhere in deep freeze, and that she probably did too — that all of the alphas did at one time, all twenty-one of them — and that they had walked around in these bodies some years before. She had no memory of such an existence, only the five years of her life since her awakening. Griff was the only alpha who ever spoke of such things, and such things he only spoke to her — and to Doctor Hurst, the one who’d created them.

The boy was still looking back at her as his mother pulled him out the door.

A half-tick after it surfaces, the memory fades, but the boy’s face remains, still looking at Jada, tears streaming from his eyes. She scans the boy again, the barrel of the rifle, and feels a foreign sensation she can’t describe — something inside. The infallible logic she’s always understood, that she can fold inside-out in her mind, fails to calculate a satisfactory course of action. But she knows the others are waiting to see what she will do.

Seeing only one option, Jada does something she has never done before. She closes her eyes, then, fires her weapon.

Streams Extracted

Log-IX

Michelle came to see me again today, but it's only Thursday. She said she snuck in with some New Testament activists scheduled for a tour of the prison. She held a bible in her hand. When she opened it, she handed me a small recorder hidden inside — said she'd copied the data files from the ROM in Griffin's toy that was sitting on my desk, and that I should listen to them. She didn't know what to make of it. I asked her about Griffin. "Nothing." That was her reply. The Starboard was still connected. The Anna- III model was still in the large rear cabinet. But they had Griffin's body. So that's it then. I guess it's all over. Griffin...

I'm still holding the recorder she gave me. I should listen to it, and stop being a coward...

MOTHERSHIP

Hawkeye looks through the air slots in a rear wall of his dark metal cell. Alpha human soldiers stand in a circle in the snow outside, except for one female in the center, facing the captain in charge. It is her. She's the one. She's been singled out for something.

"I've already evaluated them," the captain says. "I need to hear from you. Did your actions put you and others at risk on your last assignment?" The voice is too familiar to Hawkeye. He looks closely, recognizes the face. It is Sykes, his bunkmate back when he was a recruit. A dead man.

"At minor risk, sir," Jada answers. "It was three citizens."

"Risk is risk. You also neglected to mention your recent lapses in consciousness to anyone in the lab? You have something to hide?"

The alpha is silent.

"I see what's happening here. Tell you how we'll solve it." He points to a coral-haired one in the circle. "Rayne. Bring the target out."

"Sir." Rayne hurries toward the complex.

Hawkeye looks around the room, knowing escape is impossible. He listens through bars on the steel door to the silence inside, then hears metallic footsteps down the hall. The door opens and Rayne's eyes cast red glow in the dark. He recognizes her also, a vixen of death. She grins.

"Someone wants to see you."

Hawkeye backs away, looking for the slightest opportunity to break for the door. She steps in. Her left hand grips his throat in the blink of an eye, slamming his back to the wall and knocking wind out of him. She pulls him by the shirt, drags him coughing down the empty hall.

Outside, she forces him through the circle, kicks him behind the legs so he collapses to his knees.

“The general has no use for this quasi-human,” Sykes says to Jada “He’s to be disposed of. It’s what the public wants. Prove your identity isn’t compromised.”

Sykes looks Hawkeye in the face — not a blink of recognition. His eyes are empty. His body is much larger than Hawkeye remembers, probably all machine, though his face is unchanged, perhaps slightly more aged. He lifts Hawkeye by his coat and pushes him before the alpha.

Hawkeye crouches, looking up at her. This is the brainless pawn, he thinks, the one who killed his boy. Her eyes look away. The gesture sends a chill through him. There’s a look of remorse there.

“Do what’s necessary,” says Sykes.

“Sir,” Jada says. Her right arm opens, extending her Hexgun. Hawkeye can’t turn from her violet eyes, can’t stop himself from searching to see what’s there. She looks at the ground, sadness in her eyes. Hawkeye is angry at himself for feeling sorry for her.

There’s a whirring sound, a loud click as the Hexgun snaps into her arm again.

“Negative, sir,” she says.

“You realize your identity will be absolved.”

“Sir.”

Sykes turns to the others. "Take her inside, then."

Six alphas escort Rayne to the complex. Five of them remain, weapons aimed toward her. Hawkeye watches her disappear through the complex doors. As the doors shut, there is such a bang Hawkeye thinks his human heart has burst. Instinctively he drops to the snow as a thick black cloud billows from an exploding rocket fuel tanker near a wall against the mountain slope that infuses the night. A searing hot wind rushes over him as two more tankers explode; there are bright flashes under the light of the flames. The complex doors are open. Regaining his senses, Hawkeye sees the flashes are figures of alpha soldiers. Bullets and clanging steel ring sharp. His captors have joined the skirmish. As far as he can tell, the battle is all against one, the intruder a green-eyed alpha he hadn't seen there, with metal rods for arms and sparking swords.

They swarm the alpha without restraint; he fights them off brilliantly, but they force him back, multiple bullets ripping into him. They corner him between the high complex walls and overpower him. But he is swift, receiving his blows while darting every which way, bursts through an opening, putting space between him and his attackers. They're on him again at once, not leaving an inch of breath, if he requires it. He's on the bitter end, but there seems insurmountable fight in him.

An alpha with grey eyes, the most formidable in stature, fires high-speed missiles from the launcher attached to his arm at the side. Miraculously, one hits its mark dead on, exploding him into the wall. The intruder alpha bounces off and sprawls across the snow, but is on his feet again as they overtake him. He's cornered once more.

Separate blasts are fired from the complex behind them; the alphas scatter to dodge the explosions. Hawkeye faces the doors to see Jada launching grenade bombs

from her Hexgun into the swarm. The path clears.

“Griff,” she calls to the lone one, who is slightly banged up now. He bolts to her side.

The battle ensues, all on two. Sensing things becoming more intense, Hawkeye runs for cover behind a row of steel drums near the mountain cliff. As he looks on, one of the attackers, a long-haired male with four arms toting heat lasers, sides with the minority, turning to fight against the larger crowd. Another soon joins them, and the rest begin choosing sides, switching back and forth, until the battle has split in two. Complete and utter malfunction.

A hefty commercial rig bursts from a trail of the snowy pine forest onto the complex grounds.

Hawkeye sees Griff yelling something to Jada over the deafening battle. They move quickly toward the rig but three alphas shoot in to block their path. A hooded figure rushes toward Hawkeye and grips his arm. Hawkeye tries to wrestle away, looking beneath the hood.

“It’s me, Cap,” the familiar voice says.

“You? The hell’s going on?”

“Nothing good,” says Cap. “I’m getting you out of here. Let’s go.” He tugs Hawkeye behind him, leading him in a flank toward the rig. They make their way to the front end facing down the mountain and the side door lifts open.

“You working with them things?” asks Hawkeye.

“Sort of,” says Cap as the door fully extends. Ace sits inside at the controls for the roof turret.

“I ain’t going nowhere with those monsters. No fucking way.” Cap turns to him, staring with dilated yellow eyes.

“You wanna live? Get your ass in.” Cap nudges Hawkeye, who then climbs willingly into the rig. Through steel blinds on the back window, he sees Jada and the other alpha leap onto the rig, landing forcefully and rocking it twice.

“Hold on,” says Cap, now at the wheel. Hawkeye grips a wall hook as the rig peels off. Through the back window, he notices the other alphas still engaged in battle, then sees the coral-haired one sprinting after them. She dodges grenade bombs fired from atop the rig, sidestepping geysers of snow and rock shooting up around her. She lunges at the truck, shooting a white-hot spark from her needle-shaped left arm that sends a shock through the rig. An intense pressure plugs Hawkeye’s left ear, and the left half of his body shudders; his left arm and leg feel weak, and he supports himself with his mechanical arm. There’s a loud crack above, and something snaps off the rig. Hawkeye watches the turret fall from the roof and clamber into the snow.

Cap punches the accelerator. Hawkeye grips the wall hook tightly with both hands, still watching behind them. Rayne hurdles the severed turret, and one of Jada’s grenades blows her legs from beneath her. She crashes face-first into the snow, toppling over, then disappears as the rig dips down a steep hill. Cap hits a sharp right curve into the frosty pines of the mountainside. Jada and Griff climb in through the open door and slam it shut. Cap shuts off the rig’s headlights and drives through the darkness.

“She can see us in the dark,” says Griff.

“I’m picking her up on the scan,” says Jada. “She’ll intercept our path. Change course about seventy degrees west.”

Cap obeys, steering the rig around trees to turn down the mountain. They speed down the mountain slope, then Cap decelerates to ease around a steep cliff. Hawkeye can see the bright lights of Holo city far below.

Several revs later, they approach the city's ether shield. A rainbow silhouette of the invisible shield is highlighted by the hint of sunlight above the skyline of the neon city that glows like dawn.

"We can't get through the shield, Griff," says Cap.

"You can get through fine," Griff tells him, "but Ace can't. Neither can this quasi-human."

"Don't worry, Ace has clearance," Ace says.

"You're gate clearance is probably suspended," says Jada. "They won't let anyone in until they've grasped the situation. We'd have to shut the shield down to get you two in."

"Can we do that?" asks Griff.

"I can manage it," she answers, "The generator console's beneath the gate complex, but..."

"But that would leave everyone on the surface exposed," says Hawkeye.

"Yes. There's the problem." She looks at Hawkeye. "If you're opposed to this, then I won't participate." She looks him in the eye for the first time. "It seems I owe you. Your wife was killed under my command."

"You're saying it wasn't by your hand?" asks Hawkeye.

"I recognized her, and couldn't fire my weapon. It didn't seem logical."

“But my son...”

“Your son’s alive.”

“What?”

“I couldn’t conjure the will to exact a fatal wound. That’s why I was being evaluated.”

“Where is he?”

“He’s with Hodge,” says Cap. “I meant to tell you, but bullets were flying past me.” He empties his cigar into an ash tray. “Hodge sent me to look for you. I found him at your wife’s place.”

Griff slides open the side door.

“So what’s your decision? The Regime’s probably on our tail,” he says. “Do you want her to shut down the shield or not? Wall residents have either gone down into the wall or they’ve already been transported.”

“Then why not?” says Hawkeye. “It’s because of those people I’ve lived like this for all these years. Because I spoke out against fighting for the Regime. They can burn for their sins, as the bishop would say.”

“I don’t think he’d say that,” says Cap. “I think he’d pray that they could be saved.”

“Can’t they?” returns Hawkeye. “Either they can bask in their pride and die, or they can crawl into the ground like the rest of us.”

“Let’s go,” says Griff to Jada. “No time left.”

“This is crazy,” says Ace. Melia’s still up in the heights.”

“Then you’d better contact her,” says Griff. “She can make it.”

Ace turns on his comm. screen as the alphas leap out the side door and dash off into the shield. Melia's face pops on the screen.

"Melia, listen. The ether shield's about to go. You need to get to West sector Four-one-nine. There's a stronghold inside the wall. Take the skytram."

"On the wall?" she says. "Are you crazy?"

"Just trust me. They might be tapping this channel. Wait at the station. I'll send someone to get you."

"You're serious?"

"Please, hurry up. Randy would never forgive me if something happened to you."

"Alright, I'm going," she says. "You'd better be there." Her face disappears. Ace turns to Cap.

"Griff said you can get through the shield. Can you meet Melia at the station and take her down to Hodge."

"Sure," says Cap. He hops out the rig door, hesitates before the ether shield, then vanishes inside the crystalline mist.

Hodges face is on the screen now.

"Griff's on his way to you," Ace says. "Look out for Melia too. She should be with Cap."

"Alright. I'm down below. We've moved about half the wall residents through the tunnel already."

"Good, 'cause they're shutting down the ether shield."

"They're doing what?" said Hodge.

"I'm wiring through a broadcast for people to evacuate to sector Four-one-nine."

“You’ll waste your breath. Citizens wouldn’t be caught dead on top of the wall.”

“They can decide their own fates. We can show them to the water.”

“Is that Hawkeye? You’re alive?”

“Hodge,” Hawkeye says, nodding.

“Holy holiday. Someone here wants to talk to you.” The screen jumps around, and Hawkeye’s son Miles appears.

“Pap?”

“Miles? I didn’t know whether to believe…” says Hawkeye, his hands on his head.

“I’m fine, dad. Look what Uncle Hodge gave me.” Miles holds a hefty chrome revolver in his hands.

“Be careful with that thing, kid,” says Hawkeye.

“The kids a pro,” says Hodge.

Something large smashes into the rig, knocking Hawkeye over.

“Shit, we gotta go,” says Ace.

“Get here alive.” The screen darkens, and the rig rocks a second time.

“God damn freaks,” says Ace. “Grab a tool.” Hawkeye grabs a pulse rifle from the stand on the wall as Ace opens the roof hatch, standing on a platform behind a bubble shield. Hawkeye joins him as he fires at two massive man-like freaks barreling forward on their fists, springing with powerful arms and hurling themselves into the rig headfirst. Hawkeye’s rounds explode through flesh, bits of blood flying up. The beasts seem not to notice.”

“Hurry up, Griff,” Ace says through clenched teeth. “We’re sandwiches without

the roof turret.” As if on command, the ether shield flickers bright, and the city looks enshrouded in toxic flames. The brightness vanishes quickly and floating colors fade. Soon, there is no trace left of the shield. Ace hops from the platform into the rig.

“Stay and keep us cover,” he says to Hawkeye. “I’m making a push for the gate.”

“This things a fuckin’ pea shooter,” yells Hawkeye.

The rig peels off, the freaks chasing after it. Hawkeye spits rounds keeping them at bay.

A distance away, Ace slams on the brakes and skids the rig sideways on its thick tires. It slides to a stop.

“We can fit through the bars,” says Ace. “If we can reach them.”

Ace opens the rear door, shooting at the vicious freaks. He screams “go” as they advance. Hawkeye leaps out the side door sprinting. Han’s gate is near. He has to make it. Miles is on the other side. Once beneath steel dragon’s head peering down at him, Ace’s rifle rattles behind his ear. He doesn’t look back, reaches the gate and squeezes through the steel bars. Ace slips through beside him.

“Made it,” Ace says. Hawkeye, stuck, turns to see one of the freaks with its jaws clamped shut over his robot arm. He tries to jerk himself free, but the sharp teeth grip him tight. Ace spills rounds into its flank but it won’t let go. Hawkeye pulls frantically, and something snaps. He pulls his arm free and the hand is missing, sparks shooting from the wrist.

“Shit,” he yells.

“Fuck it, let’s go,” says Ace. The beasts charge the gate, and Hawkeye sees more creatures swarming toward the city. He spots the rigs too, racing out of the wild forest

and across the plain where the shield has vanished; fresh green grass has grown up in its place, and thousands of green and violet flowers have sprouted, leaning toward the morning sun.

Hawkeye tails Ace through the rear of the gate complex, taking the escalator up. Along the hall, several armed guards lay incapacitated. Jada and Griff have cleared the way. Inside, doors in the complex have been blown through, and they enter the decontamination chamber, passing between hundreds of decontaminant cells like shining coffins. Through destroyed clearance doors on the other end, they head across gridded metal toward the City Guard post outside.

“Brings back memories,” says Ace.

“Ones I wish I didn’t have,” says Hawkeye.

“Still,” says Ace. “You know those guys will make it just fine.”

“I was the only recruit in my squad to make it back,” says Hawkeye. Then he remembers Sykes. “At least I thought I was.”

Silence passes between them. Up ahead, two rigs pull onto the street through an open gate. Hawkeye shadows Ace, hanging close to the inner wall until the rigs pull out of sight, then sprinting toward the closing gates. They barely make it through, bars nipping prosthetic skin off the edge of Hawkeye’s wrist as it slams shut.

On Bay Street that runs along the port, the walks are crowded, the flow of life carrying on as usual, though Hawkeye notices a passerby now and then looking into the feathered morning sky. His lens outlines three vultures circling high above the port.

At the South Main station a few blocks away, they board skytram Seventeen westbound. The car is packed inside with children of all ages, parentless, loud and

excited. The tram zips them from the station and upward on the track. Children point out the window toward Han's gate, astonished. Hawkeye looks with Ace toward the gate to see freaks running rampant at the guard post. So the chaos begins, he thinks to himself. And it was his decision.

He spots Regime rigs filing in through Han's gate just before the West Seventeen curves on the track and zooms between cloudscrapers that block the gate from view.

As the tram curves around Macro Plaza, several broadcast screens on the buildings show live footage of the terror by the port. Freaks have made their way in, and guards are trying to defend the citizens.

"All hell's about to break in," says Ace.

As they step off the tram at the wall sector, another tram approaches along the track not far behind. Armed residents post along the wall, several wearing Hunter's armor. Hawkeye spots Cap with Bishop Jones along the wall.

"Is Melia safe?" asks Ace when they head over.

"She's with Hodge down below," says Cap. Behind Cap and the father, Hawkeye spots Jada and Griff walking toward them, speaking with armed residents, alerting them to something. As Hawkeye watches them approach, gunfire rings out behind him and bullets whip past his ear. He spins to see soldiers pouring out the tram in a barrage of bullets. Others climb up from ropes slung over wall's edge with aggressive fire, running for cover. Hawkeye hits the concrete hard, crawling behind cover next to Bishop Jones, then peeks up, aims and returns fire.

A body soars over the wall; the fiery-eyed vixen, thuds onto the wall amidst the gunfire. She slams her needle arm into the surface and something explodes, sending

shockwaves rippling like water through the concrete, ripping it up and sending shredded chunks flying at them as they duck down. Force rolls him backwards over the surface. He looks up again once the rumbling had ceased. The coral-haired alpha stands there, a slight smirk on her face as she admires her destruction. A second figure crashes on the roof, deeply denting the surface. The grey-eyed one, half a meter taller than the vixen. He fires missiles from his arm launcher at surprised soldiers. Several explode yards in front of Hawkeye's cover, showering him and Bishop Jones with rocks.

Uncovering his head, he sees Griff dash across the ruined surface and charge the tall one, his flashing blade clanging against the launcher's steel barrel. The tall one's artificial laugh rings hollow over the noise. A disturbing laugh. In those grey eyes, Hawkeye finds no sanity. No humanity. The wild look of a beast.

More soldiers arrive by tram, and lines of them still climb over the wall like ants. It's all out war. Hawkeye hears Cap's voice yelling in his ear.

"You three, get down below. Tell Hodge get ready for a breach."

"We're not leaving," said Ace.

"Bullshit. You all have someone down there waiting. You'll still have time to die if you're so inclined."

"Hawkeye glances at Ace, then back at Cap. He nods, then crawls behind Ace to the stronghold entrance, down into the wall, followed by Bishop Jones."

On the upper level balcony, they take the lift down. Inside the wall is like a fortress city. Hodges resident soldier are posted on several of the upper levels. White halogen lights line the metal railings of each level they pass, and looking below, Hawkeye watches the rickety subtrams at the old station on the ground level fill with wall

residents crowding around them. Two trams at the front pull away, turning sharply into a dark tunnel. Several barrack doors on the lower levels are open, the rooms inside lit and packed with residents.

Hodge is talking to Melia while operating the tram control box. Miles stands next to him, the chrome revolver at his side. The kid runs to hug his dad when he sees him.

“I thought you were gone, kid,” says Hawkeye, his eye tearing. “It’s like you’re back from the dead.” He finds it hard to let him go.

“We should get out of here,” says Hodge. “These trams won’t be back for a while.” He stands by the door, waiting for them to get in. Hawkeye leads Miles onto the tram, passing Ace, who follows, pulling Melia along. Hodge gets on after them, and Bishop Jones is last.

“Where’s Veronica?” Hawkeye asks the bishop.

“She’s already on the other side,” he says, smiling.

“Griff knows the way,” says Hodge as the tram starts to move. “He and Capp will meet us at the halfway camp.”

The tram raced through the tunnel, the yellowish lights along the outside cutting into the darkness.

It takes over half a day before the subtram reaches the other end of the tunnel. The sun shines blindingly through the windows, as the tram stops slowly, and several passengers get off. A recharging station, Hawkeye heard them say. He and Miles just sat there, Miles playing a handheld virtual racing game, Hawkeye looking through the window across from them. He can see broken columns of stone covered in green moss. There is a grim gray face carved into one, a horned beast with long fangs. A broken stone

wing lies on the ground next to it.

The stop in a dessert town the next day. “Resident soldiers stand in front of empty houses where windmills on the roof whirl in the cold breeze. Hey, boss,” one says to Hodge. “We’re the last group to cross the valley. Any more residents?”

“Only armed ones,” says Hodge. “Send the trams back for them, and I’d warn the residents not to stray too far from town. I’m gonna show these guys the mothership.”

Hodge leads them to a crater at the edge of town, and Hodge points down over the edge, a round starship, one of immense girth, fills the bulk of the vast crater. It’s pulsing lights reflecting the sun.

“There she is,” says Hodge. “Our flying city.”

At nightfall, Hawkeye sits at the fire in front of a tent they’ve pitched outside the village, at the edge of the ship crater. Miles is at his side as they feast on a dessert hare Ace has roasted on a spit, one Miles had hunted down. The meat is pure and fresh. Miles looks up from his food, looks down at the pulsing lights of the ship.

“Will mom meet us in the next world?” he asks. Hawkeye stops eating, looks at Miles, noticing the scar on the boy’s temple. “A symbol of mercy,” the bishop had said. If Jada’s soul hadn’t been jarred at that precise moment, both he and Miles would be dead too.

“She’s already there,” says Bishop Jones across from them, his daughter asleep against his arm. Her giant dog Augie is asleep at her feet. “She’s waiting for you.”

Hawkeye thinks of Holo city then. A lump forms in his throat. Perhaps he should have shown them mercy.

The next day, Hodge arrives on one of two full trams, along with Cap and Griff. With them are armed residents. Standing next to Miles, Hawkeye searches for Jada but doesn't see her.

"This is the last of us," says Griff.

"What about the other alpha?" asks Hawkeye.

"Han shut her down."

"Then he took off," adds Cap. "Left his crumbling city behind."

"That cyborg lady saved me, dad," Miles says suddenly, as if privy to his dad's thoughts. "I think she wanted to save mom, too."

Hawkeye ponders this. Miles was right. "The whole time, she could only do what she understood was right," he says. She'd even fought for their survival.

"Don't sound so depressed," says Griff. He pats his own chest near the pocket of his hood jacket, his fingers touching the outline of something small with straight edges.

"She's here in spirit," he says.

Streams Extracted

Log-X

I decided it was best to address the public. I knew the data from Griffin's ROM would have an impact. Capital officials were there, and General Han himself has requested a meeting with me, here in the Capital chamber. Apparently, they weren't trying to silence me. They really did consider me dangerous, but they had no idea what I was working on. The guard who escorted me here says the general is impressed by my work and wants to cut some sort of deal with me. He doesn't know the details, but he says Han's been working on plans to create an army of ultra-intelligent, cybernetic soldiers. The guard assures me that if I work with the general, he'll let me bring Griffin back as part of the project. I don't trust them. Who knows what they're after?

Looks like I'll need a plan Z. Maybe I'll load my own brain onto the Starboard, and disappear into the Network®. Griffin's in there somewhere—and Anna too. I know it. Perhaps there's some way I can find them. A street poet who lived around the dawn of the millennium once asked, "Why should we die to go to heaven? Earth is already in space." Wishful dreaming, maybe. . . .

CHAPTER IV

A PLACE TO CALL HOME

I sprinted through the ether shield, screaming in pain. The crystal haze was burning my skin away, burning me to death. Or it certainly felt that way. But I kept going, and soon felt an icy wind as I made it through. I held my tightly clenched fists before me, collapsing to my knees. My skin bubbled and oozed, glowing bright. The wind was cutting. It felt like being shredded to pieces with splinters of ice. New skin was growing over exposed muscular tissue in my forearms, then all over my body, the burning turned to itching, like insects crawling all over me. Then I could feel the wind again, mild now on my new skin. The itching was soothed, and I took a long breath, letting my heart slow down again. My clothes had burned away. I was yards away from Han's gate, and I turned around, looking up at the shield arching over my head, into the sky above. From here, it just looked like a rainbow, an endless rainbow.

Naked, I slid through the bars of Han's gate, made my way under the bridge. An electronic door at the back had been destroyed, and the lights inside revealed an escalator. I hurried to the edge of the wall, climbed up toward the bridge at the top. All the action of late must have gotten me in shape. I hardly broke a sweat before I clambered over the wall's edge, into the city's outermost sector. Unlike my last visit here, the place was abandoned, the scrap houses and decayed apartments empty. No smells lingered in the air. Everyone on the wall had gone down below.

I paused at brick building on the right. Metal heating pipes crawled out of the wall

and curled back, running into the left side of a large electric furnace. More pipes ran from the right side of the furnace, plugging into the brick wall of the next building behind me. The first buildings two windows on either side of the doorway were boarded up. Above me, a diffuse electric sign read simply “Bar.” The door was open. There was no one inside.

I made my way to the tram station, passing a couple two-story units built of concrete, the sides covered in graffiti. On my left, the outer edge of the steel wall reached up behind some small houses. Two were built of wood, with windows made of flimsy, clear plastic, aluminum pipes awkwardly by aluminum pipes and metal rods. Another was concrete, and the one on the edge was brick. That one was the bishop's. I hopped up the stairs and pushed the door. The place was barren, save for the chest against the wall. I smashed the lock open. Inside were three bottles of the bishop's blue moonshine. Folded up inside the chest was a black hoodcloak, just like the bishop's. I put it on.

Past Bishop Jones's unit was a stands where vendors sold merchandise. The crates of fruit had been nearly emptied out, except for a few green melons or oranges at the bottom. There were still piles of thrift clothing on the shelves, and I dug through, finding a pair of gray trousers with the cuffs frayed and worn. I tried them on. A bit to big in the waist, but they'd have to do.

When I got to the station, the silver-sided West Eight tram was pulling away. I saw Ace's girl near the track, anxiety on her almond face, her blue dress and curly copper hair blowing in the wind. Two young men of similar build, thin and wiry, stood near her, one taller, blue-eyed, a hint of red in his white skin, the other a slight brown, his deep brown eyes searching mine quizzically as I approached.

“Melia?” I said as she faced me. “Remember me? I’m Cap, Ace’s man.”

“Where’s Ace,” she asked, taking a step toward me.

“Follow me. I’ll take you to him.” She followed. The young came behind us. The taller one asked where we were going.

“You’re leaving your precious city behind?” I asked him. He nodded with intent.

“Fuck this place,” said the other.

I led them to the trench where Griff and Hodge’s men had smashed through surface, which led to the lift inside the wall.

We climbed down broken concrete onto a steel pillar. In the wall base, on the upper platform beneath, scores of armed residents, Hodge’s men, were gathered. Guns echoed somewhere further down, and several men near the back of the group turned and fired. I looked to where they aimed and saw a platoon of city guards, helmet visors pulled down, barreling toward them. The firefight erupted then, and Hodge’s men stood their ground, their old fashioned artillery powerful and effective in the stand-off. Several were hit from both sides, and slowly the guards advanced. Then from our side, three or four smoking projectiles spun through the air and clattered across the metal floor, dispersing vaporous white clouds.

Looking through the smoke, I watched Jada and Griff walking side by side, Griff’s mech arms undrawn, unaffected by bullets chipping his skin and sparking his battered frame. Jada’s Hexguns fired rounds from all six extensions, sending gangs of blinded guards flipping over the rail to the ground level below.

They cleaned house, then leapt over the pillar the four of us stood on and crawled out through the trench onto the surface. With the way cleared, I held Melia’s hand and

leapt to the smoky platform. Melia reached blindly in the darkness, her hand brushing the brown-eyed young man's arm feeling about nearby. I led her by the hand toward the lift up ahead. We stepped on, and the other two staggered on behind us. They were all coughing, their eyes wet with tears. Not surprisingly, my lungs were immune to the smoke.

I found Hodge at the subtram station on the ground, running between trams, directing drivers as they leaned out front windows. Hawkeye's son Miles at the tram controls behind him, reaching into a large metal crate full of antique firearms, passing them off to several residents lined up for them. Melia called out to Hodge.

"Where's Ace," she asked once we were close.

"He's supposed to meet us here. We'll wait for him. I don't think the guard will get through again, with Griff and that other alpha posted at the entrance ramp."

"Unless the others come," I said. "I'll go lend them a hand."

I left Melia with Hodge, who started directing residents into the trams. The resident army had secured the wall interior, but I could hear fighting on the surface now. I made it beneath the trench and stood below the lift car descended from above, it carrying Bishop Jones, who was carrying an auto-shotgun. I gave him the thumbs up.

"Have you seen the live datacasts?" he asked me. "Bunches of kids are heading this way on the trams, orphans, I assume. They want to escape the city. Let's say you and I go and protect them."

"Let's say," I returned. We boarded the lift with him, took it to the top level and climbed up to the surface. Resident soldiers must have stopped a wave of guards; most stood alert, while others were tending to the wounded. Near the tracks, a group of them

was escorting about a dozen young children to the wall entrance. Another tram was racing from the city toward the tram interval.

We posted behind an abandoned brick building for cover. I leaned against the wall, taking out a fresh cigar pack and peeling away the plastic. The tracks began to quietly squeal as the West Sixteen approached the interval ahead and eased to a stop. More kids got off when the doors opened, and I made eye contact with Hawkeye stepping off the tram behind Ace. As they approached, I told him Miles was down below. All this time, he'd been thinking Miles was dead.

The West Seventeen was close behind, pulling up just as the Sixteen pushed off, and we were caught off-guard when Regime soldier burst through the doors, weapons hot. More soldiers rappelled over the wall, climbing up from all sides. We fought back alongside resident soldiers, laying the firepower on thick. For a split second, something above eclipsed the morning sun; I looked up as the psycho alpha with crimson eyes leapt down in front of us, right out of the fucking sky. Her needle arm, the one she used to smash the roof turret on Ace's rig, shot a pulse wind that sucked up air, ripping up the concrete. I ducked as the rocks and dust pelted my face. Things looked much worse.

Knowing only one way to fight a war, I started barking orders. I told the others to retreat into the stronghold, to warn Hodge that things would turn ugly. I covered their backs, making sure they reach the ramp safely, then searched for a vantage point, spotting a lone concrete housing unit across from me.

A bigger, more powerful looking alpha had joined the one with red eyes and hair. This one shot mini-missiles from his arm launcher with liberty, leaving multiple casualties in his wake.

Bullets tore through my right forearm as I ran toward the unit door. I dropped the rifle, doubled over and gripped my arm in pain; the cells quickly regenerated, and I watched the wounds seal up again. The fast my wounds had healed yet.

I picked the rifle up again, shot through the wooden door of the apartment, tripped as I ran up the two flights of creaking stairs. I entered an empty room upstairs with walls of chipped green paint. I peeked out the shattered window, pointed the rifle. The tall alpha was laughing, shielding himself from Griff's attacks with the massive barrel of his launcher. Rayne's close-quarter cannon nailed him from behind, hurling him into the tall one, who caught him by the shoulder, smashing Griff's face twice with a massive fist, denting the frame of his cheek, and shutting out the green light in his right eye.

Griff shook himself free, and Jada's bombs pushed the big one back, putting scuffs and scratches on his steel.

Griff lashed out at the red-head, forcing her backward toward where I crouched in the window. I aimed down the sight and fired; she froze as the bullets struck her — all the time Griff needed. In a flash he rammed her jaw and neck with his shoulder slung his sword with a timely spark, such precise and concentrated energy that it blew her cannon arm apart. Now just her needle arm was left.

She wreaked havoc then, smashing the arm into the ground, creating a force so great it shock the foundation around me. I felt the floor collapse and fell through, debris falling on top of me.

I crawled from the rubble, looking up and saw her shoot her needle-arm shockwave right through Griff. He cannonballed backwards across the wall surface. His momentum was choked as he smashed through a brick wall. Jada stopped the female from shooting

another direct blast into Griff, setting off four heat seeking missiles. Rayne slipped one, sprinted across the wall as the others raced behind her. Jada charged after her.

Griff was lying against the wall. I leapt from the window and ran toward as the tall one came close to him. Laughing, he picked Griff up by his hood jacket, smashed him again repeatedly with his fist. I ran up behind and leap at him, putting every ounce of my soul into a wild flying punch that slammed against the side of his head. My wrist snapped, and several bones broke in my fingers. I collapsed in sheer pain. My hand was hot, like when I'd run through the ether shield. Painfully, my wrist melded back into place, I bent my fingers hard, and could make a tighter fist.

The alpha peered at me. He was over seven feet tall. With the same hand, I punched him again, jumping to connect with his chin. I struck him again and again, pain shooting through my hand each time. He laughed some more, amused at me striking his face. Soon I couldn't take the pain and I pulled back. My hand all around the knuckles was bruised and swollen, my fingers cut and bleeding, on fire again.

The wounds seal; I tried my luck again, swinging for the fences. The alpha swung as I did; his fists collided with mine, and I was spun around from the impact. I felt no pain.

His fist rammed my jaw next. Then three more punches followed. Helplessly I hit the floor. I didn't even see him coming in. He was far too fast. I lay there dizzily, nearly passing out and coming to again, still dizzy. My vision was blurred, but looking up, I saw Griff standing above me, grappled with the tall one, the tip of his Shockblade pressing into other's grey eye. The sun seemed to get brighter each second, until it blocked out everything.

I faded out once more, and then came to again. I sat up looked across the wall and saw Griff, standing still and alone. He was looking at Jada lying motionless on the ground. The red-head lay collapsed not far off, and the tall one was face down just past my feet. I stood, trying to shake the clouds away.

“What happened?” I asked. Griff turned to me, a strange look in his eyes — one of shock. It was the only time I’d seen his face show any emotion.

“They just...someone...they just shut down.”

Resident soldiers who’d survived crawled out of hiding. A strange stillness lingered now. The stillness of the dead. The sounds of the city were the only ones heard. Griff looked into the sky, one eye aglow.

“There’s Han,” he said. I looked up, saw a strange object rising into the clear blue, bright rings spinning around its dislike shape as it sped upward, becoming smaller and smaller, until it was a just speck. “On to the next world he can infest.”

We watched it disappear. Griff looked down at Jada’s body again. He unlatched his mech arm, and my heart wrenched when he started slicing his Shockblade against the side of her face, sawing the skin off. All I could do was watch, speechless, as he cracked her face open. He knelt down, pulling apart the silver skull and reaching a hand inside, trying to work something free. He removed a data chip, slipped it into his chest pocket and zipped it up.

“You can stay here if you want,” he said, looking through the fence at colorful screens on the buildings that towered us. Several screens showed Regime soldiers fighting off vicious freaks starting to overrun the city “I’ve had all I can stand of this

place.”

We had to dig through the rubble to make it down below. Children and resident soldiers had gathered at the station, sitting along the tracks, waiting for the trams to return.

Griff and I waited with them, smoking pipe cigars until lazy orange beams of the evening sun shone through gaps in the concrete rubble covering the trench. The fragrant smoke always made my lungs feel more alive, like I could run fifty miles without stopping. Griff said it was my hyper-aggressive regenerative cells attacking the nitrosamines and using them for fuel to grow. I asked if he could even feel it, or taste it. He said he couldn’t tell, but he liked how a strong puff made static noise flicker across his vision.

Just after sundown, we heard rumbling from the tunnel, and the subtrams came rattling into the station. Sleeping children curled up in jackets next to the tracks began to rise, awakened by the noise. Two sisters stood side by side, both carrying a backpack that was also a fluffy stuff animal, one gray and one black. The little sister rubbed her eyes as the older pulled her by the hand, and they were the first to stand next to the track as the front tram pulled up. They were dressed as if they might be visiting a relative.

We boarded the third car of the first tram, and the other two returned empty, save for the operators. Through the window, I could see etchings all over the tunnel walls. Graffiti — picturesque words, detailed and elaborate, stretching on for miles. I could only see glimpses, with the tram moving so swift.

I watched the markings for nearly a rev, then, I closed my eyes. When I opened them again, I saw Griff take the data chip from his pocket and plug it in behind his ear. It

was odd the way he closed his eyes, standing deathly still, staring blankly. For a long time, he didn't move, and the whole while I couldn't stop looking at him. His body seemed vacant, like his mind had drifted elsewhere. I'd never seen his eyes not analyzing something. After a long time, he seemed to regain awareness. He looked through the window at my back, noticed me there.

"What were you doing?" I asked

"Trying to talk to Jada," he answered.

After emerging from the tunnel, we stopped at a charge console along the track, and I got out to stretch my legs and take a leak, walking across the rusted metal platform where the engine charger, a large, ancient looking apparatus, was hooked to an exposed fuse box at the front of the tram. Past the platform, I stepped over the concrete ledge onto the ground, relieving myself as I looked at the foliage in front of me. A broken concrete bridge covered in ivy, reached just above the high trees surrounding it. The bridge was tipped backwards, as if being swallowed by the earth. Griff said it was one of the places Han's lifebombs had altered the terrain on the planet.

Once the battery engine was recharged, the tram pushed on, and after half the day had passed, we were riding across a crater-filled dessert of white sand, riding away from the sunset.

Deep into the night, we reached a camp outside a town of small homes with windmills on the roofs. The tram track led us through the town, and many residents stood outside of homes lit inside by electric light. We rode past dozens of inhabited houses, dozens of children playing in the white sand between them. The homes at the edge of

town were empty, and just beyond the last homes, where the cold dessert resumes, a pale copper glow shined somewhere beneath the ground. The tram stopped at the edge of town, and I could see a crater beneath the light. I walked with Griff toward the light source, and reaching the crater's edge, I saw the massive ship inside, it's exterior streamlined with smooth golden lights. Griff had supplied it with power.

We lived on the mothership for a time, nearly a full cycle, and then Griff said he wanted to said sail into the stars and head for Earth. Most of the residents stayed behind, making the windmill town their new home, but at least a third of them, the more adventurous, moved into the quarters on the ship and sailed off with us.

Yesterday, Hawkeye and I sat in the west wing lounge on the sixth level, looking at a starmap on the comm. link in his arm, trying to see if we could name any of the infinite stars through the domed glass window in front of us.

Hodge is helping Griff build a new body for Jada. He wants to build one for his parents too, when he finds them. He said when he does, he'll download the data onto his brain, and transfer it to the replicant bodies. He sounds insane to me — but who can know what's possible or not in this infinite universe? Hell, I died once, but now I was alive again. I guess it's a curious thing, me living on this mothership. There's that old saying, "all dogs go to heaven." I assume it applies to old dogs too. I guess I realize now, for the first time, that home's been right here all along, and no matter what rock in the universe I end up on, I only have to look up in the sky. Home is somewhere in the cosmos.

