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Explosion at the plaza

If there even exists a grain of hope, would I even be able to see it? Ethan tensed his muscles.

The sky roared fiercely. With each pulse from the monstrous machine made the surrounding masonry tremble and metallic barriers clang. The integrity of the windows was once again challenged, as they bounced back and forth. Dust from the plaza's cobblestone swirled through the air, sucking out the remaining moisture on his lips. Feeling his stomach turning, Ethan placed a firm hand imagining his insides were swirling.

"Mommy. It's hard to breathe." A feeble voice of a young girl penetrated the deafening darkness.

"It will be over soon," a woman reassured, "just a few more minutes."

As the sand tried to crawl into his eyes, Ethan peeked with one eye open. The voices came from the end of the line. Pitch black. The silhouette of the citizen in front of him barely discernible.

Not far, glooming lights patrolled. At the ration dispensers, on the roofs, by the railing and in the watchtowers the Lightbringers had full control of the plaza. As if surrounded by a school of anglerfish, Ethan knew their alluring lights were deceptive and dangerous. A single misstep could end his life. Either through a rifle shot in the head or worse. With each pulse from the sky, their light grew stronger, their footsteps became heavier and their movement more swift and agile.

With the light flooding out, one could sense the Lightbringer's full human-like figure. Layered thick metal platings, made their gray armored torso, hood and legs appear scaly. What looked like a metallic artificial spine went from their tailbone all the way to their neck visibly extruded out of their backs. In their hands they held large energy rifles. Having no trigger nor scope, they looked like hightech needles with a stock. On their arms and breastplate the Nation's symbol stood out, in orange, a circle encompassing the infinite symbol, reflecting gently in their lights.

In each of their hood's three balls of light swirled around flickering with intense energy. They swung back and forth, twisted and turned and flew around each other, without colliding. Like a heartbeat, their motion was regular as they all simultaneously accelerated intervals.

The mesmerizing light grabbed Ethan, holding him hostage. Loathing their beauty.

Near the ration dispensers, Mr. Drew could be heard yelling through the rumbling darkness, "Alright citizens, it will be over in a second. Stand ready to receive your parcel and get off the platform."

With dust filled tear ducts, tensing muscles and an incoming migraine, Ethan looked up at the disc that hovered far up in the sky. The technologically superior leviathan had cast its all-consuming shadow on his occupied city and its citizens.

A squeal came from his belly. With his fingers digging deeper into his stomach, Ethan looked up with narrow eyes on the invention of his so called benefactors.

I can't keep doing this, he thought, grabbing his knees. *Just get this over with, so I can get home.*

Like a signal marking the end, the disc emitted a loud metallic clang as if a giant switch was pulled. The rumble winded down. Echoes rung through the plaza, withering away down through the surrounding alleys. Occasional cracks and whips still sounded, as the powerful machine was winding down.

The dust had settled. Coughs, the sound of boots against sand and an inaudible mumble from the surrounding citizen's filled the darkness. Releasing the tension Ethan felt comfortable chills as his muscles relieved.

A flood of light gushed from above. Another intensified wave of grunts and moans rang through the plaza. With eyes twitching from the needle piercing pain Ethan raised his arm for cover.

A vivid blue light came bleeding in from above as if the fabric of the dark sky was tearing itself open. Ethan wedged his eyes open. In between the cracks, a solemn cloud came passing. The disc had disassembled itself into multiple squares, forming a grid structure, their distances to each other rapidly increasing. A swarm of hundreds of thousands dangling pointy moving pyramids floated noiselessly around, their bases pushing up against the squares keeping them afloat. Each pyramid, pushing for a moment, only to leave their space for another pyramid to take its place. At the beat of a metronome, they continued this dance of switching places, the whole ordeal chaotic to look at from a distance.

Suddenly the squares stopped moving. The pyramids began to jitter and a moment later, each square ascended into the sky. The few clouds in the sky rumbling of turbulence as they were cast around. Each square hurled towards the horizon, drifting across apartments, watch towers, district offices, over the city wall and out of sight.

The sky had been released.

Ethan exhaled heavily. *See you next week.* He dropped his shoulders, placing a hand on his head, realizing he also had to retrieve a uniform ration parcel soon, as his current ones failed last month's apartment inspections. Peeking up to the end of the line, he comforted himself with knowing there were only a few citizens in front of him.

The elderly man in front of Ethan rubbed his eyes out, grains of sand drizzling down from his head.

“Are you okay mom?” A bulky man asking her wrinkly old mother, padding her gently on the back while she violently coughed. “Try to get ready, it’s your turn next.”

“Stand still,” the young mother said while her daughter leaned on her shoulder, the mother turning her shoes upside down, sand trickling out.

While everyone was cleaning themselves up, Ethan noticed, in front of the young mother, a scruffy looking man who stood motionless, staring up at the platform. Bushy eyebrows, greasy dark hair, stubble beard and a dirty uniform, Ethan wondered whether he were using his hygiene packages at all.

When seeing the man’s dark sunken eyes, Ethan became certain he had seen him before. He feared he might be mistaking him with himself, when he looked himself in the mirror after their apartment complex was selected for a random search.

As the citizen’s had brushed themselves off, they went back to their former selves, facing the ration dispensers, unfazed by what had just happened. Hunched, dangling arms, eyes void of any thought. The plaza had returned to its mundane self again, except for the deep rung that still echoed in Ethan’s head.

The returning sun and the cloudless sky turned the city into a cooking pot. The official Citizen uniform, the long-sleeved gray shirt and pants, blocked the harmful rays, but not the heat. Ethan dried off pebbles of sweat from his forehead. The mixture of soot and water smeared his sleeve black.

“Alright everyone, just another moment, as we reboot the ration dispensation system. Be prepared everyone!” Drew marched back and forth on the platform, with his arms behind his back, looking down on the citizen’s who didn’t even glance at him.

Shade was limited in the old plaza, old dry paint flaking off the buildings often drizzling down like snow when a gust of wind found its way into the occupied city. Vibrant colored paintings once decorated the plaza’s flat walls, depicting children from various nationalities playing on a multitude of instruments; Flute, drums, violin, tuba, guitar, xylophone, tambourine and maracas was now bleached by the sun and what was left was unsaturated and crumbling. Accompanying the paintings, in the plaza center, stood the *Lighting guidance*, its intent to guide this generation towards imagination and wonders. It was a tall statue with multiple sprawling arms. On each arm, a square transparent box that once would emit a warm glow during the dark evening nights. Disconnected from power, the magic of the statue had disappeared. With rust taking over, a broken arm and most of the transparent boxes shattered, what was left was a monstrosity that cast an ominous shadow when the sun was setting.

Could he be from the factory? Ethan bit his lip, trying to construe where he had seen the guy before. *Perhaps one of the night shifters?*

Ethan shook his head. Leaning backwards, stretching his arms, his sore bark cracked all the way up his spine. The metallic press had done its job on Ethan's deteriorating body which had begun showing its first signs of old age. The worst part was not the liver spots that came bubbling from underneath his slightly leathery skin, nor was it the receding hairline that was taking over his once thick dark hair but his eyes were turning darker and more saggy leaving a dull expression even when he tried to smile.

Ever since curfew had been extended, he had to give up his evening walks where he would catch some fresh air before stowing himself into his dull apartment. The search for a replacement activity to occupy his fleeting thoughts had been difficult. Lately, the books that came in the mental stimulus package had rekindled his joy of reading. Hours would pass when he was in the right mood, but the current book, *Formation of Mountains*, was a drag, not effective enough to captivate him, preventing him from mentally escaping. Skipping the book would have felt like a waste, a dilemma that frustrated him.

"Why is it taking so long," muttered Ethan to himself.

The little girl pranced around moving to the barricade that formed the lines. On tiptoes and with both hands on the edge she managed to peek over, spying on the surrounding citizens. Resting her head on the barricade, her listless eyes darted from citizen to citizen.

When the girl looked Ethan straight into his eyes, he instinctively wanted to look at his shoes, but her brown wide eyes made him hesitate. After scouting around for any unwanted attention and when sure that none was looking, he returned her welcoming interest with a subtle wave and a rusty smile that was slightly forced. Bobbing her head, she took a moment to process the response, turned around, and snuggled her face into her mother's thigh.

"Molly," the mother said with a hushed voice running her hand through her daughter's hair. "Stand still."

The smile that crept up on Ethan's face stuck for a moment. The childish presence did not go unnoticed by the surrounding bystanders as similar smiles had crept up on their faces. The scruffy guy who also witnessed the interaction did not partake in their silent joy. Grinding his teeth, he stared at them with worrying eyes.

"Alright everyone, the delivery is over. Get in line. Pronto!" Drew waved his stubby arm that barely stretched past his belly. "You there number three-two-one-one-seven. Get up here, grab your grub and get out!" chucking lightly, looking around to see if anyone noticed his wordplay running a hand through his greasy oily hair.

The two guarding Lightbringers that accompanied Drew stood motionless with their hands firmly on their rifles.

Drew shook his shoulders.

“Nevermind! You there old lady.” his finger shaking “It’s your turn.”

The young man with her mother, offered her an assisting hand. “Come on mom, it’s you now”

With a confused look on her face, the mother waddled slowly towards the small stairs that lead to the ration distribution platform. A metallic platform that was dumped in the middle of the plaza right next to the statue. On it was a wall mounted ration dispenser, the rations stoved and dispensed from large containers that stood behind the wall.

As she climbed the few steps that lead onto the platform, she stopped for a brief moment as she got the wrong footing.

Drew rolled his eyes. “Come on Granny, we don’t go all day. We gotta get this train going!” His thick, well-combed black mustache, that went from chin to chin, vibrated with frustration.

Ethan shook his head, pulling a grimace when noticing the reflecting golden loyalist emblem that was neatly pinned on the white loyalist uniform.

Drew had been his neighbor. A talkative man with an odor like an onion and a body shaped like a pear. Together they played scrabble, a pass-time activity that allowed Ethan to think and Drew to talk. When playing, Drew had no trouble keeping a monologue going.

“Let me tell you! I would have kicked him square in his white smiley face if he were not guarded by those oversized light bulbs.” Drew had told him after his request for skin lotion was denied at the district’s office.

He would go on in length about how the Nation suppressed him. How he always was ready to fight if he just had the right opportunity. One day he disappeared. Without a trace. Rumor had it that he had been relocated to a different block or had simply disappeared like so many other citizens. A few days later, he reappeared, wearing a new uniform and guarding the ration lines. He had become part of the Nation’s loyalty program. Ethan was conflicted by resentment and envy when seeing Drew’s silky-smooth face who now guided citizens left and right.

“Jesus, old lady, what in the Nation’s name are you doing?”

His heavy boots stomped across the wooden platform towards the old lady, who stood befuddled in front of the ration dispenser. His forehead damp, glittering with sweat, an oily drop falling down his chin. When she noticed Drew approached her, her lips started quivering, unable to mutter a word.

“Stick both your arms into the holes” Drew pointed at the two circular holes in the center of the dispenser.

The elderly lady looked at him with wide open eyes. Turning around, she looked back at her son, who stood nodding giving her a thumbs up. Ethan notices the son's tapping feet and tensing shoulders. Facing the dispenser, she closed her eyes, looked away and slowly stuck her thin brittle arms into the gaping holes.

Nothing happened.

"Is this your first time!" Drew's voice turned into a yell. "All the way in!"

The old lady's eyes flickered wild with panic. She leaned a bit further forward, her elbows now in the holes.

"ALL THE WAY IN!" Drew screamed at the top of his lungs.

Before being able to respond, Drew went behind her and with the full force of his dense spherical body, threw himself into her.

Skin slamming onto steel. A muffled gurgling scream filled the plaza. Face and body ramming into the dispenser, her arms reaching in as deep as they could get. With the air knocked out of her lungs, the painful groans were only audible as a rattling wheezing. The only thing that kept her on her feet was Drew who still pressed her up against the wall, his face red with a vein crossing his forehead.

Citizens in the plaza gasped in unison. Shocked, the little girl ran behind her mother. Turning their heads, the citizens looked at one another with wide eyes and furrowed brows. None made a move. They all looked back up at the scene at which their own was being assaulted.

Drew stepped aside, the body of the old lady slumped to the ground with a loud thump. A brown ration parcel fell out from one of the holes in the dispenser, landing on her head covering her face. Groaning in pain, she laid motionless on the floor, only a feeble hand aimlessly moving around.

"Old senile bag. Why did you not just listen?" Panting heavily, his uniform changing color from the sweat. "How hard can it be for someone to stick their hands and arms into a pair of holes"

Stiffened, Ethan looked up at Drew with a gaping mouth. Even for him this was too much.

With his hands clenched, arms and legs twitching, his body was telling him to run. Ethan was unsure whether it was up to the platform or away from the plaza. Chained by thoughts, he looked at the only person he thought was willing to do anything.

"Mom!" The son yelled in full voice. Pushing off from a barricade, the man rushed towards the platform, his arms swinging wildly as if he had forgotten how to run.

The metallic platform screeched loudly as he heavily armored Lightbringers swiftly marched to the stairs leading to the platform. A loud eerie pitch came from their rifles, which were pointing

at the son running towards them. The energy orbs in their helmet swirled around fast, their glow having changed to a cautious yellow.

“Halt!” One of the Lightbringers commanded. “Or be subject to capital punishment!” Its voice static and crackling as if played from a damaged radio.

Despite trying to sound human, the uncanny long pauses between each syllable gave it a foreign tone.

Dust swirled up from his shoes as the son rapidly went to a halt. Sweat and dust mixed on his forehead, reddish drops trickling down his nose. Frozen in place, with his arms raised he stood staring at the two units.

They didn’t flinch.

Panting, the son looked at the citizens in the plaza as if his gaze was searching. One by one, the citizens turned their heads facing the ground. Some shaking their heads.

“Sorry” the mother could be heard mumbling to herself.

The son’s eyes reached Ethan. Ethan stopped breathing. His heart skipped a beat. Helplessness and fear bursted from the son’s raging eyes, paralyzing him. He wanted to tell him he understood how he felt. That he also had felt like that fifteen years ago. But all that came out was a stiff, uncomfortable frown that painted a tired, worn down man.

“Stand down! Last warning!” the light from the Lightbringer’s helmet turned to alarming red. The orbs whirled around at intense speed, the sound of electrical sparks filling the air.

Bursting to the brim, the man looked back at the two Lightbringers.

“Fuck!” he screamed, his body shaking. Hunched and defeated he slowly walked away from the plaza, closing his ears, looking away as the mother still moaned loudly in pain. A moment later, two Lightbringers who stood guard near one of the plaza’s entries, marched towards the son. Grabbing him by the shoulder, they pushed him forward, and without any further resistance, dragged him away and out of sight.

One of the Lightbringer’s on the platform, went over to the old lady that had managed to get up on her knees. Grabbing her uniform in the back, the unit effortlessly lifted her up like a suitcase. Exhausted she responded with a single painful groan, her eyes nearly shut. Her limbs fell limply, dangling in the air, arms and legs brushing against the grainy cobblestone as she was carried away from the plaza.

Drew stepped forward on the platform. “Oh well everyone. Now that this ordeal is out of the way, let’s continue, now shall we?” Drew pulled a smirk on his face, brushing away his golden ruffled hair from his forehead.

A silence fell on the plaza. Stiffened looks exchanged between the citizens. Ethan included. The only one, appearing unaffected, was the scruffy guy who had fixated his gaze on the little girl behind her

Ethan lifted an eyebrow, when he noticed the scruffy guy's watery eyes. *Where have I seen you before?*

"It's okay everyone, don't worry. This was just a one time thing, okay?" Drew standing in front of the platform with open arms towards the citizens "I mean, just do -whatever- you go to do. It ain't that hard. Next!"

Leaving the comfort of her mother's thighs the little girl returned the staring gaze from the scruffy guy. At that moment, Ethan could see something stirred in the guy. His shoulder sank, his legs started to tremble. Ethan could see the scruffy guy wanted to tell her something.

"Molly, stop it already!" the girl drilling her fingers into her mother's thighs, visibly uncomfortable.

"You there! What the hell are you doing! You are next!" yelled Mr. Drew again, clearly irritated, his voice now echoing through the plaza.

The young guy took a deep breath, closed his eyes and straightened up, ensuring to cover the bulge on the edge of his pants indifferent to the teardrop that fell down his trembling lip.

"What is it with you people today?" Drew motioned to the nearby Lightbringers.

Two Lightbringers broke their stance and paced towards him. Heads in the line started turning as murmuring intensified. Holstering their rifle, one of the Lightbringer whipped out his baton and took a strong, intimidating stance in front of the disobedient guy

"Move aside, citizen,"

Motionless, the guy stood his ground.

"Last warning. Move aside citizen or be subject to institutional correction!"

The glow from his helmet went from a mellow white to a cautious yellow.

The guy tensed his muscles and, in an instant, looked directly at the girl yelling, "Get out of here. Now!"

Thump!

The baton struck the shoulder. An open mouth but no scream. His arm dropped dead. The baton was lowered, and a silence took over the plaza. A wheezing from troubled breathing remained.

In panic the girl clenched onto her mother's uniform trying to climb to the safety of her arms. The mother with her daughter in the arms, tried to back-away but a herd of citizens, captivated by the turmoil, blocked the narrow path preventing them from leaving.

The baton swooshed and hit his stomach with a thump. He dropped to the ground, gasping for air. The mother dropped the daughter behind and shielded her.

It was as if the commotion triggered something in Ethan's memory, that he had seen the young guy's face on a poster on the billboard near the district's central.

"Enemy of the Nation. Dangerous citizen. Any information about this person's whereabouts should be reported to your local authorities immediately."

The silence was broken by Drew stomping with his new shiny boots across the plaza. "What the hell are you doing, you incompetent idiot?"

A faint muffled sound of metal spring being released came from underneath the guy. Mr. Drew continued, "I'll have you thrown into the—"

Click...

A green light blazed through the air. An ear piercing crackling screech. A ball of plasma engulfed those nearby. Matter dissolving into atoms in an instant. Brick, armor, weapon and flesh dissipating into nothing. Chaotic flailing rays shooting out, slicing everything. Gurgling screams were silenced immediately. Ethan shielded his head, stumbling backwards as a wave of heat washed over him, searing his skin. Clenching his teeth against the pain, he tried desperately to pull himself away, but all around him, screams were silenced as the flames consumed all.

The super hot air sizzled. The surrounding pavement cracking loudly. Flaky pieces of ash swirled around. The air feeling moist a sweet scent feeling

Ethan got back up on his feet. The scruffy guy, Drew, and the two Lightbringers were nowhere to be seen.

Ethan got up still confused and disorientated. For a second there was silence over the plaza.

"Get the fuck out of my way," a heavy guy said as he pushed Ethan aside with such force he nearly fell again.

What started as a murmur developed into sheer panic. The flock of startled citizens began trembling over barricades and each other pushing and hitting to get out of the way.

A lifeless woman laid on the ground covered in a pool of her own blood now degraded to nothing but a steppingstone for fleeing citizens.

“Mom!” a young boy screamed with his face distorted by fear, alone amidst the chaos.

Squads of Lightbringers emerged from the surrounding buildings and alleys.

Ethan stood dumbfounded, oblivious to nearly being trembled himself. This was the third attack this month. He closed his eyes and covered his ears longing to get away from the scene.

Amidst all the commotion, a girl stood crying, alone, next to the body of a burned woman.

Mrs. Braum and Ethan have a talk

Topless, nine points. Ethan frowned at the board as he put down the letters.

Mrs. Braum gave off a long sigh, “Really?” she said both bored and irritated.

At this point it was not even a game and they both knew it. The notepad counting their score tilted heavily in her favor. The game between them was savage and without remorse.

“Yeah, yeah, I know. Sorry,” Ethan said in a hushed and embarrassed voice uncertain of whether his inferiority stemmed from the ongoing lose streak or her dominating appearance, enhanced by her arms, thick as logs, and her striking white frizzly curled hair that glowed majestically from the sunlight through the ceiling windows.

“Baah, don’t say sorry,” she said, rolling her eyes, “man up a bit!” Her voice echoing down through the apartment complex’s staircase, the naked gray walls nourishing it with every bounce.

Despite having played for more than an hour, Ethan knew that none of them really wanted to play, but they also knew that they had to do some activity together, otherwise they would just seclude themselves in their apartments.

From the top of the wooden box, they used as a board, she picked up her pieces and played *caziques*. Twenty-eight points. As a former teacher, Ethan knew not to question her thesaurus-like mind.

“How are you and Oliver settling in Mr. Drew’s old apartment?” he asked, trying to break the silence.

She dropped the pieces on the board sighting in relief of the break from the monotone game, “We are doing fine, the apartment is a bit smaller than we had hoped for, but we will manage.”

“And what about the interior?”

“The interior? You mean the same gray, concrete slabs that everyone lives in?”

He looked down on his scrabble pieces considering whether it would be immature to play *bigot*. A loud creek came from down below, the entrance to the stairway functioned as an early warning system. In silence, they both peeked down the stairway over the railing. Swift steps quickly climbed the eight-story building, Ethan catching a glimpse of a young man.

As he nearly reached the top, with energy to spare, he skipped every second step and swung himself up on the last landing on both his feet. In his hands he held a bulky ration parcel that looked heavier than usual.

“Hi Oliver,” greeted Ethan.

“Hi Mr. Westwood,” Oliver staggered from climbing the stairs. “Who is winning?”

With a cocky eyebrow and a condescending smile that crept all the way to her ears, Mrs. Braum answered scornfully, “Who do you think?”

Oliver shrugged at Ethan, "Oh well, Mr. Westwood, you will beat her one day."

"I doubt it," she quickly responded, "now, come and give your mother a hug."

As he leaned in, she wrapped her strong motherly arms around him and held him in a tight squeeze, finishing it off with a subtle kiss on his forehead.

Occupied by motherly affection, he relaxed and only held the parcel in a corner. A small opening fell open towards Ethan, his eyes diving directly into it. *Art of War, Homo Deus*. Literature, that certainly was not on the approved reading list.

"Now sweetie, did you get what I requested?" she said with a smile, still holding Oliver's head in her firm strong hands.

"Yes mom, Heimdahl was even so kind as to lend us an extra one for free," A toothy, childish smile crossed his face.

Opening the ration parcel, he showed its contents to Mrs. Braum.

"Oh my, how lovely. Thank you darling. I'll finish this up, then I'll come back inside."

He skimped through the thick steel door into their apartment.

"I see the two of you are into some *heavy* reading?" He eyed Mrs. Braum, curious about her reaction.

“Yes,” Her voice was low and cautious, looking down onto her scrabble letters. “Yes, we do.”

The scrabble letters juggled in her hands; her eyes fixated. The air between them tensed. The curiosity in him overtook his instinct to de-escalate.

“I am currently reading this book about the formation of mountains.”

“Hmmm,” she hummed, juggling the pieces at greater speed.

“I have been trying to find a replacement for it, but I have read all my other books.”

She looked up at Ethan with a lifted eyebrow. “And?”

The rattle of game pieces intensified.

“How do you get your hands on such books? Have you requested them from the Nation?”

“Requested them? Hah!” she burst out, “why on earth do you think I would request them?”

Despite knowing they were alone, he scouted around for listeners, leaning forward towards Mrs. Braum whispering in a hushed tone.

“But how did you get them then?”

The rattling stopped.

“How big of an imbecile are you?” Her brow furrowing and her nostrils flaring. “I know it, you know it.”

The scrabble pieces were cracking under the heavy forces of her clenched fist.

“Alright, fair enough. I’ll stop asking,” he replied, leaning back, staring at his scrabble pieces feeling as if he shrunk in size.

“What?!” She threw the game pieces across the table. “Fair enough!? Is that all you got in you?”

Like raindrops the pieces clattered down the stairway.

The furious eyes drilled into him, feeling them piercing through his chest which made his heart beat uncontrollably. Uncertain and insecure he picked up his own pieces and fiddled with them in his hands in a feeble attempt of escaping her gaze.

A protruding index finger pointed at him.

“How did you lose your spine?” she proclaimed, leaning her head towards him trying to get eye contact in between the scrabble pieces.

Like a shameful dog, he bowed his head, clenched his teeth and stared into the wall next to him.

“You know what?! I saw you during invasion day.”

Shocked, he turned at her with concerned eyes. It had been a long time since he last discussed his whereabouts during the invasion day, as it riddled him with tormenting guilt.

“Through that glamorous star shaped mosaic window, I saw your chubby little head bobbing up and down. For God’s sake Ethan, we even had an outpost right on your street. You probably sat there reading comic books all day—”

“But—” Ethan turned with a lifted finger, wanting to get a word in.

“—while we put our asses on the line in the streets. Even students of mine, who had never in their life held a gun, joined the fight. Brave men and women died that day, Ethan. Brave men and women. Students, soldiers, fathers, mothers. And you, your pathetic excuse of a human, don’t even dare to go get a fucking book.”

A pulsating vein dominated her forehead.

The emerged silence in the hollow stairway rang loudly. The inescapable anticipating gaze from Mrs. Braum was too much. Despite his muteness, his face was gushing of emotions, a flood of thoughts and insecurities that wanted to burst out free.

He took a deep breath.

Slowly and controllably, he stood up from his chair and with watery eyes stuttered. “I... I was hiding.”

His lip began to quiver. “Norah... I was hiding Norah. “

Confused, she muttered, “Norah?” the question having trouble leaving her lips.

Caught in his own train of thought, the question repelled. "I did my best to keep her safe. I couldn't leave her alone. Not in a warzone." He sniffled. "But I still failed. They still got her."

Pain struck him saying it out loud, tears flowing down his chin.

"Norah?" she repeated.

He paused, the question finally hitting him. "Norah?"

A clueless look appeared on Mrs. Braum's face, shaking her head. Up above, a rare cloud had found its way into the city, blocking the sunlight and dimming the stairway. The strong and powerful white hair now looked gray, its power diminishing.

"My... my daughter?" He lifted an eyebrow, "she was a student of yours. Don't you remember her?"

Her aggressive stance calmed as her motherly warm appearance resurfaced.

"I... I am sorry Ethan. It was many years ago," she said in a soft, soothing voice, "I have had many students. I can't remember all of them. "

"She was so fond of you. You meant the world to her and—" His voice cracked.

"Sorry Ethan, I don't know, I mean it was—"

"Now she is alone, scared, who knows where and you don't even know she is."

He furiously stood from his chair, hitting the table on the way the remaining scrabble pieces strewn across the floor.

With muscles tensing and a racing heart, the furious wave of emotions was so intense he was not sure what to make of it. He wanted to hit something, not her, just something.

The door opened and Oliver peaked out. "Is everything alright?"

Mrs. Braum turned her head. "Yes, sweetie, I'll be back soon. Just go back inside."

He took a long reassuring look at both Ethan and his mother before closing the door. With the conspicuous look from the young Oliver, Ethan felt it only further legitimized his victimhood. With clenched fists and stomping feet, he marched through his door to his apartment.

"Ethan, wait," Mrs. Braum called, reaching a hand towards him.

Stopping the door from slamming shut, he turned around and peeked out his head.

"Stag N' Stones," she said with a clear pronunciation, "located near one of the wall's logistic stations in the industrial area to the west. Ask for Vincent."

The boiling rage in him made it impossible to say thank you, only responding with a subtle nod, before closing the door gently.

The flickering light from the TV bathed Ethan and illuminated his apartment in static colors. With saggy eyes, not tired enough to go to bed, he sat like a zombie and consumed the only channel available, *Nation One*. When it was playing at a low volume, Ethan had learned to ignore the tinnitus pitch emitted by the television. *Hygiene and You - How to use Nation issued products*

was on. A blonde woman, dressed in a gray Nation's uniform stood with a dull genderless doll made from fabric and artificial hair, carefully applying shampoo and conditioner.

"... and let the shampoo stay in your hair for a minute before rinsing it out. Don't forget to check the water temperature again. When brushing hair do it in clockwise circular motions while moving downwards."

The soap trickled down the body of the doll. Her monotone voice was perfect for spectating mindlessly, clearing his head and zoning out. The voice went on, only a fraction reaching his conscious mind. A form of dampened rage still dwelled in his body. Since the episode on the plaza, his mind had been circulating around Norah.

"Dad, I know we need to hide, but can the two of us still play a little bit if we are just really, really quiet?" He remembered her saying, days before the invasion, while they were bringing boxes of water and food to the attic.

Lately, the sporadic thoughts of Norah were accompanied by clear images of her, something which he boded welcome.

"Of course, sweetie," he had replied.

He would like her to be more focused on the situation, but then he remembered; She was still an innocent child. A child who just wanted to play.

"Then I'll bring Squidy," She ran over to her chest of teddies, flinging out teddies one by one in search of her favorite blue octopus plush.

After an hour she returned. "Dad, can you please help me find him?"

"Norah, we don't have time for this. Can't you bring one of your other toys?" Ethan struggled with a screwdriver, trying to get the power outlet to work in the attic.

"No, please dad, it has to be Squidy." She looked at him with teary eyes.

"No Norah, pick some other toy." His tone harsh, shunning her off with a wavy hand not looking at her.

"Okay." She turned, sniffing, crawling down the ladder.

Ethan continued on the outlet but knew that the guilt in him would bubble up and soon begin eating him from the inside. Throwing the screwdriver onto the wooden floor he climbed down the ladder.

After searching for two hours, they found the plush toy in her school bag as it had been brought to school for one of Mrs. Braum's show-and-tell sessions.

Ethan snapped out of his trance when he heard marching boots in the streets. With the couch close to the window, he turned his head and glanced into the dark street illuminated only by the helmets from a patrol of Lightbringers and a couple of lonely windows in the apartment complex on the opposite side of the street, each window, like a lighthouse signaling for astray sailors, dragged in Ethan's longings.

Mrs. Braum's voice went straight through the paper-thin walls when she burst into laughter as Oliver said something unintelligible to Ethan. Having known him from when he was a young kid, Ethan knew he would turn out both intelligent and funny. At times it hit him that Norah and Oliver were around the same age allowing him to imagine, using Oliver as a reference on how she would look like today.

Would she be just as athletic? Witty? Perhaps even whiter teeth?

The late sporadic images of Norah had burned a purer and cleaner image of Norah into his retina, allowing him to clearly see her in great detail. Blonde curly hair that rested on her shoulder, pointy ears and a neck with some remaining baby fat. Muscular, bigger arms and legs than the other girls. Bruises on her hands and wrists after climbing trees or digging holes. He imagined that today, she would look like a mountain next to Oliver.

"Hahaha!" Mrs. Braum burst out in laughter once more.

One of those good laughs that came from the stomach. It did not sound like their TV was on either. They continued to talk, their voices sounding warm and still full of energy despite it being late at night. Once, by placing his ear on the wall, Ethan listened in. They were both high on nostalgia all while discussing alternative interior designs and ways on how the two of them could rearrange the apartment. A poor mood overtook him, and he stopped listening.

The darkness that surrounded him felt as if it was creeping in. He turned up the volume of the TV and snuggled deeper into his blanket, his head barely sticking out. He wanted to share his near-death experience with someone. That it was not as freeing, clarifying nor enlightening as he had thought such experience would bring. Instead, it was full of rage, carnage and hatred. There was none to share this with. None that would truly listen to him.

Pictures of Norah began to re-emerge from the darkness of his mind. A flickering fire inside him ignited, Norah dancing in its middle. The fire did not take long before to latch on to nearby memories and emotions. A tear crept down his chin as he attempted to control the wildfire inside of him.

On the bookshelf, *the Formation of Mountains* was just standing there. Mocking him. An eyesore in his apartment. He stood up and picked up the book, clenching it with both hands.

Flinging it open he grabbed one of the pages preparing to tear it out.

But the reasonable part of his mind managed to snuck into a thought past the wall of fury.

What a waste.

With clenched teeth and a curly page in his palm, he took deep breaths, the page slowly tearing under the tension. He could feel his heart rate fall and the cloud of rage disappearing from his mind. The pictures of Norah had faded. He closed the book and eyed the generic picture of a mountain on the book's front cover.

"Screw you."

Ethan visits Stag N' Stones

The morning sun peeked above the city walls past both buildings and watchtowers. The city was still waking up, its buzzing activity, like a mechanical pumping heart, were muffled by the morning mist. He strolled down the street with crossed arms clasping at his uniform's sleeves. The warmth taking over from the morning cold was a welcoming friend for Ethan. He kept looking behind himself pondering whether he should return to his apartment.

On the opposite side of the street two lightbringers stood bent over peeking into the apartment buildings through the narrow open spaces of the all boarded window. The old , looking in between the cracks of a window nearly boarded all up. It wTheir hands firmly placed on their rifles. down the streets, they peeked through the windows of an old abandoned office building, nearly boarded all up. citizens they scouted through windows, alleys and open doors in the nearby buildings. , both in the occupied buildings where newly settled citizens had been relocated and abandoned buildings that have stood empty since the Nations' arrival. Another patrol stood on the roof looking down, observing each citizen carefully as they passed by. An elderly man with a hunched back walked the sidewalk with slow cumbersome steps. When taking a much-needed break, he stretched his back and accidentally met with the Lightbringer's eye on the roof. He stiffened. With haste he faced the concrete ground and continued his walk with prompt steps.

Ethan felt anxious at the sight of the increase in lightbringers searching the streets since the plaza incident. As he walked, he iterated the possible responses he had prepared if he were questioned about his whereabouts. A control point came up further down the road which funneled citizens who were traveling between districts. Made up of smooth steel barricades and an obelisk looking watchtower all were elegantly decorated with barbed wire. In the tower a Lightbringer, armed with a high caliber rifle, pointed at each bypassing citizen. Ethan held his breath as he entered the first funnel.

"Identification," said the guarding Lightbringer, its helmet only glowing a faint dull white.

As Ethan stretched out his arm the Lightbringer grabbed his wrist strong and firmly. The experienced traveler had learned not to retract their arm from the pain, when a unit scanned them. After a second, a faint beep emanated from the unit.

"Ethan Westborn, citizen number two-two-three-o-four, proceed to sector."

With a confirmatory nod he continued, satisfied from yet another trouble-free pass through.

As he moved further into the district Ethan looked around trying to get his bearings. Even though he had grown up in this town, this part was unfamiliar to him. What was most noticeable was its limited residential areas, the surrounding buildings mostly related to industry, some areas even barren without any buildings, the ground a dark reddish mixture of sand and dirt. Tall chimneys, silos and warehouses with walls full of grime and sot. Ethan caught sight of a

surveillance drone that flew out from an abandoned warehouse and into the air. In the distance was a screeching sound of a giant machine cutting metal. The air irritated Ethan's nose as if large, burned particles rubbed its insides.

Mrs. Braum had told him that the place was near a wall logistic station. The problem was that this district was full of them, each having multiple assembly lines descending gradually into the air and all the way to the city wall. Only few had seen the docking stations on the opposite side where large Nation freighters would come and go, the ships being so enormous their tops often peaked above the city walls.

Crates, boxes, metal plates, containers, rods, poles were all being transported on the rubbery belts and were the primary export goods of this city, manufactured in the various factories scattered all around, Ethan recognizing some of the boxes from the factory he worked in.

Having walked back and forth, uncertain on how to proceed, he scouted around for anyone who could guide him, but out here, citizens, and even lightbringers were few and far between.

Three citizens crossed the road. They wore an alternative pocketed version of the standardized uniform. In them hammers and wrenches were sticking out. Both their skin and their uniform were covered in a mixture of dirt, oil and sweat. On their shoulders they were lifting thick iron rods. Familiar with the art of metalworking, Ethan knew those pipes had weight but the men, bulky and muscular, made it look easy. Ethan could hear them talk.

“—picking up his teeth. He could barely stand after that,” the largest of the men said.

“What about the other two?” said one of the other men.

“They were not as stupid as Timmy, so they scrambled.” He chuckled, showing his coffee-stained grin.

“I haven't seen Timmy at work today though.”

“No wonder. My guess is he is visiting the fine nurses in the medical ward.” He adjusted the rods on his shoulder “I mean, I wouldn't mind going there myself if I were to be treated by—”

“Hi, excuse me,” Ethan said insecurely, his voice nearly cracking like a teen in puberty, “can you help me out?”

The three brutes looked surprised and stopped for a second. They walked up to him, intimidatingly, standing tall and strong in front of him. A wall of muscles.

“What?” the biggest guy said in a deep dark voice.

Ethan gulped, “I am looking for a place called the Stag N' Stones.”

He lifted off the metal pipes from his shoulder and dropped them on the ground, their weight making the ground tremble.

With a lifted eyebrow and a nearly roaring voice. "Why are you going there?" His muscles tense.

"I have heard it was a nice place to see around these parts." Pulling off a strained smile.

Not impressed, the brute moved his head closer, Ethan's nose clenching from his foul breath of cigarettes and coffee. "Do you think I am stupid?" His voice dull and slow.

Ethan stiffened. "One second."

With trembling hands, he reached out for his satchel, nearly dropping it on the ground after wiggling the book free. With stretched out arms he showed them the book.

With clenching eyes, the brute looked closer. "For-mat-ting of mount-tens..." Reading aloud for himself, wrinkling his nose.

Looking both back and forth, Ethan hunched forward and whispered. "I was planning on perhaps selling or trading it."

"So, you want to trade, huh?" he chuckled, his muscular chest bouncing up and down. "At the Stag N' Stones?" A condescending smile crept on his face.

The guy turned and looked at his two buddies behind him. A series of mute facial expressions were exchanged and after a confirmatory nod from both, he looked back at Ethan with a smirk on his face. In an instant, the big guy's arm swung and snatched the book.

Ethan stood in shock with both his hands still in the air. In the strong and swollen worker hands, the book looked more like a children's book.

The big guy took a step forward and pushed Ethan with such force that he fell on his back, managing to set off with his arms only barely avoiding slamming his head into the ground. Ethan looked up at the giants, who had taken another step forward, towering over him, stomping him flat if they wanted to. At first, he wanted to flee like a mouse into his hole in the wall, but the rage that had lingered the past few days began blossoming. He stared at them with furious eyes and biting lips waiting for their next move. Unbearable to not know whether they would beat him into a pulp. The three of them just stood, as if they were waiting for Ethan to make a move. Nothing happened. The intense tension between them turned into an awkward staring contest.

The brute turned around and looked at his buddies once more again, finishing off with a confirmatory nod. The big guy swung his arm, but this time the arm stopped and reached out to Ethan with an open palm.

Ethan hesitated. He grabbed the brute's moisty hand and in a single swoop was lifted on his feet. The big guy slammed the book into his hands with such force he had to put counterweight as to not tripping again. Still maintaining his newfound confidence he kept looking at them with a stern aggressive look hiding his confusion.

Struggling to get any words out, Ethan dared to say “So, what will—”

The big guy interrupted by pointing at a group of buildings. “Past the silo. Apartment blocks on your right. Second alley. All the way to the end.”

Ethan turned and saw a narrow alley in between two apartment complexes. At the end of the street was a wall logistic station, the one Mrs. Braum had spoken of.

With a firm grip the brute grabbed his metal pipes and swung them effortlessly back up on his shoulder. They continued their stroll into the warehouse next to them, chuckling. Ethan stood confused for a second, padding himself on his chest trying to figure out whether the pain stemmed from a bent or broken rib.

Each step through the narrow cobblestone alley echoed effortlessly making Ethan’s attempt at walking in silence impossible. The surrounding windows were barricaded with planks and wet cardboard. Dumpsters full of trash, not having been emptied for years, were left for its own biological cycles of decomposing and cultivation of new life, the stench emanated foul and rotten. *XoXo was here, Lies and deception, Shit-tastic*, a dog taking a crap in a Lightbringer’s helmet, a citizen hanging in a noose. The mixture of new and pre-Nation graffiti that decorated the walls was a museum of what was, their color vibrant standing out from the monotone brick pattern.

As he turned at the end of the alley, he knew he had found the place. An old tavern masoned with crooked white limestone and black wooden beams for support rested comfortably among the towering apartment buildings, its Georgian style suggesting it had been stuck in a time bubble while modern society had popped up around it. A large stag with its antlers shoveling stones was painted on the sign that hung above the door saying *Stag N’ Stones*.

The heavy wooden door gave off a loud squeak. A thick musky scent grabbed his nose, full of cheap tobacco and a hint of sweat. Shady men and women were scattered across the room sitting at crooked wooden tables and chairs all worn over the years screaming for wood oil and a gentle hand. A couple of incandescent bulbs in the ceiling barely illuminated the room in a mellow red intensity, leaving the room’s corners dark for those who valued their solitude.

Two bearded middle-aged men hunched over a table, turned around skulking at him. They huffed at him and turned, shaking their raffle full of dice that clattered loudly over the dented table.

“Just a twat,” one of them said.

A tough looking lady, with a mug in one hand, biting nails on the other, snorted at the sight of Ethan, her face bitter and full of resentment.

The slow and careful steps did not prevent him from being eyed like an animal in a cage, as he moved up at the passage towards the main attraction, a dark brown bar made from solid wood,

a mirror mounted on the back wall neatly decorated with a mosaic of colored bottles, its selection astonishing him.

The bartender, a wrinkly old man with glasses, followed Ethan with cautious eyes. As he reached the bar, he crossed his arms and kept his silence with no intention of breaking the ice, Ethan uncertain whether he was the only one who felt the awkwardness between them.

“How much for a Graham’s Golden?” Ethan pointed at a green bottle with an image of a bleating goat, its label half-way peeled off.

“12 stamps.” the bartender replied short and concisely, his arms still crossed.

Ethan pulled a grimace “12 stamps?!”

The bartender shook his shoulders.

Last time the bitter drops of fermented grain had touched his tongue was from a single malt hidden away with them in the attic, a sip or two whenever Norah slept. His eyes longed for its content.

“Alright, fine.” Out from the small breast pocket in his uniform he pulled out a booklet of stamps, nearly empty despite being the first week of August.

With a sigh, the bartender snatched the stamps, picked up the bottle and poured up into a metal cup.

Ethan swirled the cup, disappointed by its clear transparent colors and its smell of raw ethanol. After taking a sip, Ethan was no longer in doubt.

“This is Alcovoid!” Ethan proclaimed as the peak intensity of rotten potatoes was fading away.

The bartender still stood with crossed arms now with a faint smirk on his face.

“Why are you putting Nation crap like this in old whiskey bottles?”

“Where else would I put people's spills?”

Disgusted and repelled he put the glass on the counter, drying off his tongue with a clean section of his uniform.

“But—”

“I have work to do.” He turned around chopping a handful of questionable sausages pulled out from the dirty sink.

Ethan could still see his sour face through the mirror.

The conversations in the bar had turned whispery and its patrons carefully watched him from the corner of their eyes. Ethan looked around the tavern, humiliated, uncertain about his next move.

From a dark corner a middle-aged man with short black hair went up from his table. With a confident stride he aimed directly for the counter, steering past tables and chairs with ease and knocked on the wooden counter.

“Jimmy, can I get two cans of pickled onions please?” he said, rubbing his black stubble beard.

The bartender knocked mockingly on his head. “Are you an idiot or what? I already told you we don’t get more supplies until the end of this week.”

“What about the box next to the fridge?”

“Can’t you just pick something from the shelves?”

With his old-man fingers shaking, the bartender pointed at his selection.

“Seriously Jimmy?” He said a smirk on his face and a lifted eyebrow.

“Forget it, they are not for you.”

The man leaned over the counter getting closer to the box. “Well, I don’t see any official Nation seal on that box. You wouldn’t mind telling me how you got it then?”

Jimmy went silent for a second “A friend,” he replied swiftly.

“And you are aware that your friend and I know each other very well?” His smirk growing bigger.

Turning around, Jimmy started chopping up sausages.

“And you are aware that your friend and I help each other out?”

Jimmy frowned angrily at the man. “Baah!” He furiously threw his towel in the sink, grabbing a can from the box and with a heavy thump smashing it on the counter. “Sometimes I wish your kind would be sent to the mining outposts.”

“Thank you.” Winking at him teasingly with a toothy smile, he went over the counter grabbing a can opener, going to town with his prize.

After having chowed down a couple of juicy onions, wiping himself from the spills, he reached for a pocket in his uniform, took out a pack of cigarettes and dragged one out. He padded down all his pockets.

“Darn it.” The man turned to Ethan. “Hi friend, you got some fire?”

Ethan looked surprised, imagining he must have heard wrong. "Excuse me?"

"Do. You. Got. Fire?" waving the cigarette in front of him.

Being asked directly whether he carried contraband caught Ethan off guard. "No..."

The man staring at him with a strong gaze, the dark wrinkles under his eyes making Ethan wonder when he last had slept.

"Of course, you don't," the man said, rolling his eyes. He went around the bar counter where Jimmy was now washing dishes in the same sausage sink. "Excuse me, Jimmy."

Jimmy looked at him with a vicious disgruntled face as the man tried to get past him, Jimmy grunting at him. Bowing down he fiddled with a small metallic box and pulled out a zippo lighter igniting his cigarette. With a loud bang, the guy slammed the zippo lighter on the counter and took a long puff.

"So, what do you want?" blowing smoke out of his nose before picking out another snack.

"I want to trade," Ethan said hushed.

"You want to trade?" Lifting an eyebrow. "What do you want to trade?"

Ethan hesitated answering. "Are you Vincent?"

"What do you want to trade?" Ignoring his question, the man dived in for another treat.

Ethan turned and dragged out his book from his satchel. "I want to trade this book."

The man stopped mid-chew, his mouth full of onion, eyeing his offer. "That book?"

Ethan nodded, his stomach aching.

"That's it?"

"Yeah?"

"And what do you expect to get in return?"

"...Another book?" the answer sounding more like a question.

Ethan rubbed his sweaty palms on his pants.

"Another book?" the man repeated condescendingly.

"You know, one of those hard-to-get ones."

The man paused for a second, finishing off his last bite before moving the empty can to the side.

“Alright, so let me get this straight. You have come to this part of town to trade your common, widely available, Nation-approved book ‘*Formation With Mountains*’ for an illegal book that would grant you a free one-way-trip to the district’s precinct?”

When said it out loud, it became apparent to Ethan that he had no idea what he was doing. Turning his head, he noticed that the patrons in the tavern were giggling, having caught their full attention. He nodded slowly, doing his best not to lose face.

“Sorry, we don’t do that here,” he replied swiftly, turning to leave the counter and the conversation.

Defeated and embarrassed, Ethan felt the urge of just turning around, running out through the door, but faint images of Norah started appearing in his vision, as if she was there. Sitting on the counter, gazing at the colored bottles, like prisms, throwing their lights around in awe, her childish fascination captivated. With her back to Ethan, he looked at the mirror to see her, but its grimy surface only allowed her face to be seen as a smudge. The figment reminded Ethan why he was there, a boiling rage filled him up from the inside, telling him instinctively to take action.

“Wait!” Ethan proclaimed.

The man turned around; his sunken dark eyes full of contempt.

“Let me try again,” he said in a tone instigating some authority. “Are you Vincent?”

He sighed, “I don’t know of this Vincent you are talking about, and even if I did, I would not tell you. You are more trouble than you are worth.” His eyes tensed. “Leave, and don’t come back here again.”

Ethan felt the desperation in him build up. With a reaching hand he urged to just run up and grab him by the shoulder. Realizing it was a bad move, he dropped the idea and gave off a visible sigh. Ethan looked around the room and saw that the citizens had lost interest in him as well.

As he packed his book back into his satchel the door opened with a bang and a brittle-looking young guy rushed in with a wild look on his face. Without hesitation he ran to the counter and exchanged a few words with Jimmy out of ears reach. With a subtle nod Jimmy pointed at the toilet where the young guy rushed to.

Like a hurricane Jimmy, behind the counter, started stashing boxes away, latches, hinges and locks being opened and closed. The second he was done he turned around, started washing dishes, sweat dripping down his forehead.

The old men playing dice tensed when they saw Jimmy, ruffling behind the counter and returned to their game with even more focus and vigor. The lady, biting her nails, stopped only to look into the open air with wide eyes taking a long continuous sip from her mug.

Through the dirty window, an armored personnel vehicle came hovering into the alley at high-speed whirling up sand and dust. After breaking, within seconds, the doors on the back slammed open and out rushed a squad of heavily black armored Lightbringers armed to their teeth with rifles, their metallic boots screeching on the cobblestone surface as they approached the tavern door. Inside their helmets the energy orbs swirled around in fast complex patterns in a cautious and pulsating red.

Frozen in fear, Ethan observed the patrons for guidance, surprised to see their ignorance of the amassing forces outside. From the corner of the eye, he noticed the lighter still laying out in the open on the counter. Swiftly he grabbed it and snuck it into his uniform's sleeve to then lean on the counter acting unaffected despite his shivering body.

The door was kicked in with a loud bang nearly going off its hinges. Dust from the upper beams came raining down. The patrons broke their spell now, appearing both surprised and shocked.

"What is this?" Jimmy shouted from the counter.

A white armored lightbringer entered the tavern, its massiveness challenging the creaking floorboards underneath it. Standing tall and firm, with its hands on its side it shouted. "Search initiated. Head up against the wall" the synthetic deep voice coming off clean from its internal speakers. The rest of the squad came swarming in, pointing their rifles at them.

Most citizens in the city had experienced their fair share of random searches before, at work, in the park or in their homes, which meant they followed protocol by placing their hands behind their neck as they approached the largest and most bare wall, the other lightbringer units carefully aiming at them with their raised rifles.

"Citizens comply or face institutional correction." The commanding unit forewarned, shouting out to all the citizens who were neatly aligned at the wall. "Tell us the whereabouts of Phillip Schmidt."

None spoke up, an eerie silence emerged as everyone knew this meant trouble. With a nod the white commander signaled the other Lightbringers who thoroughly started patting down each citizen one by one.

"Clear!" the first yelled, moving next to the muscular lady.

Ethan had placed himself in front of a renaissance painting of a couple of hunters dragging a stag in the snow through the naked woods. In the reflection of its glass pane, he noticed that the young guy, who had rushed into the tavern, snuck up behind the counter reaching out for an ajar window. After struggling with the latch, he covered back behind the counter when another Lightbringer, responsible for keeping guard, moved further into the tavern and began roaming.

"Clear!" the other lightbringer yelled moving to a scruffy young woman next to Ethan.

Having taken one step too far into the lion's den, Ethan felt cornered. Palms sweaty, short of breath, a racing pulse caused by the increasing weight of the lighter in his sleeve.

"Clear!" the lightbringer yelled, moving to Ethan. Strong soft synthetic silicone-like hands touched his angles. Slowly but thorough, it continued its search upwards, reaching his thighs, crotch and all the way up his back. As it finished off the shoulders it continued towards his arms, Ethan closing his eyes and biting his lip to not succumb to the pressure.

"Clear!" it yelled, continuing its search, the next patron being Jimmy who was already muttering a wide variety of curses.

The build up pressure wanted to leave Ethan, exhaling violently, but fearing giving him away, a controlled sighed was the only relief possible. A subtle smile crept up on his face. For a second, Ethan believed there was a chance he would end up scot-free.

"*Shit*," Ethan thought to himself when he looked again at the reflection in the glass pane.

The Lightbringer, who was roaming the bar, approached the counter where the young guy was hiding, only a matter of seconds before blowing his cover. Ethan looked down at the floor, feeling he already had done enough for these strangers.

There she was again, right underneath Ethan as he leaned with both arms on the wall. Norah, with her head bowed, looked at the floor, pulling the sleeve of where the lighter was, as she usually did when she wanted her father's attention.

"I am sorry daddy," she said sniffing. "I know Squidy is just a toy and that you got more important things to worry about."

Despite only being able to see the blonde uncombed hair of hers, he knew she was in tears as they dropped down right in front of his feet.

Aware that she is nothing but a figment, he still felt the urge to just drop down and hug her. To tell her, it's alright. That her father is there.

But that would be a lie. The untamed rage began whirling inside him again. Whips of fire swung around scorching his insides, the pain reaching all the way to his fingers and toes.

With clenched teeth he muttered to himself. "Fuck..."

The lighter emitted a metallic clank as it hid the wooden floor, the surrounding lightbringers turning their head. The lightbringer who previously padded Ethan returned, bowed down, and picked up the lighter, carefully investigating it inside its massive palm. With force it grabbed Ethan's wrist and held it for a second.

“Report. Citizen Ethan Westwood, two-two-three-o-four is in possession of pre-State contraband, a violation of the rehabilitation protocol, administering institutional correction and temporary prohibition of stimulus- and succulent ration parcels.”

From its belt it pulled up a baton and with a click extended it to its full size. A hit with full force at Ethan’s thigh forced him to the ground giving out a loud painful groan. Another swing followed immediately after hitting him on his left shoulder.

“Stop, stop!” Ethan cried out loud instinctively as he crawled into a fetus position.

Lying there in pain he sensed from the corner of his eyes that attention was all on him. A figure swiftly snugged through the window.

The Lightbringer grabbed Ethan by his neck and lifted him up on his feet. “Citizens, disperse, establishment is closed until further notice”.

In a single file the citizens left out the door, Ethan limping forward using both wall, chair and tables as support knowing it would be a long walk home.

The other citizens eyed Ethan as they went their separate ways after leaving the alley.

Samus is introduced and gets into trouble

The folders on the desk were towering. Samus looked at the pile and thought to herself that if one more were to be put on top, the entire thing would collapse and crush her.

From her desk she could see her colleagues' backs drenched in sweat by the boiling heat that had taken a toll on the office. All windows in the never-ending office were open, but the air was still outside. A futile fan in the ceiling spun giving off an occasional squeak, the only sound loud enough to drown out the continuous keyboard clicks. Her desk was located perfectly to observe the repetitive pattern of worker-desk-worker-desk-worker-desk.

Beatrice, who sat in front of her turned her head, her lazy eye slowly drifting. “Morning Samus, I did not notice your lazy ass had already arrived.”

Samus chuckled, “Well, it does sound like your lazy eye could use some calibration. I can offer you a smack on the head if you need.”

Beatrice smiled and nodded. "What's up with that pile?"

"Hell, do I know. The Nation is busy expanding as always. They are piling up the work their hollow heads can't fathom I guess."

"Oh well, good luck with *that*. See you next year." Waving at Samus with a sassy hand before turning back to her desk.

Samus turned on her desktop computer, the internal fans immediately starting on full throttle. After a couple of minutes, it froze.

With a smack on its side she yelled, "Come on, your piece of shit." Her eyes itching with frustration.

Two shakes later she took the inevitable option of rebooting.

A middle-aged man approached her desk.

"Samus, how far are you with the relocation report?" asked Emanuel, who dried off his hanging chubby chins with a towel, sweat finding its way into his facial crevices. "Do you think I could get them today?"

His usual radiating warmth from life in the Mediterranean was not enough to extinguish the bottled-up frustration.

"I only just started on this task yesterday! It appeared overnight I have been tasked to move half the district's people." Her voice was loud and frustrated. "The profiles just keep flowing in and now this piece of junk is working against me."

With wide open eyes he stepped back with raised hands. "Oh, wow Samus, sorry that I asked." Moving back to his desk.

Samus sighted, "Sorry Emanuel its just—"

He turned around looking at her with a sincere smile. "It's fine Samus. It's hard not to get agitated working in this sauna."

With a subtle and embarrassed smile Samus nodded, closed her eyes and took a deep breath before turning to the pile, grabbing the top folder.

An elderly lady's profile. Marguerite Fischer. Notes on her were that she had family in one of the other districts and had onset Parkinson. Like the many others in the pile, she required new housing as her block was to be demolished and replaced by a landing pad for intercity trafficking. She typed in her details on the computer and searched for available housing that would maximize the Nation's production output. The only available accommodation was at the opposite end of her district, but her health report stated she would be unfit to reach her post. Samus had already sealed her fate, which was sending her to the bio-recycling center. As a last

opportunity she investigated the possibility of swapping her out with a citizen that had received a remark in their citizen records.

Madison Smith, 46 years old, entrance to ration parcel distribution center, theft of ration parcels from citizens.

Olivia Jhonson, 32 years old, at citizen's home, unapproved attempt of reproduction.

Ethan Westbborn, 42 years old, Stag N' Stones, possession of contraband.

Dylan Garcia, 11 years old, indoctrination center, assault on Lightbringer with brick

At first, she barely registered what she read, glancing over the screen, the heat turning her thoughts to vapor. Aware that her subconscious had picked something up, she re-read the list. In disbelief she stared at the CRT monitor. For a moment, she felt as if time had grabbed her shoulder pulling her back into a valley of desperation and anger, the surroundings nothing but background noise to the vivid images that passed her retina.

The well-known creaky leathery footsteps approached her from behind, breaking her trance, swiftly closing the open documents on the computer. A stiffening tension building up in her shoulders, her gaze fixated at the screen.

"Good morning Samus." William's deep radio voice not creamy enough to loosen her up.

"Morning," she replied concisely, her facade of disinterest botched by her flaring nostrils spasming from the pungent cologne.

"How are you holding up?" Placing a hand on her shoulder, his warm touch and strong clutch from his big hand hitting a nerve on her collarbone. "The latest performance review indicates that you are sending an increasing number of civilians to repurposing."

Samus wrestled free from the fixated gaze and planted it on William, noticing his silver hair being even more greased and combed up than usual, a certain telltale that he wanted something. Without blinking, she tried staring through his eyes and back into his mind to decipher his ill intentions.

"Do I have to remind you that our citizens are a vital resource and repurposing them is a shortsighted gain?" he replied calmly and collected.

Despite the criticism, an alluring smile appeared on his face, enhanced by his strong and square jaw.

"There is simply not enough housing. With the Nation taking over more residential areas, where are the people to live if they don't erect more housing?"

"Well then." Rubbing his stubble beard. "In that case, I assume you have submitted a formal suggestion to the Nation's expansion planner?"

Samus felt he was hitting where it hurt, and he knew it.

Samus had through the years of working with William observed that those who wrote formal requests to the Nations were either loyalists or civilians tugged up in a corner with no way out. A direct communicative channel to the Nation disguised as a game of Russian roulette.

"I am not going to risk my ass like that. What if my suggestion is rejected? I would either be relocated to the mines due to incompetency or I'll get executed if they believe my request is considered offensive."

"Well, why do you think they would do that?"

"Because I have seen it! People from this very office!" her voice loud, making her neighboring colleagues turn their heads to see the commotion.

"Well, I have been writing formal documents many times, and look where I am now. Head Citizen Facilitator." Looking at her proudly, with both hands on his hips.

"You would sell your mother, first chance, if it meant you would get a clap on your ass by a Lightbringer. I mean—"

Samus shut when William abruptly pointed at her with a stretched out trembling index finger.

"Shut it! Remember who you are talking to." His eyes were wild like an animal.

Surprised, she tugged her head looking down at her desk, she nodded.

"Good." His wild eyes and tensed face fading back into its confident former self. "I know your situation is not ideal, so let me help you out."

Turning towards the stack of folders he grabbed with both hands taking the vast majority of the pile waddling to one of Samus' colleagues, Etna an elderly brittle and quiet woman who valued her solitude behind her office desk. He dropped them off her table with such force a part of the pile fell plastering the floor in paper.

"Here you go, Deena, is it?" As she was opening her mouth to answer, having lost interest, William waved her off and went back to Samus.

"But—" Samus muttered.

"Thank me later, I have other business to attend to." Waving behind his back as he left through the door.

Samus sighed, stood up from her chair and started picking up the strewn out papers. Handing over the papers to Etna. "I am very sorry, anything I can—"

"Just leave me alone!" Tears flowing down Etna's chin.

With respect, she gently placed the papers on her desk moving back to her own. She looked around, but everyone was staring at their screen except for Emanuel who was already on his way to her table.

“Yikes,” Emanuel said as standing next to Samus’s table. “What was that all about?”

“It’s a long story.”

“The two of you have been working together for so many years. What happened?”

“Emanuel, I know you are just trying to help, but let this one slide.”

“I mean, you were best buddies and—”

“Emanuel!” Raising her voice, exposing her teeth in frustration.

“Alright, sorry Samus.”

Collapsing on her office chair, she looked exhausted at the pile which now was half in size. Despite most of the work now involuntarily being redistributed to Etna, there was still plenty of work ahead. Fingers tapping, clock ticking, folders migrating from one bin to the other, profile after profile was entered into the terminal, the monotony only broken by the scheduled drinking breaks to fetch lukewarm water from the water cooler.

“That’s it for me today,” Emanuel said while cleaning his desk. “Will you be working late?”

“I have to,” Samus sighed, clicking frantically on her keyboard. “Otherwise, I won’t manage the deadline.”

“Yeah, I feel sorry for you. Anything I could do to help?”

Samus shook her head. “It’s fine Emanuel, have a nice evening.”

When Samus finally left the office building, the sun had long descended behind the city walls. The city hummed at much lower intensity during the night, which soothed her ears after being forced to listen to keyboard clicking the entire day. The streets were empty as most civilians were huddling up inside the apartments as it was way past their curfew. She walked on one of the exclusive routes designated for privileged citizens, a benefit she received since starting in the Nation’s planning wing. The improved lighting and regular Lightbringer patrols allowed her to walk carelessly through the city, letting her mind drift and embrace the nightly chill.

The route to her apartment led through the old city park, a neglected green area too swampy for construction. Tall grass, wild bushes, weeds covering most of the concrete path, a natural ceiling of tree crowns. One of the few areas for a citizen to experience nature inside the walls, one of Samus’s favorite places. Brushing away thorny hedges, ivy and tree branches as she walked on the path, she noticed a silhouette sitting on a bench underneath the gloomy light from a streetlamp.

“Good evening Samus.” The silhouette barely recognizable from the shade covering his face.

Samus stopped abruptly, immediately recognizing the blue business suit.

“Seriously William. What do you want?”

“Well, I am just making sure you get home safely.”

“Screw you.”

“We are not at the office anymore. Go at it. Let it off your chest.”

“You know what I mean, and you already know my answer. Fuck you. I am not doing whatever you plan on doing.”

“It’s a simple task.”

Samus awaited in silence.

“Now listen, Claudia from the Nation’s planning board is only one mistake away from getting the boot.”

“Let me guess. You want her position so you can walk around high and mighty.”

“You clearly don’t fathom what this means. If I get this position, I’ll be meeting with the Nation’s planetary ministers on the orbiting citadel.” His face peeked out from the shade, nearly glowing with excitement.

From his pocket he dragged out a zip lock bag, the two blonde hairs in the bag barely visible.

“Luckily, I had a meeting with her yesterday. Her wild uncombed hair made it too easy,” he chuckled lightly.

“And?” Samus replied condescendingly.

“And?” He replied back, surprised by the question.

“We agreed that the previous job was the last.”

“Time changes,” he burst out, “new opportunities arise. I promise you I will make it worth your while. What about one of those penthouse apartments in the residential sector? One of those with a patio and a view to this place that you are so fond of.” With open arms gesturing to the hanging trees bowing for them.

“Not interested, William.” Her tone confident.

“Come on Samus, listen, if I get this position, you won’t be seeing me very often. You will finally get rid of me. I’ll be way too busy somewhere up there.” He looked up, pointing into the sky.

"No," she said harshly.

"No?"

"William, I am not doing it. I know you helped me out a long time ago. Find some other bootlicker to do your dirty errands."

"Well, sweetie, don't seem like you have much of a choice, do you? You remember who you are talking to, right?" His toothpaste grin reflected by the streetlamp.

"I don't have time for this," she replied swiftly and began walking.

He leaped up from the bench and blocked her path.

"Hey, hey, wow!" he said, "Not so fast."

Without stopping, Samus sidestepped to pass him, William grabbing her shoulder with force attempting to hold her back.

Old reflexes kicked in and within a split second, Samus turned towards William, punched him directly into his solar plexus grabbing him in a choke hold while forcing him to the ground.

"Listen up your fat sack of meat, next time you put a hand on me, I'll gouge your eyes out and stick them up your ass."

His eyes wide open, hands frantically trying to get a grab on her forearm to wrestle it off his neck, his body twitching and turning.

"Do you get that?"

Stiff face, veins extruding from the skin, the muscles in his face tensing. Wild fanatic arms flail backwards hitting Samus. Barely flinching, she tightened her hold.

"How big of an idiot are you? Last warning before I break your neck. Leave. Me. Alone!"

His tongue stiffened like a plank stuck out from his gaping mouth, a faint squeak coming from the bottom of his throat as he attempted to mutter something. The veins in his eye turned into a fiery red.

"Nod!"

He frantically nodded his head.

Releasing her hold, William dropped to the ground. He took to his throat, coughed unstopably, his breath wheezing. A gust of wind passing by raining down leaves on the struggling William.

Collected and determined, she continued down the route at a fast pace not looking back until she reached her apartment. Leaning on the door, she caught her breath. Despite her heart racing, she felt empowered with a snark of anxiety of not knowing what tomorrow would bring.

She went up the stairs to her apartment and nearly stepped on a package that was lying in front of her door. Half a ration parcel tugged neatly with a band.

A note on the package said, "Today you looked like a sour asshole who could use something sweet - Emanuel". She looked inside and out she pulled a loaf of bread, some cheese and half a portion of marmalade. Tugging the parcel into her chest she went inside feeling warm and cozy.

The next morning, even before opening the office door, she could hear the keyboard clicking before entering through the door. The sun had barely set, but she still felt the wall of heat the second she entered. As she approached her desk, she felt good to see that only a few more profiles had been added to the stack.

"Morning Beatrice," Samus said when she sat down at her table.

No response.

"Morning Beatrice," she repeated, "I was not aware there was such a thing as a lazy ear as well."

Beatrice barely looked over her shoulder "Sorry... Yes... Morning Samus." Then returned to her desk.

The dull response made Samus lift an eyebrow but thought to herself that it may be one of those days where it was better to give her some space.

Scouting over the ocean of desk workers, Samus could sense an eerie feeling that flowed through the office. Her colleagues were scouring her desk, but the second they caught her eye they turned their heads back onto the screens. Everyone ensured to walk in a long arc away from her table. The muttering at the water coolers was faint and whispery.

She looked over at Emanuel's desk and then at the clock on her computer.

"Have anyone seen Emanuel today?" she asked out in the open. The nearby colleagues twitched only to ignore her, staring even more intensely at their work.

"Anyone?"

The office gradually went silent, the keyboard clicks fading. The colleagues furthest away turned their heads, eyeing her as if they expected some sort of reaction. She stood up from the table and scouted over the sea of workers in the hopes he was at a distant desk chit-chatting with someone else. The keyboard clicks did not resume, instead, it was replaced with a faint murmuring.

A tensing pressure built up in her chest, her stomach turning the lack of keyboard clicks making her feel ill.

A nearby colleague, a skinny, old man had leaned over to his neighboring colleague to reach her in whisper range.

"You there." Samus pointed at him, taking a hasty step forward, her teeth clenched. "Where. Is. Emanuel?" nearly yelling at him.

The old man was at a loss of words and sunk into his chair nearly becoming one with it.

"Sweety," Beatrice said in a soft and comfortable voice.

Samus turned her head, eyes full of fury. "What!" she yelled as a drop of sweat ran down her forehead, her pulse racing.

Beatrice moved her eyes to Emanuel's desk and nodded gently. Samus took a breather and stared at his desk. The keyboard, mouse and monitor were still there but the desk was wiped clean of both folders and post-it notes. Even his doodles of Samus and him were gone.

"Beatrice," Samus said, concerned, "where is Emanuel?"

Beatrice took a deep breath. "Well, this morning—"

Steps of leathery shoes hitting the hard wooden floor entered the office with confident steps. "Well, sweet Samus. Let me tell you!" William had entered the office and behind him two armored Lightbringers were following armed to the teeth.

Samus felt the sensation of dread spreading through her body.

"Well," William said with a confident and snarky smirk, "it appears, your colleague, Emanuel, had an awful habit of 'borrowing' office supplies."

Samus searched in his dark brown eyes. Condescension and a bit of superiority, but most of all it was pure spite and hatred. She knew that, because she was feeling the same.

"We couldn't allow such atrocities to continue, after all he is— sorry I mean was stealing from The Nation."

"Was?" Samus repeated.

"I have just done what any abiding citizen would do."

"What have you done? Where is he?" Her face frozen, emotionless, despite the heating rage inside of her.

“Well, I don’t know of course, but my guess would be he has been sent to the bio-recycling center, probably powering your vary computers as we speak.”

Samus was void of words and emotions. With slow and heavy steps, she walked to her desk, sat down and stared into the floor.

“Now, you be a good girl and continue working.” He smiled and took a step forward and whispered to her calmly right into her face. “Next time, you will do as I say.”

She stared into the air.

“Do you get that?”

Quivering lips and the boiling rage blocked any words and rational thoughts. She tried to open her mouth to mutter, but it was as if her throat was shut tight and her jaw locked.

“Nod!”

In distress and humiliated, she nodded as tears fell from her watery eyes.

“Perfect, I’ll see you later.”

William left the office with the Lightbringers following him like guard dogs. The murmuring resumed, now even more intense than before. As she rubbed her tears off with her sleeve the keyboard clicks started resuming.

“Samus?” Beatrice stood next to her desk. “I am sorry about Emanuel”

Samus kept wiping off her chins not eyeing her.

“Samus, we have been working for many years. I know you well.”

Rubbing her nose, she looked Beatrice straight in the eyes.

“Whatever you are planning on doing, just be careful.”

“I promise you, I will.”

Pyramid arrives, Ethan is interrogated

His head was still woozy, the exhaustion having a firm grip on him. The bags under his eyes felt pressured, his movements slow and sluggish. His mouth bathed in a thick sludge of coffee

number seven. His favorite in the series. Less acidic with no need to rinse with water as it barely left any black smudges on the teeth. The caffeine slowly cleared his mind.

Despite the orange morning sun burning through the windows, Ethan felt as if a gloomy dark cloud was hovering over him. The fist sized blue and yellow bruise on his thigh was irritably stinging and the clarity of yesterday's events made him shudder with embarrassment, imagining the other patrons had seen a squealing pig when he was lying there on their floor.

A faint knock came from the window behind him. Turning his head, he saw nothing except the horde of uniformed workers marching towards their posts, Lightbringers every hundred meters carefully observing the morning commute. Sighting out loud he stood up, gulped the rest of the coffee and waddled towards his wardrobe, recently stocked with fresh clean uniforms delivered by the Nation cleaners. Another knock came from the window.

With squinted eyes, Ethan noticed a small object at the bottom corner of his window. A small pyramid shaped object was attached to the glass on the outside. It was slightly bigger than a die. Ethan moved closer. It twitched and wiggled around, stretching and bending organically. On one of its sides a spherical piece of glass, much like marble, was attached which it used to knock on the window. Realizing it had caught his attention it stopped.

"Cluck."

With a lifted eyebrow Ethan moved closer, uncertain of what he heard.

"Cluck, cluck-cluck" his new friend clucking like a chick, its voice pitchy with a static noise as if emitted from a broken speaker.

He tapped on the glass.

"Cluuuuuck!" it shrieked loudly.

Its marble looking object lit up in a cautious red, then rolled around on the glass panes a few times. It was unclear to Ethan how his new friend managed to stick to the frictionless surface.

"Are you... Alive?" said Ethan awkwardly.

"Cluck," it replied energetically and pleasantly.

He unhinged the latches on the window and left it ajar. The pyramid rolled underneath and onto the opposite side. With an extruded finger, Ethan tried to touch it. The pyramid, just as eager to touch Ethan, flipped itself on the top of its pointy end to get as close as possible.

On contact, the pyramid rolled around in circles. "Cluck, cluck. Cluck-cluck. Cluck!" full of excitement.

"What are you?" asked Ethan, uncertain whether it was capable of answering.

“Cluck, cluck. Cluck, cluuck.”

Ethan scratched his head. With an open palm he offered the pyramid a platform. Without hesitation it jumped from the pane to his hand, rolled around a few times and nudged itself comfortably in the crevice between his fingers.

Shocked by its soft near silicon-like texture and its forwardness he tried to lift it with two fingers.

“Clliiick!” The sound was angry and metallic, unpleasant to the ears.

“Alright, alright! Sorry, sorry!” he muttered, rubbing his ears.

He took it to the table where it jumped onto its surface and investigated everything on the table. When it reached the mug it crawled on top, balancing itself on its edge. It crawled into the mug.

“Cluck, Cluck. Clliiick!” It screeched as it accidentally rolled on top of some black smudge on the mug’s side, falling back on the table twisting and turning as if it tried to rub it off the table surface.

“Wait, hold on.” Ethan grabbed a dirty uniform from the basket and with gentle miniscule strokes rubbed off most of it.

“Cluck.” The pyramid thanked him, calming down.

Ethan invited the pyramid to jump on his finger. Hesitantly it scooted over, tipped itself on its edge, its pointy end nearly touching as if it was sniffing his finger.

“Cluck?”

“It’s alright.”

“Cluuuuck!” A pulsing green light glowed from its orbs and swiftly jumped onto the finger and began twisting and turning in a dance.

Together they played, his fingers working as a balancing rope. With his other hand, he tried scratching its soft sides. Like a dog being scratched behind its ears, its erratic motions stopped abruptly and began trembling. The green light pulsed more slowly with a diminishing intensity.

“You are a crazy little thing.” Captivated, he eyed his new friend with soft eyes and a genuine smile that originated from his chest.

The perception of time was a distant memory as he wallowed in curiosity and company.

Like lightning from a clear sky, a heavy intense knocking came from the door.

“Click-click. Clliiick!” The pyramid emitted an intense pitch as it rolled around in panic.

It crawled up his arm, diving into his sleeve and all the way up to his armpit. Before Ethan could do anything, it had nudged itself into his skin and started drilling.

As if being stabbed with a screwdriver the pain made him fall to the ground. As it kept twitching and turning, it was impossible for Ethan to grab it through the uniform.

"Citizen, open up!" it yelled from outside the door.

Barely noticing the command Ethan struggled not to scream while trying to prevent the pyramid from tearing him open. Frantically he ripped open his uniform, struggling with the zip.

"Cluck-cluck. Clu—" Ethan stood with gaping mouth as the last thing he saw was the base of the pyramid before disappearing into his body through his skin, closing the open hole after itself.

"What. The. Hell?" Ethan said with a trembling voice, both in shock and pain.

"Cluck." A muffled beep came from inside Ethan's body.

"This is your last warning, open up the door or face institutional correction."

The knocks on the door hit heavy.

"I am coming," yelled Ethan to buy himself a few more seconds to clear his mind and zip on back his uniform.

A swarm of thoughts overwhelmed him. Would it be building a nest inside of him? What would it do to his organs? Ethan moved towards the door. Outside stood two lightbringers in gray armor with a baton in each hand.

"Citizen, you are to report to your district's office immediately," one of the Lightbringers said with a baton ready in hand.

"What for?"

"Classified. Report immediately or be subject to force."

"Alright, alright, take it easy!" Ethan said as he went through the door feeling anxious.

A few dotted clouds decorated the orange morning sky, the nightly chill still lingering. Guarded in both front and rear Ethan and the units walked in file on the sidewalk towards the city center where the district's office was located.

Loudly commanding, "Move! Make way!" even though there were several meters to the nearest citizen, the unit in the front created an express lane.

After having walked for half an hour, Ethan noticed they would soon reach the office. With a pain in his chest, he looked at his surroundings, observing how the city center had turned from being

a place where one would spend their time shopping, see magnificent shows, move their hips on the dance floor or enjoy a croissant and a coffee at a café table. Now, half of the 19th century buildings were demolished, and, in their stead, large monolithic black buildings stood towering, signaling that no history was sacred, only the Nation's.

Despite all the black buildings looking the same with no signs, doors or windows, it seemed as if the units knew how to differentiate them. They walked over to one that was placed next to a long-abandoned movie store. Standing firmly, at a distance, they waited diligently looking straight forward. Citizens who had to pass them walked on the trafficking road instead of walking between the wide available space on the sidewalk between the building and Ethan.

"Oh no" Ethan thought to himself when he noticed a bullfinch in the sky. The forest bird descended to land on the edge of the black monolithic building. Upon contact, the surface began to pulsate, waves forming on the surface breaking the illusion of solidity. Dark matter extruded around the bird's legs and within a split second, the matter sprung engulfing the bird, dragging it in and swallowing it whole only leaving a single feather that drifted away by a gust of wind.

Powerless to do anything, he looked down onto the pavement, not in the mood for further curiosity. After having waited for a bit, the surface of the building began vibrating again and out emerged two higher ranked Lightbringers visible by their blue armor and long rifles.

"Ethan Westborn, you come with us now," said one of the blue units.

The two gray units left, and Ethan continued his trip to the district office with his new friends.

The district office was a tall and old white administration building with an extravagant entrance decorated with neatly carved marble columns and a long stair up two a pair of large wooden oak doors. Above the door *District Sierra* was mounted with large capital letters. The area was buzzing with activity as both lightbringers and citizens circulated both on the street, the stairs and through the doors. Citizens standing in line from the door, onto the sidewalk and down a couple of blocks.

Next to the wooden doors, two bull mechanoids stood guarding. Heavy units, covered in thick armor decorated with the Nation's gray colors. They resembled a lightbringer, but bulkier and tall enough that the pilot in the cockpit could peek through the windows on the first floor. Even by just standing idle, the sound of metal against metal peeped from them as soon they made the slightest move. In their oversized hands they both held rifles so big that even no ordinary lightbringer would be able to carry. Through the frontal shield in the oval blue cockpit, Ethan could see the dim crimson red glow from the piloting Lightbringer's helmet.

Ethan shuttered, captivated by fear of the machine that could stomp him to death with a single squeeze.

"Move!" yelled one of the lightbringers guarding Ethan, pushing him so hard that he nearly landed on his nose.

He got up, brushed himself off and walked up the stairs, feeling as if the mechanoids were eyeing him still.

"Wait here," one of the escorting lightbringer said as they entered the entrance and into the large circular room.

Various doors leading to different wings of the building; *Citizens affairs, Precinct, Medical, Loyalty Program*. At the center of the room a big sign hung from the ceiling saying, *Request desks* were underneath, citizens were waiting in line to be assisted by 'humanized' lightbringers specialized in citizen interaction. They wore light armor and a thin white human-like mask that was lit up from the lights in their helmets. Ethan could not shake off their uncanny mannequin-esque appearance feeling as if they were dragged out from a horror movie.

An old gray lady, with sunken eyes moved up to one of the desks.

"Hello Citizen, what request do you have for me today?" The humanized lightbringer behind the desk asked.

She sat down while trying to cover her trembling hands.

"I-I would like to visit my son at district Golf. You see, It is his birthday next week and I haven't seen him for years."

"Certainly citizen, let me check your records."

When she offered him her hand, he took a firm grip on her wrist. When releasing her, she swiftly hid her arm under the folds of her uniform.

"Alright Miss. Fischer. Let's see. It seems like you will be relocating to a new district in a week?"

"Ah yes, it will be in the opposite end of the city, so I hope to get a chance to see my son before that."

"Alright, you have no remarks in regard to violation of Nation law and order."

"Yes, yes," she replied eagerly.

The mask slowly dimmed green. "And you are still a viable worker at this district's ration packaging center."

She stared at the mask with great anticipation, "Yes, yes. I am still able to lift a couple of sacks at a time."

The mask turned to a clear green hue. "You even reported an incident of multiple citizens gathering up, without permission, for more than 10 minutes."

A smile crept up on her face.

"Ahh, yes, yes. Those malevolent citizens were up to no good." The green light from the mask reflected in the old lady's eye.

"It seems you have also partaken in some additional community chores the past 6 months."

"Yes, yes. I really would like to see my son. I hoped if I swept the streets as well, there would be a chance off—"

"But"—Its green color drastically changed from green to a strong yellow—" it does seem like you have been making similar requests for the past 12 years, all declined due to bad health."

Her lips started to shiver, "Please, give me a chance. I promise, I'll be able to do—"

"Sorry, the trip to district Golf is predicted to be a two hour walk for you. We don't have the available resources to escort you or dispose of your body in case you die from exhaustion."

"But—" she muttered.

"Request declined, next available request is in 8 months and 22 days. Next!"

It was as if her world collided on her. She hid her face in her hands and sobbed.

Ethan's stomach twisted and turned.

"Move!" The lightbringer commanded as he came back, nudging him to move towards the *Precinct* doors. From the few times Ethan had been here, he had always counted more people entering those doors than leaving them.

The sheer size of the precinct surprised him. Guided through numerous corridors, passing hundreds of doors, Ethan had lost track of how to get back. They stopped at a large open metallic door where Ethan was shoved into. The insides were barren with both floor and walls made from metal plates. Ethan looked at a wet spot underneath him. Blood. Ethan wondered if this came from the former visitor of this room. He felt his pulse rising, his stomach hurting from the anxiety of not knowing what was happening. Without any pockets in the uniform to place one's hand into, Ethan wandered aimlessly around fiddling with his hands. Frustrated, he rubbed his nose furiously.

"Do you have an itch?" said a female voice.

Ethan looked around confused, having no clue where the voice came from.

"I said. Do you have an itch?" The voice's tone turned bossier.

"No?" muttered Ethan, still trying to pinpoint the voice.

"Ethan Westborn, metal worker at the solar frame assembly plant?"

"Who is asking?"

"Do you believe you have clearance to ask such a question?" the voice said condescendingly.

Ethan grunted.

"Now, Mr. Westborn, we received data yesterday that you had a small diversion from your ordinary daily routines the other day. What were you doing on such a Sunday stroll?"

Ethan hesitated. "I have heard that my produce at the metal factory is shipped in boxes which are transported on the assembly line in that area. I just wanted to see how the end product would look when they were shipped out of the city," he replied, biting his lower lip.

"Mr. Westborn, this is a serious matter, divergence of such a caliber constitutes uncertainties of your prioritizations. I will advise you to comply."

Ethan sighed. "Alright, alright. Look, I-I was bored." feeling a lump growing in his throat. "I wake up. I shit. I eat my bread. I go to work. I get home. I read. I eat again. I sleep. It is an endless cycle. I decided to do something different and take a walk."

"To the other end of the district?" the voice pausing. "Mr. Westborn, you are a pacifist. You have no records of any misdemeanor and yet you decided, on this day, like any other day, to break this statistic?"

Ethan hesitated, "Y-Yes."

"Alright. I am sorry we have to do this Mr. Westborn."

Silence took over the room. Ethan looked at the door, waiting for someone to come in.

Nothing.

"So, what is—"

A sharp and painful sounding pitch filled the room. Ethan took to his ears and fell onto the ground. It was as if his eardrums were expanding and were about to explode. His brain was screaming, as if an icepick were stuck right in the center. He rolled around stuffing clothing into his ears. His body could not figure out if he was supposed to scream or hold his breath. His mouth formed syllables to screaming stop, but no voice came out. Even with his eyes closed, he saw flashing lights in front of him as if it was the nerves themselves pulsating. Each string of nerve bending and turning at each pulse. A repeating pattern emerged, that became clearer at each pulse. A silhouette of a girl facing him, with her hair covering her face, a finger pushing on where her lips would be, as if she was shushing.

"Be quiet daddy, or they might hear us."

He could hear her saying that one time they were out fishing.

The flashing lights abruptly disappeared. Ethan opened his eyes.

“Now Mr. Westborn, I hope the two of us can cooperate now. Do you mind explaining your reasons for visiting the Stag n’ stones?”

Out of balance and with a trembling supporting arm, Ethan got back up on his feet. By pulling and turning he unwind his uniform that had twisted and turned. Hands shaking. A burning sensation inside had rekindled, uncertain whether it was the traumatizing pain that had induced it. With the newfound vigor he had no need of voicing the truth, ready for more pain if that was what it would take.

“Come now, Mr. Westborn, we don’t got all day.”

Mute, he tried to think of a lie to get out of the situation, but his mind was void of any creative thought.

“I-I...” he muttered, trying to buy time.

“Mr. Westborn, now!”

With his blank canvas, he closed his eyes preparing for another run.

“Cluck, cluck!”

Ethan heard the muffled clucks as if the sound traveled through his body up to his ears.

Ethan looked down, fearing the thing would start to drill out of him again. At first, he thought nothing would happen, but then he noticed his eyebrows were turning numb. The sensation quickly traversed downwards reaching his eyes, nose, upper lip, tongue, jaw and all the way to his throat, not feeling his face or neck. With the sudden overwhelming numbness, he feared he was having a stroke.

“Cluck. Cliiiiiiick!”

He could sense his numb body part started moving.

“*This is it,*” he thought to himself, “*I must be going crazy.*”

He was blinking, twitching his nose, moving his tongue and even breathing but it was not him. As if seeing from the eyes of someone else, he was now only a visitor in his own body. A puppet on a string

“Alright, let me be clear with you.” Ethan could hear the spoken words coming from him, but he knew he was not the one who did the talking.

“I heard a rumor of a book trader that would swing by the Stag N’ Stones with illegal books ready for trading. My plan was to lure him, expose his identity and hand him to the Nation. To

initiate trading with him, I would have to go up and ask if he got light. He would hand me the lighter and if I accepted it, he knew I was willing to take risks and wanting to trade. Your search, coincidentally, happened in the middle of our exchange. You even searched him at the place, but his stash of books was hidden elsewhere.”

A silence emerged.

“Can you confirm his identity?”

“Yes, I can, Radim Beran, citizen id seven-one-two-one-five.”

No response.

After five minutes, Ethan’s eyes shut. Still in control of the rest of his body, he panicked, uncertain of what the pyramids’ intention was. He decided to lie down, thinking the most natural action to do with closed eyes was to take a nap. As he lay down, his head followed, then gently rested on the ground. As time passed, Ethan was still engulfed in darkness in his own body, his mind convinced that it was time to doze off.

“Alright Ethan Westborn.” The voice coming back from the speaker.

Ethan heard himself grunting, his head opening its eyes.

“We can confirm that your statement has been confirmed.”

“Excellent.”

“One last question. How come you were not forward with us?”

“My plan was to lure out even more smugglers and black-market traders, but I do fear my cover is now blown after I assume you have taken care of Mr. Beran?”

“Mr. Westborn, when you have information of any perpetrator, don’t engage in vigilante affairs. Instead, address us, your benefactors, with said information.”

“Duly noted.”

“And one last thing. Do not lie to us again. There will be no next time.”

Ethan’s head nodded gently.

“Alright, well. The Nation thanks you for your loyalty. We are sorry for the inconvenience this may have caused you. You can file a request at the desk near the entrance for a calorie-plus ration package and we will even expedite the process so you can receive our apology within the next 6-7 months. We will inform your superior that you will take the rest of the day off.”

“Cluck-cluck. Cluck...” the sound inside Ethan’s body fading.

In an instant, Ethan felt he had regained the sensation in his face again. With a slow and firm hand, he caressed his face, happy to be in control of himself again.

Two lightbringers opened the door, and escorted Ethan out towards the main entrance.

The walk home was slow and dreadful. He looked up into the clear blue sky and concluded that the mirror would come at any moment now. A heavy pressure was building up in his chest and his heart racing. The detainment had him question whether he was bargaining for more than he could chew. On top of all that, he had a living pyramid crawling around in his body. The scorching sun was the icing on the cake. Exhausted, he dragged himself home, looking forward to throwing himself onto his couch.

The familiar hum came approaching from the distance, the enormous disc easily identifiable in the horizon. As it approached the city, Ethan could see the top of the wall being engulfed in a wave of shadows. The surrounding factories winding down their machines, knowing they would not be operable as long as the disc was discharging. As the intensity of the roar increased, so did the rumbling of Ethan's stomach. The burning sensation of acid reflux filled his throat.

"Hi, you, can you hear me?" Ethan said to his stomach fearing the pyramid was having a party in there.

"It would be nice if y-you—" He took to his throat as if started contracting, trying to swallow a few times.

But it was too late. He knew there was no way around it. Motionless, he stood for a minute, only to fall on his knees then to paint the sidewalk with the remains of his morning coffee. Citizens passing him barely turned their heads, but instead sped up their pace. Realizing he had hit his hand, he grunted annoyed, trying to rub it off on the sidewalk.

The edge of the shadow caught up and engulfed him. Having found its spot above the city the machine started discharging, the hairs on Ethan's neck floating. Taking a step away from the pool, he sat down on the sidewalk looking around in the darkness. Glows in the distance were the lights from the patrolling lightbringers who continued their watch. Ethan looked up in the sky at the mirror. The black surface was full of colored diodes covering the entire sky, as if all the stars had been replaced. Ethan had to admit that the sight was beautiful. Looking carefully, he imagined seeing it was not one solid entity, but it was made from different layers or even beams. Leaning backwards resting on his arms, he thought back to the first time he experienced this horrendous contraption and the fear it had induced him.

"We only just wanted to be alone," he thought to himself.

Ethan left out a big sigh. Hands now flaky of the dry body fluids, he tried to rub off the worst remains on the sidewalk. Swiftly, he redacted his hand as he touched something pointy that suddenly moved. A small red light glowed in the darkness.

"Cluck. Cluck?" it said, startled.

“Oh hi, it's you!” Ethan conflicted on whether to run or stay.

It rolled around a few times around its own axis.

“So, you got tired of my body?”

It stopped. “Cluck?”

“Thank you in there, I don't know what you did, but I believe you saved me.”

“Cluck!” A clear white light emitted from it.

The pyramid turned back and forth a few times then proceeded down the sidewalk. After a few meters, it stopped up.

“Where are you going?”

“Cluck-cluck. Cluck. Cluck!”

The pyramid rolled back towards Ethan then back down the sidewalk.

“Do you want me to follow you?”

“Cluck-cluck-cluck!” Its light turning green and jumping.

As soon Ethan started to walk towards it, it continued down the street. With cautious steps and a guiding hand, he fumbled in the dark letting the pyramid lead the way.

Samus gets revenge on William

Samus ran into her apartment, slamming the door behind her loudly. Her back clanged to the door while she caught her breath. The shirt was tight with sweat which covered both her back and arms. She knew there was not much time left when the first convulsions had started. Rushing to the toilet she looked into the mirror. The fat chins were already shrinking, and the tips of her brown thin hair were returning to its original blonde color.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck,” muttered Samus to herself as she watched her face contort beyond recognition.

Samus could hardly recognize the man in the mirror as her lips were already twisting into grotesque shapes as her cheekbones were jumping and dancing.

She collapsed on the cold slim bathroom floor, placing herself in a fetal position her chubby stomach pressed up against the bathroom wall. The stomach sloshed, distorted and stretched into unbelievable shapes. Her legs stretch out in sporadic bursts, each time accompanied by a crack like a bone breaking.

She twisted and turned, clasping her face and body, but every time she got a firm grip and a sense of control the body continued transforming into other body parts.

“Ahhh!” she screamed in pain, “hell this hurts!”

A flash of pain in her thigh caused her to hammer her knee into the bathroom wall. Both pus and ceramic from the shattered tiles formed a cloud of dust that settled like a carpet on her hair, sticking to her damp skin.

Samus turned her body on the slippery bathroom floor, covered in her own sweat. The intensity of the transformation slowly fading away with only a few patches of skins contracting. An eyebrow had trouble finding its original form, a process Samus knew could take a bit of time. When the worst of convulsions had passed, she breathed a sigh of relief and rested her head on the toilet’s cold porcelain.

When she came to herself again, she stood up and looked at herself in the mirror. She had returned to her own self. Touching her face, she pulled different muscles, but everything appeared as they should. Samus turned her head to get a better view of the small black unit fastened behind her ear. With a careful hand she slowly pulled it out along with the attached needle cleaning it off with a damp towel. Walking to the shower, she loosened a tile from the bathroom wall exposing a secret compartment containing a box. Pulling it out she placed the small black unit into it.

The following morning, Samus trudged off to work. A calm and peace had settled not only over her but also over the city. A wayward bird that had strayed from the few green areas whizzed over her head. A rare sight, Samus believing it must have been lost. She stopped and enjoyed the welcoming sight. She was prepared that today she would be challenged. After taking a deep breath, she pulled herself together and continued towards the office.

But the calm had not settled inside the warm office. The keyboards continued to click away, undisturbed by yesterday's events. Samus looked around at the sea of damp backs once again forming the landscape. Emanuel's place had been occupied by a small, thin woman who spent more time searching for each key on her keyboard than looking at the screen.

A loud noise sounded as the main door to the office was almost kicked in. A swarm of battle-ready Lightbringers entered with a white sergeant in the middle. Two of the units remained at the door, taking up a guard position with their hands firmly attached to their rifles.

"Citizens, remain in your seats," the white sergeant shouted out in the room. "We need your cooperation."

The remaining units marched down through the row of desks and past Samus'. She kept a hand on her screen so that it wouldn't crash down by their heavy footsteps. Through the glass window, William could be seen sitting with a face full of both wonder and fear. A drama was unfolding behind the soundproof glass that the office staff watched with great curiosity.

"What on earth is happening?" said Beatrice as she rolled her chair over to Samus.

"I have no idea," said Samus composedly.

"William really looks like someone who is in a pinch."

At first, William sat still in his chair with his hands on his lap, but suddenly he pushed off with such force that his chair slammed into the wall behind him and almost knocked one of the units

off their feet. With his mouth wide open, William shouted directly at the white sergeant, barely audible through the glass. With a simple nod, the white sergeant signaled, and the units toppled and grabbed him by both arms and legs. William swung a fist against one of the units. Missed, accidentally hitting this golden nameplate that dropped off the table. A kick made his coat stand fall, getting stuck in the window blinds. When the office door opened, the audience was blown away by William's scream, shouting with the full power of his lungs.

"I haven't done anything," William sobbed, "I haven't done anything—uff—let me go!"

Two units had a good grip on each of William's arms and were dragging him past the tables.

"W-what are you doing? Stop!" Tears rolled down his face, trickling down leaving black spots on his blue suit.

The office staff was filled with mixed reactions. The newer and younger employees looked on with open mouths and eyes filled with pity. The more experienced ones had a hard time hiding their satisfaction.

"Why are you doing this to me? I have—urgh—done so much for you! Don't you know? I am the Head of Citizen Affairs!" William tried to pull his arm back by shifting his weight to one side.

"Citizen, control yourself, or be disciplined," said the white sergeant.

"You can't just—" William pulled his arm back, causing one of the units to lose their grip. The individual tried hard to regain control, but William's flailing arms fluttered in the air. Suddenly, the white sergeant turned around, drew his metal baton, and slammed it into William's temple.

Stiff as a board, he collapsed onto the floor and slammed his nose into the ground, causing an audible crack. The units grabbed both his arms and legs and dragged his almost lifeless body through the room, leaving a red trail of blood behind.

The office staff looked at each other in shock.

The white sergeant went forward once more. "Citizen, position yourselves against the wall and await the hearing. Position yourselves with distance from each other."

The office staff hurriedly swarmed towards the wall. Samus, who still stood emotionless, sauntered up to the wall. One by one, they were each led into William's office where the white sergeant now sat.

Beatrice stood impatiently waiting. She looked towards the glass window and saw the thin old man in the chair.

Beatrice turned to Samus "I think he's breaking. I mean, look at him! His body is shaking."

Samus didn't respond. With a smile on her face, she leaned up against the window watching two citizens talking on a nearby street corner.

"Or maybe it was Michael, I mean—" she gasped. "—or Lars? I-I have no clue what have happened but... I am just so excited!" she burst out, raising, clenching her hands in excitement.

Beatrice continued, "I think maybe that"—Samus stared at Beatrice with a focused look—"it could have something to do with some of the alarms that..." Beatrice stopped abruptly, staring back at Samus.

"Samus?" said Beatrice slowly, raising an eyebrow.

Samus nodded slowly with a smile that almost crept up to her ears.

"Okay," replied Beatrice with a small, self-satisfied smile and turned to look at the wall. "I get you."

"Next!" was shouted through the room, and Samus entered the small office.

Three units stood in each corner with their hands secured on their weapons. With so many units gathered in the small space, Samus could hear the faint static sound coming from the energy swirling in their helmets.

"Citizen, take a seat," commanded the white sergeant with a red glow in its helmet.

On the table, a small screen was prepared with a paused video.

Leaning over to start the video, the Lightbringer looked at Samus. "Identify the citizen."

The video was from a surveillance camera hanging in a dark alley somewhere in the city. A patrolling unit cautiously searched the alley with its illuminated helmet, slowly going from container to container. Suddenly, a large figure appears behind the unit and brings it down to the ground with a strong grip around its neck that almost tears its head off. The unit managed to point its helmet towards the figure, and in its blinding glow, clearly showing the face of William. The white sergeant paused the video and pointed with a dictating finger at him.

Samus had thought that both the image quality and the angle from which the video was taken would have been better, but there hadn't really been time for more planning.

"It's William," Samus answered confidently, "he's my superior, that piece of ass is recognizable anywhere."

"Are you aware of the motive?"

Samus shook her head. "No idea. Lately, he has been making arrogant remarks and mentioned how he is superior to the Nation."

The white sergeant's helmet dulled to a peaceful white.

"Leave the room."

Despite feeling as if she was in control of the situation, sweat was still trickling down her forehead. On her way out, she made eye contact with Beatrice and gave a small nod.

The weather was still scorching hot. Samus made sure to pull her collar up over her neck to avoid getting scalded. Not far from her apartment, she saw the dried-up corpse of the bird she had encountered earlier in the morning. Samus presumed that it hadn't found its way and had become another victim of the ever-baking sun. She crouched down and stared intently at the poor creature. She considered picking it up and laying it somewhere in the green area, but abandoned the idea, fearing the foreign bacteria it could bring.

Although the day had gone almost better than expected, she felt beside herself. With a cup in her hand, she stared out the window at empty streets, illuminated by the moon and some units patrolling up and down the streets. In the surrounding apartments, silhouettes of other families could be seen serving dinner, playing charades and even hugging. Samus had gotten into the habit of keeping an eye on one of the windows on the opposite side. Here lived a family whose little son in the evening stuck his head out from the curtains and spotted Samus. The two had spent the evening making faces and playing a remote version of hide and seek with each other. However, this came to an end after a few days when the boy's father discovered what they were up to and forcefully pulled the boy away. Since then, Samus hadn't seen him, but she kept her hopes of him peeking out again.

The sofa had been taken. She argued with herself that she could have another piece of chocolate since she was planning on breaking curfew this evening. As she munched on the dark, bitter snack, she got up and walked over to her music system. A display showed

Nation-approved genres such as guitar, orchestra, and flute. She wished there was an option for something with more singing, although the lyrics were likely to be pure propaganda anyway. Normally, she would have selected orchestra, but for the evening, she chose piano as Samus' mood required a more melancholic note.

As the evening wore on, she sat on the sofa fumbling with the black transformation device in her fingers. It was a tool she had used extensively over the years. Her thoughts drifted back to her group. She missed them. She missed the feeling that what she was doing made sense. That she wasn't alone, but what she was doing was part of something bigger. When she started, there were only a handful of them, and she quickly rose through the ranks, after which she was handed the transformer, which subsequently became her favorite equipment. There was almost no plan that didn't start with it. She could take on any form that suited the mission. An old lady with a glass eye, a big man with a white beard and bushy eyebrows. The disguises were there to ensure her identity remained hidden. Occasionally, she wished she were recognized, just so they could see that she wasn't gone, that she still existed, and that she was still fighting. Although she missed them terribly, she knew that trying to reconnect would be suicide. She tried to shake the thoughts out of her head, knowing that they wouldn't lead to anything constructive.

"Come on, Samus, no way around it," she said to herself. She sighed deeply and forced herself up from the couch and walked to the bathroom.

She pulled out the small black box from the shower and placed it on the sink. Ziplock bags containing hair, nails, dead skin, and eyelashes filled the box to the brim. In black writing, there were names like *Mr. Hacklesworth*, *Danté*, and *Beatrice*, and other bags with labels such as *Dark-haired man - medium*, *Woman - nine fingers*. After some time, she found the bag she was looking for, *Gilian - strong hands*. The bag contained what appeared to be an entire nail. With a cautious hand, she pulled the nail out of the bag, and with a small knife, scraped off some of the nail down into the open compartment of the transformation device.

"Ufff," Samus said loudly as she gritted her teeth with each turn of the knife.

Afterward, she put the nail back and hid the box in the secret compartment. She closed the lid on the transformer and began to undress. Her uniform and underwear were tossed into a pile on the floor, where Samus chose to lay and use the pile as a pillow. Although she had done this many times before, she had never learned to start the process without trembling. She took a deep breath until she could feel her heart beating slower. With a slam, she pushed the device

into the back of her ear, the needle smoothly penetrating the skin. She gritted her teeth and held onto the toilet bowl with her hands, and her feet planted on the bathroom wall. The convulsions began immediately.

"Fuck!"

Returning to the tavern, visiting The Stranger

Ethan knew where they were going when he saw the entrance to the alley in the distance. The pyramid gracefully moved in between the crevasse of the cobblestones towards the tavern. When entering the alley, Ethan was certain he heard the faint joyous buzzing of a filled-up tavern but as they approached the sound gradually faded into nothing. When nearing the Stag N' Stones, it sprinted towards the door waiting patiently for Ethan.

"Cluck-cluck!" it wiggled with intense energy.

"I am not sure coming back here is such a good idea," Ethan said, looking up at the swaying sign.

"Cluck!" It circled around itself, before it snug through a small crack at the bottom of the door. He looked around to ensure none was following him. Gently, he pushed the door open and peeked inside. There were none inside the bar.

"Hello?" he yelled. "Anyone here?"

As the only response was a faint echo of his voice, he opened it further and walked in and was met with a thick smell of old staleness. Ethan looked perplexed around the tavern. The chairs, tables, floor, counter and even the bottles were covered in a mixture of ash and dust, as if it had been laid untouched for decades. Walking around he kicked up dust which swirled around in the air, dancing in light that leaked past the window curtains. He looked behind himself and saw that he was leaving dusty footsteps. Walking over to the wooden counter, he noticed that the wall mounted mirror was cracked distorting the reflection. All cabinets were open behind the counter, appearing ransacked with only trash left behind. A handful of the colored Alcovoid bottles were shattered and spread out on the floor and counter.

Ethan lifted his eyebrow when he noticed a white wooden door. It was placed on the exact same spot where the renaissance painting was earlier. This door, however, was free from any dust and even looked newly painted. He put an ear to it. A mellow hum came from the inside.

He took the golden knob, free from ash and turned it pushing the door open.

"Welcome Ethan Westborn." A pleasant deep voice coming from the back of the room.

A tall slender man, sitting behind a desk, looked at Ethan with dark sunken eyes. The first thing Ethan noticed was his blue suit and tie, an attire which he loathed.

"I know it is a lot to take in but be aware our conversation must be brief." He adjusted his tie "This illusion can only last so long."

Ethan's jaw dropped.

The part of the room Ethan entered was an ordinary room with plank flooring and gray walls, but towards the back it gradually transformed into a dark cosmos with vibrant planets, galaxies, stars and gas clouds. The man behind the desk, sat in the center of this nothingness surrounded by a thousand twinkling stars. A red galaxy cluster swirled around behind him slowly consumed by a black hole as it reached its event horizon. The room-sized cosmos gave off a mellow hum, a sort of music to Ethan's ears that sounded pleasant and chaotic at the same time.

"What is all this?" Ethan said, unable to hide his astonishment.

"A spatial warp mirror. It isolates us for a brief moment allowing us to converse in private."

"So, they don't know we are here?"

"No Mr. Westwood, this is a safe place to talk."

"Talk about what exactly? And how do you know my name?"

"Well..."

"Cluck!" A voice came behind Ethan.

The pyramid strolled past him directly towards the edge of the black nothingness. Before reaching the edge, it leaped forward and caught by the nothingness slowly floated, unobstructed, into the open palm of the man. He clenched his hand and when he opened it again, it was gone.

"So, you send the pyramid after me. Were you spying on me?"

"Merely making sure you got through the day." The wrinkles on his chin folded making way for a confident smirk.

"But why?" Wrinkles appeared on his forehead, "what interest does a loyalist, like you, have in me?"

"Don't let the suit and tie fool you. The two of us are more alike than you think. Let me properly introduce ourselves first." Folding his wrinkled leathery hands together.

“Cooperation between the two of us may prove beneficial. We have a common goal,” he paused, looking deeply into Ethan’s emerald-colored eyes, “a desire to be in control of our own paths. But our beloved benefactors have other intentions with us.”

“We?”

“Earth is not the only civilization struggling with the Nation’s expansion. We are a selection of entities that try to...” pausing to think, frowning lightly “Find alternative solutions.”

Ethan stood silently with clenched fists. Questions kept bubbling to the surface, feeling as if he was bursting to the brim.

“There are more civilizations out there? The Nation is—*what*—a super power? And you are not from earth?”

“Mr. Westwood, I know you have many questions. I’ll advise you to refrain from asking. Time is short.”

“And how do you expect me to trust you?” Ethan looked at him with doubtful eyes.

“I can’t possibly expect you to trust me. Not yet at least. All I request of you is that you listen.”

Ethan stood mute for a second to think it through. He nodded willingly.

“You, me and everyone else have been given a post by our benefactors. Some have been fortunate enough to be located in offices, factories, fields and mines. But those of your neighbors, friends and family who have disappeared haven’t just vanished from the surface of the earth.”

Ethan investigated the dark contour less abyss in front of him. Images of Norah flashed his mind; Her red ladybug dress, her blonde curly hair, her comfortable childish hug her only long enough to fully embrace his neck, her soft fragrant from their rosy detergent when she had snuggled her newly washed teddies.

“Yes, she is alive.”

“What?”

The stranger opened his mouth but hesitated. He looked down at the table with a concerned frown and a severe look on his face.

Folding his hands, he looked back at Ethan. “Your daughter, Norah, will soon be coming of age. She will be ready to conceive and join the Nation’s breeding stables to produce the next generation of loyal workers.”

All former questions were wiped from his memory, leaving space only for the utmost one “Where is she?” he burst out.

“I am afraid we don’t know exactly.”

An avalanche of emotions rushed through him. The rageful embers that had come and gone whenever he had been thinking of Norah now burst into a fiery inferno. In his mind she stood there clear as day. The young Norah sitting on the ground in the middle playing innocently with her plush squid. Rapidly, her body started morphing.

Ethan reached out towards her, in his mind screaming. “Dad is her, please. Norah, I am here!”

Her stumpy arms became slender and longer. Her body taller and curvier. She stood up and threw her squid away. Her walk gradually changed from a waddling walk to an elegant strut, walking out of the ring of fire, not as a child but as a woman.

Desperation and panic gripped Ethan. The sand of time had slipped through his fingers, and he was now left with nothing. He never got to see her first piano performance. Be there to taste her first self-made dinner. Be there when she found her first crush. He never got to teach her the wonders of the universe. Teaching her the complexity of being a person among other people. Be there when she started asking about her mother. Be there for her when the world turned against her. The longing overwhelmed him. If only he could hold her tight once more.

With clenched fists he fell on his knee, sobbing, tears barely touching his skin before being dragged by the pull of the cosmos.

“Mr. Westwood,” the stranger said in a warm and concerned voice. “it is time for you to act.”

Ethan heard him, but kept his eyes closed.

“It is time to cut your leash.”

In his mind he saw Norah turning her head as she walked away “Please father, I am still your daughter.”

Ethan opened his eyes, staring at the other worldly stranger in front of him.

The dark space surrounding the stranger slowly contracted. “Stay with us. You will find meaning. Perhaps a direction.”

The roar from air being swallowed by vacuum filled the room. In a white rapid flash the darkness imploded into itself consuming the stranger and the universe.

Ethan, in shock and panic, rushed forward stumbling over himself. “Stop! Wait! Come back!” he yelled, his arms reaching trying to latch on to anything.

All alone, Ethan now stared back at the barren room that rang with an uncanny silence.

He held his breath. Legs weakening. He dropped to his knees, tears flowing down his chin. With a clenched fist he hit the floor multiple times, his knuckles fiery red. Screaming at the top of his lungs he allowed pain, rage and hatred free passage.

He sobbed loudly and sniffed. His breath became more controlled, wiping off his chin and face. The wildfire in him was still potent and strong, but a newfound control allowed him to look inside himself. The feeling of panic, loss and longing were gradually replaced with a rage that was more of a bestial nature. In control of himself again, he stood up and went back out through the white door.

It was crowded to the brim. People laughed in every corner and their voices were loud and energetic. The hinges on the entrance door had been strengthened with another bolt. The two older guys, who last time was sniggering at Ethan, had returned for another round of dice.

"That white fucker had a good grab at my bosom. Guess his miss don't own any," the nail-biting lady said, in company with an elderly man, both laughing out their guts.

A group of patrons surrounded a table, where a tower of onion cans was stacked as part of a game of Jenga nearly touching the ceiling beams.

Ethan looked back and saw the renaissance painting where the door previously stood. He felt the wall, but the texture was the expected painting on rough concrete.

Exhausted, Ethan grabbed a stool near the counter. Hunched over the counter, he took his time to gather strength before returning home.

"Breeding stables," he mumbled to himself.

The thought that his sweet and innocent daughter had possibly become livestock for The Nation was unbearable. He closed his eyes and dreamt back to the time when they all went to the beach, all three of them. He hadn't forgiven himself for not taking a picture. Norah, facing the ocean, the sun passing through her curly wavy golden hair in her red ladybug dress caught by a breeze. His exhaustion turned the detailed imagery into a blurry mix of nothingness. His mind entered a welcoming black void of thoughts, where he could rest. With closed eyes, his head resting on his arm on the counter, he was out for a second.

Loud empty metallic cans fell on the floor, and he jumped out of his mindless thoughts with his heart in his throat. Citizens at the nearby table burst out in laughter clapping their hands and thighs.

"I told you it would not work!" one of the players said cheerfully, clapping his opponent on the back who kicked the cans across the floor.

Laughter was a rare commodity, something Ethan usually would have embraced, but right in this moment, he was filled with spite. How did they dare laugh in their situation? Mindless sheep.

"Hi book trader." A citizen sat next to him.

It was the middle-aged man he argued with the last time he was here.

"You look terrible. Rough day?" the man asked.

"Well, I have certainly been occupied," Ethan replied, staring at the counter.

A silence between them emerged. Ethan could feel the guy wanted to say something, but he had trouble spewing it out.

"Look buddy, we have received info from up above that you are a standup guy."

Ethan looked up at him.

"Sorry about last time," the guy said with an honest look on his face, "we are cautious with strangers, we never know when we are dealing with a loyalist or an idiot."

Ethan replied with a nod.

"This one is on me," The man reached over the counter, knocked once and a metallic cling sounded and pulled up a miniature bottle of whiskey, placing it in front of Ethan, "it is nothing special. I hope it can mend the wound between us."

The stranger got up and started walking.

"Wait," Ethan said, "what is your name?"

He chuckled. "Sorry, where are my manners? People around here call me Heimdahl."

Ethan grabbed the bottle and raised it. "Thank you Heimdahl."

A Macallister twelve years old. Once, a cheap blended whiskey only used for Irish coffees, now a contraband and highly sought commodity on the black market. He let the bottle rest in his hand and swirled its content around. A too good an opportunity to pass on. He looked around the tavern. Three guys at a nearby table talked while eying him, making no attempt at hiding their attention. They all offered him a friendly smile, one of them returned a reassuring nod. Unscrewing the tight, and slightly rusty lid off the bottle he raised it to his nose and took a long careful whiff. The stingy esters burned his nostrils, but notes of char escaped the burning sensation. In a few sips the bottle was gone, and the warm trickling feeling traveled down from his throat, through his chest to his stomach. The percentages in the bottle did his work on both Ethan's mind and mood. The newfound energy postponed his exhaustion.

One of the guys that had been watching him stood up from his table and walked to Ethan. His stubby body and overly large head made him look like a teddy bear waddling.

“Hi buddy, are you up for some dice? We have an open spot,” the guy asked with a toothy grin, running his hand through his black thick hair full of gel. “Name is Michael and the twig over there is Vincent.”

Ethan looked over at the table. A black haired skinny tall, waved back with his small brittle arms.

“Alright, sure, let's play”. Ethan reached out for a handshake. “The name is Ethan.”

“We know,” replied Michael swiftly and shook back. “Come, I'll grab you a chair”.

The dice rolled diligently. Ethan lifted the raffle; underneath was a three- and a two-eye die.

“Oh, come on!” Ethan yelled.

Conversation was difficult in the loud tavern in the rowdy and careless atmosphere.

“I was certain that it was a bluff. I usually have a keen eye for such things.” Ethan acting hurt, showing off a sour face.

“Well, nothing penetrates this poker face of mine,” replied Michael and crossed his hairy arms with a smug look on his face, “I can be void of any emotions if I want to be.”

Vincent laughed. “You serious? What about that time were—”

“Knock it off!” Michael waving Vincent off with a sassy hand. “I know what you will be saying. Just shut your mouth!”

“Oh yeah?” Ethan leaned forward, a smile on his face, his eyes wide looking like a kid craving a story.

Michael sighed “Fine!”

Vincent leaned back into his chair. “So, Michael was on a scouting mission, having to simply report the Lightbringer activity at a junction. This would have been a cookie-cutter mission—”

“Oh boy, here it comes,” Michael replied with a condescending voice, rolling his eyes.

“—if it wasn't because he dozed off on the bench he was sitting. “

“Come on, everyone can take an impromptu nap! Right?” Michael looking at Ethan for support.

“Except that you were also wearing a signal jammer, you know, if caught it would be not-so-pretty.” Vincent pulled a mocking face, looking at Michael.

“Alright, fine, thank you for the story, Vincent.”

Vincent scooted forward in his chair, with a raised finger “And better yet! A patrol of Lightbringers approached him. He fled to an alley and escaped hiding in an open manhole, not knowing that these sewers were still in active use. You could see him blush through the gunk smeared face.”

Vincent threw himself back into the chair clapping his hands. “You should have seen him! When he came back to the tavern, you could smell him before he even opened the door.”

Ethan burst out in laughter holding a firm hand on his stomach, Vincent too.

Michael tried to keep his macho grin, but the contaminating laughter broke his barriers and laughed along with them. As the laughter began to settle, they all leaned back in their chairs.

“A scouting mission you say?” Ethan asked in a hushed voice.

Vincent nodded.

“I mean...” Ethan hesitated, fearing he would kill the mood,” what are you guys?”

Vincent and Michael stared at each other with an insecure intensity. They both nodded and turned their heads towards Heimdahl who was watching them from a distance at the bar counter. He returned their seeking gaze with a confident and reassuring nod.

“Some call us scoundrels, saboteurs and even traitors. Others call us freedom fighters, saviors, heroes. I personally prefer free-thinking people,” Michael replied.

Ethan turned, still sitting on his chair looking at the surrounding patrons. “So, are all the people here a part of the group?”

“Most people here are active members. Then there are those who support us. Like snow top over there.” Michael nodding in the direction of the white-haired nail-biting lady.

“Lydia, she is a saint” Vincent added “Always an eye open. Always knowing what moves in the civilian sectors.”

“What about those old men at the table?” Ethan asked, looking at the dice playing men.

“They are the Makowski brothers. Some old farts. They have been regulars for years, even before I joined,” Michael replied, “they work inside the city wall near the docking station. They ensure that once a while, a crate goes missing. Who knows where it ends up?” shrugging his shoulders with a cocky look in his eyes.

Michael leaning back into his chair, crossing his arms. “I hope you understand why we are so rough on strangers. We can’t let all the riffraff into the tavern.”

Ethan glared over the tavern in search of something. “Who is in charge?”

"The only one here you need to listen to is Heimdahl," said Vincent.

They all turned their heads at the bar counter. No signs of Heimdahl.

Vincent continued, "he is making sure we are moving forward. We trust him and he trusts us."

"So Heimdahl is pulling all the strings here?" Ethan flickering an eyebrow, glancing at the renaissance painting on the wall. "And no one else?"

"Well, Heimdahl does collaborate with some high and mighty people. However, everything around here is on a need-to-know basis, so it's better to leave the power networking to the qualified one," Vincent said, taking a sip from his bottle.

"Well, he does seem like a man with an opinion," Ethan stated.

"Well, he definitely has one," Michael replied, "not only that, but he has also been here the longest and has done some crazy ass shit."

Vincent jumped in. "Don't get fooled by his forward appearance, it is not just for show. He has partaken his fair share of dangerous endeavors for this group, keeping us afloat."

"Dangerous endeavors?" Ethan asked, pondering. "Like the explosion at the plaza?"

They both looked down into their laps and an awkward silence followed.

"That... Was a botched job." Michael replied, staring at the dice he was fiddling with in his hand.

Vincent looked at his lap.

"A botched job?" Ethan asked, feeling he already had killed the wiper, uncertain whether he should keep digging.

"Clement, an experienced fella." Michael pulled a sorrowful frown, throwing the dice in his hand on the table, it clanged loudly on the wooden table. "He had just received news that his wife had disappeared."

Ethan looked away, still listening.

"Unstable minds do unstable work." Vincent looked up from his lap. "If we knew about his wife sooner, we would never have assigned him for that mission."

A silence emerged between them.

"Will I be given a job?" Ethan looked at them with an uncertain look, still feeling like the odd one out despite having had a blast of an evening.

“Not anytime soon, you barely touched the top of the iceberg. And you lack training,” replied Vincent.

Undermined, Ethan felt he had overstepped, just remembering that he only just got to know them. He wanted to get closer to them, to be invited into their embracing inner circle. Looking down onto the table, he circled his finger in a spot of condensed water on the table.

“Give it time. Stay around. Be active,” Vincent continued with a smile on his face, “for now, your eyes have just opened. Use those eyes. Be our eyes.”

“Thank you,” Ethan returned a grateful smile, “I am glad to hear that.”

A heavy knock on the wooden bar counter filled the room.

“Alright lads, last round. Curfew begins shortly,” Jimmy shouted throughout the tavern.

“Well, I am out.” Ethan clapped his thighs, standing up. “Cheers everyone”

He raised his bottle of Alcovoid and chucked down the remainder, a gulp so big it turned a few times in his stomach.

When exiting out the door and into the alley the musky air reached his slightly intoxicated mind making him dizzy. It had been a long time since Ethan last had a buzz and so felt the need to relax. He looked through the open area for a place to sit and saw a small wooden staircase next to one of the surrounding apartments. As he approached the staircase, it was as if something was moving near a dark corner. Ethan could faintly see half a silhouette of someone.

“Anyone there?” Ethan asked.

The silhouette did not move. With cautious steps he approached the dark corner.

“Hello?” Ethan continued.

When he reached the corner and was just about to look behind it a fat hand came out from the dark. It pushed him violently in the chest causing him to fall on his back slamming his head into the cobblestone road only softened by a puddle of water. As Ethan tried to get his bearings and up on his feet, a short and dark cloaked figure was already far down the alley with great haste.

Any attempt to follow was out of the question as the mixture of blunt trauma and alcohol did not bode well for his stomach. Seeing some trash cans in the corner of the open area, Ethan barely reached them before retching. With his sleeve he dried off his mouth with his sleeve and decided that he had enough experiences one day, knowing that work tomorrow would not be void of hangovers.

At the factory, receiving a package

The morning rush was full of both men, women, kids and elderly walking single file to their post. With bowed heads they walked solemnly to their factory, warehouse, administration building or shop all while the sun sat in the sky scorching their skins. Ethan was stuck in the middle of a queue into the factory. In front of him a hunched old shivering man in his seventies leaning heavily on his cane. Behind him, a young kid named Lester which Ethan had estimated to be around the age of fourteen. Dull and imagine less, Ethan recognized the eyes of a youngster who had worked most of his childhood. Ethan had only spoken with Lester a few times, even though they met weekly at Ethan's workstation where Lester would scuttle around sweeping the floors. Their conversation between them had been brief as Lester showed himself to be just as interesting as *Formation of Mountains*.

The line moved forward. Ethan looked up at the old rusty facade of the factory. It was covered in metal plates whose edges were being eaten up by rust. The old Balduin and Co. sign was long gone but a faint bleached outline was still visible.

"It's a shame," the old man said to Ethan. "She was once the pinnacle of this city. People moved from afar, even traversing borders, just to get a job here."

Ethan looked surprised at him "Did you work here before the Nation?"

"Why, yes I did," he replied with a smile, showing off his gummy grin. "In fact, I even worked here during the conflict itself when she was producing armored vehicles at the speed of light."

"Fascinating!" Ethan proclaimed, "how did the factory keep up against the shelling?"

"She is a sturdy one, I can tell you. She was born adaptable to warfare, only taking weeks switching from producing toilet tanks for ships to reinforced armor plates. During shelling we all hid reinforced security rooms inside the factory which could withstand even the worst of barrages."

"How come you are standing here? I had heard that a good portion of the workers were executed for participating against the Nation?"

"That is true." The old man leaned towards him. "But this old fella had a few tricks up his sleeve".

Ethan smiled "Really? What's your secret?" listening with great anticipation.

"Well." The old man chuckled. "I shook a deal with The Nation tipping them the location of a squad of soldiers hiding inside the factory. I can tell you, that is one hell of a bargaining chip."

"Oh." Ethan remembering why he rarely engaged with strangers.

As the line moved forward, Ethan reached the entrance. Two Lightbringers stood in the entrance of the factory at a checkpoint.

"Ethan Westborn, citizen id two-two-three-o-four" Ethan recited. A Lightbringer padded him down from top to bottom and motioned him to continue.

With the burned smell in the air, Ethan knew the ventilation had faulted again during the night. Walking down the dim hallways, he crossed paths with the night shifters. The machines in this factory were running twenty-four-seven producing metal rods, plates, hinges, bolts with all sorts of bends and cuts.

There it stood. His lovely metal bending machine. It was located at the furthest end of the factory where the bigger machines were located. It had been his closest and most trustworthy companion for years, knowing it in and out. He was aware of all the damages, fixes, flaws and potentials. secretly hoping that the machine was just as reliant on him as it was for him.

"Hi Talbot, how has she been behaving?" Ethan asked a man fiddling on the backside of his machine.

"Acceptable. She is leaking a bit from the secondary cooling exhaust again."

"Alright, I'll take a look at it."

Talbot waved farewell over his shoulder and left.

Ethan walked over to the production plan in a folder near a workbench. He had no idea who made the requests but assumed it was some loyalist in a fancy suit. He barely got to know the result of his metal bending. Usually, it was just a couple of instructions and guides and how to bend a specific piece of metal or rod but at the end of the day the resulting metal was shipped away in a crate on an assembly leaving the factory.

There were multiple pallets of metal waiting for him. He preheated his machine, calibrated the belts and aligned the metal press.

The workday was like any other work date with rarely any interruptions. He knew how to operate the machine through routine and was able to just get caught away in his thoughts. It was similar to his books but here he also got to work with his hands. Metal after metal was heated, bent, pressed, bent and cooled.

"Citizens, time for consumption." A lightbringer swung by his machine throwing a ration parcel on his workbench.

Ethan grabbed a stool and tore it open. It was the unknown gray gooey mass with yellow pellets again. Despite its horrendous looks its taste was nothing but bland. He looked out of the window and thought to himself that the mirror would arrive at any second now.

As scheduled the humming in the distance came rapidly approaching. The machines were winded down and all the lights in the factory went out, replacing the mechanical orchestra of machines with a single deafening hum. In pitch black darkness, Ethan carefully continued to eat his sludge as he had done so many times before.

Clang

What sounded like a lid opening followed by faint skittering footsteps emerged from somewhere in the dark. Ethan listened carefully, pondering whether it was one of the newer employees who still had to learn to navigate the factory during a solar charge.

Footsteps approached him. He looked over his shoulder, but no sign of any glowing lightbringers.

“Who's there?” Ethan asked hesitantly.

The footsteps stopped.

Ethan grabbing a hammer from his workbench “Hello?”

The footsteps turned into a run towards Ethan. With his hammer in hand his strategy was simply to sit still hoping that his assailant was unsure of his precise location.

The footsteps stopped right in front of him.

Ethan raised his hammer, ready for a swing.

“Ethan don't worry. It's me from the bar. “

“Who?” Ethan replied, his heart stuck in his throat.

“Heimdahl.”

“Heimdahl? What are you doing here?”

“Ethan, I know this is suddenly. We would usually not put anyone this early on a task, but we need your help.”

Heimdahl's voice sounded desperate in contrast to his usual confident tone.

“What happened?”

“I don't have much time. This package is going out of the city and a ship is departing within two days. Bring this to the district's office and don't tear open the wrapping.”

“Inside the district's office?” Ethan proclaimed. “Who am I delivering it to?”

“We got people on the inside, just make sure someone from the Nation receives it.”

“Someone from the Nation?” Ethan repeated. “What am I bringing? What if I get caught, what should—” Something dropped into Ethan’s lap.

“We are counting on you Ethan. Don’t come back until the job is done.”

Before Ethan could answer, Heimdahl had left his footsteps fading away into the darkness.

Ethan felt the package which was wrapped in crackling paper. The wrapping on the squarish box was tight. Ethan wondered what the content of the package was. He lifted it and was surprised at how heavy it was despite its size. Sitting there, Ethan realized he had lost track of time. Looking out the window, the first rays of sunlight had returned leaking through the factory windows. Another set of footsteps emerged from the factory, but the boots against the concrete were easily recognizable.

There was a strict no-baggage policy which meant that you couldn’t bring anything in or out of the working facilities. Ethan looked around his workstation in panic for an idea.

He rushed over to a container near his machine that was full of metal scraps from all the remains after his work.

“There is sufficient light. Get back to work!” yelled the lightbringer from the room next to him, his cone of light bleeding into Ethan’s room, like a walking candle in the dark.

Ethan threw the parcel in the container and covered it with some of the metal scrap. Sprinting back to the machine he started fiddling with it aimlessly, pretending he was hard at work

The Lightbringer crossed the corner and stared directly at him. Like a deer gazing into the headlight of a car, Ethan stared at the Lightbringer stiffened in an awkward position.

“Citizen, what is your situation?”

Ethan felt like he was caught in the act “Uff! I got a leg cramp?” it came out sounding like a question.

The lightbringer took a step forward, looked up and down at Ethan. From there Ethan could see the swirling balls of lights in his helmet increase in speed as it analyzed him.

“Citizen, are you able to maintain control of your bodily functions or are we to amputate the offending extremity?”

“D-don’t worry, I am sure it will correct itself.” Ethan stuttered.

“I am putting this in your record. Citizen, proceed working.”

Ethan swiftly turned and walked to a nearby pallet and picked up a metal rod. The Lightbringer still lingered, observing Ethan as he continued working. It slowly walked around near his workstation, hitting rhythmically its stun baton in the palm of his hand. It tapped the machine

with its glove, glanced at the manuals on his workbench, turning a couple of pages and carefully observed its surroundings as if it seemed to search for something incriminating. As it approached the scrap container, Ethan felt the urge to do something drastic. A second strike in his records would have dire consequences.

The lightbringer put a hand on the edge of the container and leaned overlooking into it.

"Hmmm," the Lightbringer hummed as it stared directly into the container, reaching down with a hand.

Ethan held his breath, feeling he was on the brink of fainting.

"Shit, watch out!" a citizen screamed from the neighboring room followed by a ruckus of metal hitting the ground as if a cabinet of tools had tilted.

Like a hunting dog, the Lightbringer reacted promptly and raced towards the commotion.

Ethan sighed in relief. He wanted to return to the container and ensure it was properly hidden, but decided it was better to leave it alone. Continuing with his shift, Ethan kept a watchful eye on his hiding spot.

As the workday had passed, he shut down his machine, gave it a friendly pad and left his bag of tools, goggles and mask on the workbench. On his way out, he was padded from top to bottom by the Lightbringer that visited him earlier. The lightbringer stopped as it was padding his leg.

"Is your extremity in operational order?"

"Oh yes, it has never been better."

"Proceed."

With only limited light passing through the factory's small windows Ethan always had to spend a minute or two allowing his eyes to adapt to the clear blue sky's brightness. Walking a few steps down the sidewalk he stopped as he crossed the corner of the factory building. In front of him was a fenced area, which was part of the factory. Multiple heaps of metal scrap were strewn all over the area, which would later be scooped up, dropped in crates and shipped for recycling.

Ethan took his time, rubbing out one of his eyes while keeping watch with the other. Stretching out, touching his toes, straightening his back. He ran a hand through his hair brushing off metal dust. As he was nearly running out of ideas on ways to look occupied, a door on the factory inside the enclosure opened.

Lester dragged the container sluggishly towards a pile of metal scraps.

Ethan coughed loudly. Looking up Lester noticed him returning nothing but a small subtle lazy wave and continued pushing the container.

Ethan burst out another fake loud cough. With a sigh, Lester pushed away the container with force and moved up to Ethan staring at him with his dead lifeless eyes.

“What is it?” he asked with a tone so annoying and monotone that Ethan's blood boiled.

“Hi Lester, listen, what would it take for you to go grab something special from that container of yours.”

Lester looked behind him.

“You will know when you look into the container,” assured Ethan.

He grumbled, scratching his acne riddled face.

“Sodium ration.”

“What?” Ethan proclaimed.

“Your next month's sodium ration. I want that.”

Ethan sighed, it was one of his favorite ration deliveries containing bacon, butter and cheese.

“Fair enough, if that is what—”

“— and your fructose rations. “

“Oh, come on!” Ethan nearly shouted.

“Do you want it or not?”

“Alright, fine.” he said, frustrated.

Lester walked back, dug into the container and walked back with the parcel and through a damaged hole in the fence handed over the package.

“Here, and don't forget, otherwise you will have the lights knocking at your door,” Ethan nodded, turned around and stuffed the parcel into his jumpsuit.

The bulge on his stomach was unnaturally large. He had to get home fast, before anyone noticed and left with rapid steps.

When he reached his apartment, he took the parcel out from his jumper groaning as small metal shavings scratched his skin. He dusted off the parcel and placed it on the table. The paper wrapping had sustained a bit of damage. A few of the edges were bent and the metal scraps had torn a few miniscule holes, glimpsing through noticing its content was metallic. A faint sense of anxiety rumbled in his stomach fearing the damage on the crate could have jeopardized his task.

Ethan sat down in his chair and stared at the package. A large label was glued on, containing various official Nation signatures with a large red ink stamp saying *Discontinued* and *Repurpose*.

What sort of mess has he gotten himself into? He was not aware of its content. If caught with it he would not know whether it would result in a correctional beating or worse. Thoughts and uncertainties began to emerge along with an uncomfortable inner stomach pain. He realized he still had the option of just throwing out the package. But what about the people at the Stag N' Stones? Who were they? It was as if his brain had breathing room to think, now that he was not being tortured, intoxicated or working. Doubt swirled between his stomach and his brain.

"Dad, will you help me put tape on this gift for Gran Gran?"

Ethan turned his head, seeing the back of Norah, wrapping in the parcel on the table.

"Sure sweetie, what are you sending her?"

"One of my teddies," she replied, fiddling with the wrapping paper.

"Why are you sending her one of your teddies?"

"I heard you and her talk on the phone." she tilted her head, her tongue out, struggling with a piece of tape stuck on her finger. "That she was afraid of sleeping alone in the hospital bed. I thought she could get one of mine."

The words struck Ethan deeply, as if her compassion gushed in through an open wound washing away any doubt he had. The warm sensation filled his body with a determined rage, feeling as if he was ready to progress now. He imagined standing side-by-side with Michael, Vincent, Lydia, The Makowski brothers and Heimdahl, his new group of like-minded people, ready to take on their benefactors.

There was no time to read this evening, a plan was in order.

Samus visits Ethan in his apartment

Ethan lay in his bed staring into the cold gray ceiling, having only gotten little sleep. Next door, the energetic Mrs. Braum and Oliver were already bantering, their voices waking up Ethan.

Outside was quiet, apart from the occasional patrol that strolled down the streets. A subtle faint knock came from the door. Ethan jumped out of bed in shock, worrying who came knocking at this hour. He lit a candle and slowly walked towards the door.

"Who's there?" Ethan asked in a hushed voice.

An inaudible voice faintly whispered through the door.

"What? Who again?" Ethan whispered back, putting his ear on the door.

"Heimdahl, open up." the voice whispered back.

Ethan hesitated. He put his candle on the table and moved back over to the door. The door unlocked with a metallic click. Ethan stepped back and waited for the person to enter. Nothing. Ethan lifted an eyebrow, leaning on the door opening the door on crack.

With great force, the door was kicked in and Ethan flew down on his back. Still dazed, he tried to get his bearings, but someone swiftly entered the room and hit him right on his temple, causing his vision to blur. Fumbling around, defenseless, the stranger started tying him up with zip ties.

"Where is it?" the person said in a strong commanding tone.

Still confused, Ethan wanted to say something. He leaned back on the wall he was put up against and took some deep breaths to combat the nauseating feeling, still unable to see clearly.

"Where the fuck have you put it?" the stranger slamming the wall next to him.

One by one, Ethan could hear his drawers being opened, their contents being poured out on the floor. His vision slowly returning. From the blur Ethan could discern that it was a bald man with a dense body wearing a uniform.

“Who the hell are you?” Ethan managed to mutter.

“Just tell me, where is it?”

“Where is what?”

“Your silver wares?” his voice full of spite “You know what I fucking mean. Where is it?”

“I have no idea what you are talking about.”

The man grunted and continued to empty the apartment inside out.

As Ethan was returning to his normal self, he tried to wrestle himself out from the zip-ties but they were put on tightly.

“I don’t have fucking time for this.” The man said while scouting the apartment in desperation. He turned his head to Ethan and sighed. “Fuck this.”

He walked over to Ethan, grabbed his collar and lifted him up until he only stood on his toes, showing that the dense body consisted of more than just fat.

This close Ethan could get a good look at the oval, chubby face that was ransacking his apartment. His leathery brownish skin gave him the appearance of a sailor who had

experienced his fair share of trouble. His bushy stern looking eyebrows helped him mediate that he was one not to mess around with.

“Tell me where the package is, or I swear to god, I'll punch your gut out of your throat.”

“I have no idea wh—”

A fist pummeled into Ethan's stomach, punching the air out of his lungs. He collapsed on the floor rattling for air. He barely regained control of his breath before being pulled back up on his toes.

“Let me try again.” The musky breath of coffee and Alcovoid penetrated Ethan's nose.

“Where is it? I'll give you precisely five seconds to think about your next move.”

Ethan was conflicted between staying strong and wanting to avoid another gut-wrenching punch. His eyes gazed around for a way out but ended up fixated for a short second at the table where his TV stood dismantled into pieces.

The man dropped Ethan on his feet. “What the hell are you doing over here?”

He scoured over to the table and carefully observed the dismantled TV where the backside was open, cords hanging out, electronics scattered around the table. A smile crept up on his face as he grabbed Heimdahl's parcel that was lodged into the tv's backside.

“Thank you, Ethan, this is all I wanted.”

With swift steps the man moved towards the door.

Ethan took a step forward "Wait, before you go. Who are you?"

His eyes relaxed and the stern looking face turned mellow and warm.

"Sorry Ethan, I don't have time to explain. Trust me, this is the best for both of us."

They stared at each other for a brief second. Even though Ethan had just been knocked to the ground by this brute, he felt that there was some sincerity to him. Their gaze was interrupted by the crackling voice from a speaker blasting outside.

"Citizens, local curfew initiated immediately."

Both slowly moved closer to the window to peek out. Three armored vehicles were parked outside on the road with Lightbringers scattered blocking any traffic in and out from that area. Through the windows in apartment blocks across the street, Lightbringers were busy turning the apartments inside out as uniforms, utensils, sheets, and books flew through the air. Mothers, fathers, daughters and sons were guided out of the complex and all neatly lined up against the wall. Two Lightbringers, from left to right, started padding them down thoroughly, the kids not spared from the rough force used.

"Mommy?" a young girl eyeing her mother for help as the girl reached out for her hands when a Lightbringer came approaching.

A smack in her ribs with a baton made her succumb to a ball.

"Silence." the Lightbringer commanded, dragging her by her arm back up on her feet.

Whimpering with tears flowing, the unfazed Lightbringer continued searching, her trembling footing making the little girl wobble from side to side.

“Shit! A random search.” The guy’s face tensed, clenching his teeth. “I don’t have time for this.”

The guy left the window and looked around the apartment as if he was searching for a way out. He peeked out the door and into the hallway, grunted and returned inside, closing the door. He closed his eyes and took a few deep breaths. Ethan could nearly hear him think, carefully observing the nerves contracting on his forehead.

“Ethan!” The guy looked at him with wild eyes, “don’t do anything irrational,” the man said before he rushed into the toilet and shut the door.

Ethan felt the rush of an opportunity and hastily moved towards the burning candle still on the table. With a bit of adjustment, he placed his zip-ties over the fire. The smell of burned plastic itched his nose and within seconds he was free.

For a moment he wanted to rush out of the apartment, but realized he wouldn’t get past the guards outside without extensive questioning. He took one of his kitchen stools and broke off one of its legs. It wasn’t much but at least he got something to defend himself with. Slowly he walked towards the toilet door, stopping the second he heard extensive groaning from inside.

“What’s happening in there?” Ethan asked.

No answer, except groans of pain.

“I am coming in,” Ethan said as he reached for the handle.

“No... Aaargh! Stay—eurgh—out!”

Ethan noticed the voice had become shriller. With his other stool he sat down in front of the toilet door with the leg in hand.

The sound coming from the toilet changed character over time. At first it was grunts and subtle bursts of gasps. Later it turned into muffled screams. When it quieted down, curiosity overtook Ethan. With a raised arm, ready to strake, and took the handle and opened the door slightly. A woman lied on the floor in now oversized clothing. He closed the door again.

“What the hell,” he said to himself, sitting back on his stool, baffled.

A moment after, the woman opened the door holding on to her cloth to not drop.

They stared at each other. Silence. Ethan would have felt the interaction awkward and uncomfortable if it wasn't for his attention being fixed on her eyebrow that contracted, twisted and turned.

“It will do that for some time still,” the woman said.

Ethan nodded “Alright.” Still staring.

“Can I take a seat?” she asked, her voice hoarse, clearly exhausted, running a hand through a messy blonde hair.

Ethan nodded, still holding a cautious stance with a firm hand on the stool leg and a confused look on his face.

With heavy steps she trudged towards the couch and dropped onto it.

“Alright, that did not go as planned,” she said, staring into the air.

A silence emerged between them.

“Well, this is awkward,” she said, staring at Ethan.

Ethan’s pondering gaze was fixated on the new stranger in his apartment. “Well, I guess you have enough time for an explanation.”

“Alright yes, what do you want to know?” pulling up her oversized dangling cloth.

“What do I want to know? Where should I even begin? Who are you? Why do you need the package?” The rambling made him fluster. “Are you even the same person who entered my apartment?”

“Well, yeah, isn’t that obvious?”

“What? No! What sort of black magic is this?”

She looked at him with tired, annoyed eyes.

“Let me help you. My name is Samus, I was here too free you from that package.” She dragged it out from underneath the clothing and dropped it onto the table, giving off a loud metallic bump.

“What do you know about this package?” he asked.

“You don’t know?” she asked. “It does not surprise me you know nothing about it. It could be anything really, Contraband? A weapon? A toe?”

Leaning back, she folded her hands. “It appears they have continued with their need-to-know basis.”

“So, you don’t know what’s inside it either?”

“Well, we could open it and figure it out?” she asked sniggeringly.

“No!” Ethan yelled spontaneously, shocked by his own response.

“Jeez, alright,” she scoffed, looking away from Ethan with a smile.

Ethan opened his mouth to ask some more questions but shut it again, fearing what he wanted to ask would jeopardize everything.

“Don’t look so conflicted. I know all about your rebel friends in the Stag N’ Stones.” She leaned back onto the couch with her hands folded behind her head. “They are properly still using a few of the reconnaissance tricks I taught them.”

This was the first time Ethan had heard the word ‘rebel’ being used for the group. When overhearing rumors about rebels fighting against the Nation, he used to hold them in high regard. But the way Samus presented it, it came off as condescending, tearing down any notion of rebels being morally true.

“So, you are a rebel?” Ethan asked, the word not clicking well on his tongue.

“Was a rebel,” she exclaimed, “things have turned for the worse since I was there. That is why I am here. To help you escape the tragic fate you so eagerly are racing towards.”

“What do you know that I don’t?”

“That your new friends are not who they seem to be. That you are nothing but an expendable pawn for their goal. That package there. Could be anything really. Why don’t we go and take a look?”

Ethan stepped forward and raised his weapon. “Do not touch that package or I swear I’ll strike you!”

Samus chuckled. “Oh my, you’re feisty. What’s riling you up?”

“It’s none of your business. From all I know you could be a loyalist.”

She burst out in laughter, swiping away the sweaty hair from her eyes. “Me? A loyalist? Come on Ethan! How dense are you? If I were a loyalist, it would have been a bull-mech that came marching in.”

“Then what was that shit you pulled off in the bathroom? Is it Nation tech?”

“Have you considered I could be a witch?”

With a lifted eyebrow, he stared her down without pulling a mime.

She shrugged with a smile on her face. "Sorry, I don't plan on spilling all my secrets at once. I'll save some for later. Perhaps when you come and thank me."

Ethan lowered his weapon. "Thank you for what?"

Samus took a deep breath and stared into his eyes. The silence only broken by the lightbringers still ruminating outside.

"So, I guess you are still planning on doing whatever you are supposed to do with that package?"

Ethan nodded.

She rubbed her forehead. "Alright, fine. It seems like they have already gotten a strong grasp on you."

"What is all this nonsense about me being exploited? And if so, why do you even care?"

She broke eye contact and looked up into the ceiling. "Listen, you are not the first man fallen victim to their deception. They praise their cause for the liberation of us, the citizens, but their actions are contradicting. An ulterior motive is what is pushing them forward."

She paused to think and bit her lip. "I just don't want to see your mangled body under a Lightbringer's boot."

The caring words struck him hard, even though coming from a complete stranger.

She sighed, lowering her shoulders.

A smile crept on her lips. "It's fine, these are not the best circumstances for a meeting. I mean, who would trust someone who just barged into their home and punched their gut out."

Ethan took to his stomach, the pain still ruminating as if his intestines were still returning to their former position after being relocated.

"Give me another chance before doing whatever you got to do."

"And then what? Are you planning on taking another swing at me?"

"If that is what it takes?" She chuckled. Ethan looked at her unimpressed.

"No, I'd like to show you something. Do you know of the abandoned container yard not far from the assembly stations in the west?"

"Yeah, the old docking station for West Logistics. In the industrial area?"

"Correct, meet me at the entrance to the yard near the toll both tomorrow after work, I promise you it will be worth your time."

Ethan lifted an eyebrow. "So, you want me to meet you in a secluded area of the town?"

"Yeah, I promise you it will be great."

Ethan's thoughts were racing. What if she was right? How would he know if he was being exploited? He looked at the package on the table, feeling anxious about its content. Next to Samus' in the coach, Norah was leaning up against her, her face buried in her side.

The burning sensation in him reignited, a faint ember of rage started to blush from deep within him.

"No dad, why do I have to go?" Norah said, her voice muffled.

"Come on! It's going to be a great birthday party. Emily would love if you joined."

"No!" Norah exclaimed. "She is not my friend. I would rather stay at home."

Ethan went down on eye level with her. "What's wrong sweetie?" he said in a soft caring voice.

"Well..." Norah sniffled, "she thinks she is so much better than everyone. And she also lies a lot. I remember one time, that—"

"Ethan?" a faint voice emerged from somewhere in his periphery.

The images of Norah in his mind evaporated instantly.

"Hello?" Samus leaning forward towards Ethan, waving a hand at him. "You were gone for a second there. Are you alright?"

"Y-yeah, I am alright." Befuddled, Ethan realized he was still holding the leg from the stool, then, half-heartedly, tried to reattach it back.

Ethan took a deep breath. "I-I am not sure. Perhaps if—"

An engine revved outside. From the reflection of the window, one could see that the armored vehicles were leaving the area.

"Welp, that's my cue!" she clapped her thighs and got up on her feet.

"But—" Ethan muttered.

"Sorry, I better be off. The longer I stay here the more we are both at risk." With weakened legs she waddles towards Ethan's wooden wardrobe.

Opening it up she dragged out a uniform. "I'll be grabbing one of these." Shrugging her shoulders. "Sorry."

Ethan stared at her emptily, his mind still racing from all the questions he wanted to ask, trying to come up with something to make her stay a bit longer.

"Hello?" Samus said loud and clear.

Ethan shook his head, tilting his head confused.

"Are you done ogling me?"

Befuddled, Ethan his lips, his eyes rapidly blinking. "Ehm, ehh."

“Be a sport and turn around, will you?”. Her lips pulling a confident smirk.

As Ethan turned, he confirmed that the package was still resting on the table. It had received a few more scratches in its wrapping, exposing even more metal.

“See you tomorrow!” Samus said.

“But—”

The door hit shut with a slam. In a pile in front of the door the oversized clothing was left behind in a sweaty smelly pile. Rushing to the window he saw her pace down the street, the uniform still a number or two too big. The search was complete, and streets were, for a time, free from any lightbringers.

That night Ethan sat on his couch with Samus’ leftover uniform in his hands. It was an older version of the Nation worker uniform with back pockets, discontinued from production as the pockets often were used for hiding contraband. Ethan noticed that something was scribbled into the washing tag of the uniform. Barely readable, the name Keith K. was written with a black pen.

Samus shows Ethan her hideout

The trip to the industrial area was a refreshing walk as the surrounding area was less obstructed by tall buildings and guard towers offering a wider blue sky. He reached the factories where Ethan met the three workers who directed him to the tavern. Passing past the open door into the factory he quickly skittered away when he heard brutish laughter from inside. In front of him was an open field of dry dirt with small patches of grass. A couple of silos filled the otherwise barren area. On the other end was the shipping station that from a distance looked like a bunch of colored playing blocks strewn around. As Ethan walked across the field, he could see the assembly station was operating at full speed. Crates raced on the assembly belts from and to

the wall and occasionally, just above the city wall, Ethan could see the top part of large Nation freighter that just had docked.

A faint dot in the distance ascended from the assembly station moving towards the field at which Ethan was traversing. As it approached it became clear to Ethan by the beeps it emitted every few seconds that it was a scouting drone. Its spherical shape with black lenses made it look like a sea urchin without spikes. Not interested in catching unwanted attention, he tried moving behind the silos, breaking the line of sight between him and the drone. Ethan stood still next to one of the silos awaiting the drone to pass, listening carefully. The beeps seemed to move across the field, passing him. Then it stopped moving. Slowly, the beeps came closer and closer to the Silo to a point where the beeps resonated with the silo's metallic casing.

Ethan held his breath. Suddenly, it appeared as if the drone had changed its mind and flew away with great haste. Peeking around the silos Ethan deemed the sky free and continued towards the shipping station.

"Hello" Ethan called out after standing for several minutes next to the toll booth. No signs of Samus. He looked over the concrete lot where rusty containers and prosperity were slowly withering away by weather and time. A sense of powerlessness overwhelmed him seeing the deteriorating state of West Logistics. Having once been a central hub for exchanging containers due to its central placement far inland, companies decided to establish large warehouses and factories, meaning the station became a vital nerve for the prosperity of the city. Now its front facade consisted of broken windows, the West logistics red circular logo hanging in a thin thread from the building and spouts of weeds pushing up through the concrete.

"Do you want to see something much cooler than this dead horse?" a voice came from behind Ethan.

In a gasp, he swung around. None.

"Down here."

With her torso just above the manhole, Samus was leaning on the ground with her arms.

"Where did you come from?"

"I have my own ways of getting around." she chuckled. "There is something I want to show you, come with me!" Sinking back into the manhole.

On tiptoes he approaches the open hole, the stench of still murky water hitting him.

Samus looked up. "What are you waiting for? Come on!"

With slow and careful steps, he descended into the manhole. Landing on the concrete, his shoes half-way up with water. Too tall to stand up they both crouched around. The pipe leads in two different directions, both leading into total darkness.

"There is a rope at the wall, use it for guidance."

Stumbling around, Ethan touched the grimy concrete surface, nearly screaming the second he felt something plushy. Realizing it was just a patch of moss, he continued to feel the wall, grabbing onto a large piece of rope.

"You got it? Hold on to that and follow the sound of my steps."

The echo in the pipes made it difficult to locate how far away she was. With trembling steps, he followed the watery footsteps in front of him. When Ethan started to feel the exhaustion from crouching, he noticed he was surrounded by darkness. The feeling of claustrophobia came creeping up only managed by focusing on his breath. Wandering down in the darkness he felt paradoxically both vulnerable and secure at the same time. He knew he had no way of escaping if Samus had any ill intention, however, she already had plenty of chances to get rid of him if she really wanted.

The footsteps in front of him abruptly stopped.

“Two seconds.” Samus echoed back at him. A moment after, a flood of light overwhelmed him, feeling as if his eyes were being bleached.

When he popped up from the manhole the most wondrous sight met him. All around him were colored light bulbs emitting the warmest of rainbows. The sides of the container were plastered with old movie posters and iconic portraits of rockstars. Two bean bag chairs were stowed in a corner next to a coffee table with a vase of plastic petunias. The container smelled fresh of soap and perfume. Samus walked over to a small, improvised kitchen. A large metal bowl for a sink was full of water and on a wooden crate stood a microwave and an electric kettle.

“Wow, what is this place?”

“Isn’t it obvious?” she answered while filling up a kettle using water from the sink. “It’s my little get-away.”

Ethan got up from the manhole and more closely began inspecting the posters. “Oh, Wild Star Furry. I was at this concert.”

“For real?” she replied, sounding surprised “Where did you sit?”

“B section, if I am not mistaken. We were seated too close to the bass though.”

She chuckled. “Well, I was at that concert as well. I guess we weren’t that far from each other then.”

She grabbed a small box with various assortments of teas. “Lemongrass? Liquorice?”

“Tea? And I get to choose?” His eyes flickered between the two. “Lemongrass please.”

Samus handed a mug with cat ears, full of freshly made tea. The fresh scent dulled his senses as he took a whiff of its content.

“How do you get power?” Ethan asked curiously.

“I have some small solar panels attached on top of the roof of the logistics building and a battery attached.”

“Have you made all this yourself?”

“Yeah well, having been on numerous reconnaissance missions you learn a few things or two. Having a degree in electrical engineering does help as well.”

She pointed at a small workbench where wires, circuit boards and transistors were spread out.

“Most of these things I have scavenged over time. You would not believe what you still can find in the abandoned buildings around town.”

Ethan took a seat in one of the bean bag chairs, nearly drowning as it consumed him upon impact. “It sounds like being part of the group was not all bad?”

“If you asked me while I was still active, I would have told you it was the greatest possible thing that could have ever happened to me.” Looking into her mug, swirling it around.

Ethan couldn't help but pick up a rubic cube from a shelf within arm's reach. “If you were so fond of it, how come you left?” he asked while fiddling with the cube.

Samus sat down in the other bean bag. "I have a sister somewhere in the city."

She bowed her head, staring into her mug. "Her name is Helena. I have been looking for her ever since we got separated after the Nation took over".

She took a sip, the tea too hot blowing on it gently, the heated mist swirling gently upwards inside the enclosed container. "I assume you have met Heimdahl?"

Ethan nodded "Yeah, we have had a few talks." placing the rubic cube back, now all shuffled.

"Well, he shot right through me with his charisma when I first set foot in the Stag N' Stones. I was told this was the place to go to if I wanted to find Helena. After a bit of back-and-forth, they agreed to try and help me if I would assist them in return. It was not long before they returned with knowledge about her. I was thrilled. In return I did various missions; Reconnaissance, sabotage and even..." she hesitated to continue.

"Murder?" Captivated, the question came bursting out from Ethan.

"Liquidation, yeah."

"Citizens?"

"Yeah."

The two stared at their mugs, the silence between them only interrupted by the faint sips they took from their now cold teas.

“How many?” Ethan carefully asked.

“Two.”

Ethan nodded, looking back into his mug. Taking a long sip, daring not to eye her. “Why did you leave the group?”

“After a couple of years of doing missions, I got impatient. When I voiced my impatience, they were willing to assemble a team for an expedition to the opposite side of the town. But every time we tried to react to new intelligence something came up. Either the intel was misleading or something was blocking us from progressing.”

“How unfortunate,” he replied.

Samus glared at him with a visibly irritated look. “Don’t you get it? This is what they are doing to you!”

“Doing what?” Ethan continued staring into the mug not willing to engage with Samus’ wild eyes.

“Ethan don’t lie to yourself. You know damn well what I am talking about. I know you feel it too.”

Uneasy, Ethan grabbed the rubic cube again, and immediately began fiddling with it, feeling as if the temperature in the container had increased.

“You are not putting your ass on the line for a charity. That I know.”

“You don’t know me.”

"No, I don't know you!" Her teeth and hands clenching. "But I know the influx of recruits that has passed through the tavern, all with similar stories."

A painful stir in his stomach made him feel uneasy, Ethan standing up starting to pace around the container.

"Young men and women got to the tavern at some point because they were looking for something. They all ended up leaving with more than they bargained for with hopes and wishes of an impossible future," Samus continued.

She wrestled herself free from the bean bag. "Today the majority of those recruits are biofuel!"

She moved to a cupboard next to the sink slamming the mug furiously.

With her back to Ethan, she muttered. "I fear, if you don't think twice, you will end up the same."

Ethan leaned up against the container wall. "If you were aware of all this, how come you didn't do anything about it?"

She turned around, looking at him. "I was sucked in too deep. Any faint notion of my sister made me blind. It was all I could think of. I could not see straight."

"What happened when you left?"

Her tense face and wild eyes rapidly turned into an empty, hollow look. "Nothing." She turned to the Wild Star Fury poster. "I just left. Never heard from them again." Her voice hushed.

Samus went back and sat down on the bean bag. “So, that’s it. That’s my speech.”

Ethan couldn’t help but feel sorry for her. The strong and independent appearance she brought into his apartment was slowly fading into a more complex and delicate personality. He sat down onto the bean bag, feeling peace settling.

The two of them stared into the open air, Ethan suddenly waking up.

“Who is Keith K?”

Her eyes widened.

“Who?” she asked, the pitch of her voice slightly off.

“It was written in the uniform you left in my apartment.”

“Oh Keith! Poor Keith.” her eyebrows furrowed. “Keith was a recruit. He got wounded on a mission and later died at a hideout. We needed all the resources we could get. We decided to keep his uniform and cut a lock of his hair.”

“A lock of his hair?”

“It’s for my transformation unit. You know, the one you experienced yesterday.”

“How does that even work?”

“Technically it's a metamorphosis unit. It's a small device you place behind your ear. It allows you to take any appearance as long as—”.

A large metallic bump came from the outside. Samus and Ethan looked at each other with a stern look. They got up and placed their ears on the container wall.

Outside multiple metallic bangs echoed as container doors were opened and closed. The rustle of boots and armor moved towards them hastily. Samus grabbed Ethan's arm and nodded towards the manhole. While opening the heavy metallic lid into the sewers, something grabbed the welded container doors from outside and shook it with great force. A few seconds later, the metallic surface of the door turned into a steaming hot red, turning into liquid drizzling down. Samus hopped into the manhole barely using the ladder, landing at the bottom effortlessly. Ethan followed up more clumsily crawling down the ladder, closing the lid behind him.

“Come on, this way!” Samus commanded Ethan, helping him up and pulling his sleeve to signal the direction, her footsteps rushing away from him. Fumbling his way forward, the darkness was now more terrifying than anything he had ever experienced.

“There is a turn up ahead, be careful,” Samus yelled back at him.

Ethan could hear the manhole cover being removed and a flood of light came from behind him as he continued forward. His biggest fear was for a Lightbringer to jump down and hunt them, but his imagination was not prepared for the metallic clang that hit the ladder and fell with a splash in the shallow water. The manhole cover was shut again, and the darkness engulfed them both once more. Turning his head he noticed in the shallow water, now far behind him, a faint hue of red. A loud shrieking beep was emitted from behind him. Then another beep.

“Get down!” Ethan yelled, throwing himself into the murky water, his hands covering his ears.

The blast struck Ethan with such force that he felt as if his face and body was grated by the concrete surface. The air in his lungs was pushed out feeling as if his lungs had imploded. Gasping for air, he accidentally swallowed some of the murky water and began violently coughing. Despite having covered his ears he felt as if his ears were just about to pop,

squealing on the ground until the worst of the shock was over. Despite the rough treatment, he was not seriously injured, still believing he got all his arms and legs. Disorientated and in pain he got up on all fours and began crawling forward in what he thought was the right direction.

“Samus!” Ethan tried to yell but only a faint hoarse voice came out.

Slowly he traversed the darkness alone. The claustrophobic feeling came back knocking, but the adrenaline had taken control pushing him forward like a machine. He suddenly stopped as he touched something in front of him. It was Samus’ shoe.

“Samus!” he yelled.

Fumbling around he noticed it was only the shoe.

“Samus, are you there?” He continued forward searching hands until he felt the touch of fabric, certain this time that it was Samus.

“Samus!” he yelled.

After having located her head and placed two fingers around her neck and putting her ear next to her mouth.

“Oh god.” He exhaled in relief as he noticed a pulse.

“Samus, wake up!” He firmly slapped her roughly on her cheeks. “For god’s sake, wake up!”

The echo from the explosion was now only a faint reverb that resonated in the distance. The silence laid heavy on his shoulder fearing he had to traverse alone.

Suddenly, Samus' gasped for air, grasping Ethan's uniform with a strong clenched fist while trying to pull herself up in panic.

"I thought you were a goner for a second," Ethan said, assisting her.

"Give me a second." Her voice withered.

The silence in the concrete tubes was eerie, only broken by Samus' heavy heaves of air. Ethan on high alert, tripping to move on.

"Alright, I think I am good to go."

"What do we do now?"

"Let me see." She paused to think. "If I am not mistaken, we are not far from a safe place. Come on, let's move."

Slowly, both continued venturing further into the nothingness.

The manhole cover popped off with ease, Ethan and Samus rushing out. Samus searched a nearby wall and with a click the room was lit up by a small incandescent bulb, the poor lighting casting a soft warm glow on its surroundings dust particles swirling in its light. With clenched stingy eyes Ethan skimmed around, stretching his back before strolling around.

The room surrounding them was full of heavy machinery; Drills, presses, anvils, hammers, heaters all neatly lined in rows. Some covered in tarp, others in a thick layer of dust. Fiddling with a lever on one of the presses, the familiar grip made him inspect the machine more closely. Ethan stopped up and turned to Samus.

“Where are we?” he asked curiously. “I am fairly sure I have seen this machine before.”

“We are in one of the old basements of Balduin and Co. whose entrance has been walled up. Should be safe here.”

“Are we at my post?” Ethan sounded surprised.

He turned to the machine. “Then this machine got to be the former version of my metal press. When I first got my post, we were schooled using one of these.”

“That machine? Doubtful. This room was used as a safe space during the Nation’s arrival. We only discovered this place when we mapped out the sewer systems.”

“So, this is a hideout?”

“Yeah, we have used it from time to time. The factory’s location is supreme. Tons of workers checking in and out. Perfect place for spying, catching the latest gossip or sneaking out making first contact for potential new recruits.”

“Didn’t you just say it was walled up?”

“Well yeah, but we made a small makeshift solution for that.” Pointing at an open ventilation shaft, a chair underneath to reach the opening.

Ethan followed the ventilation shaft, seeing it branching out leading to both in and outside the factory.

A sudden realization overwhelmed Ethan. "Are we... on the run now?"

"I don't know," she replied as she looked out through the small holes drilled into the walls, leading out to the factory floor. "I'll have to go check."

"How?"

"I'll go to our apartments. If they are onto us, they would be swarming our slabs. You will have to wait here while I am gone."

"So, your plan is to waltz out into the streets, not knowing if your face is wanted or not?"

"You asked me earlier how this worked." She dragged the small black transformation unit out from one of her pockets. "Let me show you."

She walked over to a dirty slim mattress that was thrown into a corner.

"Shit!" she proclaimed. "I'll have to borrow your uniform."

"What?" He looked down at himself, pulling his slim, white uniform still wet and grimy that clinged to his body. "Why?"

"When I am done, my uniform would be so small it would look like I was trying to wear a doll's clothing."

He sighed "Really?"

“Yes! Really!” sounding annoyed. “Now get out of that uniform. While you are undressing, I’ll be in this corner. It will take a few minutes. Don’t try to help me. Just let me ride it out.”

She pulled her worn uniform off and after a deep, concentrated breath she jacked the transformation unit’s piercing needles into the back of her ear, flinching. Without second guessing the green, moldy mattress she threw herself down rolling herself into a fetus position.

Ethan turned around as he felt uncomfortable staring at the defenseless and undressed Samus. The increased friction from the wet cloth forced Ethan to sit on the ground trying to kick his pants off his feet like a toddler. After getting one leg free, he noticed the grunts and rumbles from behind, his curiosity giving in. Turning, the sight nearly made him faint. Her flesh molding was like the waves in a storm, contouring her body into unimaginable grotesque shapes. Bulges the size of footballs surfaced on her skin, Ethan fearing they would pop at any second. Her legs, arm and torso were increasing in size as the mattress had become too small for her. Ethan grinded his teeth and barely dared to peek out from his nearly closed eyes. An instinct to rush towards and help her submerged, but decided to have faith in the process as he had no clue what to do.

As the intensity diminished Ethan could faintly recognize the brownish skin and oval chubby face that the abomination in front of him was the same guy who had burst into the apartment.

“What? You haven’t even gotten your uniform off?” Samus said, still lying down on the mattress her voice now deep and rough.

Despite knowing the true identity of the man, anxiety still crept up in him at seeing him again. With a gaping mouth, he shook his head and finished taking off the uniform by pulling vigorously, the cloth sloshing off, throwing the wet bulge at her.

“So.” Ethan stared at the half-naked man on the mattress. “Who are you now?”

Pushing herself off the ground and onto her feet, she leaned towards the wall, her legs still wobbly.

“Just a stranger. You would not know him.” Not eyeing Ethan as she began to jam her legs into the tight uniform.

Ethan hesitated, looking fearfully at the brute in front of him, then the question came spilling out “Is this Keith K?”

She stopped and stared at him. Eyes furious. Her controlled, deep, audible breaths made Ethan wonder whether she would strike him. A loud gulp emanated from him. No response. Her eyes buried into his, making him take a step back.

Just as Ethan couldn't take the silence anymore Samus broke it. “I'll leave now.”

She walked over to the ventilation shaft, stood up on the chair and clumsily crawled up into the open-air duct, the vents just big enough for her new body.

Finally, being alone, the suppressed exhaustion found its way. Sitting down, he leaned up against the wall and concentrated on the factories' humming and the mumbling voices from outside. Feeling as if he only had dozed away for a minute, a faint metallic rumble moved towards him. Out from the open-air vent, the oval, tanned head of Samus' disguise stuck out.

“The coast is clear,” she said right before jumping out from the vent.

She pulled off Ethan's uniform, which was still moisty, and threw it at him. “I went by my slab and brought myself a fresh uniform.”

He rubbed his eyes, still waking up. “So, that's it? We can just walk outside scot free?”

“I believe so, yeah. I'll be staying here until this wears off.” Pointing at her own face.

“So that’s it? What now? Should I just go home?”

“Yes, but—” she hesitated. “One more thing Ethan before you leave. Can I ask you something?” her tone, serious.

“What is this?” Ethan looked at her worried.

“Have you met the suited man?”

The tantalizing hum from the void echoed in his mind. The bare mention of him stirred something in him, uncertain of what it was.

“A suited man? Someone at the tavern?” Ethan replied with his back at Samus, dressing himself.

Ethan could feel the staring gaze from her and decided that he was not in a hurry to get his uniform on.

“Ethan. What did he promise you?” the deep voice making the question sound more like an accusation.

Zippering up his uniform, Ethan kept his back at Samus. Took a deep breath and turned. Samus towering over him in her disguise.

“That is none of your business! Why are you so eager to prevent me from working with them?”

“It’s difficult Ethan, it’s like—” she bit her old, weathered lips. “I don’t know what is up and down anymore.”

Silence emerged. Specks of dust gently danced around them.

“Just because they have been unable to find your sister, it does not mean they can't help me!”

“It's not just that.” Samus' eyes flickering. “I-I feel like there is a haze in my mind. I really want to find Helena, I truly do, but I am not sure if it's even possible.” Her hands rubbing her temple.

Ethan flicked an eyebrow.

“You are not making sense.”

“I know! It's just... I miss Helena with all my heart. But it has been so long I can't remember what she looked like.” Her deep voice cracking, eyes watery. “Don't you feel it too Ethan? That something is wrong?”

“Feeling what?” looking at her acting perplexed.

“Please, tell me it's not just me!” Her desperation reaching the surface of her rough face, one of her eyebrows starting to twitch. “Tell me!”

His thoughts wandered towards Norah, seeing her ever so clear in her red ladybug dress and golden hair picking petals off flowers in their rose bush, the imagery leaving a warm gentle sensation that swirled in his body.

“Sorry Samus, I-I don't know what you mean.”

Samus fell onto her knees, sobbing, her face in her large hands. Ethan stared at her with unease, uncertain whether he should comfort her.

“Argh!” Samus faltered on her knees, gasping for air.

The skin on her thigh contracting and expanding, blood vessels protruding wiggling like worms.

“Fuck, I forgot all about it.” Without brushing off the tears on her chin, she hastily took off her uniform.

“I-I’ll be over—” she grabbed her arms which then began to twist around its own axis.

Ethan took a step forward. “Should I—”

“No!” waving him off “Just leave!” Her voice already talking with a pitch.

On all fours she crawled towards the mattress in the corner, Ethan seeing her back contorting and her skin bubbling.

As he stepped up on the chair, he looked back at the agonizing Samus, who had stuffed her mouth with a part of her uniform, her muffled screams sending chills down his spine. In a leap he went up in the ventilation shaft and out towards the street.

That evening, Ethan sat staring into the open, his mind at unease. Outside the sun had set. The windows on the opposite side of the street, families were preparing for the night with kids huddling up next to their parents for storytelling.

From the light of a lonely candlestick, Ethan sat with the uniform Samus had left. Like a prompt the name Keith K was repeated in his mind. With a rageful throw the uniform landed in the corner of the apartment, Ethan heaving of irritation and anger.

“For fuck’s sake,” Ethan whispered to himself, frustrated. He looked at the package on the desk and picked it up, his fingers itchy for tearing the paper wrapping apart.

His thoughts ran amok. What if she was right? Why did Samus go through all that trouble? How could he be certain that they could help him find Norah?

He ran a finger on the surface, the ruffled and dry feeling reminded him of the gifts he used to give to Norah. Despite the wrapping’s abrasive surface, it was cheap and had a good nostalgic feel to it. He knew Norah did not care anyway and would just proceed to tear open the gifts with childish fury.

“Happy birthday sweetie!” Ethan remembered saying, as he handed over her birthday present.

Despite not being able to see her facial expression, as her morning hair dangled in front of her face, he knew she was overly joyful for today.

“Thank you, daddy.” Norah eagerly grabbed the present, digging her nails into the gift, tearing up the wrapping like an animal.

“Oh, a blue octopus!” she stood up on the bed, wrapping her arms around Ethan. “Thank you, daddy. I love it!”

A smile crept on his lips as the warm sensation washed over him. He opened his eyes and noticed he was cradling the cold heavy package.

Scouring over the table with the dismantled television, he sat down, lodged the package into an opening and grabbed his tools.

Delivering the package then returning to the tavern

Pebbles of sweat ran down his back making the uniform stick to his body. He wheezed and struggled to catch his breath as he waddled down the street. The cathode television was one of the older heavier models, its shape difficult to get a proper grab on making it troublesome to carry.

His back hurt as he had to compensate for the unevenly distributed weight. Stopped to catch his breath he readjusted his grip as the plastic casing was slipping on his sweaty palms. It did not take long before the first Lightbringer approached.

"Citizen, state your reason for carrying this transmission receiver."

"I don't think it is working."

"What functions are at error?"

"I have tried every possible thing I could think of, but I simply can't get a signal to any of the Nation's channels."

"Have you tried unplugging it from its power source, await approximately ten seconds then reinsert the unit into its power source."

"Yeah, I tried that. Still no signal."

"Why haven't you delivered your unit to the nearest citizen operated repair station?"

"Michella on the corner already had a look at it, but she was unable to figure out what was wrong."

The lightbringer hesitated to answer. Its orbs of light swiftly swirled around as it analyzed the response.

"Understandably, Michella's cognitive functions is not par with others similarly ranked citizens."

Ethan looked at the unit confused "Sorry?"

The orbs swirled a few more rounds as if it was thinking.

"She is an idiot."

"Oh," Ethan replied.

“The recycling station is in the opposite direction. Where are you taking this unit?”

“I am taking this to the district’s office. I would like to file a request for a Nation’s technician to look into it.”

The orbs swirled for another round, then the light from the helmet turned green.

“Noted citizen, please continue.”

With stretched arms and bent knees, he lifted the television with his legs and continued down the street. After walking for a few more minutes another Lightbringer approached him with rapid steps. Ethan sighed knowing this would be a long trip.

After finally reaching the district’s central office, he took a break before bringing it up the stairs. Ethan looked over at the billboard and noticed that there were more wanted posters than usual, but lucky for him, not anyone he could recognize. His imagination couldn’t help but wonder how his scruffy, black bearded face would take out on the billboard if the Nation found out about what he was doing.

Entering the district’s office, he knew that there would be no way back. He looked towards the office entrance eyeing the two bull-mechs who still guarded the entrance, their sheer size still overwhelming Ethan. His legs felt heavy and his arms weakening, pondering whether he should take another moment before entering. As he stood there, doubt rushed through him, his stomach started turning. His eyes darted at his surroundings, at the entrance, the doors, the bull mechs, the surrounding black monoliths and the scorching sun, feeling he were searching for something that could make him change his mind. He looked again at the billboard. A small portrait hung on the wall of a woman, the blonde uncombed curly hair catching his attention. His thoughts wandered towards Norah realizing that he could possibly be looking at her photo, but the large bushy brows, the birthmark underneath her right eye and her cold face made him uncertain. It had been many years since he last had seen her, but feeling certain that if he met her in person, he would recognize her instantly. The sight gave him newfound energy. Tightening his muscles once more, he got another firm grip on the television and moved towards the stairs.

As he entered the central district office he stumbled towards the nearest desk. The human-like lightbringer eyed him as he placed the television on the desk with a loud thump. Ethan took a seat.

“Hello there good citizens, how can I help you today?” Its face already lit up in a cautious yellow.

“My television has no signal. I would like to request a Nation technician to look into it.”

“Alright, let me look into the situation for you, stretch out your arm please.”

Ethan held out his arms. The Lightbringer grabbed it and pressed a thumb on his wrist.

"Alright Ethan Westborn, citizen id seven-one-two-one-five. Give me a second to look through your file and evaluate your possibilities."

For a second the Lightbringer stood staring into the air, its light pulsating.

"It says in your records that you haven't filed any requests for years. It does seem like you have been on the straight and narrow."

Ethan never had the need to request anything, knowing it was more trouble than worth it.

"It also says that you were a witness to the accident on the plaza a week ago," the masked Lightbringer continued.

Ethan had hoped they would bring this up so he could try and play the victim card.

Ethan's eyes opened wide. "Yeah, it was a horrible experience." He sniffled. "I could barely—"

The Lightbringer's face turned rapidly into an aggressive red. "You have been on the straight and narrow, until you decided to take up your vigilante affairs."

Ethan managed to stop the waterworks before turning on.

"You have been registered as going off-path of your usual routines and have even been brought in by the central correctional force for questioning. Now you are here to request further resources from the Nation?"

Ethan was shocked "But—"

"Why do you think now is a good time?"

Ethan clenched his hands on the armrest. The intensity of its mask increased rapidly, Ethan clenching his eyes.

"Well?" The unit nearly yelled at him leaning forward over the table.

"Alright, alright. You got me." Ethan exhaled and sighed. "During the terrorist attack at the plaza I really thought that was the end of me. That has had me contemplating my life. I tried something new, I went off-course, I wanted to be more than just a feeble peasant. I wanted to be a heroic figure. The hero that the Nation needs."

The light of the Lightbringer began to dim.

"I have now realized my limitations. That the life the Nation has chosen for me is exactly the life I need. I have ever since tried to get back to my normal routines by watching as much Nation television as possible."

There was an awkward silence. Ethan stared at the unresponsive mask, and he knew, behind that mask, the orbs of light were swirling at great speed, analyzing Ethan's story.

Its mask turned green, and it sat down. "Alright Ethan Westborn, you humans are per design flawed. Acknowledging that the Nation's decisions are absolute is what every standup citizen must do. Your request has been granted."

One of the other lightbringers in the room moved over, grabbed the television and walked through the door entering the citizen's affairs wing.

Stepping outside the office, Ethan felt triumphant. Standing on the top of the stairs, he took in the view of the bright blue sky, the city landscape and the evening sun preparing its descent behind the city wall.

Before barely opening the door, Ethan could feel the heat from the crowded Stag N' Stones. The atmosphere was light and cheerful. Stepping in the first few patrons turned their heads.

"Here he comes," Jimmy at the bar yelled.

"There he is, the man of the hour," The oldest of the Makowski brothers followed.

As Ethan walked towards the counter, he passed Lydia who raised a cheerful fist. "Huzzah!"

Jimmy slowly began to clap, then the youngest of the Makowski brothers. Soon the entire tavern was clapping and cheering.

Even though they were all clapping and even yelling his name it still took him some time to realize that the applause and cheering was for him.

At a table not far from him, Michael and Vincent clapped along.

"Well done mate!" Michael yelled.

"Yeah, a true trooper," Vincent added.

At the counter Heimdahl stood waiting, Ethan walking up to him.

"Welcome back friend." Heimdahl greeting Ethan with open arms.

Ethan stood next to him, side by side. "Thank you." Ethan smiled with a confused look in his eyes.

"Your first mission. How was it?"

Ethan tried to smile, but it only became a small flick.

He leaned closer to Heimdahl and whispered, "What did I exactly do?"

"You helped us in a sticky situation, that is what you did!" Heimdahl burst out, clapping him on the back, his strong hand staggering Ethan.

"What was inside the package?" Ethan's voice hushed.

The over-the-top smiling Heimdahl toned the intensity down, grabbing Ethan's shoulder in a squeeze. "The mission came from the up-aboves and told us the package content was critical for furthering our cause significantly."

"So, you don't know what was inside the package?"

He walked in front of Ethan and stared directly into his eyes. "Look, our up-aboves protects us by only sharing the information we need to know, otherwise the information we possess may lead us into harm's way."

"Alright," Ethan replied, looking down, barely smiling.

Heimdahl grabbed Ethan's shoulder. "Now, it is time for celebration." He turned around and with open arms yelled throughout the tavern. "Everyone, listen!"

All the patrons turned and stared eagerly at Heimdahl, the room still vibrant from the energetic chat and bantering.

"Our new recruit Ethan here has done a marvelous job today. He risked his life for what we truly believe in."

Ethan looked over across the patrons eyeing him cheerfully looking at him with awe and genuine respect. He put on a partially forced smile, certain that he looked like a goff.

"We are portrayed as bandits, terrorists, scoundrels and evildoers. They say we are riff-raffs, who wallow, distressed, in our own self-made purgatory. Do not give in to those lies. Do not listen with your ears, but with your heart. Don't let their words poison your soul and suffocate your hopes. In dreams we thrive, growing taller than any man."

Heimdahl raises a victorious fist into the air.

"Everyone, help me celebrate Ethan Westborn. A true dreamer!"

All the patrons raised their arms "Hurrah, hurrah!... HURRAH!" The last hurrah so loud Ethan feared it could be heard all the way out on to the main street.

The evening was crowded, rowdy and optimistic. Patrons swarmed Ethan to retell his story on how he managed to sneak out the parcel from Balduin and Co and how he pried open the television to jam the parcel in there only to then put on a show at the district's office. With his throat sore and his voice hoarse, he couldn't remember when he had talked this much.

As the crowd of interested patrons had dispersed, Ethan noticed the empty chair next to Michael and Vincent and took a seat.

“Great job buddy!” Vincent looked at him with a genuine proud smile.

“Yeah, I couldn’t have done it better myself. Well done.” Michael tapped him with his elbow.

A sudden warmth overtook Ethan. “Thank you.” A smile appeared that nearly reached his eyes.

Jimmy approached them. “Hey lads, this one is on the house. Don’t tell anyone.” Sliding three bottles on a plate on their table.

Scouring at the bottles Ethan wondered why Jimmy would serve Alcovoid on a plate, but after a whiff it was clear to him. Lukewarm stouts.

With their bottles in hand, they clanged them together, the sound ringing through the tavern loud and clear.

The patrons in the tavern were prepared for festivity, the jolly atmosphere reaching the ceiling, the air full of muffled chattering voices. Every table in use, patrons were busy arm wrestling, stacking cans or playing flute using bottles.

With their stouts finished, Ethan, Vincent and Michael had resorted to Alcovoid to keep the party going.

“— I tell you” Michael standing up “We have so many potential recruits in the pipeline, it’s insane.”

Vincent opened another bottle of Alcovoid. “I certainly agree. The wall’s docking stations are swarming with people, who work on the docking bay leading outside on the other side of the wall. They have seen glimpses of a world long gone. They usually seem more eager to join than others.”

“Yeah, some of those dock workers are nastily big, I bet they can pack a punch.” Michael looking at his own clenched fist.

Vincent turned to Ethan. “What about you Ethan, don’t you know anyone eligible for joining our ranks?”

His thoughts immediately landed on Samus. “I might know some. What is the recruitment process?”

Michael chuckled. “Didn’t you no go through that process recently?”

Ethan paused, looking at the renaissance painting still hanging untouched on the wall, his mind stirring on a question.

"I assume you spoke with Heimdahl?" Vincent asked, before Ethan had a chance to answer.

"Why, yes I did," Ethan replied looking at his bottle. "Even though our second conversation was much more pleasant than our first."

Both Michael, Vincent and Ethan chuckled silently and synchronously took a sip of their bottles.

"Is it really Heimdahl that handles all the recruitment?" Ethan asked.

Leaned back in his chair Michael sat with his arms crossed. "Heimdahl and his silver tongue. That is what gets us going."

Vincent straightened up. "Yes, we scout and identify potential candidates. Then we come back and select those we deem most suitable, then Heimdahl finds a way to approach them directly."

"Did you also scout me out?" Ethan looked at them wondrously.

Vincent shook his head. "No, we assumed you were Heimdahl's personal project."

From the corner of his eye, Ethan could still skim the renaissance painting, the question spewing out of him.

"Does the name Keith K. say anything to you?"

Shocked, the two looked befuddled at Ethan, their joyous attitude replaced by surprised concerned looks.

"Keith? Keith Kendrick?" Vincent muttered.

Both Vincent and Michael stared at him with anticipation. The tension between them made Ethan feel isolated from the surrounding party. Ethan shrugged.

Michael leaned forward. "Where did you hear that name?"

Ethan's eyes flickered, only to land on empty bottles on the table. "I overheard the name from someone here. I was just wondering whether that was a name of one of the new potential recruits."

"No, no." Vincent shook his head. "Kendrick was much more than a recruit."

"Who was he?" Ethan dared to look at them again.

Vincent and Michael glanced at each other.

"Well," Vincent began. "Kendrick was Heimdahl's right hand. He had mastered the art of reconnaissance and surveillance with a plethora of skills only one could dream of acquiring."

"Where is he now?" Ethan asked.

Michael and Vincent looked at each other once more, then nodded. Michael pushed himself away from the table then tapped his feet on the old flood boarding, emitting a hollow rung. Ethan frowned, clearly confused.

Michael sat himself back at the table. "He is six feet deep. He is right underneath us."

"What?" Ethan said as he thought he heard wrong.

"Yep, poor Kendrick got backstabbed, that's what happened." Michael crossed his arms falling back into his chair.

Ethan looked at Vincent with raised eyebrows.

"It would seem so," Vincent nodded. "Kendrick and his partner were to meet at West Logistics, to make an exchange for a shipment of ammunition. However, instead of his partner arriving, a squad of Lightbringers came marching."

"So, he was ratted out?" Ethan looked at with wide open eyes and a gaping mouth.

"Yes. A fierce firefight broke out, one Kendrick was destined to lose. Through sheer miracle, he managed to sneak into the sewer systems and back to this place." Vincent taking a sip from his bottle.

"What happened then?"

"He was hurt badly." Vincent eyes darting away. "Not much we could do."

Michael placed his Alcovoid on the table. "Yeah, he was hallucinating badly, having some crazy out of body experience. Kept saying he had seen himself running away from the Lightbringers, trying to hide in the West Logistics station."

Vincent rolled his eyes. "Yeah, Michael, blood was gushing out from multiple lesions. It was either the blood loss or the pain killers that were talking."

Michael turned to Vincent; his face determined. "But what about the rumors?"

"Michael. Kendrick is dead. We have talked about this a ton of times. Accept it already."

"What about Lydia? She said she had seen him just recently walking in some dirty uniform?"

Vincent looked over his shoulder, ensuring none was in ears range. "You know, just as well as I, that Lydia is as sweet as she is dumb."

Fluttered, Michael lifted his finger “But—”

“Michael, enough!” Vincent raised his voice. “You promised to let it go if we showed him to you one last time.”

Breathing forcefully, he looked down, looking both full of rage and disappointed.

Michael looked up. “Sorry about that Ethan.”

Vincent added. “Yeah, sorry, as you can see it is still a vulnerable topic.”

“Who was his partner?” Fully immersed, Ethan barely noticed that he was still taking sips from his empty bottle.

Ethan could see both their faces turn when asking.

“A woman named Samus. She was Kendrick’s apprentice. A skilled scout but her alignment was questionable,” said Vincent.

“How so?”

“Her mind was elsewhere. While we fought for the common good, she was solely focused on her own needs of finding her sister.”

“You should hear Heimdahl and her bargain. Heated discussions. No need to turn on the heaters, that’s for sure.” Michael chuckled. “She agreed to participate in missions, but only if Heimdahl kept his eyes and ears open for her sister.”

“What happened to her?”

Vincent shrugged. “She disappeared after the incident at West Logistics. We never heard from her again. But we know she is alive.”

Ethan looked befuddled. “I mean, why did she betray Kendrick in the first place?”

“Beats me,” Michael shrugged. “Probably struck a deal with the Nation exchanging Kendrick for her sister. Or perhaps she couldn’t resist the tempting offers of becoming a loyalist.”

Vincent leaned in. “She got a post at the Nation citizens affairs administration now. Her timely disappearance and our busted exchange do not bode well for her allegiance.”

Uncertain whether it's the new information or the Alcovoid, Ethan felt dizzy.

“Oh shit, it's late.” Michael stood up. “I am off, take care guys.”

Ethan looked around the tavern, the discussion had been so captivating that he did not notice that most patrons had left the tavern. With a wave, he left as well, stumbling on his way home in the light of the orange evening sun.

Samus visits her mother

The evening sun was already setting and surrounding buildings and the occasional drone cast a shadow on the citizen priority path that led to the entrance of the residential housing in the outskirts of the district. As a force of habit, Samus ensured that the loyalty badge on her uniform looked proper before entering.

“Identification,” said the guarding Lightbringer.

“Samus Wilford, citizen id seven-zero-zero-two-one.”

The lightbringer lit up green and directed her through. It had been ages since she had seen this part of the city, but despite the Nations placing black monoliths, watch towers and checkpoints she still knew her whereabouts. A mixture of deteriorating residential buildings and grimy warehouses still characterized this area as the second-class citizen’s part of town.

Samus found it refreshing to see detached houses instead of the monstrous gray apartment complexes, her imagination running wild with fantasies of having something of her own. But at closer inspection the dreams were shattered. Broken windows, roofs with holes, crooked pavement and grass in the yards so tall that it reached the windows.

Walking down the streets she praised that the street signs were still intact. Taking a turn down *Greenwith street* she believed to see the house she was looking for. Despite having prepared all night for this, she could feel her heart was racing faster the closer she got.

The path from the street to the front door was like a corridor of tall grass. The garage door was barely attached, leaving an open gaping hole in the garage where garbage such as worn-out uniforms, ration parcel wrappings and books laid in piles. The crack of roof tiles underneath Samus shoes, made it difficult for her to approach silently. At first, she wanted to peek through the windows but branches from a large unkempt tree blocked her from seeing clearly through the dirty algae that had clinged to the glass.

“Come on Samus, you can do it,” she whispered to herself, taking in a big breath before knocking.

Tensed, she waited. Realizing that she was wearing her loyalist uniform she tried to think of a way to stand so the badge would not be the first thing she saw when opening the door. When seconds had become minutes, Samus placed a gentle ear on the door. Nothing.

With her legs lifted high, she started walking into the tallgrass, that reached her stomach, pushing herself forward to the backyard stepping over the rotten fence. Peeking past the corner of the house, Samus noticed her sitting comfortably in a flimsy lawn chair, awake, basking in the sun sipping on an Alcovoid.

Samus knocked on the wooden wall.

Startled, the woman turned her head and immediately took a defensive stance, placing her hands on the armrest, Samus unsure whether she was preparing to flee or attack.

With a strained smile, Samus waved gently, not daring to approach.

"Who are you?" Her deep, rough voice belied out of her.

Her thin hair, veiny skin, yellow teeth and her aggressive tone to anything foreign and different was just like she remembered her.

"Don't you recognize me?"

The woman narrowed her dead looking eyes, staring at her intently, another wrinkle appearing on her forehead. Samus gave her additional thinking time, hoping she would recognize her, but once again, she was disappointed, shaking her head as if she had not learned a thing all those years ago.

"Mom, it's me."

The dead eyes turned lively for a moment, her defensive stance disappearing, placing her hands on the sides.

"Wait, is that you S-Samus?" she muttered.

"Don't you recognize me?"

Her lively face went on only for another moment, only to return to its former dead expressions.

"What the hell do you want?" scoffing at Samus, sitting back into the chair.

"That's it? That's the welcome I get?" clenching her fist, wanting to yell.

"That is all you are getting!" Nodding conclusively, looking at the tall grass also covering the backyard, sipping on her bottle. "Now scram!"

"I actually came here to ask you a question."

"I don't want to hear your stupid question. Now leave me alone."

Samus looked at her, antagonized.

"I need to know. Do you know where Hele—"

Samus flicked her head to the side. A bottle came flying past her head, the mother staring at her furiously.

"I. Said. Leave me alone. Fuck off!"

The disappointment overwhelmed Samus, feeling her eyes ready to burst into tears. She started questioning why she was here in the first place.

"What the hell did I expect? How could I assume she would know anything at all or is even capable of helping. She looks like she is barely capable of taking care of herself." Staring at the unwashed, long, uncut hair and her chins with what seems to be old dirt.

An aching feeling rumbled in her stomach, slowly traversing up to her chest. With a stomach on her chest, she turned and began walking back through the tall grass which she came from. Through the corner of her eyes, she could see the tall grass rustle vividly. Sticking out from the field of grass, the heads of two young girls emerged: One with blonde long hair and red apple cheeks. The other, a black tangled bird's nest for hair, which covered her face, its oily grease reflecting in the sun.

"Shit, not again," Samus thought, trying to fend off the images in her head.

The two young girls giggled loudly as they chased each other in the tall grass, leaving a path of bent straws where they trot.

"You can't catch me, not with those cow feet," the young Samus yelled.

"Oh, let me show you!"

Helena, who was both older and larger, put all her effort and in a leap caught Samus, the two of them rolling in the grass, falling on their backs.

"See Samus, I don't always give my hundred percent. Then I have something for later." Helena said, laying down with her hands behind her head staring into the sky.

"Helena?" Samus' voice concerned. "Are we really running away?"

"Yes, we are!" Helena looked at her. "Don't worry, we got all we need." She grabbed their bag, opened it and showed Samus that it was bursting to the brim with chips, candy bars and sodas.

"Yummy!" Samus reached out for a bag of chips, opening it impatiently and immediately started stuffing herself.

A faint rustle approached them. Peeking up from the tall grass, the two girls saw their mother trampling with fury towards them, her forehead drenched in sweat, panting, her eyes wild with anger.

"What the hell do the two of you think you are doing?"

Stiffened in fear, the two girls looked at their mother. Samus eyes wide of fear.

"Tell me? What the hell are you two doing?"

The girls looked at each other, then back at the mother without uttering a word.

"I don't have time for this. You are coming with me."

The mother grabbed Samus' trembling arm and with force started pulling.

"Aww!" Samus screamed as the mother's forceful grip squeezed her wrist.

Helena turned around, grabbed their bag and threw it directly into their mother's face.

"Leave us alone!" Helena screamed at the top of her lungs.

A silence between them emerged only broken by the grass rustling in the wind.

The mother's head turned crimson red, seconds from exploding, until her attention was drawn by the snacks and candy strewn all over the place.

"Wait, how did you get the money for that?" She paused to think. "Did you spend the money I gave you for groceries on candy?"

Helena took a step forward. "Groceries? We were only asked to buy you more whiskey and you did not even give us enough money for that. We knew you would not believe us!"

The mother looked at the two of them, her eyes flickering. The mother took a step forward towards Helena, towering over the little girl. Helena looked up. The mother lifted her leg and kicked the little girl right in the stomach. She succumbed on the ground, gasping for air.

Samus wanted to scream, wanted to help, but could not.

"I'll give you a beating so bad, you would wish you were never born." The mother took a heavy step towards Helena, who had rolled herself into a ball.

"Wait, are you still here?" The mother's old hoarse voice came from behind, breaking Samus out of her trance, realizing she had not left the property.

Samus turned looking at her mother with fury.

“How fucking dare, you?” Samus eyes wild of fury with swinging arms she stomped towards her mother, smelling she reeked of old sweat. “A part of me wished to find you, hoping the two of us could have a normal mother-to-daughter talk, perhaps mend some wounds. The other part of me wished to have found you rotting on the toilet floor covered in your own vomit.”

The brute mother stared intensely at her with narrow, vengeful eyes, showing a bit of teeth, Samus sensing fear underneath the rageful mask.

“You left me when I needed you the most! What kind of daughter would do that!” The mother bit her lip.

“I was only a child!” Samus raised her voice. “How was I supposed to help you when you reeked of alcohol, and you would hit me whenever I made any mistakes! It was as if I lived in a house full of landmines.”

“Hit you!” the mother scoffed loudly “I have only disciplined you! Like any other parent would do. But then again, I am not sure of the difference that has made.”

She looked at Samus' loyalist badge “Seems like you turned out the way I imagined,” the mother said scornfully, spitting in the tall grass. “Egocentric and clearly full of yourself.”

It was as if Samus could hear something snap inside her head. Two steps forward, she grabbed her mother's uniform and threw her up against the wall so hard a tile fell off the roof. Seeing her mother squirming pathetically, her tensed up face, clasping her hands on Samus's wrist to wrestle her away, put a faint smile on her lips.

“Listen, your old bag. You can't tyrannize us anymore.” Her mother paused squirming.

“W-what?” Her underlip quivering.

“You tell me right now, or I swear, I'll stuff that bottle in your throat and shatter it.”

A series of struggling disgruntled grunts emerged from the mother.

“Do you know where Helena is?” asked Samus harshly.

The mother paused, her eyes flickering back and forth only to stare back at Samus in silence. Samus shook her up against the wall.

“Are you deaf? Have you seen her or not?”

“W-who?” The mother paused, smacking her lips, breathing more controllably. “Who is Helena?”

The explosion, back to tavern, execution

Ethan barely noticed the first few rumbling explosions from outside. His wooden bed shook and creaked loudly, but his tired mind brushed it off as the occasional heavy transporters thundering down the streets to disperse or collect citizens at night. It was only when it rapidly intensified, he leaped out of the bed and saw the dancing red light that lit up his apartment. He looked out the window, but his sleepy head had a hard time comprehending the glow. As his head slowly cleared and his eyes adjusted to the light, the adrenalin began pumping as he opened his eyes and mouth in awe.

From his window he could see an industrial complex in the far end of the city that was caught up in flames. His gaze followed the thick gray cloud of smoke that licked the city wall as it moved up towards the sky. He had never given the thought of what the building was, but at this moment, he hoped it was full of Lightbringers, if possible, screaming in agonizing pain.

His perverted captivation was washed out and replaced by a creeping anxiety of what would happen next. His increasing heart rate was kept at bay when Ethan noticed, with squinting eyes, that sparks or flashes of light came from the smoke near the epicenter, like the pulsating light from a distant thunderstorm. Within a few seconds the fireworks intensified, becoming increasingly intense and in an instant a bright flash blinded Ethan when an enormous fireball erupted. In the moment after, a towering misty wave of white vaporized air moved at an unbelievable speed in his direction. Experienced as he was, he knew the uncanny silence was only temporary and he threw himself onto the concrete floor. A monstrous roar overwhelmed him, feeling as if heaven was falling. The building shook, trembling the concrete he lay on. Plates, cups and books fell around him from the cupboards crashing onto the floor. His hands over his head in fear of raining glass as the windows bounced back and forth, fighting intensely, so as to not break.

When the roar ceased, and a straight thought was possible the families in the surrounding buildings woke up. The light turned on in all apartments except from those which had lost their power. Mothers yelled for their children as they screamed in fear while nervous men peaked out from their doors and stepped out on the streets, breaking curfew, trying to understand why the world was ending.

The city-wide alarm started blaring, which meant citizens not on the ground would be shot on sight. A tool that had been primarily used to demoralize citizens by being used once or twice a month. The men on the street scattered inside again like spooked mice.

The alarm was on throughout the rest of the night and Ethan, unable to sleep on the hard surface. After a few hours, the adrenaline had disappeared and the drowsiness began to overwhelm him, his eyes itching with tiredness. The lack of sleep, in the middle of the night, on a cold floor was the perfect recipe for doubt and regret. He began questioning the last few days of choices. Why did he feel the necessity to help them out? He had gotten himself into a lot of trouble, and for what? The taste of community and a glimpse of hope? This was invasion day all over again. Pointless to the point where it was laughable.

Outside, Ethan could hear the heavy armored vehicle that rapidly approached only to stop on the street outside. Heavy boots jumped out from the vehicle and started marching into the apartment complex where Ethan lived. The hallway echoed loudly as they climbed the stairs.

"This is it," Ethan thought to himself, his eyes searching his apartment for anything. Powerlessness overwhelmed him. The boots could be heard scratching outside the door, Ethan clenching his eyes and covering his ears, his body tensing, waiting inevitably for the door to be kicked in. Ethan felt a tremble as if something hit the ground but was surprised it was not as intense as he expected. Peeking with a single eye open, he was surprised to find himself still alone in the apartment.

"Dad, please help!" The helpless screams of Norah shrieked his brain as if all his neurons were flaring up. Instinctively he jumped up from the ground. His eyes wild, scouting around manically. Certain that he had heard her voice, he started to listen carefully.

"Mom! Mom! Please help me." The screams of Oliver send shivers down Ethan's spines.

"Oliver!" Mrs Braum screaming at the top of her lungs, her voice cracking full of desperation.

"Where are you taking me? Please help me mom!" Oliver's voice, full of fear.

Ethan shook his head, imagining he must have heard wrong. He snuck towards the window, peeking outside. Two lightbringers had a firm grip on Oliver's arms as he was dragged into one of the armored vehicles, the kid trying to wrestle himself free, his legs flailing as the lightbringers dragged him across the floor. Behind him, another two lightbringers were dragging Mrs. Braum.

"Please, I beg you. Let my son go!" Her gaze fixed on Olive, the terrified look on her face looking like she was on the brink of insanity.

As she was about to be thrown into the back of the vehicle, Ethan could see Mrs. Braum was gushing out her motherly strength.

“Let my son go! Let my son go! Let my son go!” she repeated, wrestling free from one of the lightbringers, lashing out left and right with the free arm. The lightbringer punched her in the ribs, Mrs. Braum staggering, giving the lightbringers the opening to throw her into the van.

The muffled voices rang with a metallic clang from the inside.

“Let my child go! Let my child go! Let. my. child. go!”

“Mom, where are you?”

The vehicles took off at great speed, their engines fading away in the distance.

Then the silence came. A cold dreadful silence. As the newfound adrenalin was wearing off, emotions had a chance to run free. He came to a realization of what had brought him here. This group of people, his fellow brothers and sisters at the Stag N’ Stones, was the only one who could help him reach Norah. The thought of seeing her again, fighting his way to her empowered him. He could feel his muscles tensing and his mind clearing. It was all for her and doubting the patrons would jeopardize it. His body was trembling with newfound energy and he was ready to take action. But the alarm outside worked like an invisible chain. Going outside would have been suicide. He had to restrain himself from running out on the street.

Next morning, the same energy and determination still lingered in his body and decided to visit the Stag N’ Stones after work. Ethan stepped outside on the street and noticed how the morning air was thick of ash. He caught a flake in his hand and rubbed it around feeling its soft touch as it dissolved into nothing. The fire was now under control and the alarms had been lifted. The streets were swarming with Lightbringers patrolling the streets and roofs. He began doubting whether visiting the tavern today was a good idea. The sound of thrusters above him came from two scouting ships that flew slowly at a low altitude following the rush hour of citizens towards work. Usually, the trip to work was one mindless continuous walk, but today he had to stop when a squad of two lightbringers and a patrolling bull-mech passed him, a terrifying sight that ran cold down his spine. He had only seen these units stationary, guarding points of importance, and even in their statuesque posture he found an inner fear in himself that one day, the hunk of steel would turn on him and rip his chest out. But seeing one such unit in motion, he now realized that if one would come hunting for him, there would be no place to hide.

As Ethan turned into the alley leading to the Stag N’ Stones, his senses were on alert. The silence in the alley made each of his footstep’s sound loud, his shoes screeching on the cobblestone’s surface. At every side-alley, he peeked around the corner to ensure none was following him.

“Psst!” A faint whisper came from behind him.

Jumping into the air, he turned rapidly, his face and his flickering wide open eyes searching from where it came from.

“Over here!” the whisperer waving a hand behind a dumpster.

Not able to recognize the voice, he took cautious steps towards the dumpster. The head of a thin faced man with grimy unwashed hair, peaked from behind the dumpster.

"W-who are you?" Ethan muttered, not going any close.

"It's me! Come closer." The man signaling eagerly for Ethan to approach.

Ethan took another step forward. "Who are you?" Now seeing a slim man with twigs for arms and legs.

"It's me Samus, now get over here."

Hesitating for a moment Ethan moved over next to her.

"This isn't my best-looking guise, I know." Rubbing her poorly kempt mustache.

"Samus, what the hell are you doing here?"

"I knew I would be able to find you here." Her squinty eyes were wide and full of worry.

Ethan her increasing panting.

"I-I need to tell you something." Samus looked at him.

"Wait, hold up!" Ethan interrupted her with a hand. "Let me stop you."

Shocked, Samus leaned away from Ethan.

"What shit are you now tricking me into?" Ethan scrunched his nose in anger, baring his teeth.

Confused, she lifted an eyebrow, shaking her head lightly.

"I-I have no idea what—"

"I know damn well there is more to you than what you pretend to be."

"Ethan," she said slowly. "I have no idea what you are talking about."

"Alright let me ask you then." He paused to build up confidence.

"What really happened with Kendrick?"

Mute, she stared at him with disbelief. Ethan could feel he hit the nail on the head, a certain rush of victory gushed through him.

Her defensive posture turned confident, getting up on her feet. "You really want to know?"

Surprised, Ethan nodded.

“Rage.”

“Rage?” Ethan repeated slowly.

“Rage. The same rage that you have felt. The overpowering strong delusional feeling.”

Twisting and turning her words in his head, he couldn’t make sense of where she was going with it.

“The same rage that pushed me through each mission. Taking down lightbringers after lightbringer “Stabbing of those loyalists.” She paused for a moment, her eyes glancing. “It’s the same that got Kendrick killed.”

Inadvertently, Ethan gasped. “So, you admit to have killed Kendrick?”

For a moment, it was as Ethan could see past her disguise and into the real eyes of Samus.

She nodded.

“But why?”

“I snapped. I realized, after years of service, that they had played me for a fool. That they knew nothing of my sister. I was just a piece of equipment to them, chained to their tavern by fake promises.”

A rustle sounded in the distance, both stopping for a second to listen. Samus looked back at Ethan.

“I have seen how little they value life. Recruits joined us freely. Young men and women who wanted to live their own lives, with passions and dreams, willing to fight for us, were used up like paper napkins. Whenever they got caught, we simply told Heimdahl. He ensured their fall wouldn’t lead back to us. We asked no questions.”

The air between them tensed. Ethan feeling squirmy and uncomfortable.

“I couldn’t just tolerate it. I had to do something. Any rational thought had disappeared.” She clenched her fists. “I was so mad Ethan. So mad you wouldn’t believe me.” A droplet of sweat dangled down her forehead.

“The only thing my mind was focused on was revenge.” She paused to catch her breath.

“I lead the Lightbringers to Kendrick.”

Ethan took a step back, his muscles tensing.

“You killed Kendrick,” Ethan said, biting his lip. Conflicted to his core. He couldn’t believe what he just heard. He did not want to believe it! Not because he cared for her or for moral justice, but because of the world changing view he had to accept.

“Ethan, I-I need to tell you something. It’s important that you—”

“You killed Kendrick” Ethan raised his voice, the panic crawling up his spine.

Clenching her jaw and hand, she struggled to swallow, her eyes trembling. “Ethan, listen to me you—”

“You killed Kendrick!” Ethan screaming frantically.

In an instant, Ethan turned dashing towards the main alley leading to the tavern. Samus, fast in her current form, caught up to him grabbing his shoulder.

“Ethan!” she said with troubled breath. “Wait!”

Wrestling free of her grip, he sprinted towards the tavern, Lydia peeking out from the door half-open, as if she was searching for something. Noticing Ethan and the scrawny looking guy behind him, Lydia took off like an uncontrollable train passing Ethan, straight towards Samus.

Without looking back, Ethan stumbled through the door falling as he entered the tavern. Heimdahl, Vincent, Michael and the others who sat around talking in a big group all got up on their feet, Ethan noticing they placed their hands firmly in their pockets, grabbing for something.

“Ethan!” Michael yelled loudly, helping Ethan up on his feet stumbling further into the tavern leaning on a wall to rest. Grunts, screeches and groans were heard outside, which stopped immediately after what sounded like a sack of potatoes hitting the ground.

Lydia, covered in grime and sweat came dragging in with Samus in one arm like if she caught a trophy and threw her across the tavern floor.

Heimdahl stood up from his chair. He ran a hand through his hair and placed both on his sides. “Who is this stranger?” Tilting his head.

With effort Samus turned around on the side and stared directly at Heimdahl. A busted lip, a red bloody scratched up area covered her right forehead and a bleeding nose that dripped on the floor. Ethan barely recognized Samus in her disguise that he talked with a moment ago.

“So, tell me, friend.” Heimdahl’s voice, firm and confident, taking a step forward. Crouching down he got up close to the stranger to inspect him closely. “Who are you?”

Samus looked at him in silence, Ethan clearly noticing the rage in Samus’ eyes.

“You are not much of a talker, are you?” Heimdahl stood up again, taking a step back.

“Ethan” Heimdahl turned his head to him. “Who is this?”

Sensing doubt in Heimdahl's tone, Ethan looked at him befuddled, his eyes flickering between Heimdahl and Samus.

“T-this, this is...” lost for words he could sense the panic building up in him.

“Ethan?” Heimdahl visibly impatient, smacking his lips.

“T-this is...” Ethan kept repeating. Exhaling loudly, he looked at Samus directly into her eyes. The rageful look had vanished. Lying there defenseless, alone among enemies, Ethan could clearly see that Samus, who had been so strong and confident, now was full of fear, her eyes begging as if she sent out a reaching hand to Ethan.

What am I doing? What if she is innocent? They will be lynching her. How would I know if I just got Samus into a trap?

“Dad!”

Ethan looked down. Norah, on her stomach, with her legs kicking in the air and a colored pencil in her hand. Just below the dangling hair that covered her face, Ethan could see she was busy drawing a prosperous forest.

“What is it sweetie?” Ethan replied.

“If Gran Gran is asking what is in the gift, should I tell her?”

“Well, it's a gift. Telling her would ruin the surprise.”

“Would it be okay if I told her there is an elephant in the box?”

“Of course.” Ethan chuckled. “Gran Gran is clever. I doubt she is so easily fooled.”

Norah paused drawing as if she was thinking for a moment.

“Does that mean it's okay to lie sometimes?” Norah putting the finishing touches on a couple of men wielding rifles on her birthday card.

“Oh, well...” Ethan fumbling over his own words. “No, it's not okay to lie. You should always strive to tell the truth.”

“I see.” Norah gently nodding, picking a brown pen, making strokes of what appeared to be antlers “I'll be honest to Gran Gran then.”

Ethan missed her innocent honesty. Her words sent warm waves through his stomach up to his chest, kindling the embers that lurked in him. Spits of fire swirled around, blooming into a furious

determination. Seeing her blond-haired, red dressed daughter on the ground a faint sensation of doubt lurked its head above water.

But it was too late.

Drowned in emotions, Ethan shook his head.

"This is Samus." The surrounding patrons gave off an audible gasp.

"Samus?" Heimdahl lifted an eyebrow at Ethan only to then stare back at her. "The transformation unit," he muttered to himself, his face puzzled.

"Ethan, are you telling me, you brought a traitor back into our home?" His voice concerned. He looked at Ethan. "You got some explaining to do."

Ethan swallowed nervously. "She has been following me for a couple of days, trying to convince me that everyone here is expendable. Pawns in a game where you, Heimdahl, are the player." Not daring to look at Samus he turned his head, looking at Vincent and Michael covering their mouth with a hand visibly shocked.

"Your snake!" Samus yelling from the floor. Veins extruding from her neck and forehead. Baring teeth. "Your pathetic excuse of a human!"

The surrounding patrons took a cautious step back, only Lydia and Heimdahl standing their ground.

"I should have gutted you in your apartment when I had the chance." Red veins appeared in Samus' eyes, her body tensing up.

"It sounds like you have continued down the path of war?" Heimdahl, taking a step forward towering over the defenseless Samus.

"Everyone, look!" Heimdahl pointed at Samus with a trembling finger. "This...! This is the result of the poison that the Nation feeds you. Luring weak souls with luxuries, privileges and security. It corrupts their soul, making them stray away onto a path where your core values can be sold for a price. And yet, despite trading away your humanity, you still end up on the floor underneath our boots."

The surrounding patrons looked at each other, nodding unanimously, Ethan shamefully staring at Samus from the corner of his eyes.

Samus turned her head, looking up at Heimdahl. "Go to hell!"

"And this is the thank we get! For all that we have done for you! The countless hours of searching and spying, your brave brothers and sisters risking their lives. Only to find your sister!" Heimdahl's voice sounded as if it was ready to crack.

A red bloody snot flew across the floor splatting out on Heimdahl's brown worker shoe. Heimdahl looked down slowly. Nostrils started flaring and his breath became slower and more controlled. The confident grin gradually faded into a spiteful, malignant look.

"This is for Kendrick."

His bloody shoe hit Samus right in the temple, knocking her out cold.

Heimdahl looked at the Makowski brothers and gave them a commanding nod. Without further explanation they grabbed Samus under her arms dragging her to the backroom at the end of the bar with Heimdahl taking the lead.

Perplexed, Ethan hoped to see Samus just burst through the door and escape out of the tavern. He looked around and saw everyone eyed him in silence. Uncertain whether they were supportive or judgemental. A moment later, the Makowski brothers and Heimdahl came out of the backroom, without any signs of Samus.

Heimdahl looked over the tavern with all the patrons staring at him, as if they expected a speech. There were no signs of what had happened in the back, no blood, no nothing, except for Heimdahl's stoic appearance.

"Everyone, go home and stay low. The streets aren't safe."

Mumbling, the patrons aimed for the door, Ethan joining.

Heimdahl took a step forward saying, "Ethan, stay. I wish to speak with you in private."

As the last patron left the tavern, Heimdahl went up to the counter and sat on the bar stool with his hands on his knees.

Heimdahl took a deep breath. "How does it feel?"

"What do you mean?" He knew what Heimdahl meant but didn't want to give it away that he was affected.

"Today, you sentenced a citizen to death."

When said like that it gave a chill down Ethan's spine. Even though he was not the executioner, he still felt it. He was a murderer, a killer. He felt horrible, dirty, as if dark sticky tar covered his insides.

"I'll manage," he replied swiftly without looking at Heimdahl.

"I know how you feel and why you did this." He reached over the counter, grabbing two glasses. "It's... difficult to find the right people to trust," he said while pouring a squirt of whiskey in each glass, giving one to Ethan.

"What happened with Samus, what made her turn against us?" it burst out from Ethan feeling more comfortable in the intimate atmosphere between them.

"She lost her way." He took a sip from his glass. "We all have our reasons for doing what we are doing, but what unites us is that we have a common enemy, and we strive towards the same goal. If we are ever to make progress, we need to stand and work together. Samus was egocentric; her sole focus was to find her sister."

He sighed. "Unable to help her, she settled on another path. An awful shame."

They both stared out in the open for a moment, the silence allowing Ethan to think.

"What about the explosion?" Ethan took a sip from his glass.

Heimdahl shrugged. "Not us. We were talking about it this evening, to figure out what was up and down. We know very little at this point. Could be just an accident."

Accepting the answer, Ethan continued to stare into the open. With none but them in the tavern, the silence was pleasant. Each miniscule sound rang hollow against the wooden surfaces; the wooden scent intensified from the patrons leaving out the open door, fresh air flowing in.

Heimdahl looked at Ethan. "Why are you doing this?"

As a reflex, Ethan was about to reply with a swift easy answer that could be interpreted in any way, but he hesitated.

He took a deep breath. "I am searching for my daughter Norah. The Stranger told me that if I stuck around, there was a chance of seeing her again."

Heimdahl smiled. "Your daughter? Tell me about her. Maybe I have seen her?"

"Last time I saw her, she was five. That was perhaps ten years ago."

"Tell me about her anyway. What did she look like?"

He pictured her in his mind but being it so long some details were a bit hazy. "Blonde curly hair that nearly rested on her shoulder, always wore a cute red dress, thighs with still a bit of baby fat in them, a birthmark on her right arm and a scar on her left arm from falling down from a playhouse, another scar on her neck for—". Ethan stopped abruptly, feeling he had talked over himself feeling awkward as if he failed some sort of social test.

Heimdahl looked slightly confused but then chuckled with a friendly smile. "It's alright. I understand you."

The two of them sat in silence in each other's company. It was slowly becoming dark outside, the clock soon striking curfew.

"It feels horrible," Ethan said solemnly.

"I know it does... I know."

Heimdahl swirled his glass around. "One last thing before we leave."

"Today's events are nothing to celebrate about." Heimdahl raised his glass towards Ethan. "But I am glad that there still exist trustworthy people like you."

A cautious and humble smile crept onto Ethan's face.

Ethan is summoned back to the Stag N' Stones. Gets back to meet the stranger

Armored vehicles continuously ran back and forth that night making Ethan's bed rumble each time they came hovering down the street. A stomachache kept him awake, Ethan just staring into the ceiling. Guilt-ridden thoughts ran amok, playing on repeat whenever he closed his eyes. Having lied awake in bed for hours he got up, lit up a candle and moved towards the toilet. The faint glow casting light on his messy apartment; Electronics strewn across the table, various dirty uniforms decorated the floor and a broken stool whose leg rested on the couch.

After having relieved himself, he felt as if he was ready to sleep. Stepping out from the toilet, a small green diode was visible at his window.

"Cluck-cluck." the pyramid's voice muffled from behind the glass.

Pulling a cautious grin he went to the window.

"I see you came back." Ethan released the window latches, opening the window.

Rolling down and through the gap, it flipped on its pointy end. "Cluck-cluck"

"No, that is not going to happen."

"Cluck-cluck?" Its light turned into an angry yellow. "Clliiick!"

"Alright, alright. Take it easy" Ethan opened the palm of his hand, presenting it.

"Cluck, cluck!" Its light turned green and after rolling around its own axis for a few spins it leaped and elegantly landed on Ethan's palm, nudging itself in between Ethan's fingers.

Stepping over to his table and with his arm wiped off all the electronics, the parts spreading out on the floor. Slowly, he turned his hand, making a ramp for the pyramid to descend from.

“Cluck, cluck!” It energetically slid down from his palm and onto the table, rolling around in circles.

“How are you doing little fella?” Ethan taking a seat. “I hope you don’t have plans for burrowing into me again.”

“Cluck, cluck!”

“So, what is it you want?”

The pyramid paused its rolling for a moment, its light turning white.

“Cluck!” It rolled to the end of the table.

“You want me to put you down?”

“Cluck, cluck.” Its light turning green, then back to white.

Assisting it down, it then rolled to the door of his apartment.

“Wait, you want me to go outside?”

“Cluck!” Its light turning green.

Ethan looked outside the window. “But it’s the middle of the night?”

Impatient, the pyramid started rolling into the door “Click! Click! Click!”

“Alright, listen, are you sent by the same person that sent you last time?”

“Cluck!”

“And this is an emergency that can’t wait until tomorrow?”

“Cluck!”

“And you promise me, you will keep me safe?”

“Cluck!”

Ethan sighed nodding nervously.

Opening the door, it rolled out all the way to the entrance that led to the street.

“Should I open the door?”

“Click” the responses now at a much lower intensity.

Ethan put an ear to the door, the sound of multiple marching boots came passing by.

“Cluck, cluck!” The pyramid’s light turning beep as soon as the steps outside were no longer audible.

Opening out to the main street, the two ran out into the dark and silent city watched over by the Nation and the moon.

With all his strength, he lifted off the manhole cover and slid it aside, Ethan flinching as the metal screeched against the cobblestone. With both hands, he lifted himself up, the pyramid resting on his shoulder. Looking down at himself, he rolled his eyes at the sight of his uniform being grimy once more.

Ethan knew he was not far from the tavern, when he noticed he was at the same place where he confronted Samus about Kendrick. Windows, fire stairs and dumpsters were all covered in a thin layer of ash, gentle as the first morning snow.

The pyramid jumped down and rolled away towards the tavern, Ethan right behind it following its trail in the ash. His footsteps did not echo with as much intensity, muffled by the surroundings, the only sound reaching the alley was the faint humming from the conveyor belts near the logistic stations, still transporting goods to the docking stations at the wall. Noticing that the untouched ash on the route to the tavern, made Ethan thank he would be the only one there.

Awaiting eagerly, the pyramid jumped up and down as Ethan approached the tavern, sneaking underneath the gap in the door before even grabbing the handle.

Peeking in, he recognized immediately the obscure scene. The tavern was, once again, covered in a layer of ash and dust, thicker than the last time and for what seemed untouched for years. A draft snuck in, blowing the dust off the beams in the ceiling, making it drizzle down gently. There were no signs of the pyramid, not even a trail. Chairs and tables had deteriorated, their structure hollow with the surface crumbling. The floor had collapsed in the far end of the tavern, leaving an open pit, Ethan not daring to go near. The white shining door stood uncanny on the bare wall, Ethan feeling uneasy about its presence with no signs of the renaissance painting. The golden doorknob shining with not even a speck of dust. With a push, the door elegantly swung open.

“Welcome back, Mr. Westborn.”

The stranger sat solemnly behind his desk in the center of the dark void of space that surrounded him. A large galaxy with vivid colors swirled around behind him and appeared to be consuming a small red galaxy, pulling its stars towards its gravitational center.

Ethan took a step forward, his mouth open in awe captivated by the astonishing dreadful view.

“Mr. Westwood, you are aware of the limitations of these meetings. Let us be brief.” The stranger adjusting his tie.

Knowing they only had a short time to discuss, Ethan felt the stress immediately, feeling it was now or never. “Sir, if I may, I have some questions I really need answering. I need to know if—”

“We know of Norah’s whereabouts” The stranger interrupted Ethan.

“What?” His planned questions were wiped off his mind, no idea of what he was about to ask. He couldn’t believe his ears.

“We have located your daughter, Norah Westborn.”

Shaking his head in disbelief, befuddled, he struggled to find the right words.

“Okay. W-where is she?”

“She is on a prison transport that is going to the docking stations in the wall. From there, she will be relocated to a launch pad where she is to be sent to the Nation’s orbiting citadel.”

With heavy pressure on his chest, Ethan felt he struggled to breath. “The flying citadel? That means—” his lower lip quivered.

“Yes, that means we only have this one chance.” the stranger tilted his head, eyeing Ethan with his dark hollow eyes, radiating an utmost gravity.

In an attempt to collect himself, Ethan started stepping around “Yes, alright. Yes. W-what do I. What do we do?” Feeling the stress intensifying caused by his own rambling.

“Ethan!” the voice strict and commanding, making Ethan stop his tiptoeing. “Heimdahl will brief you with the details.”

Ethan took a step forward. “The details? The details for what?”

“This is your chance of getting her back. It is now you must wake up. Wake up from your slumber and release the chain that has bolted you to the ground.”

A rumble rapidly intensified from the dark void. The distance between the galaxies and the stars shrunk, the edges of the dark void contracting towards the Stranger.

“Wait!” Aware of what was about to happen, Ethan took a swift step forward tensing his muscles, ready to leap, not knowing whether he would land on the floor or drift into space. Stepping on the edge of the void, Ethan felt the front of his foot going through. Instinctively, he wanted to stop but he had already built too much momentum. Falling over forward into the dark endless nothing, he closed his eyes wrapping his arms around his head, the rumbling sound from the contracting space roaring.

Ethan felt a loud wooden thump when he landed. Opening his eyes, he saw he was no longer in the stranger's room, but inside the Stag N' stones, right in front of the bar. When getting his bearings, he noticed Heimdahl leaned casually on the bar counter staring into the empty tavern, the tavern lit up by the orange morning sun, his eyes bloodshot and tired.

Ethan got up on his feet, pulling himself up using the bar counter. "Heimdahl?"

"Ethan, it is good that you are here." Heimdahl not looking at Ethan.

"It's already morning?" flickering an eyebrow he felt his heartbeat increase as his inner clock yelled in distress. "For how long have I been out?"

Unresponsive, Heimdahl continued to zone out.

"Heimdahl, have you talked with—"

"Yes, yes I have," Heimdahl interrupted Ethan then turned towards him. "Excuse me Ethan, I-I am not myself right now."

"What happened?" Ethan felt worried, not having seen Heimdahl this perplexed before.

"A lot has happened since yesterday." Heimdahl exhaled deeply. "Lydia and Jimmy have been captured."

"Captured?"

"They came in the middle of the night. Snagged them out of their beds, dragging them onto the streets. I have been spending the entire night figuring out what is up and down and what we must do."

Biting his lip and with wide eyes, he looked at Ethan with sincere appreciation. "Ethan, I am truly glad you are here. We need you. Norah needs you." Heimdahl grabbed an object next to him which was wrapped in an old dirty uniform.

"Here, take this." Handing the bulge to Ethan.

"What is it?"

"It's a bomb."

Rapidly, he retracted his hands and looked at Heimdahl with a gaping mouth.

"Sorry." He took to his head, rubbing his tired eyes. "It's an electromagnetic pulse bomb, it's used for frying electrical components."

Clueless, Ethan continued staring at him.

"The plan is to intercept the prisoner transport on its way to the docking station when it flies over the city. From the information I have gathered, they should all be on that ship. Including Norah."

The continuous mentions of his daughter made him slowly realize that he was not dreaming.

Heimdahl continued. "We have estimated its path to cross the district's plaza in four hours. If placed at a high enough altitude, we will detonate the bomb remotely when the transporter crosses the plaza and knocks it out of the sky. I'll assemble a rescue team that is ready to pick up people the second it has crash landed."

Ethan felt the increasing heartbeat. "And you can't do it?"

"I don't know if this place will be swarmed by Lightbringers soon. I must stay here and ensure our headquarters continues to be operational."

Ethan sighed, nodding understandingly.

"Ethan. You are the only one I can count on." Heimdahl moving the package closer to Ethan.

Running his hands through his hair, Ethan closed his.

With his hands covering his face he muttered with a muffle "H-Heimdahl, I am not sure I can. I am not sure I can do it!"

"Ethan. Please. I need you more than ever." His voice cracking.

His hands still covering his eyes, he felt as if the darkness dampened the stress in his body, allowing him to control his thoughts.

Send out on another mission with only limited information. How do they know if Norah is on that transporter? Why was it me who was summoned? Why is there no one else to take on this task?

"Dad, are you coming?"

Ethan lowered his hands, the young Norah waiting patiently at the door to the tavern, ready to leave. Staring out the door, rocking impatiently "Remember, to bring Gran Gran's gift."

Eyes flickering between her and the neatly wrapped gift on the table. "Norah, I-I don't think I'll be going. I can drop you off there if you want?"

"What? Are you not coming?"

"No, darling," Ethan sighed, "I think I'll stay home."

“But why?” her voice disappointed followed by sniffles. Despite only seeing her back, he could see she was drying her eyes with her arm. “Don’t you want to see Gran Gran?”

“It’s just...” he exhaled heavily, glancing upwards. “It has been a long time since I have seen her. I don’t know what I should talk with her about. I think it’s better if it’s only you.”

“But dad, we are going to have so much fun!”

“I know Norah, it’s just—”

“If you don’t want to do it for yourself, then do it for me!”

I’ll do anything for you.

The glowing embers in him reignited. Blushing up, they started to spew fire that, like a forest fire, started spreading to all parts of his body. Energetic and determined he could feel his insides tremble with rage.

A strong firm hand grabbed his shoulder. Heimdahl had approached him even closer, now standing face to face. Ethan shook his head, wrestling away from the remaining images in his mind, but the fire in him stuck.

“Ethan, please.” Heimdahl’s baggy eyes begging, deep lines and wrinkles on his forehead, his skin pale lacking the usual vibrance. “I promise you. When you get back, there will be no more secrets. I’ll let you in. Into my inner circle of trust.”

Ethan looked over to the open door leaving the tavern, uncertain whether it was closed a moment ago.

There was no doubt. Only the eagerness of action. “I’ll do it,” Ethan confidently replied.

“Thank you,” Heimdahl replied, his legs weakening with relief. “We owe you.”

Grabbing the bomb, Ethan could feel the bomb being so heavy he would have to put additional effort to try and walk normally.

“When you are done, go back to your apartment. The Stranger will summon you so the two of you can talk before the firework goes off.”

Standing on the threshold, Ethan looked back at Heimdahl. “Promise me one thing.”

Heimdahl turned, listening carefully.

“If I don’t make it. Promise me to keep searching for Norah.”

“I promise you. We will.” Heimdahl nodded.

Ethan is caught by the Nation

He held the bulge tight into his body, eyeing every corner and rooftop. Walking at a pace, but not too fast.

The plaza had been nearly untouched since the accident. The ration dispensers were still mounted, and the barricades were scattered all over. From the far end of the plaza Ethan could still see the scorched area. Dark black spots tainted the ground from the unfortunate people who perished that day.

Looking up into the sky, he knew he had little time. The lighthouse statue stood tall in the center of the plaza, Ethan evaluating what ledges he could use to climb up and place the bomb on one of the tallest arms. Next, his focus was placed on the strewn-out barriers, trying to memorize their placement, struggling to recollect when closing his eyes.

Ethan exhaled heavily attempting to control his rapid breathing. Biting his lip, he closed his eyes once more, feeling he now finally got.

The stomping boots from a lightbringer came marching in his direction. He quickly bent down, took off his shoe and shook it as if he was trying to get a stone out. The lightbringer passed him, barely glancing at him.

When the Lightbringer was out of sight, Ethan looked up into the sky again “Come on...” he muttered to himself.

The slow rumbling started. Ethan prepared himself, wrapping the bomb around his waist using the uniform. The menacing disc swallowed all light, darkness engulfing both him and the plaza. As the rumbling intensified the lightbringers began brightening up. That was his queue.

With rapid but cautious steps and his hands forward he traversed the darkness crossing the plaza. Stomping on a piece of metal, he knew he had hit the first group of tilted barricades. Cautiously stepping past them, trying not to get his foot entangled in between. Like stars in the night sky, Ethan used the glowing lightbringers for orientation. Near the statue there were barricades still standing. Slowly, he continued forward and with fumbling hands felt his way. Noticing he had reached the base of the statue he then had to make a small climb to reach the nearest arm, which he could then use to reach the next. After double checking that the bomb was probably secured, with a single thrust he managed to grab a ledge pulling himself up using all his strength.

Struggling to conceal his heavy breathing, caused by both climbing and anxiety, he took a short break to collect himself. In the darkness Ethan noticed a light from the corner of his eyes, which sent shocks down his spine. Their lights pulsated gently to the beat of the mirror's humming and were approaching him.

Fast.

In panic, Ethan clumsily tried to take the next leap.

Jumping, he grabbed the ledge.

Trying to pull himself up, the ledge began crumbling underneath his fingers.

With his hearth in his throat, he fell backwards down from the statue landing on top of stacked together barricades knocking his head. Blood pumping full of adrenalin, he quickly got up, but his dizziness had made him lose his orientation.

The lights came closer and closer, surrounding him. Like a cornered animal, Ethan began to erratically run from side to side. His foot stuck in between two barricades, he fell on his back. From the ground he could see how the lights came from all sides, their lights blinding him.

Completely surrounded, one of the lights bent down over him. Ethan could clearly see the orbs of energy swirling around like he had never seen them before. Each orb flew in a mesmerizing circular pattern with a tail of light after each. Paralyzed in fear, he knew it would be futile to scream or fight back.

A black long silhouette unfolded between him and the swirling orbs. It was the last thing Ethan saw before the baton hit him in between his eyes.

The interrogation room was dark and only illuminated by a single dim light in the ceiling. Ethan sat quietly with his hands on his shaking thighs. The metallic room echoed his tapping footsteps. He was still a bit dizzy, fearing to take a sip of the bottle of water that was placed on the table by a lightbringer. Having checked multiple times, he found it confusing that he was not restrained. To settle the nervousness, he had already circled the table multiple times carefully inspecting every nook and cranny of his cage.

Multiple footsteps came approaching down the corridor, the sound of marching boots making Ethan tense, wanting to curl up in a corner.

The door swung open and a heavily armed lightbringer stood firm and tall. Taking a step back the Lightbringer signaled someone out of view to enter. A tall muscular woman with short blonde slick hair entered the room. Under her arm she carried a thick folder, full of papers. Stopping up at the table, she stared at Ethan. Her pronounced wrinkles and sunken eyes induced fear in him, making him grasp the chair he was sitting on.

"Aren't you in a lot of trouble Mr. Westborn?" She grabbed a chair on the other side of the table, throwing the brick-like folder on the table making a loud thump.

Sitting up straight she clasped her hands, resting them on the table. "My name is Lieke Beenhouwer, one of human's representatives."

He had never heard of a human's representatives before and had a hard time believing there was anyone among the Nation's rank that dared to present themselves on behalf of the humans. Neither

"I expected a Lightbringer." His voice pitchy, not daring to take his eyes off from the authoritative figure in front of him.

"Lightbringers are aware of their inability to communicate properly with humans. That is why they send us instead in serious cases."

She ran her hand through her blonde greasy hair. "Alright, Ethan, let us talk about your new friends."

"Is this an interrogation?"

She chuckled "No, hardly. Let me be straight with you. We know way more about you and your friends than you do yourself."

Ethan lifted an eyebrow. A superior grin appeared on her face. "Your new friends. Those at the Stag N' Stones. You have spent quite some quality time together the past week."

She opened her briefcase and studied her papers. "You have helped them root out a friend of yours. Samus Wilford. A former Stag N' Stones member that turned on the group and ended up working in the Nation's planning wing. "

Ethan sat in silence, smacking his dry lips, now staring at his lap.

"Not only that, but you have also helped deliver a package on behalf of them."

Ethan maintained his silence. She grabbed a thick stack of photos from her folder and threw it on the table, photos strewn out over the table. With hesitation he observed the photos from the corner of his eyes, certain they would be surveillance photos of him.

His eyes opened widely. Turning his head he grabbed a stack of photos with a trembling hand, feeling a lump in his throat.

Rubble, fire, smoke. A landscape of steel and concrete bent cracked and twisted. Buildings with only their frames left, the remaining either scorched or pulverized to dust. Large black lumps of charcoal curled up, Ethan barely recognizing the remaining human traits. Limbs, blood and intestines painting the ground underneath the collapsed pillars.

One by one he carefully looked through each of them, "What... What is this?" slowly sifting through each photo.

"This is the mark you will be leaving this world." Her tone was condemning.

Rubbing his forehead, he paused at a photo of two kids lying underneath rubble.

"Malic and Tuskana. They were five and seven years old. They were extracting recyclable metal from incoming piles of rubble."

Keeping a hold on the picture, he grabbed another one staring fearfully at it. A female body lying face down in a pool of blood.

"Patricia, mother of one, she operated the ovens."

He looked up at Leika with watery eyes. "The kid?"

"Without a biological parent, the kid will transfer to a Nation's loyalty fostering program. It's a tough childhood full of discipline and servitude."

With a trembling hand he continued to swap through the photos.

"Thirty-two citizens lost their lives that day."

Hearing her, paralyzed, he continued going through the pictures. A sharp painful pressure felt as if it was trying to burst out from his torso, the pain leading all the way up to his throat, feeling as if it began to snare, struggling to breath.

"And do you know what for?"

Ethan shook his head lightly, still not taking his eyes off the pain he had caused.

"Disruption of bio cell production. Do you know how long it will take the Nation to resume production?"

Ethan looked up from the photos staring at Leika directly in her frowning eyes.

"Less than a week."

Ethan stared into the open air, feeling his eyes turning watery.

With quivering lips, he could feel the disbelief turning into a furious rage. His chair crashed on the floor as he stood up pointing finger at Leika. "You are the one forcing citizens at these factories! You are the one putting innocent citizens in danger" Ethan yelled, froth appearing at the side of his mouth. The adrenaline rushed through him, blood was boiling, and hands were trembling.

She stared back at him and shook her head condescendingly. "Do you even know this group of yours? Do you even have the slightest idea of who they are and what they do?" She looked through her folders and threw a bundle of papers on the desk.

Ethan picked up the papers and furiously went through them.

Jimmy Harres, forty-two years old, parked a truck full of explosives near a power relay station, investigation indicates that the individual was looking for a son.

Catherina Galiano, twenty-six years old, rigged multiple laser rifles with explosives causing them to explode on use, interrogation revealed she was trying to find a missing brother.

Clement Adler, thirty-nine years old, detonated a plasma grenade at a ration line, investigation concluded the individual was avenging a dead wife.

"Who are these people?" he asked, looking confused.

"These are people who were in the same boat as you. People who have met and interacted with The Stranger."

He flickered an eyebrow. "How do you know about The Stranger?" it poured out from Ethan's mouth.

"The Nation is a vast galactic empire beyond our comprehension and has fought for territory for eons. They are in continuous fights with other civilizations we haven't even met. We don't know yet who The Stranger is or who he represents. All we know is he is an enemy trying to sabotage the Nation's operations here on earth."

"So, The Stranger is not from Earth?"

"From our intelligence, he is not even human. He is a different species or perhaps a biological weapon, capable of manipulating organic matter."

"Capable of manipulating organic matter?" Ethan asked bewilderedly, uncertain of the conversation's direction.

"Ethan, let me ask you." She leaned forward towards him. "There is something emotional inside you that has driven you to do the things you have done."

The pain in his chest intensified, feeling as if it was ready to burst.

With heavy breaths he managed to ask. "Where is my daughter Norah?" Involuntarily exposing his teeth, nearly snarling at Leika.

The stern look on Leika's face faded away, her aging features making her resemble a caring mother. She leaned back and with a sorrowful tone said, "Ethan, you never had any kids."

“What?”

Leika stared at him in silence, her breath deep and controlled.

“What are you telling me?” Ethan not fathoming what she just said.

“Ethan, you never had any kids. The Nation keeps extensive records and—”

“D-do you take me for a fool?” Ethan flustered.

Ethan waited patiently for a comeback or an explanation. Ethan could feel his thoughts fleeing left and right, not able to think straight.

“I have a daughter; her name is Norah Westborn.” His voice cracking. “I haven’t seen her for years, because”—Ethan inhaled deeply—“because she is somewhere, god knows where.”

“Ethan, whoever this Norah is, she is nothing but a made-up memory.”

Clenching his fist he hammered a fist into the table, the table tumbling to the side the papers on the table spreading out on the floor.

“What do you mean she is just a memory?!” Ethan felt more and more out of control as the panic was settling in. “I remember her so clearly.”

“Ethan, let me ask you one question.”

Holding his breath, he did his best to listen carefully.

“What did Norah look like?”

Closing his eyes, Ethan concentrated inwards and imagined Norah in front of him. She stood just right there in his mind, so clear and vivid as if he was looking at a photo. His little Norah, having fallen asleep on the couch with her plush octopus, her hair fallen, covering her face, the dim light from the evening sun embracing her.

“Blonde beautiful curly hair. A small mole on the back of her left hand. Her favorite red ladybug dress that so elegantly fanned out when she danced.”

In his mind, he tried to imagine walking to Norah and pulling away the hair that blocked her face. Her face was right there in front of him, but he had trouble finding the words to describe it.

“Her index finger and ring finger are equally lengthened.” He kept going, struggling. Her face was nothing but a haze.

“S-she has a scar on her right shoulder.”

The anger that was built up was slowly being replaced with another type of anger. An anger that was directed towards himself. Tears trickled down his chin.

"She... She... has another birthmark on her left thigh."

Whenever he thought he was just about to recollect her face, his thoughts lost grip and the face returned into a blur.

"And a... a..." Holding on to the table he could feel his knees weakening.

Torn between realities, he could feel his heart shatter in two. He felt as if the physical laws of the world were broken; How could it be that he was feeling the loss of Norah again, when he had not lost her in the first place. Dread was overwhelming him, his fingers and toes turning cold and his heartbeat increasing.

The realization that the daughter he had loved did not even exist, made his heart ache. "But she is right there" tears flowing freely down his chins. "I can see her in front of me, all the memories we have." How could his daughter not exist, when she so vividly existed in his mind? It was as if his current existence was crumbling around him.

"It is always their face," she said. "We believe it is a limitation of The Stranger's abilities."

Ethan stood motionless, barely hearing her. "What about the prison transporter?"

Lieke sighed. "I can't tell you, that is classified. But it's not a prison transporter."

His thoughts were still racing, Ethan struggling to focus. "What about the other patrons?"

"It's difficult to say. Some of them are part of the group because they disagree with the Nation's approach. Others, the more zealous of them, and the ones doing the extreme assignments, have undergone the same treatment as you."

Leaning back, Ethan covered his face with his hands, heavily panting, sniffing.

Lieke leaned forward, tapping the table.

"I know you are in a bad spot, but listen, Ethan, and listen carefully. You are still in a predicament. If you want to get out of this alive, you need to do exactly what we say."

"What do you want?" Ethan coldly replied.

"That package of yours you brought to the plaza."

"What about it?"

"We are giving it back to you."

"To do what with it?" Ethan eyes frowning, not sure why they would arm him again.

"You are to give it back to the Stranger."

The last walk to the tavern

Trapped in his own apartment, he knew he wasn't alone despite not being able to see anyone, certain his every move was carefully observed. Tapping with his feet, he sat nervously with the bomb in his lap, just staring out in the open. His apartment looked as if it had been turned inside out, but his thoughts were at another place.

"Cluck-cluck."

The recognizable window tapping got Ethan up on his legs, placing the package on the table.

"Hi again friend, nice to see you." Ethan doing his best to act natural, smiling with both rows of teeth. The pyramid responded with a bright friendly green.

Opening the window on the hatch, the pyramid snug underneath, ready to perform their ritual.

"Cluck-cluck, cluck!" With a presented hand, it jumped, nudging itself in between his fingers.

The eager pyramid's affection hit a softer spot than usual for Ethan. "Alright, alright. That's fine." bending down to place it on the floor. Sliding off his hand, it rolled to the door.

"Cluck-cluck!"

With the pyramid taking the lead, Ethan walked behind, hugging the bulgy uniform closely. Other citizens walked carelessly past him, not noticing the small pyramid that stayed out of sight whenever someone passed them. Nearly noon, the bright blue sky bathed Ethan in rays, sweat drizzling down his back.

The Lightbringers on the streets and rooftops were carefully eyeing him. He had been instructed to act as naturally as possible and go directly to the Stag N' Stones. Any sudden movements would end fatally. Despite the promises of being spared, if he got the job done, he still felt like a dead man walking.

Reaching the checkpoint to the industry sector of the district, the Lightbringers awaited as usual. Even though the setup was planned, carrying an armed bomb into the checkpoint felt wrong, nearly humorous.

"Identification," the lightbringer said, commandingly.

“Ethan Westborn, citizen number two-two-three-o-four.”

“Clear,” the Lightbringer yelled without even glancing at the uniform, waving him through.

The sector was buzzing with activity, fine black particles waved in the soothing air giving hints of burned metal. In the distance, Ethan saw the conveyor belts at the wall’s logistics station were hard at work, transporting an excessive number of crates to the wall, multiple freighters behind the wall, still only their tops visible, lining up ready to be loaded. Not far, through the open area with the scattered silos, Ethan could see the alley that led to the Stag N’ Stones, his goal in sight. Reaching the warehouses, a recognizable chanting from a group of brutes was heard, coming from the open warehouse door.

“— and then she slapped me across the face when I asked for another bandage.” The men belly laughing in unison.

Even though he wanted to stop and turn, he powered through, staring into the ground keeping his package close to him. As he was just about to pass the open warehouse door, rods came sticking out, the man carrying it closely followed.

“Clliiick!” the pyramid faintly shrieking, hiding behind the door.

“Oh my, if that isn’t Mr. bookworm.” the largest of the men, a chuckling grin crossing his puff face, placing their rods on the ground.

“Oh yeah,” another one of them said, “you are the talk of the town. Tell us, what’s it’s like?”

“Sorry, I don’t have the time.” Ethan’s voice was low and cautious. With a bent head, he tried to pass them, but a strong arm prevented him from continuing.

“No so fast mister,” the biggest of them said, “we heard you took out a nasty loyalist, is that true.”

With rapid panting, Ethan stopped up looking nervously around.

“Yeah, we heard you liquidated her yourself! What weapon did—” the biggest of them shut his mouth, his face struck by fear as he stared past Ethan. Without muttering a word, they flung their rods back on their shoulders and continued across the street.

Confused, Ethan looked around noticing that behind him, two Lightbringers had crossed the corner behind him, now standing guard.

Wanting to continue, he could feel his legs were not complying.

“Cluck, cluck!” The pyramid had already left its hideout and was already ahead of Ethan ready for him to advance.

It was as if seeing the alley, something inside him prevented him from continuing. Something pulled his uniform from behind, believing it was one of the lightbringers. Turning, he saw Norah, standing with his plush octopus in hand.

“Dad, it's boring here. Do you want to leave?”

“But sweetie, we just arrived at Gran Grans, why do you want to go back now?”

“I just don't like it here. You were right, we should have stayed home. Let's go home dad.”

Ethan shook his head, but the memory kept on playing. Wanting to scream, wanting to lash out, locked in his own mind.

Ethan looked down at Norah, her face covered by her dangling blond hair.

“Sweetie, look at me.”

Ignoring Ethan, she took a step forward and embraced him, hugging his legs, squeezing them tightly. Her gentle soft touch made waves of warmth rush through his body.

A lump appeared in his throat, his lips quivering.

“Sweetie, will you please look at me.” His voice strained.

“No dad, I do not want to.” Her voice muffled from having buried her head into his leg.

Exhaling deeply, tears flowing down his chin, he placed a hand on top of Norah's head and pushed her away “Norah, let me see your face. Now!” His voice cracking in despair.

Slowly, she took her hand and wiped away the golden hair that blocked her face, looking up at Ethan.

Nothing.

A blank canvas, as if he was watching a mannequin doll. Desperate gasps gushed out from Ethan. With clenched hands he looked away from the monstrosity that was in front of him. He took a step back, begging for this nightmare to end.

There was no rage. No anger. Only a newfound painful meaninglessness. But also, no doubt. His mind was clear. For once, it was as if he could see clearly as the haze of emotions had been lifted. But the new view was nothing but a shattered existence.

Closing his eyes, he wished for rapture to come and take him. If someone would just take the shot and get it over with. He was ready. A faint rumble shook the ground and his body. As it gradually intensified, Ethan opened his eyes and saw in the distance the large technological leviathan crawling past the city wall consuming all light in its path.

“Cllllliick!” the pyramid shrieked loudly not far from him, its light a dangerous red, hopping and dancing to get his attention.

Confused, Ethan looked around uncertain of what was happening. Noticing behind him, the Lightbringer had drawn their rifles, pointing at him, Ethan sensing they were on the very edge of pulling the trigger. Smacking his lips, the adrenaline drastically piling up in him, his eyes darted between the Lightbringers, the disc and the open area in front of him.

In an instant, the light was gone.

Ethan began running.

The darkness had swallowed him, and he ran as fast as he could, barely sure if he could keep his course. Falling over a stub of grass, Ethan swiftly got up again and continued running the adrenaline having taken full control. As the disc began charging, the faint starry dots started to bloom, Ethan sensing from the corner of his eyes the swarm of Lightbringer that was not too far behind him.

After having fallen Ethan had lost his bearings and was no longer certain if he was running in the right direction.

A shrieking flash, with the speed of light struck past Ethan's head, slamming into the silo in front of him, leaving a red glowing hole. Ethan drastically turned, barely avoiding running into it at full speed. Continuing he could faintly notice that the city-wide alarm blared through the air. A barrage of shots followed, the sound so intense it managed to deafen the disc's roar, its shrieks drilling painfully into his ears. With each shot, Ethan got enough light to readjust his course. A shot strafed his leg, the faint embers from his uniform showing where he was hit, the pain not strong enough for him to stop.

Reaching the logistics station, Ethan took cover behind the goods that were transported on the low hanging assembly lines. Shots continued to fire around him, blasting open wooden crates splinters pummeling into the arm Ethan used to cover his face. Knowing he couldn't stay there for long.

A loud thump emanated as if something was thrown on the assembly line, Ethan feeling lighter.

The disc had done its job and released the light back. With pinching eyes, he continued running, sensing a side alley that he believed led to the Stag N' Stones. Navigating the narrow alley left and right, he could feel the change of pace was catching up on him, the exhaustion kicking in.

When he reached the door, he kicked it open with his remaining strength. The tavern was full of patrons aiming both handguns and rifles at him. Chairs and tables were used as fortification, even patrons standing on the ceiling beams looking down. Behind the bar counter, the face of Heimdahl peaked above. The Makowski brothers watched Ethan closely, one of them grunting, his hand clenching tighter around his machine gun. Michael and Vincent, armed with both a

shotgun and a rifle stood confused, lowering their weapons. Michael covering his mouth with his hand, Vincent running a hand through his hair, both seeming as if paralyzed.

Heimdahl walked over tables and chairs to get to him “Ethan?” he asked shockingly, pointing at him with a revolver. “What the hell have you done?” his face strained, showing teeth.

Panting, sweat dripping from his forehead, Ethan replied confidently. “This is for Samus.”

A heavy explosion trembled the city. The wooden wall and furniture creaked, and the falling bottles shattered all over the tavern. Concrete and debris could be heard raining from the sky, a large chunk falling through the roof crashing down into a table and through the floor in the far end of the tavern. The tavern shook violently, knocking both Ethan and the others to the floor.

Heimdahl got up and dusted off his uniform. With shaking steps, he approached Ethan and dragged him up from the floor, Ethan standing on his toes. “What the hell have you done?” his mouth foaming with anger, like an animal on the brink of killing its prey. Ethan stared back at him with a dusty stern look.

“Traitor vermin.” Heimdahl took his revolver and forcefully pushed it up underneath Ethan’s chin. “Go ahead, just do it,” replied Ethan, feeling as if the touch of the barrel was just about to penetrate his skin.

A series of loud thumps came approaching from outside the tavern. Heimdahl flickered an eyebrow and hesitated, removing his finger from the trigger.

A high electrical pitch originated outside the tavern, Heimdahl turning his head left and right to see in between the red curtains that covered the big front window. Ethan’s point-of-view had a clear view, a view that sent a frightening chill down his spine, his mouth open, ready to scream.

A bull-mech with a high-powered rifle was winding up outside, the barrel pointing directly at Heimdahl. With forceful arms, Ethan pushed Heimdahl away, creating a distance between them. A powerful continuous red ray crashed through the glass and obliterated Heimdahl’s shoulder, the remains of his body flung to the ground. The roaring ray continued its chaos by being dragged across, slicing patrons in its path. The patrons did not hesitate and returned fire. Patrons shot from behind tilted tables and counters. An armored vehicle had arrived and out came rushing multiple lightbringers, immediately opening fire. The air was heating and smelled of gunpowder.

Ethan got up on his knees and began crawling through layers of rubble and glass. Looking for a way out he noticed the window at the bar counter. With bloody hands full of glass and stones, he crawled over one of the Makowski brothers who lay in a pool of his own blood. Pulling off the blinds he saw a metal barrier covering the window, installed on the outside, Ethan realized the Stag N’ Stones had turned into a kill box.

Vincent, covering behind the counter, placed a precise rifle shot right into the helmet of one of the lightbringers. It collapsed on the floor, its helmet light frantically flickering until it turned dark.

Two other lightbringers stepped forward, returning fire while a third one rushed, dragging the destroyed unit to safety.

The bull-mech wound up another shot. A fiery ray crashed again through the tavern, melting anything in its path, dragging it slowly towards the counter. Michael, who was in front of the bar counter noticed the hellish beam move towards him and in panic, tried to climb the tall bar counter. Ethan could see the instinctive panic in his eyes, begging for help. Grabbing his hands, Ethan tried to pull with all his might, but the struggling Michael made it difficult to pull him in. Vincent, not far from Ethan, rushed over to help but before he could do anything, suddenly, Ethan managed to pull Michael up on the counter.

Ethan released immediately the grip from his trembling hands when he realized he only had pulled half of Michael up on the counter. When the roar from the ray ceased, Ethan noticed, through a cloud of dust and embers, that a wall in the far end of the tavern had been knocked down.

Vincent stood trembling in fear, eyeing his dead friend with sorrow. His lips quivered, visibly struggling, wanting to hold his friend's hand. A desperate cry burst out from Vincent. Leaving his cover, he grabbed Michael's shotgun from the ground and psychotically started to shoot aimlessly at the Lightbringers in a blind furious rage.

Ethan skimmed towards the opening, narrowly avoiding the Lightbringer's shots at Vincent. As he took a step out from the gaping hole in the tavern's wall, he took a few steps away and saw in awe a wonder.

There it was. His legacy. The city wall had a gigantic hole in it, debris strewn all over the open area.

Through the hole, on the other side, Ethan could see a couple of hills, its surface seemingly to be covered in brown withered grass. A couple of mountains, with snow on top, decorated the horizon. Citizens had already started climbing the debris, flooding through the hole. A teenage boy with nothing but his uniform. A dad with a baby girl in his arms and a mother with her son with hands full of rations. An elderly man with his granddaughter on his shoulder joined up with a couple of other elders and left. Citizens, without hesitation, helped each other get over the rubble.

Even though this was a gaping wound to the outside, there were no Lightbringers near it. The chaos in the Stag N' Stones was still unfolding, Lightbringer still came rushing to the scene from all sides.

A shootout behind him and a blaring alarm was not enough to stop the sense of calmness that had overtaken him. This felt right. Noticing a bench not far from him he walked to it and sat down. With crossed legs and in silence he carefully observed how citizens flocked together to leave the city.

When the intensity of the battle had ceased, it did not take long before the bull-mech was repositioned to block the hole in the wall. With waving batons and pushing people away Lightbringers forcefully began sending people back to their homes. Some more resistant than others.

Turmoil broke out as a group of angry citizens resisted their commands, trying to get past them. It did not take long before the heavier Lightbringers trooped up and began to incapacitate the angrier citizens one by one. Astonished, Ethan observed the fearless citizens with glee.

Someone approached Ethan and sat next to him. Uninterrupted, Ethan kept watching the turmoil, not eyeing Leika who had taken a seat.

The two just stared at the chaos that was unfolding in front of them.

"Why did you do it?" asked Leika. "Those who escaped are likely to die outside the city walls anyway."

She looked back at the open hole in the wall. "It's a harsh world outside."

Slowly exhaling, Ethan thought thoroughly. "This was a choice of mine," replied Ethan proudly.

"You know the Nation will not go easy on you."

"I know," he said calmly, nodding gently, a concerned smile appearing on his face.

More and more citizens arrived at the hole in the wall, the grouped citizens beginning to look more like a mob. The occasional yell became more and more frequent as friction between the pushing citizens intensified by the Lightbringers knocking and kicking them down. A couple of men managed to push themselves past the Lightbringers, who were then mercilessly shot in the back. The mob turned crazy, yelling and pushing with even more intensity and fury.

"Come, it is time," Leika said, looking at Ethan.

An armored vehicle stood ready not far from them, its latch open, ready to be boarded.

"Can I sit and watch this for five more minutes?" Ethan still not taking his eyes off the unfolding chaos.

Without any objections, Leika leaned back onto the bench, the two calmly enjoying the view.

**** Ensure that William is someone affiliated with the bust of Kendrick ****

**** Add more Helena moments for Samus ****

**** Iterate through all Norah flashbacks and standardize them ****

**** Mention the mother earlier ****

**** Inconsistent between how the pyramid guides Ethan around ****