

Prologue

It was already noon, and there were still so many bodies to burn. The morgue was overflowing again, and Winston hated his job. He sat outside on hard concrete smoking, the loading dock a brief escape, and watched a meat wagon unloading a fresh batch of dead bastards. Winston inhaled nicotine to calm frayed nerves. The door behind him screeched at being propped open, but he'd been there since the morning before and couldn't be bothered. Corporate mandated overtime. Fuck his boss, and fuck the door alarm. Hard to get real tobacco anymore, but he paid an obscene amount for his vices. Home-rolled menthol tickled his lungs, he sighed smoke. The ex-wife likened him to a hedonist, and he certainly agreed pleasure was much preferable to the constant dull drone of his life. He almost laughed at the two porters unloading bodies: they were solemn, eyes reverent as they handled taut body bags. Must be new. Not yet ground down by the reality of being glorified taxi drivers for the dead, a cheap imitation of the ferryman delivering more of the poor dead for him to scavenge out shiny bits crow-like for his corporate overlord's precious bottom line. When they were finished unloading, Winston stubbed his cigarette and went in, kicking the block of wood from the door.

Inside, the corridor was dimly lit. Maintenance delayed again, probably citing budget constraints. His footsteps thudded softly on concrete and he wondered which club he should head

to after his shift, neural interface cycling through his favorites as he walked to the locker room. The place carried the stench of sweat and overworked bodies like it was built from them, each ceramic tile faded the dull yellow of used gym socks. Winston knew the auto-cleaner bot could easily scour the whole place, but corporate wasn't willing to pay the subscription fee for the service anymore, so it collected dust in one of the supply closets like a gaunt effigy of cost-saving cuts to make stock prices go up—for more shareholder debauchery—and the room suffered for it. Winston couldn't decide if he was in the mood for dancers, dancing, loud music, fighting, fucking, or getting absolutely sloshed. He knew of places that were great for one or two, but none did them all well. Ideally, he'd just find a memory broker that had something that contained everything, but he knew that kind of memory chip was way out of his normal budget. Daydreaming was free, though, and he was well-practiced.

He clanged open his locker, noticed he still had a few days before the monthly usage fee, and pulled a syringe and dark green ampoule from under his spare uniform. He told himself it was only to get through the rest of his shift, to have time to live a life after it was over, but the truth was he loved it. Ten cubic centimeters, a needle slid with practiced ease between soft flesh and optical implant, and he was off. Adrenal glands pumped, digital pupils dilated, heartbeat an erratic symphony. Winston slammed the locker shut, didn't bother locking it, and stalked to the sink. The seams of the faucet and the drain were crusted with years of mineral deposits and looked as tired as he felt. He spent a few credits to turn on the tap and scrubbed his hands, and tried to ignore the tan line where his ring used to be. A pair of cheap latex gloves hung out of his trouser pockets, and he slid them on. He took several deep breaths, reveled in the drug running

its course and how awake he felt. Resigned, he headed into the morgue, prepared to wrench implants from the remains of a dead flesh mall.

He clocked back in through his neural interface so the boss couldn't cheat him out of pay, and shoved open the double doors. There were five new corpses there on dissecting tables, next to the three he'd been working on before break. One had its chest split open, flesh peeled back in a bone rainbow perched on the precipice, ribs splayed as rotten angel wings wide for the scavenger. Nestled between the grim offerings was the bloodied chrome of a Hayashida 'Hercules' Mk.2 artificial heart implant, valves half-connected. Winston grabbed a scalpel and set to severing the rest of the links that held it there. They didn't perform autopsies, those weren't for the poor. No profit in it. They were harvesters, no more or less. The dead wouldn't rest if there was money to be made, and the incinerators weren't built to handle metal, so Winston's job was to remove it. The pieces were resold at 'new' prices if the company could get away with it, 'lightly used' at minimum. No need to waste good chrome, good money. The last connection undone, Winston lifted the metal heart from the chest cavity with a wet squelch. He rinsed it with an overhead adjustable nozzle and set it in the autoclave to clean.

Back to work on the body, he was sad no trace remained of their former life. Winston wondered if they'd been an artist or musician with calluses on some of their fingers, if they'd had any talent, what in the god-forsaken city had sent them on to the afterlife, and what their family thought of what was happening to their remains. He sighed. There were more implants to remove: a jawbone, the optics, the ZenTech neural link system, a left leg that looked like it might have been discounted veteran chrome. An elbow joint, some superficial skin implants, a

reinforced tendon, all of them went into the autoclave. Winston knew he'd wind up on a table just like this when he died, no saved wealth for a funeral or any remaining family to cover the cost. He wondered what the harvester that worked on his body would daydream about him and it excited him to think of the life they'd imagine he lived, the stimulant still raging in his bloodstream. While he worked, he stashed the occasional piece in one of the body-free mortuary drawers to sell later. As long as he met the expected quota, no one ever noticed. He suspected the interior security cameras didn't even work.

When he was done working on the mangled cadaver, he peeled off bloody gloves and dropped them in a can, a few more credits coming out of his account for hazardous disposal, and deposited the newly delivered bodies in drawers for the next shift. He glanced at the two he still had to finish, and knew it was going to be a long day, but he had a trip to make. He put on fresh gloves, transferred the finished one to a mobile cart and wheeled it into the dark. He hadn't bothered to close everything back up, so the sight he had heading down the hall was ghastly. He hadn't been gentle, favoring expedience, so the whole thing looked like it had been subjected to an industrial blender. No need to waste time suturing it all closed, no need to be presentable when the meat was going to burn. Thankfully, the drainage system on the embalming table worked and there wasn't any fluid to slough off in the corridor. Winston crossed a boundary in the middle of the building, wheels click-clacking on the divider, flesh jiggling on the cart. Nothing fell. Small blessings. Didn't need another charge coming out of his account.

The air grew warm, pungent. The acrid taste when he breathed almost caused him to retch. Ventilation malfunctioning again. Have to deal with it for weeks while corporate dragged

their heels. There were wheel tracks worn along the route from heavy traffic. Winston knew he could look up how many bodies had passed through since the place started operating on his optics, but he didn't give a damn. He wondered about the lives they lived that led them here, not how many tons of ash they amounted to, how many discrete plastic containers made their way to the expansive scrapheap outside the city. He used the cart to bang the crematorium doors open.

“*Merde!*” Richard spoke with a heavy French accent. “Winston. Look at what they’ve done to me, it’s unforgivable.” He gestured one hand to the furnace door that refused to shut properly, leaking heat and smog and stench into the room. His other hand held a large hoagie with a few bites taken. “I put in a ticket, and they tell me they’ll bring it up at the budget meeting next month.” He had soot on his face, and his eyes sunk into their sockets, dim and gray.

“You’re eating.” Winston couldn’t believe it. The smell. The smoke. The taste of charred corpses couldn’t be good seasoning.

“Of course!” He pretended to be offended. “I’m not some dandy, and I’m definitely not clocking out for lunch when dealing with this,” he said. He looked at Winston and raised an eyebrow. “Why, you want some, *chérie?*” he laughed.

“Sure. Just help me get this thing into one of your open ovens first,” Winston said. He didn’t take the offer seriously. He eyed the hoagie and cringed.

Richard set the sandwich down and led him to the far end of the room to an incinerator that just finished its cycle. He pulled the ash capsule out of the tray at the bottom of the machine,

a life in totality encased in plastic forever and ever. He took it over to a pallet and tossed it with hundreds of others, forgotten until its shipment to the landfill.

“You should come out with me tonight,” Winston offered. He scratched the mole on his face, and wondered if he had the time to shave.

“Some other time,” Richard said.

He walked back to the oven and opened the door. He pulled the table out and they transferred the remains from the mobile cart. The table slid back inside at the press of a button. Richard whistled a childhood tune that sounded like a lullaby as he touched the interface and navigated to the standard cremation service, plastic with no urn, and pressed the ignition. Winston knew it could all be done from his optics, but appreciated him making a show out of it anyway. They watched through the window for a while as the body caught fire. Interesting seeing organics liquefy, no matter how many times Winston had seen it. The flames curled and devoured, smoke and ash in its wake. No ceremony.

“Right,” Richard clapped. “I’m starving.” The stench still hung in the air. Too many bodies to burn not to use the defective furnace. He led them back to the table and sat, splitting the hoagie in half. No hand washing involved, a few credits saved. He handed it to Winston.

“Thanks,” he said. He contemplated throwing it into one of the furnaces. They ate together in silence. It didn’t taste awful. “Two more before sundown,” Winston said, chewing the last bit of food. Too much synth lettuce, not enough spice.

“I’ll be here,” Richard said. “My *demesne* never stops burning. You know this.”

Winston walked back to the morgue and his two lost guests, a bumper harvest of chrome waiting for his sickle. He got to work. Scalpel for easy access, bone saw when it wasn't. Rib shears, forceps, enterotome for a rare piece of intestinal chrome. Implant after discount implant removed and autoclaved, blood and loose chunks down the drain; the smell wasn't strong enough to overcome the burnt hair and skin that seeped into his pores. He stowed whatever he could in his contraband stash. He had an appointment for one of the rare pieces after his shift, and was counting on the payout to finance the evening's trip: the uppers he'd need to enjoy himself, the strippers, and cheap hardcore memory chips. He carved as fast as he could, rough with the meat but careful with the implants—damage came out of his own pocket. It took him hours, and he knew the sun was setting when he finished because his pick-me-up was fading. Another change of gloves, another fee. He couldn't leave them on, they'd charge him for sullyng anything he touched. As he wheeled the bodies to the crematorium, he triple-checked the meeting location on his neural net. He was nervous. It was the biggest deal he'd ever done, and fucking it up wasn't an option.

"Final delivery," he called out. He slammed the two carts through the doors and wheeled to a stop near the table where they ate lunch together. "I'm out of here."

"I'll call you if I decide to go out tonight," Richard said. He jerked out a salute in the fashion of the French Foreign Legion, despite never having served. "Got another hour in this fetid prison, *mon ami*."

Winston left as quick as he came, tripping on loose shoelaces, footsteps smacking down the dark hall. The building was sinister when the sun went down; hungry, like the disposal of

countless bodies wasn't enough and it craved ever more. He ran gloved hands over his face. He was losing it. A few more steps, a turn in the hall, the door, and he was back at his locker. He peeled off his uniform, the gloves, tossed it all in the bottom cubby knowing the thing would smell of death tomorrow, but he refused to pay for the wash or shower—they were cheaper at home, and he didn't have the time. He pulled on gray synth-weave pants and a tattered band shirt, his favorite puncture-resistant coat with a dark hand print on the back—he wasn't a member of the Black Hands, but repping always kept people from harassing him when he was in a hurry. Dressed, he retrieved a cryo-sealed tube that housed the strangest optical chromeware Winston had ever seen. He regretted selling it, but knew it was too risky to hold onto, and tucked the container in his jacket. He hit the exit and stepped out into the night-noise of the city for the first time in thirty-six hours.

The sound blasted Winston after the stone-silence of the morgue. Above, the monorail hurtled past carrying people and cargo downtown. Advertisements lit up his optics: Tenno Tech's new lung implants—this version guaranteed not to gum up when exposed to heavy amounts of synth smoke, Stanton Arms had a new energy revolver hitting market, the 'energy of the future' brought by Energo Lunar. So. Many. Dick pills. He tuned them out, since deactivating was a subscription he refused on principle, and headed down the walkway past holograms of palm trees—real palms could never survive in such a northern climate. He heard the chatter of pedestrians walking with their optics lit up, smelled a street-side ramen cart that mixed with the piss of the city, saw an NDPD squad car amble by. The buildings towered over the street, drowning it all in neon—Cherenkov radiation, bold red words, vomit yellow. Skyways criss-crossed between megabuildings and aerial vehicles hovered out of the reach of the masses.

The meeting place was within walking distance, and Winston hurried. He lamented not taking another ten cc's before leaving, but knew there was going to be plenty later. He crossed the street between two parked military-surplus humvees, still armored, and headed down an alleyway.

The contact stood halfway down the path with arms clasped behind his back admiring digital graffiti of a melting green demon skull and a bouquet of deep purple prince's-feather. The ground was wet with drain run-off. The air carried mildew and rotten shoe leather that wrinkled Winston's nose. He decided he'd had enough raunchy fragrance for at least a week and knew he'd spend the evening immersed in an expensive memory chip, something that tuned up pleasure to a careless degree and eliminated any negatives. Pure, unadulterated fun to cap a shitty day. His old boots splashed to a stop a few paces from the tall man.

"Hey," Winston called. It was getting harder to keep his eyes open. Uppers before the memory broker, then, or he'd waste money sleeping in the booth. A short stop at home. Simple.

"Present the merchandise," the man replied. His voice was smooth, high-pitched, made for a men's choir. He didn't turn from the hologram. His fingers tapped monotonously on his wrist and they clinked in perfect tempo, synth skin stretched over metal arms. Expensive work. "Credits will come through the net."

"Sure," Winston said. He reached in his jacket pocket, gripped the container, and every hair on his body stood on end. The General Sciences Peripheral 'Fossa' Mk.1 that smoothed his nervous system short-circuited and he stumbled to his knees, eyes wide and unblinking. The metal slipped from his fingers and rolled on puddles and concrete. A sharp crack, the smell of spent gunpowder, and he was splayed on the ground. His chest became an orchestra of pain,

cortisol and adrenaline flooding his tired system. Another crack of thunder, and the contact's face exploded on the shimmering wall, fading the hologram. Slow, measured steps approached from behind, and Winston strained his neck to witness the guilty party: machine, more than man; military chrome linked to unrecognizable metal. A black revolver smoked at the attacker's side. He bent, grasped the container in his free hand, and turned to face Winston, who realized he'd been whimpering. There was warmth in his pants, and the stench of piss mixed with his blood. The attacker hadn't even bothered with synth skin. His implants were raw, powerful, and fully visible. There was no face to speak of, no shred of cosmetic humanity. Malevolent eyes witnessed the sum total of Winston's life, and judged it lacking. Another retort, and only darkness remained with two more bodies for the harvest, two more to burn.

Chapter One

The gods were dead, but the orphans playing in the shadow of the wall didn't care. Corporations were the only gods left in New Detroit, the toxic air and collected filth their sacrament to the masses. Malory sat on worn stairs with her twin sister and racked out a large chunk of phlegm, no blood. They were too poor for hospitals, or implants, or a neural net, so they watched six others in the distance bounce through luminescent chalk hopscotch lines etched into cracked blacktop. It was early autumn, the evening chilled and bitter, and only one of them had anything that could pass for a jacket. Their grime-caked faces were red with exertion and cold and one kid chanted an off-tune nursery rhyme the director used to sing them. Mal let her eyes wander to the orphanage that squatted beneath a semi-defunct apartment tower. The paint was yellow, faded, peeling away in vast sheets, and she wondered if anyone would care if the whole place exploded in resentful flames. She knew they hadn't had a meaningful donation in months, forced to adapt to sleeping hungry or stealing what they could. Malory would light the fuse herself if they had anywhere else they could go.

"It's good the blood's gone," her sister said. They were identical twins, but her sister had a small mole under her left eye that made her lazy smile mischievous.

"I guess," Malory said. It didn't matter much because there was nothing clean for them to breathe—her lungs would rupture again, it wasn't worth celebrating.

“I dreamt about mom last night,” Maya said. Silence of the grave settled between them. An aerial vehicle passed by high overhead, tilting toward city center, the muted retort of a gunshot from blocks away announced the end of a life, and one of the kids gave a high-pitched cheer as someone made it through the squares with their eyes closed. “I always forget you don’t remember them,” she said.

“Nope.” The only thing Malory remembered were flashes, disjointed sounds, the essence of violence. There was dull metal, a broken mirror, toys strewn across hardwood. There was the chime of a clock from down the hall, a twisted sheet with cartoon cats, blood pooled against baseboards. Screaming, low and guttural, from her own dried throat. A strange fragrance of spring flowers. Trying to stitch the mess together into a memory when she went to sleep left her a headache and panic-sweat. She wished she could remember their parents; the way Maya spoke of them was wistful and left her guilty.

“It’s okay,” Maya said. She reached out and wrapped a malnourished arm around Malory, leaned her head on her shoulder. The warmth was welcome. Her hair smelled of dust, dandruff, and synth apples. “We’re still alive. We’re still here, and someday you can make the world pay for it, if that’s what you need.” The same kid made it through all the squares with his eyes closed a second time and they all booed because they knew he cheated.

“Maybe.”

The entire city blared, red warning signs overriding holograms and digital displays. Advertisements for gravy flavored synth-soy paste and the newest episode of Tianwei International’s kiddie show about skeleton grave robbers were blotted out by exclamation points, evacuation pleas, and codes that navigated neural nets to shelter directions. Klaxons wailed

murder on concrete edifices. The air traffic swerved to land at the nearest AV lot and stores dropped shutters on panicked pedestrians. It was only noise to the orphans. Mal and Maya jolted and covered their ears. The rest stopped playing and milled about as a group, faces twisted in distaste. One girl crouched to play with a dead worm. They didn't have anything to do. A shelter would never take in those that couldn't pay—Aeon Automotive's 'Shark Teeth' autonomous enforcement drones, a half-step away from military hardware and designed for riot suppression, made certain that unsavory elements were cast aside as refuse. The kids would wait it out, or they wouldn't. Only a handful of things could trigger a full lockdown, smaller emergencies not worth the expense. It only mattered which culprit: terrorist attack, sudden onset weather event, war, chemical or radiation leak, epidemic, solar flare—the city had seen all and still remained.

“Skyfall's coming,” a distant voice called.

Oscar Karna, the only kid with a surname besides the twins, the ninth and oldest of them, ambled up to everyone from down the street. He looked mature enough that he could trick smaller businesses into letting him work under the table for a couple credits and never really hung around the rest of them. They only considered him part of the group when he brought them food. Malory knew it was only a matter of time before he joined one of the gangs and never came back. She'd seen it happen, so many churned through the doors of the orphanage into crime or obscurity. That was just the way of things: join a gang when you were old enough, slowly die, or disappear. No one ever got adopted. Adoption was a myth like Lacey Lantern or Ozone Cordova, a beautiful fiction to foster hope. Oscar was tall, had the whispers of a beard, and carried himself with a certainty in his shoulders, in the firmness of the eyes none of the others

could claim. He had a bag overstuffed with bootleg merchandise he'd been hawking on the corners before lockdown, the strap close to breaking.

"You wanna watch," he asked. His left eye twitched—a withdrawal symptom, probably slinging more than just bootlegs. Maybe he'd joined up already and only came back out of habit.

"How," Nadia asked. She was the shortest, the only one with a jacket Mal had given her for a birthday the year before, and she still shivered when she spoke. "You're not dumb enough to make us climb the wall." Her voice was a haunted children's doll: soft, eerie, and mechanical, affected by a memory chip she'd dug from trash outside an uptown bordello.

"I know a different way," he said. "No security bots, no cameras. No one will even know we're there." He smirked, disdain leaking through. He was cocky. That got people killed, would kill him too, someday. "Follow," he said, and walked away.

Malory looked at her sister, tangled hair falling in her eyes, and smiled. They stood and chased after him. Their legs were short, and he was in a hurry. The rest tagged along, Nadia having to run full-speed, desperate not to trip. There was no traffic on the roads, cars and armored vehicles left abandoned, and streetlights pulsed like the breath of a dying beast. Where tree holos stood, only massive exclamation points remained. The world was stained red, the monorail quiet. Nine sets of footfalls slapped the pavement. Other rejects loitered in alleyways and inlets they passed along the way, and there were enough of them to build a small mountain if they banded together to storm a shelter, but none of them wanted to be a doomed hero. Malory had never been so far from the orphanage and wondered if she'd ever go back. A chunk of dead moon could land on her head any moment—it would be easier that way, she knew, but kept jogging after Oscar hand-in-hand with her sister. Far above, she saw a daredevil dancing in the

middle of a skyway, waiting for the show. Always an anarchist at the end of the world. Paying to be packed in sardine safety didn't sound appetizing to her, either.

"We're here," Oscar said. He stopped in front of a busted gate, analog prosecution sign spray painted with a black hand print. The rusted chain failed to hold and shrieked offense as he put weight against it. It opened enough for them to squeeze through. "Get in, quick." Impatience, the attitude of a babysitter, too many uppers.

The old tower was dark and in complete disarray. Trash and broken things littered the square, more than a few used needles jutting from piles of detritus. The roof, their destination, housed the Tianwei International satellite uplink from before they built the massive array circling downtown, beaming cheap overproduced drivel directly into the city's optics. The faded purple neon bulbs that lined the facade were shattered and lifeless, a monument to excess and decay. There were no red warnings of imminent disaster here, no power grid. The doors and windows were shuttered with thick steel—they had never bothered to rent out the vacant floors, and Malory wondered if the person responsible had been downsized without letting anyone know, a last middle finger to the company. Some enterprising individuals tried to strip what they could from the exterior, unable to carve their way inside, but it was fruitless. None of the gangs wanted to fight the Black Hands in the depths of their territory for access to scraps and the copper wiring of a defunct corporate property. There was no way for the kids to enter; scaling the outside was dangerous, but possible. There were ample handholds, scaffolding, ledges, ladders, and cables. Some window washing platforms none of them could hack. Getting to the top in time was an exercise in endurance.

Oscar started with a leap, feet slammed into metal grates. He didn't slow down for them.

He ambled up at a brisk pace, backpack swinging, boots sure in cracks and crevices. He was up and over the side of the entrance and out of view in seconds.

“I don’t think I can do that,” Nadia said. She looked down at her tiny frame when she had everyone’s attention to illustrate her point. The rest of the kids looked hesitant. Helping was beyond them.

“I’ll help you,” Malory said. She turned to her sister and squeezed her hand. “Lead the others. We’ll be right behind you.”

“Okay,” Maya said. She flashed her lazy smile, gathered the rest, and headed up. “Follow me, it’s easy,” she shouted. She scaled the building as fast as Oscar, proving the point. The rest shuffled after her, slow and slipping on the ridges and grips. They disappeared above the entrance on shaky legs.

“How are you gonna help,” Nadia asked. She raised an eyebrow in suspicion. They were the same age, but she was the perpetual burden, and wasn’t used to anyone showing concern.

“Easily,” Malory said. She turned around and kneeled down. “I’ll carry you. Maya and I are much stronger than we look,” she lied. Her knee shifted in the gravel, far too close to a used needle. She channeled unmatched confidence to hide that she hated heights and had a crush and wanted the excuse.

“Don’t be stupid, you’re almost as small as me,” Nadia said. She crossed her arms. She didn’t buy it. She knew kind lies, it seemed.

“I’ll get you to the top with the others,” Malory said. Her legs ached at the prospect, the self-inflicted torture to distract from fear and attraction. “Promise.”

“If you say so,” Nadia shrugged. She climbed onto Mal’s back and squeezed tight enough to restrict blood flow.

The first step was an aborted stumble, calves and lower back caterwauling in protest. In the fragments of her memories, she suffered far worse, and she refused to stop. She swallowed the pain and took a second step. Numb hands gripped at metal, feet shoved to lift two girls up the wall. A frame of signage, glass crushed to dust under their weight, and Malory was thankful she wasn’t barefoot. She hoisted them over the entrance, breathing heavy, and didn’t look down. Nothing mattered to her except the next surface to seize, the strange taste of copper in her mouth, steady breathing without triggering a coughing fit, and the warm vice-grip Nadia had around her neck and waist. A metal girder; an oversized bolt protruding from dull steel; a section of abandoned scaffolding from window shutter installation; an exterior ladder to replace problematic sections of neon tubing; an industrial air conditioning unit; miniature roof sections that existed as a signature quirk of the architect; seams in sheets of siding peeled back by weather and scavengers; it all passed below her mistreated body hauling her friend into the terrifying sky. She could see others high above them, but acknowledging them left her horror-struck with vertigo.

Malory was drenched, and expected to be a dried out synth-raisin husk by the end. More handholds, taut suspension cables, a discarded window washing bot, and she started to fantasize about letting go. The beautiful splat of a gore angel they’d make, the wind of the fall, no more torn muscles. She knew Nadia would resent her as a ghost. Calmed, another step, another. Sweat rolled from her chin, stung her eyes. Her heartbeat drummed in her ears, against her ribs. Last year, she found Nadia in the closet crafting stilts out of rotted synth-wood and plastic. She told

Mal she wanted to be taller. Overshadow Oscar, the director, the people that looked down on her, and so Mal sat in the cramped closet and inhaled mothballs and mold to help finish the stilts. They broke after a dozen steps, but they laughed and laughed and she'd help her get to the top to look down on everyone even if it killed her. When she crested the next ledge, she was face to face with the others loitering, staring at her. They were resting below the massive black uplink satellite that capped the building. Nadia dismounted and Malory collapsed to her back, devouring oxygen. Her fingers bled, and she thought her toe was broken.

The frosty air dried her tormented body as the others chattered. She sat up on her elbows to watch Nadia walk to the side they'd climbed and look out over the city and had to admit she was the largest person in her heart. She'd never say it out loud, though. Too mortifying. Out there was New Detroit in all its unfortunate majesty: ZenTech headquarters loomed over downtown and the other, lesser, skyscrapers, the dozen hab megabuildings—the last which remained indefinitely under construction, the ugly dome of Luna Paradise theme park and doomsday global seed vault, the wall that caged it all, the river filled with cancer, the hypertrain tracks stretching beyond to Chicago, to the raw material port in Traverse City, across the lake to Toronto and further into New Montreal. It was motionless, illuminated in dire warning, millions bracing in anticipation.

“It’s beautiful,” Nadia said, eyes a carnival of stars.

“Very,” Malory said. She wasn’t looking at the same thing. Brief moments of stolen love made the rest bearable.

“Hey, you two,” Maya called. “You should come sign!”

Nadia turned around, caught Mal staring, and smiled like a pale specter. She trudged up in oversized shoes and held out a delicate hand. “You shouldn’t fall so hard for me,” she said. She was too small to help lift, but made the gesture anyway to complete the tease.

“Maybe,” Malory said. She pushed the hand aside and used her spent legs, glad her face was still flushed from exertion and wouldn’t betray her.

“Thank you,” Nadia said.

“Anytime,” Mal said. “A little less climbing, though.”

They laughed and walked to the rest of the group who busied themselves around a flat section at the base of the array. One of the kids pulled out a wicked combat knife and carved into the black, uncaring metal. The surface screeched as it gave way, one letter after another, until it spelled out a name. He admired it for a few moments while muted hurrahs sounded behind and handed the blade to another. Each orphan etched proof of their existence into an unfeeling structure, into a piece of the city that rejected the very idea of them. Another fished broken chunks of luminescent chalk from a cargo pocket they’d used for the game and forgot and smeared bright colors around the carvings, ornamenting the monument they’d made themselves. It would wash away at first rain, but it was enough for memories none could take away. Malory was the last to engrave her name into history:

SPENCER

LILAH

MARTIN

OSCAR

KHALIDAH

AUGUST

NADIA

MAYA

MALORY

“We can get higher for the show,” Oscar said. He pointed to an unlocked maintenance door. Inside, a ladder connected to darkness and a hatch to the reflective surface of the dish.

The climb was gentle, the halo of light from the entrance grew distant as Malory ascended. She couldn’t see anyone above, and listened for footsteps to avoid a boot to the forehead. Rung after rung, the smell of sweat and heavy breathing clogged the shaft. Someone thrust the hatch open and flooded the passage with dim skylight and fresh air. They filed out and sat on the edge, feet dangled over the abyss. The ravaged land hidden by the wall, the abandoned suburbs, the phantom farmland sprawled like a siren call to what could have been. They knew nomadic tribes roamed in the remains of a world that no longer was, and that it’d all been picked clean that close to the wall, but when they tried to imagine living that way, they found it wanting, even with bellies concave in hunger.

“I always wanted to go out on an adventure to bring life back to the land,” Maya said. Her tone said it had been outgrown, a discarded children’s fantasy.

“I just wanted to make enough money to fund the orphanage,” Oscar said. He shifted, and pulled at the strap of his bag.

“I want to build a ship! See the stars,” Nadia said. She was obsessed with the legend of Allison Cerny, who stole from corporations to fund a colony ship to a new home.

There was a low rumble on the horizon, no louder than the buzz of a refrigerator, but insistent. It grew, slow build to crescendo, decibel by decibel; an apocalyptic scream. It tore through the sky, cradled in flames and inanimate savagery, and passed over their heads with a concussive thunderclap. Their bodies jerked in the sonic boom and late evening turned to summer solstice at noon. The projected impact zone included the city limits, and Mal wondered if they’d witness the end of the world. Time seemed to stop, then violently accelerate, and then it went over the opposite horizon faster than it came. The structure shook under them as the meteor came to rest, a piece of dead and broken moon bonding with dying earth. Perdition existed in the north where it landed. The shock wave and debris didn’t pass the wall. It halted mid-air, suspended by the energy field cast over the cursed metropolis like an aborted haboob. The hypertrain route north needed to be rebuilt, but the wall held—it was designed for it. Malory realized the most unrealistic wish of the orphans wasn’t eliminating the needs of the poor, or an adventure among out-of-reach stars. It was her own dream of putting the moon back together.

Chapter Two

Malory woke with a blood-curdling scream to the sensation of being murdered. She was in her childhood room collapsed next to a broken mirror listening to the metronome of an antique grandfather clock down the hall. She gagged on the taste of iron as the shadow moved through the space, eyes hazy and unfocused. She knew the shadow meant death, the loss of parents, her home, years in an orphanage discarded by society with only the love of her sister and she couldn't breathe, couldn't fight back, couldn't stop the man and she would be the next to die and finally know what it felt like for a blade to caress her intestines. She howled again, all wounded animal and inviolable proof of her existence. It was a will to remain even when the only thing left was spite, or a girl who wanted more than anything to remain whole and loved and couldn't. Then she was back, tangled in sheets, drenched in a fountain of terror-sweat, her sister's foot lodged against her face in their upstairs broom closet just big enough for a bed. She unraveled herself from the sleep-clutches of her twin, who drooled on a ratty pillow, and slipped into the hall. She needed to wash and there was no more sleep to be had.

The bathroom on the second floor was cold, spartan, and barely functional, the window showed a couple inches to dreary brick and the apartment tower next door. She peeled off her clothes and left them on the sill to dry and tried to get the tap to spit out anything that wasn't fresh from the arctic. It took several minutes, but she was practiced, and knew how to turn it in slow metronome bursts until it dribbled hot water. It wouldn't last long, so she hurried to rinse

herself of trauma, the vestiges of sleep, and collected grime. She kneaded knuckles into her scalp and used the pleasure to distract from hunger that gnawed on her ribs. The mirage of dream-gore on her tongue threatened to send her into another panic, so she visualized the nightmare of half-stitched memories slopping down the drain. She hoped it would leave her clean, warm, and stress-free, and it almost worked—the shadow sinner wasn't easy to ignore. When she was done, she wiped off with a towel she shared with her sister. It was still damp and she cringed at the texture. She dressed, left the room, and tiptoed down the stairs to the first floor.

Everything was dark and deceptively peaceful. If Mal closed her eyes, she could imagine being anywhere else: a highrise corporate condo with a curtain wall overlooking the expanse of the city, the massive rooftop holograms, all that neon. She could walk into Purgatory to work a gig, just as much badass mercenary as Mover Marlow or Redtail Martinez. She could remember the false safety of her childhood home, the scent of baking and synth-limes, a mother's smile, but she wouldn't—the familiar texture of a well-traveled linoleum kept her grounded and on track to her destination. The front window of the orphanage was positioned so that laying down in the perfect spot let the kids gaze up between the embrace of the wall and the crowd of skyscrapers at the moon—the large survivor trailed through the sky by wayward fragments and Energo Lunar's catastrophic mistake, heavenly body reduced to comet chased eternally by disintegrating tail. Malory had never seen it whole outside old photos, holos, and discarded memory chips and wondered if standing on its surface in a fogged helmet before disaster was as peaceful as she hoped, a distilled approximation of freedom from the trappings of her life. When she leaned back in the spot to look at the moon, she lifted her hand and envisioned expansive mechanical digits

threading patchwork into defunct amalgamation—her impossible dream of putting the moon back together complete, if only in her imagination.

A glint from the closet in the hall to the left caught her eye, light bleeding from the crack underneath. She knew who it was, and decided to have some fun. She crept to the door, slowed her breathing, and felt the cool of the handle. She waited a few moments, then wrenched the door ajar with a snarl, deep and primal, to scare her fellow insomniac—Nadia didn't even flinch. She sat cross-legged in a pile of alloy parts and frayed wires, dark bags under her eyes and hair a mess, every bit an abandoned doll in the scraps of a techie's makeshift workshop. She set down the gear in her hands and looked up.

"Three out of ten," she said. She smirked and brushed the errant strands of yellow from her face. "You need some new material."

"Bite me," Mal said. She closed the door behind her to keep from waking the director.

"Maybe, after I'm finished," Nadia said. She clicked her teeth together playfully.

"What are you making?" Malory asked. She didn't see anything that could equate to extra height among the offal.

"You'll love it," she beamed. She lifted a couple disconnected pieces and waved them around. "None of us have any implants or optics, so my little baby will be marvelous. If I can get it working." Her face fell in frustration.

"I don't know what that is," Malory said. It was an eldritch of coiled metal, tangled wires, and bright chalk face winking on its surface.

"Oh. Right," she said. "It's a home-brew EMP. Should shut down implants and cameras. And reusable, unlike a grenade." She went back to tinkering with junk.

“Where did you even learn to make something like that,” Mal asked. She sat down and picked through scrap, looking at the variety. She didn’t recognize most of it, and wondered how Nadia had gathered so much.

“Memory chip,” she said, as if that explained anything. When she noticed Malory’s silence, she sighed and continued. “Rich people throw chips out all the time, and I look for them whenever I leave. I have a whole library in my room you could watch if you ever came to visit.” She turned back to the pieces in her hand, threaded a wire through old neon tubing, connected to another, twisted. “Found this one yesterday, and couldn’t sleep without building it.”

“Why crabs, though?” Malory asked. It was kind of cute, if not haunting the uncanny valley. It would have looked at home stalking the labyrinthine sewage system hunting rodents.

“No reason,” she said. She looked up and flashed crooked teeth. “I just like them.” Carcinization in action, and even tech bent to the evolutionary imperative at the whims of a tiny tinkerer. She added another bent plastic cap to one of the claws.

“Need any help?” Malory asked. She didn’t know the blueprint, but she could at least shape components.

“Always,” she said. “I can’t figure out how to fit the magnifiers in the core. Definitely not my own fault for modifying the design, though.” The sea creature was still missing legs and a pincer, its body cavity plucked open to be filled in a slow autopsy in reverse—metal, tubes, and determination crammed into a steely corpse.

“You could use the limbs,” Malory suggested. It seemed like plenty of unused space to solve the problem.

“That could do the trick,” Nadia said. She blinked and tilted her head to the side, chewed the inside of her lip, and took a deep breath. “Yeah, I think it’ll be great. Put the rest of the legs together, and I’ll handle the insides.”

The fabrication progressed like clockwork—circles of recycled neon glass, junkyard magnets, coils of metal and wire and plastic fused into lifeless automaton just before sunrise because two orphans complemented each other in symbiotic familiarity. Pancake torso topped with scavenged solar panels, each leg molded, stuffed, and assembled into chalk-faced crustacean. A pinched finger, a few drops of blood, another blemish on a tattered dress. Mal pictured an army of them crawling through the ventilation of ZenTech tower, situating themselves at critical infrastructure junctions, and bringing the entire corporation to its knees. The place had been assaulted before, but never with autonomous EMP drones, and she thought it was novel enough to succeed. Nadia might be able to get them moving like she imagined with access to a proper atelier, but that was for the future, and if they lived that long. They stole glances at each other as they worked, but neither noticed the other bewitched, and then it was done. A treasured moment of peace consigned to the trash heap of oblivion and reminiscence.

“I wish we could test it,” Nadia said.

“The director will kill us if you set it off in the orphanage,” Mal cautioned. It was the perfect kind of recklessness she’d come to expect; Nadia had no regard for consequence or side effects, just the desire to know the creation performed as anticipated.

“I guess we’ll just have to go in blind,” Nadia said. She picked up the completed device, spun it around, and looked in its luminous eyes.

“What do you want to use it for?” Malory asked.

“A heist,” she said. “I want to hit Bagley Market.” The place was a fortress of unabashed consumerism: three tiers of stalls overflowed with synthetic meat, fish, eggs, and raw vegetables, street carts hawked savory fried food, and the brilliant colors of textiles waited for new owners. Clothes, shoes, bags, perfume, bedding, books, stationary, toys, electronic scrap, holograms, memory chips, gray-market programs, second-hand chromeware, and surplus civilian robot models all crowded the walkways with vivid signage and cameras pointed in all directions.

“That’s insane,” Mal said. There was no hesitation. “We’ll need some of the others.” More help meant more to eat, less hand-me-down rags and dumpster dives, technology that was made the same decade. A chance the orphanage hadn’t been able to give them.

“Martin and Spencer always tag along,” Nadia said. There was a lot of risk, but they never shied from adventure.

“I’ll talk to them before class,” Malory said. She stood, stretched her back until it cracked, and scraped at the dried blood on the tip of her fingernail. “Do you have a plan?”

“Sure,” she said. “Set the crab off near the stalls we want to hit to knock out cameras and optics, grab what we can, and run.” It was matter-of-fact, and left no room for error, for dreaded consequence. “Should last a minute or two.”

“Winging it, then,” Mal said. She laughed and left the room.

The hall was filled with the distressed noise of waking others—the director hummed a melancholic tune from behind their closed door that promised a strange lesson, August and Lilah wailed at each other over a grungy sweatshirt they both wanted to wear, and the ominous thumping of Oscar rattled the thin walls to shut them up. Others scurried to the kitchen to devour whatever crumbs they could find. Malory didn’t bother. Instead, she walked to the bathroom and

washed the crusty scab on her fingertip and tried not to think of her parents being murdered as the sink ran red. It was going to be a long day. She sighed, wiped her hand on her dress, and headed for the classroom. She found Martin and Spencer on the way bent over a gray object in the living room whispering in short bursts and her curiosity exploded: illicit porn chip, an ampoule of uppers, stolen jewelry, the command codes to an Aeon Automotive combat drone. She stymied her thoughts and headed for them. Martin was titanic, primordial genetics not even a childhood of poverty and malnourishment could staunch, while Spencer was stringy bone and sinew held together by skin like paper. They hid their mystery object when she approached.

“Job for you, if you’re interested,” she said. She thought it resembled the bleak steel of a black-market revolver, but couldn’t be certain.

“Absolutely,” Martin said, his voice was high-pitched and didn’t match his size. Next to him, Spencer shook his head up and down as fast as he could.

“Sneak out with me this afternoon,” she said. She could tell they were afraid of her prying, so she swallowed her curiosity.

She spun on her heel and went to the classroom. It was full of dirty mats for the orphans. None of them had implants, so instead of scrolling through memory chips on their optics while being monitored through the net, they had to use antique VR goggles the director had procured from an old tech salvager after a rare donation. The lessons were rudimentary: arithmetic, basic English, French, Japanese, and Mandarin, the geography of the city within the walls and the gangs and corporations that controlled its territory, some science and technological primers that Nadia obsessed over, history modules with heavy doses of propaganda, a single file on music theory, and a bizarre course the director had created that focused on creativity and acting with an

abundance of short films and plays and improv performances. Mal's favorite was the guidebook on programming—there was no interactivity, but she could dive deep into the languages and memorize whatever she could. She dropped to her usual mat, slid on the visor, and ignored how much she felt like a corpse in a morgue. She let the code cascade across her retinas as she waited for class to start.

The others came in and took their places, chattering until the director navigated them to a saturated blue screen and a narration of an ill man who lived in Old London. Malory tuned it all out and floated on syntax for forty minutes until she was certain the director wouldn't notice her leaving. She took off the ancient visor, stood, glanced at her sister on the mat next to her, and decided to leave her behind. It was too dangerous to risk them both. She crept to Nadia, shoved a wet finger in her ear, and then moved on to Spencer. She grabbed Martin last, afraid the giant would have trouble shuffling out without making noise. They were out in the crisp, dirty air in less than a minute. Malory coughed. She looked up at the wall that meant hope and safety for so many and knew it was the teeth of a colossal monster that had long swallowed her whole and would never let go. It was early morning, and they'd be in the shadows until almost noon.

"Where to?" Martin asked. He flexed his arms, ready for a fight.

"Bagley," Nadia called. She hoisted the rechargeable crab to her shoulder and attempted to showboat. "Gonna set off beautiful Ms. Clawdia here and snatch whatever we can."

"Awesome," Spencer said. He was practically vibrating in and out of existence from excitement and low blood sugar, and had something tucked in the waistband of his basketball shorts. There were no more questions.

They headed to the market, and billboards, holograms, and glass storefronts lined the way. Traffic was congested even far from city center as the throngs bustled in the morning commute. Pedestrians multiplied as they reached the monorail stop outside the entrance of the shopping district. One of the holo trees flickered and dropped dainty digital leaves in Malory's face that splattered into light when she touched them. The sound of the masses was overwhelming, and she had to grit her teeth. She missed the quiet of the closet, the gentle closeness of her friend, the urge to touch. The group of orphans walked through the signed archway, past countless transactions and goods they'd only seen in their dreams, and headed down, down, into the depths of the open-air emporium.

"Here," Nadia said. She'd stopped at a four-corner junction that had a selection of synth meats, fruits, and breads in one direction, racks and stacks of clothing and animatronic mannequins that displayed fresh designer outfits in another, and tech display cases, code laptops, various sizes of printed circuit boards, mounds of miscellaneous memory chips, and illustrated diagrams of assembly instructions in the third. The final path led to a staircase that ascended directly to street level.

"Showtime," Malory said. She leaned against a stone pillar to observe the crowd, the way it pulsed, and looked forward to the chaos. Adrenaline pumped. The air was sticky and smelled of autumn and sweat and so many people.

"Focus on food and anything we can actually use," Nadia said. Her eyes were dilated, wild with manic glee. The exhaustion that haunted her face like a death mask was condemned to the abyss. "If it needs a fence, grab something else!" She slammed the button on the belly of the crab and lobbed it into the center walkway. Seconds passed. A drop of sweat rolled down the

nape of her neck, and she clenched and unclenched her left fist over and over. Nothing happened. The murmur continued, buying and selling, buying and selling, a shout, a laugh, and then someone's boot knocked the machine on the way to somewhere else.

Reality teetered to a halt—a woman in an orange sweater carried a large box against her chest, a hooded man stalked past with his hands stuffed in his jacket, a couple made out on a stone bench, obscuring graffiti. An aggressive Stanton Arms advertisement twirled in bright reds and yellows overhead and demanded attention. With a sharp click, the wave spread invisible electric current that terminated optics, cameras, holograms, ads, robots, space heaters, the fluorescent streetlights, servos on a few arm implants, and one old-school digital watch, but it didn't stop at the intersection like Malory expected. Instead, it continued to devour the entire market, one shop at a time, until it reached equilibrium at the monorail and fizzled to an end. Her three conspirators moved immediately. They snatched large duffel bags from the clothing area to fill, but Mal didn't budge. It was too much—they might have gotten away taking out a small corner, but disrupting the business of all of Bagley was beyond the pale. The crowd was disoriented, blind, and on the verge of panic. Mal had to do something, anything to change their fate, but no answer came. She had no power, no way to change the fate they'd set in motion.

Martin, Spencer, and Nadia weaved in and out of the paralyzed throng, their bags near bursting. Grubby palms reached out to secure their gains. More, and more, and more still: packages of dried meat, pasta, assorted tubers, and hard bread, jeans and shorts and sweaters and winter coats and shirts without moth-rotten holes in them, so many sets of current-gen VR goggles to replace the junk they used in class, three compact laptops built for coding and memory design, and entire boxes of high-end educational and entertainment memory chips

disappeared into their bags. One by one, they ventured further into the boutiques to search for mandatory treasures, and disappeared from Malory's view. She was motionless, cold stone at her back, scanning over the sightless. Her body shook with every heartbeat, and each thud drowned out the bedlam of terrified rabble they'd robbed like miracle workers in reverse. It was too smooth, too neat. She could feel the specter of catastrophe coiling around her spine, ever craving, ever keen. Spencer stumbled back into view as it opened its jaws wide for the feast— a security guard reached out with a vice-grip on a skinny arm. Spencer hesitated, a moment where his rational mind still existed, then pulled the revolver from his waistband and fired.

Chapter Three

Pandemonium ensued while the gunshot echoed off tightly-packed bodies and out into the morning air. Most ducked while a dozen others tried to run stone-blind and collided with walls and displays and deactivated patrol bots, while security drew their own weapons, ready to return fire. The victim slumped to the ground and released his hold on Spencer. His breath was heavy with a fresh hole punched just below the ribs. Spencer dropped the revolver, adjusted the bag on his shoulder, and fled up the steps. His feet slapped on concrete while shouts from the crowd blended into cacophony, and he was gone. A few seconds later, Nadia skipped from the rows of tech displays. She balanced three different bags on her tiny body, each more full than the last, an insane little Atlas holding up the future of the orphans. She hummed her usual off-tune nursery rhyme as she fled. An alarm warbled to life at the edge of the affected zone, and Malory had her answer—one of them needed to stay behind or NDPD would bring Containment down on them all. Martin was next, and had trouble working through the people because of his large frame.

Malory watched them go. She wondered if they'd only ever amount to desperate kids trying to claw back an existence from the rotten maw of the city. The mercenaries that worked from Purgatory said there were consequences for those who dared to live, and Mal believed. She headed for the discarded revolver, one foot in front of the other. Detention Center or forced labor, maybe a bullet and alleyway dumpster if the corpo in charge of the market was in a bad mood. It was easy. On the way, she focused on a pair of black cat earrings on display, and fantasized about

a reality where she went to the store and paid with honest-to-god credits, the awkward small talk with a bored cashier, owning something with no real purpose other than to make her feel better. Her ears weren't pierced. She slipped the cats from the display and into her small dress pocket anyway, stifled a laugh, and continued on. The bleeding guard flinched as she bent and picked up the gun. She was surprised by the weight, the cold metal on her skin, how dangerous it felt, and worried her fingers into the gray steel as she waited for everyone's optics to reboot.

She heard the metronome caw of a crow mocking, the wind rattling a loose panel above her head, and the trembling of the crowd. She knew this was the moment she'd save if she had her own neural net, a snapshot in time before everything changed, before the bill came due. Another moment, another, and then electronics flared to life—backup routines and failsafes restored sight to the blind. Awareness rippled and followed the same pace as the attack. By the time it reached the outskirts, the first glares were on her ruined dress and disheveled hair, the weapon in her small hand. So many eyes, so many examinations of her life. Disgust, fear, curiosity, disdain, anger, doubt, frustration washed over her like an endless cascade, and Malory decided she hated them: for their horror, the scrutiny, their willing participation in a system that created people like her, like Nadia, the rest of the orphans—for the audacity to be unsettled by a person stealing from a corporation—because they were thoroughly brainwashed into celebrating them like sports teams. Good little capitalists, righteous fucking consumers. Condemned, the lot of them. She raised the gun, tasted the anger between her teeth, and then something struck her. Everything went dark.

There was nothing. Nothing, and then loud ringing in the emptiness, a concierge bell in the waiting room for a dream. Ding, ding, ding, ding, ding. No pain existed in that other place,

only a lifetime boiled down to the persistent thought of this is bad this is bad this is bad this is bad this is bad this is bad this is bad. And then an array of what went wrong exploded in time with the bell—was it a stroke, a brain aneurysm, a seizure? Or was she dead, heart stopped, struck by lightning or the wrath of an uncaring god, the final devouring of a city she despised? And with the thoughts the pain seeped in. With it, an attempt at awareness, and figures moved in quivered Rorschach test, the low bass drum of distorted voices, and the stench of piss. Meaning reinfused the shapes around her, into shoes dragged on industrial tile, the stains of well-used abattoir walls, the ache in her face. She blinked, thought of her mother’s forgotten smile, how they used to hold hands and run when it rained, and then she was in a steel chair, arms and legs bound tight, uncertain if the light of the room flickered or if she was on the verge of losing consciousness again. She was not alone.

“You shot my brother,” the other said. He had close-cut hair, an unkempt beard, the disposition of a man that beat his son whenever he had a few too many rum and cokes on the weekends. He cracked the swollen knuckles on his left hand, the calm delivery betrayed by shark-dead eyes.

Malory tried to answer in a haze, and her world shattered at her jaw. Agony and swollen words strangled in her throat. She wanted to feel the damage, the fractured flesh of her cheek, but rope dug into her wrists and kept her still. Consciousness bloomed back full-force, and she was in the basement of Bagley Market’s exclusive real-meat boutique, the slaughter floor drain between her feet. She yanked against her bindings and screamed.

“I wouldn’t bother,” the man said. “This place is built to bury the death calls of cattle. Your little lungs don’t stand a chance.” He took a few steps forward until he loomed like

euthanasia, his face split wide in a mannequin grin. “Gutter rats always carry rabies and plague when they crawl from the sewer covered in shit, tainting everything they touch like a tribulation from God.” He tilted his head. “And here you are.” He hocked a loogie in her face and laughed, deep and throaty, but it rang hollow.

“Fuck off, synth-pig!” she screamed. Her heart, still congested with the smoldering wreckage of a desire to shoot the bystanders, ignited in a conflagration of rage. She wanted to sink her teeth into his jugular, tear out the artery, and drink deep.

“A little fight,” he said. “I like that.” He walked over to a cart filled with assorted instruments, complicated contraptions, and knives designed to slaughter livestock. “Makes it much more fun when you start to squeal.”

“I won’t tell you a damn thing,” Malory said.

“You will,” the man said. He gave a half-hearted shrug. “Even if you don’t, I will thoroughly enjoy myself.” He moved the cart next to Malory and sighed. “You will tell me about your friends.” He turned his back and started to unwrap tools. Metal clinked against metal, the silent work of a mortuary.

“I hope your brother dies,” she said. She resented his broad back, the shoulders unbent by a life of cruelty, the aroma of days-old cologne.

The man set down a half-unwrapped tool, plastic packaging fresh from the autoclave, and turned toward her. His face was impassive, malice woven into each hazel iris. Concrete eyes, ivory smile.

“You know,” he said. “We’re lucky, you and I. It’s such a rare thing to be implant-free these days. ZenTech practically gives their older neural net models away.”

“It’s not by choice,” Mal said.

“Yes, yes,” he waved. “You don’t have to remind me when you smell that way.” He rolled up his sleeves, and exposed a tattoo of an all-seeing eye in an hourglass, surrounded by a snake eating its tail.

“You’re part of a gang,” she said.

“Don’t you dare compare me to those bumbling dipshits from les Fantômes or the cowards in the Black Hands, girl,” he sneered. “The Sons of the Prophet aren’t a gang. We are a dedicated brotherhood that seeks to free the world from its oppressive shackles.”

“Right,” Malory said. She rolled her eyes. “Cult with a god complex. Got it.”

“It is fated,” the man said. He lifted a needle from the tray. “Our founder used to work with the Prophet. Information extraction. He was pretty damn good. Got to the point he could get anything from a subject just by talking to them. Some threats, here and there, the hanging sword of danger.” He brought the needle to her fingernail, set the point just underneath. A little pressure, the slight sting. “His favorite method was a self-immolation program—a few drops of gasoline, ignition to completion to ash a thousand times a minute. Star-bright dying and the total conquest of the soul. I’m not as good as him.”

“Fuck you!” she screamed. The needle inched deeper. Blood welled from the wound.

“I’ve always found more pleasure in the slow break, anyway,” he said. Deeper, deeper in. “The expressions, the trembling as a private symphony with me as the conductor. Tell me where your friends are.”

Malory didn’t answer. Instead, she thought about Maya, her sister, and a memory of watching her reset the weights in their heirloom grandfather clock. The slow ascension, the

creaking of cables, the fragrance of mahogany stained wood. Her sister, filled with joy turning the key, hadn't yet known pain. The needle went deeper. Malory always gave her turn to wind the clock to her sister to make her smile. In the corner of the memory was a shadow, the shimmering space where her mother stood watch. An ink-blot vibrating in and out, suppressed by her own subconscious. She would not allow herself to remember here. The needle inched deeper until only the eye protruded from under her recently chewed nail.

"Tell me about your friends," the man said. He turned around, grabbed a second needle, and set the point at the tip of her middle finger. I'm looking forward to the pliers the most. The versatility is unmatched. Fingernails, sure, but also teeth, ears, noses, eyelids, anything they can grab. You won't grow up to be a memory star, but it'll be a blast. For me. What are their names?"

"Lacey Lantern, the Mythological Merc," she laughed. The new needle slithered deeper and Malory reached for another memory of her sister: a fountain lake in the park, surrounded by jets blasting arcs of water into the air, Maya spinning in circles and drenched to the bone. The mildew smell did nothing to dampen her enthusiasm. She wanted to swim in the center, but the excision that used to be their mother wouldn't let her. Malory hated the place, the way it was built as a cheap imitation of something out west, the crowd of spectators, how everyone knew they were poor from their ragtag bathing suits. The needle crept in, and the water turned red. Parabolas, spirals, and criss-crossed streams of blood blossomed around her sister. The edges of the memory curled like rotten leaves, and their mother threatened to re-emerge. Malory took one last look at her sister's face and let the recollection die as the last of the needle buried itself beneath her fingernail.

“Where are your friends?” the man asked. If he was surprised by her resilience, he didn’t show it. He turned around and grabbed the pliers.

“I’m going to kill you, someday,” she promised.

“We all daydream,” the man said. He moved the pliers from one hand to the other, reveled in the weight. “Our founder, Ridge, was the only surviving member of the Prophet’s companions. Got thrown in jail a few days before the uprising.” He looked up at nothing, took a moment to contemplate. “I always wondered what it’d be like to miss your life’s purpose.”

“You need help,” she said. Her hand radiated agony to her elbow.

“Maybe,” he shrugged. He pointed the pliers at her face. “But the skills Ridge passed down will lead us to the second uprising someday, and free this city.” His mouth twitched with an adherent’s fervor, spittle flying free.

“Bullying children, are we?” a third voice asked. It was soft, melodic, like the notes of a closed-lid piano. The newcomer was tall, wore a dark pinstriped suit, and leaned on the door frame with an air of authority. “You should know better, Banks.”

“It’s only fair,” he said. He lowered the pliers, resigned to the fact his fun was over.

“It’s not the first time your brother’s gotten himself shot,” the newcomer said. There was a hint of danger in his words. He let the statement hang in the air a moment, two, then stepped into the room. His boots echoed with finality, a promised ending to a story only whispered in back alleys and homeless shelters. He stopped in front of Malory and knelt, his attention on her tortured hand, implant pupils spinning like clockwork gears. “That’s a shame. Mundane tissue is so very obsolete, after all. Better to do without.”

“I’m not giving up my friends,” Malory said. She stared at the drain between her feet and knew gray matter would be sliding down it soon.

“That’s nice dear, but I don’t give a shit about any of that,” the newcomer said. He reached up and grabbed her face, lifted it until their eyes met. His hand was mechanical, cold, all lines and elegant curvature. “You can call me the Stranger, and I want to make a deal.”

“What?” she asked. She had nothing to give, nothing to trade.

“This,” he said. He raised his other hand, the crab Nadia made clutched between metal fingers. “I want it. The design, the rights, all of it, and you’ll be free to go.” The offer tempted like songbird tunes. “No police, no record. No evidence you were ever here. Just me, you, and this lovely design changing hands. What do you say?”

“Yes,” she croaked. There was nothing to think about.

“Excellent,” he said. He released her and stood. “Pull those out of her pitiful hand.”

“Wait,” Banks said. “She shot my brother.” His grip tightened on the pliers.

“Oh, fine,” the Stranger said. “If you must, take her to the market square and have her whipped. No more of this basement barbarity. Then, you will let her go.” He turned and quit the room without looking back. There was no argument to be had. The corpo’s word was law in the depths of the market.

Banks moved, one wound at a time, a needle and a yank. Blood stained the wood, the floor, the cattle drain. He removed the ropes from the chair, but left them wound around her wrists and held them as they marched down the hallway, past holding pens and loading elevators, the smell of animal and shit and bleach, to the stairs and smooth concrete. Her feet slipped and she noticed a wad of gum stuck to the underside of the handrail and then she was inside the

storefront and visible to rushed customers, their shopping, the clean glass cases and digital displays, advertisements for different cuts of meat, rich clientele illuminated by hanging lights, tiny placard labels, and so much raw red. The bell rattled as Banks shoved her through the door and out into the market. He led her to an open square, past gawking onlookers, and forced her arms around a stone support column for a discount furniture store that specialized in sectional sofas no one shopped at. Malory focused on the cool of the stone against her abused face instead of the back of her dress ripping open, the jeers from the audience, or the way her teeth clenched near breaking.

The whip was made of clear filament with a heated core to cauterize as it rended flesh. It unspooled as Banks flexed his arm, eager to start. The air parted in a devastating crack and Malory's shoulder blades burst in pain she couldn't dissociate—she screamed until her vocal chords tore, and screamed more. Each lash was annihilation: pristine skin separated, blood cooked to evaporation, and the spreading scent of well-done synth-steak, over and over and over, until Malory was on the edge of permanent collapse. The crowd cheered for the first, the second, then faded to silence as the grotesqueries unfolded. Fourteen lashes sculpted the jagged branches of an oak tree in scars along her spine that would never bloom. When the punishment was over, Banks untied her and sent her on her way.

Malory kept her head down as she walked; she wasn't sure she could control herself if she saw pity, if she saw disgust on the faces around her. One foot in front of the other, back to the intersection of the market where their heist had taken place. She paused at the stained ground, the only evidence left of what they'd done—the market moved on, ever busy, ever selling. The few minutes they halted a small, myoclonic jerk in the boundless musculature of commercialism. She

headed up the stairs to the exit and never looked back. The sun was setting, and her dress fluttered in the wind. Each flap of the loose fabric made her wince. At a stop light, a flock of holo-hummingbirds circled around her head, each a fractal array of blue light that glistened in her eyes. She cried then, and did not stop until she reached a public bathroom and saw her face in the mirror. The side was black and blue, deformed with swelling. She used the free sample from the faucet to scrub grime and blood, and when it wasn't enough, she tore fabric from the hem of her dress and used it to tie the back closed. It was dark when she reached the orphanage and the others were celebrating.

Everyone but Oscar was in the living room: Martin was shoveling strings of dried meat into his already stuffed mouth, Spencer was modeling different designer outfits that all hung loose on his tiny body, and they all had beers in hand. Mal's focus gravitated to Nadia, who was surrounded by screens and electronics and assorted hardware. It was easy to tell she'd come up with something new to build, another tool that could change all their lives.

"What happened?" she asked.

"Made sure no one would follow us," Malory said. She touched her swollen face. There wasn't enough left to crack a joke the way she normally would, just an ever-present bitterness. She walked over and sat next to Nadia. "I need a drink."

"You can have mine," she said. She took a swig, belched, and handed it over. Their fingers touched, lingered, separated.

"Where's everything else?" Mal stared at the mouth of the bottle a moment, then chugged until it was gone.

“The attic,” she said. “Hid most of it from the director until we could come up with a bogus donation that was at least half believable.”

“Smart.” There was a silence that hung between them. Her face, her hand, her back all threatened to undo her. She sighed, set the empty bottle aside, and leaned until her face was next to Nadia’s ear. “I love you,” she whispered. She hoped the night would be free of nightmares for the first time in years.

Chapter Four

Malory woke, years older, to an embrace that wasn't memories of her dead mother, the ever-present phantom of a murderer, or the sweat of misplaced panic. Instead, Nadia's doll face was snuggled into the small of her neck. Each gentle breath tickled smooth skin and sent electric chills to the pit of her stomach. She wanted to stay there forever. Her arm was numb, but she didn't care; she focused on the warmth, the closeness, the steady rise and fall of a chest that belonged to the girl she loved until her bladder threatened to explode. She unwrapped herself with practiced movements and was glad Nadia was a heavy sleeper, whenever she actually slept. Mal slipped into the hall and headed for the bathroom with steady steps. The other orphans were beginning to wake, and she was happy to beat the competition to shower. When she entered, she stared at her reflection in the cracked mirror—the vestiges of malnutrition and sleep deprivation were still there, hidden under the surface, but her smile spoke of confidence, of a future, of possibilities free from the boot of oppressive poverty and unfeeling corporate greed. She accepted the way she looked, and the cold water did little to ruin her mood.

When her shower ended, she walked back to Nadia's room wearing a towel, long black hair dripping rivulets down her scarred back. She'd come to enjoy the pattern the whip had left, the way it represented friends, their safety, a chance stolen by their own desperate ingenuity—each branch represented a different possibility: university classes, a job repping General Sciences Peripheral products to wealthy clientele, or dangerous mercenary gigs in

Purgatory, anything free from the eternal downtrodden to gang enforcer pipeline. On her way, she found Martin and Spencer in their usual places in the living room, far too animated for the early morning. She had a brief flashback to whispers over their black-market pistol, the way they'd kept it hidden until the fated shooting, but she shoved the thought aside; they were all armed now, anyway.

"What's got you two so worked up?" she asked. Her feet left wet prints on the perennial stained floor.

"Oscar's gone," Martin said. His voice had deepened over time until it finally matched his giant frame.

"The Black Hands made him a full member yesterday," Spencer added. The heist they'd passed off as a unique supply donation had done little for his stick-thin frame and gangly limbs.

"Oh," she said. It wasn't much of a surprise, and would have happened far sooner if Oscar had been more personable, more skilled. "He leave anything behind?"

"No," Martin said. "He even stripped the Purgatory Hall of Fame merc posters his predecessor pasted everywhere."

"Damn," she said. "I was hoping he'd leave his little crow hologram for you, at least." She shifted her weight to the other foot, careful not to let her towel slip.

"Same," Spencer said. He had a thing for birds, and had tried to steal his own emitter several times, to no avail.

"Think I can take the room?" Martin asked. He'd made no secret of how uncomfortable sharing with Spencer had been due to his size, and it had become a running joke among the new generation of orphans.

“Who’s gonna stop you?” she asked. The director did nothing with room assignments. Mal let the question hang in the air until recognition dawned on his face, and then she walked away. They continued to chatter excitedly in her wake.

In the room, Nadia was tilted, half-naked, one arm draped over her face. The sheets were pushed to the foot of the bed, and one leg dangled over the edge. Malory walked over, dropped her towel, and ran fingers along an exposed flank in light circles until she felt a tremble. She didn’t stop—she traced invisible letters on goose-pimpled skin until Nadia shrieked.

“Okay, I’m awake!” Nadia reached out and grabbed Mal’s wrist to stop the tickling, and yanked her onto the bed. Damp hair slapped against skin. “Gross, you’re still soaked.”

“Too late,” Malory said. She wrapped her arms around the smaller girl and kissed her deep until neither could breathe.

“You’re so clingy in the mornings,” Nadia said. Her face was bright red, still unused to such straightforward affection.

“You know you love it,” Malory said. She angled downward, lips on skin, slow caresses, and blew a raspberry next to Nadia’s belly button. The sound bounced around the small room.

“Ah,” she exclaimed. “You’re the worst!”

“Maybe,” Mal said. They laughed together, and then faded to silence and shared warmth.

“Don’t you have somewhere to be?” Nadia asked.

“Yeah,” Malory said. She stood, walked over to their shared closet and started to dress. It was fall, so she chose her favorite transparent jacket, an obscure band t-shirt of a cat devouring the fragments of the moon, black shorts, and leggings. “Don’t be too jealous, but I’ve got a date.”

“Your sister doesn’t count, idiot,” Nadia said. She sat up and watched Mal, still blushing.

“Harsh,” she said. The sleeves of her jacket slid on, and she loved the way the see-through material reflected the neon at night. Perks to aggressive advertising, a fashion statement crafted from endless consumption. “How’s your new project coming along?”

“The servos are a bitch, but I should have it walking soon,” she said. It had kept her up through most nights, kept them sleeping apart.

“Looking forward to seeing it in action,” Mal said. She finished pulling on the leggings, twisted her damp hair into twin tails, and walked back to the bed for another kiss. “I’ll be back tonight.”

“Find me working in the closet,” Nadia said. There was a hint of mischief in her sunken eyes, the promise of bodies pressed. “I’ll show you something fun.”

Mal headed upstairs to find her sister, to their old shared room, and found Maya waiting in the hall in front of the door. A pang of guilt curled around her heart—she still felt terrible about moving in with Nadia, about leaving her sister on her own. That guilt was the driving factor in the plans for the day.

“You’re late,” she said. The mole under her left eye twitched. Agitation. She’d been waiting a while and given up on excitement.

“Sorry,” Mal said. She dug at one of the cuticles on her left hand until it felt like tearing. Her jacket crinkled with the movement. “Let’s go.” She turned to leave without making sure Maya followed.

“You haven’t even told me where we’re going,” she said. Her voice was flat, bored.

“It’s a surprise, of course,” Malory said. She headed down the stairs.

“Whatever.” Her sister followed in silence.

Outside, the immortal wall still loomed—never ending, never yielding safety that embraced New Detroit against the perils of the firmament, kept them caged in an open-air prison. There hadn’t been another skyfall since the day they all climbed the abandoned satellite uplink tower, but it was primed and ready in perpetuity. The two sisters walked down the street, crowded with the morning commute. None of the countless billboards garnered their attention, and no glass storefront was their destination. They paused at a massive hologram of an angel tree outside the nearest monorail station and admired the twisting, reaching branches, the detailed moss on bark, the flutter of so many leaves. Malory wished it was real so she could run her hands along the surface, feel the weight of age and nature and the foreign concept of longevity.

“Do you think mom would have liked this?” she asked. The memories remained sealed, quarantined to spare the core of pain, but she couldn’t help but think of her any time she saw something beautiful, something fleeting.

“I think so,” Maya said. She hesitated, then pushed further. “Mom would have encouraged us to climb the branches if it was the real thing, and taken pictures of us dangling near the top.”

“Come on,” Malory said. She tried not to think about it further and headed toward the monorail entrance. “I don’t want you to miss the show.”

“What does that even mean,” Maya protested, but followed anyway.

The inside was pristine, white, and encased with glass and tasteful advertisements. They waited in the ticket line behind suits, well-dressed travelers, and factory workers for minutes until it was their turn. The machine was vibrant blue and awash with digital displays for stops,

times, and prices per head. Mal pulled a makeshift rectangle from the pocket of her jacket that reflected the lights and signs of the station and pressed it to the analogue keypad until she heard the chime of successful payment for two to the industrial sector D that was embraced by another section of the wall—the object was her magnum opus, the results of all her programming efforts since their heist: it was a self-made hack for corporate dispensers that were tacked on faucets, vending machines, and kiosks to nickel and dime people to death. Two paper tickets slipped out and she grabbed them before Maya could ask any incriminating questions. They moved through the crowd, careful not to bump into anyone, and made their way upstairs to a bright yellow car that would take them to their goal. It was covered in graffiti that said ‘They Lied’ over a large Prophet’s Eye she recognized from the guard’s tattoo yet to be covered by the automated system.

They scanned their tickets and went inside. It smelled of recycled air and fellow passengers. They took two seats next to the handrail and waited for departure. The car filled, more and more, until it reached capacity, and filled more still until people were standing shoulder to shoulder. Malory thought they resembled cattle on the way to slaughter, but didn’t say so. Her foot was stomped on, scuffing the leather of her boots, and she resisted the visceral urge to kick the offender in the shin. Instead, she snuggled closer to her sister and watched the people, their eyes glazed over in glittering blue displays of the network, of message apps, of memory recalls. It would have been too easy to pick their pockets, harvesting credits and valuables to sell later, but that wasn’t why they were there. She ran her fingers across her sister’s arm and relished the feeling as the car started moving—they’d been apart too long, and she missed the way they used to wake tangled in each other, how they’d argue over meaningless things, all the history they

shared. When they got off the monorail, they were on a dirty street filled with the smog of progress, factory workers heading this way and that to long shifts of suffering and sweat.

“Looks promising,” Maya offered. She wrinkled her nose and tried not to sneeze.

“Trust me,” Malory said. She grabbed her sister’s hand and led the way.

The path was lined with emotionless concrete facades, highrise factories as far as the eye could see, each topped with billowing smokestacks and the occasional squat retention tank water tower. Burnt steel and plastic tainted the air. Malory walked fast, avoided breathing too deep, and was careful not to let her grip loosen, even when their palms began to sweat. She led Maya up a fire escape, across the corrugated metal that was near rusted through, and into a broken section of wall on the fourth floor. The interior was caked in dust and cobweb, but she continued on. Sheets and discarded tarps hung from the rafters and crunched as they moved. The low rumble of surround sound vibrated in the distance, and Malory knew they were close. Runoff pooled on their path, a leak left over from a storm the night before, and caused their steps to slap, wet and hurried. She shoved a wooden barricade aside and then they were there: they stood in the rafters overlooking what used to be the Ford drive-in movie theater that had been enclosed by the industrial resurgence of the city and remodeled as a vintage viewing experience. The massive silver screen was airing commercials before the run of her sister’s favorite D-tier horror movie.

“Wow,” Maya said. They sat together on the edge, their legs suspended over the audience below. “How’d you even find this place?”

“Oscar told me about it when he was drunk a couple weeks ago. Apparently, it’s a front for a division of the Black Hands.” She wondered what a group of hackers turned cartel needed a rundown theater to hide, but it didn’t matter.

The lights dimmed, and a few moments later, the movie started. The opening scene was the expanse of a carnival, filled to the brim with rides, attractions, and the painted faces of clowns herding crowds into queues. The focus of the film was a group of rich kids on vacation blowing off steam and their boisterous, shitheel antics. They cut in lines, littered, made fun of the performers during displays of talent, and intimidated anyone that got in their way. In the middle of the runtime, the group split into pairs and headed in different directions. The camera followed each of their journeys and signature rides, and alternated back and forth with terrible pacing. The twist revealed the rides were designed to kill—the clowns were only there to shepherd damned souls to the afterlife. Each of the rich kids died in a gruesome way, dripping with schlocky blood spatter and dismembered parts. The film ended and all the carnys packed up like nothing happened and headed to the next town where there were more rich kids and sinners to ferry into the great carnival in the sky.

“Thank you,” Maya said. She was beaming. “It looks so much better on the big screen.”

“We’re not done yet,” Malory said. She stood and led her sister back the way they came. The monorail was less crowded the second time around, free of the morning commute. The stench of the industrial sector clung to them until they got off near the riverside—the park was one of the last green spaces in the city, and normally cost a fortune to access, but Malory’s hack let them in unhindered.

“That’s gonna get you in serious trouble, one of these days,” Maya said. She tightened her grip on Malory’s hand.

“Maybe,” she said. Detention Center and forced labor couldn’t be much worse than the lashing.

The grass was fresh, mowed in even checkered lines that washed away the stress of travel as they followed the path to the river. In the distance, the massive span of the hypertrain bridge loomed out to Toronto, alight in bright neon and displays even during midday. Malory hacked them cheap synth-cakes they could eat as they walked along the bank and listened to the flow of fresh water—it was the lifeblood of New Detroit, an artery that brought in all the corporations like flies on shit. When they finished eating, they went to the edge and picked up rocks to skip along the surface. Maya managed seventeen, they counted, as the sun began to set.

“I know what you’re doing,” she said. She dropped the rock she held and gave up on the game. She sighed deep.

“What are you talking about?” Malory asked. She crammed her hands in jacket pockets and shifted on the gravel. The water rippled.

“Just promise me something,” Maya said. She turned until they were face to face. “Even if we end up on opposite sides of the city, promise me we’ll always be there for each other.”

“Always,” she said. She reached out and pulled her sister into a tight hug. “Forever.” The sun slipped behind the horizon, behind the megatowers and highrises, the wall, the river radiant for a moment until light twinkled out.

They decided to walk back to the orphanage and enjoy the spectacle of budding nightlife. B-girls, dressed in provocative clothing, coaxed pedestrians into bustling bars and clubs while the bouncers, decked in after-market military implants with iron on full display, menaced anyone looking to cause trouble. Outdoor seating was stuffed with noisy eaters, and traffic filled the roads, congested the air. So much noise, so much life. The way the throngs moved along was organic, mesmerizing, an autostereogram in reverse. There were automated turrets, customers,

and greed in every direction. Every few blocks, Malory spotted one of the new Model Eight Aeon bots that almost passed for humans moving about on errands and advanced AI programming. She wished she could get her hands on one, but her amateur hacking was nowhere near capable, and buying wasn't even worth the fantasy. Everything thinned the further they went: there was less light, obsessive advertisement, and less safety in numbers. They cut through an alleyway near the orphanage and immediately regretted it. The ground was still wet from rooftop runoff the night before, and cardboard and trash piled high on each side, mixed with the torn canvas of years-old tents and the miasma of human refuse. People called it home.

A ways down the alley, directly in their path, stood a machine that was once a man—he was a monument of shifting chrome, unmarred by superficial synth-skin, and glinted in the low-light path. In his hand was a black revolver that he lifted and fired once, twice, and then he moved. The steps were slow, measured, but carried the weight of inevitability, an unending tide that would wash away the world's wrongs. Malory tried not to breathe, to exist, and clung to her sister in pained silence. The monstrosity bent down to grab something, paused a moment, and another gunshot joined the night-noise of the city. He turned then, swung his mechanical hand precision-perfect to point the smoking gun at the two girls.

“We didn't see a thing,” Malory managed. She felt her sister convulse in her grasp and wanted to scream. She hated the powerlessness she felt, the misfortune that stalked her like a scorned lover, and couldn't help but think how perfect the green demon skull graffiti behind the man looked covered in viscera and gore.

The man lowered the pistol, and Malory saw acquiescence cloud his eyes before he holstered it and lumbered out of the alley. The sisters turned and sprinted back to the main street,

careful not to slip on trash or shit-slick pavement. It took them fifteen minutes to circle around to the orphanage; their lives circled the abyssal drain of New Detroit just to conserve fifteen goddamned minutes, and they only survived by whatever grace rattled around in the chrome-sick mind of a psychopathic mercenary. Their lungs burned as they worked their legs.

They reached the front door looking much the part of blood-drained apparitions, and before they could talk about what happened, found the director waiting. The foyer was stifling, solemn, filled with the overpowering scent of lilac perfume. The floor, stained and filthy as far back in memory as the girls could reach, had been polished to a shine. Candles had been lit and placed around the room. The chandelier they had a running bet on falling any day had been refurbished, and it shone bright and restored in all its antique glory. On the table nearby, expensive china was set out for tea that still steamed in cups. On either side of the table stood a man and woman dressed in enough money to make a corpo blush. The man, in a dinner jacket laced with dark and gold that evoked cascading obsidian. The woman wore a black sequined gown smeared with blooming flowers in negative. They both had optical implants that threw out so much digital noise their facial features melted to a blur. It was clear the trio had been waiting for the sisters to arrive. Bile festered in Malory's stomach and lurched its way up her throat until she tasted it.

"Your return is most timely," the director said. Their tone was kind, foreboding. "You have my congratulations, and condolences." The contradiction carried the same air as the psycho's black revolver, a certainty that life would never be the same. The director cleared their throat. "Our esteemed guests have chosen to adopt."

"No," Malory squeaked. The world spun. She knew what was coming.

“The processes and paperwork have been completed,” the director continued. Their countenance slipped, just for a moment, and revealed heavy melancholy.

“Can we hurry this along?” the man asked. His voice was unearthly, distorted. Another implant. He turned his head to the side, looking at an internal display of the time. “I have another engagement I must attend to.”

“Certainly,” the director said. They clapped, then motioned with their arm to one of the sisters. “Maya, I’m afraid you’ll be leaving now.”

“There’s no need to pack,” the woman added. She clasped her hands tight in front of her waist. “We’ll have new things procured.”

“Once again, I offer my congratulations. And my condolences,” the director said.

“No!” Malory screamed.

“It’s okay,” Maya said. She pulled her twin close, squeezed bone-tight, took a deep breath, and whispered in her ear. “Just remember your promise.”

“Please,” Malory begged. She didn’t want this.

“Say goodbye to everyone for me,” Maya said. She kissed her on the cheek and let go. Her expression was stoic, unmoving, as she followed the couple back out into the city.

The moment had been an absolute whirlwind, and before Malory could process, she was away and running down the hall. She didn’t stop at her girlfriend’s makeshift closet workshop, she didn’t acknowledge the other kids, and knew when she stopped the raw, unforgiving truth would collapse into her. She climbed the stairs three at a time, tripped, and skinned her knee through her leggings. The borders of her reality quaked. She continued, one foot in front of the other, and burst into the room they used to share. The smell of her sister lingered. She closed the

door behind her, climbed into the bed, threw the blanket over her head, and cried until nothingness consumed her.

Chapter Five

Their mom was murdered on a quiet Thursday night, and Malory watched it happen, cowering in a closet trussed shut with an old extension cord and hope. At the time, the Bennet family lived in Megabuilding 4A, in an upscale little apartment paid for by the life insurance of their father. The interior was decorated in dull yellows and muted brown, and had a small shrine that billowed incense and held hologram portraits of their ancestors—the living room was dominated by a top-of-the-line entertainment system the sisters spent hours in front of watching silly cartoons and educational programs and terrible horror movies while their mom was working shifts at an implant distributor in the market three floors down. They had never been outside; the megabuildings were self-sustaining ecosystems complete with hydroponics and energy generation floors, shopping centers that provided any goods or services imaginable, and adult recreation ranging from bars to brothels all enclosed nicely in a little corporate fiefdom. The grandfather clock chimed in the hall. That night, Maya was away at a friend's first sleepover, and Malory had sat in front of their window and stared out at the city, the glittering expanse, and counted aerial vehicles flying by until she went to sleep.

She woke to the shadow of her mother in the bedroom shaking her hard enough to hurt. There was a gash on her forehead that dripped on the sheets. Red. Animating force shed cleanly. Malory remembered being more upset at her stained bedding than whatever was happening—it was her favorite, decorated with little black cats in various poses playing with yarn and stuffed

mice and each other. Hands reached out and grabbed her face to force attention and the fragments of repression and the haze of years coalesced into how her mother used to look. She had the same mole as Maya, sharp brows, eye implants the striking color of violet lit up in emergency service call on hold. Her skin was alabaster smooth, marred by the fresh wound and the procession of time. Panic permeated stern features and her mouth moved in words the sleep disturbed girl couldn't understand, high-pitched and grating. She gave up and yanked Malory from the bed, clutched blanket trailing behind. She knocked over the mirror as she dragged her to the louvered closet and shut her in the dark.

“Always remember that I love you,” her mother said. She ripped an extension cord from the wall that powered assorted night-lights and holograms and wrapped it around the handles to seal the girl in false safety.

The bedroom door, hastily barricaded with a synth-plastic child's chair, exploded inward. There, in the frame, stood a man. Malory watched him through the slats, the way he crossed the threshold, the hatchet he carried. He could have been anyone in her mind: a blank slate boring banker, or a mega corpo deal closer, a street food vendor working to put his kids through college, or a greenhouse recycling supervisor on break. He wore a gray tracksuit, logos faded by sun and repeated washing, sported a close-trimmed beard, and seemed to encompass the world as he moved chrome-fast and raised his instrument of death. Malory cringed at the sound it made as it met skin, met bone, the way it tangled with her mother's screams, the splatter, and made sure to stand statue-still as she watched. Her heartbeat hammered in her head. The man was a brute, a butcher, and he grunted as he swung once, twice, over and over, long past the escape of a soul. He stood when he was done, and swayed in place grave-silent for fifteen minutes, eyes glowing

in rewatched memory, before he left. He never looked at the closet, or found the girl. Her mother's name was Reina, and Malory remembered. She used to smell of spring flowers.

She woke alone on her eighteenth birthday with tears in her eyes. The room was cold, crowded with packed boxes of Nadia's haphazard tech inventions. Her girlfriend had worked through the night. She sighed and rolled out of bed—she dressed in clothes from the day before, too apathetic to dig something clean out of her backpack. They were leaving at the end of the day, after the party. She headed out to the kitchen, sidestepped the other orphans decorating the halls, and started to cook breakfast. There wasn't much left but bread, powdered synth-eggs, and a little strawberry jam she hid in the back of the empty fridge's humidity drawer. As the eggs sizzled, she smeared it on toast and made tea. When everything was done, she took two plates on a tray down the hall to the closet. She nudged the door open with her foot and took in the sights: Nadia, hair pulled into a messy bun, face smeared with piston grease and exhaustion, surrounded by a veritable warehouse of circuit boards, machine parts, and scrap plastic molds primed for use, and in front of her a half-assembled four-legged robot that looked like an iteration of Malory's pilfered cat earrings.

“Room service,” she called. She climbed through the mess while balancing the tray, shoved parts aside, and sat beside her tiny tech lover.

“It's morning?” Nadia asked. Her eyes were dull, half-focused, and she'd been gnawing on her lip until it split.

“I think it's closer to noon,” she said. She set the food down between them. The tea let out a wisp of steam that curled and died.

“Oh,” Nadia said. She reached for a cup, and her eyes went wide in alarm. “The party!”

“Don’t worry,” Malory said. She stabbed her eggs with a fork. “Everyone else is already working on it. Pretty sure they knew you’d forget.”

“No,” Nadia said. She rubbed filthy hands on her overalls. “You don’t understand.” Her breathing picked up like she was barreling toward a panic attack.

“So tell me,” Mal said. Her mouth was full of imitation poultry, so it came out jumbled. “And eat something, for fuck’s sake.”

“I haven’t finished,” Nadia said.

“Big deal,” she said. She lifted a piece of flaccid bread covered in jam. “I’ve spent years sleeping in a room with all the things you never finished.”

“It was for you,” Nadia said. She stared at the food, but didn’t eat. “Your present.”

Malory didn’t know what to say. It would have been far too easy to act like it didn’t matter, since the last time she received anything she didn’t steal herself was a digital snow globe that showed the old moon in a sea of stars from her mother.

“It was supposed to be done by now,” Nadia said. She squinted at the half-assembled mechanical cat. “The little bastard’s actuators won’t work.”

“I’ll make sure to name him that,” Malory joked. She chewed another lackluster mouthful and took a sip of tea. It had gone cold. “Besides, you can just give it to me when you’re finished. A late gift is still a gift.”

“Right,” Nadia said. She went to say something else, but stopped. She picked up her cup, considered a moment, kept a secret. “Right.”

They ate together, and then Malory watched her work. Metal, wrenches, compact fabricators, the raw sheen of unpainted steel. She stared at the way the smaller girl’s hands

moved, swift and calculated, riddled by calluses and wear. The concentration, the way the world dissolved down to only the project and the steps to finish. It was the most beautiful thing she'd ever seen, but it couldn't last—the party wouldn't wait.

“Alright,” Mal said. She reached out a hand and put the assembly to an end. “Go shower. You smell worse than the boys after they’ve been running laps around the block.”

“Fine,” Nadia said. She flashed a shit-eating grin. “You’re just mad I won’t let you shower with me. You can’t tell me otherwise.”

“You’ll cave one of these days,” she said.

They came out of the closet to a flurry of activity—two of the younger generation were hanging a banner in the hall, August, Lilah, and Khalidah were dragging an old soda fountain through the front door they’d stolen from gods knew where, and someone had turned on the system speakers well past necessary and set it to play lo-fi pop instrumentals. Every cohort shared the same birthday. It simplified paperwork for the director and provided the perfect opportunity to cycle the groups when they aged out. When they knew they were leaving, they all wanted a spectacle when it happened—most would never see each other again once they were spat out into the bowels of the city and told to survive. Gang warfare, corporate liquidation, the NDPD, a failed Purgatory gig, it was a coin flip on what would take them first, and so it was one last celebration for the others to remember them by, a final snapshot of faded friendship. Nadia headed upstairs to shower, while Malory went outside and sat on the stairs in the same place where she and her sister watched the others play hopscotch before skyfall so many years before. She never expected to survive so long. She watched the slow setting of the sun.

When Malory was ready to go inside, she was interrupted by the sound of high-pitched buzzing and propeller blades. An industrial drone swooped down, kicked up dust and debris, and scanned her with facial recognition software. It blooped, happy in confirmation, and dropped a wooden weapons crate at the base of the stone steps. She approached with caution after the drone ascended, a thousand possibilities swirling through her head, and almost none of them good. She saw the words 'From Oscar' spray painted lazily across the lid and sighed. She cracked it open and fished out a handwritten note:

Hey kids,

It's been a while. I wanted to stop by in person to see you all out, but my assignment has kept me busy as shit. I know some of you are planning to join the Black Hands, and I sometimes think it would have been better to sign my soul away to a corpo rep, but I wanted to let you know I'll be here to help you feel welcome and get settled in. I've earned at least that much leeway since joining. Anyway, to make up for my absence at your party, I've sent something quite special. A little taste of freedom, you could say. Just make sure if you let the younger ones share it that the director doesn't find out. You know how they can be if you give cause. Good luck, have a blast, and I'll see some of you soon.

Oscar

Malory stuffed the card in her pocket and looked at the goods. Inside, countless bottles of top-of-the-line liquors and synth-ciders twinkled in every imaginable flavor. It was worth an absolute fortune, and selling it all would set one or two of them up with a wildly different future;

it would all be in their bellies before the end of the night. She wondered where he'd stolen it from, what kind of heat he got from doing so, or if it had been a gift from his gang mentor. She bent down, tried to lift the thing, and couldn't. Instead, she grabbed a bottle of strawberry spirits and headed for the door. In the foyer, she flagged down a group of younger orphans.

"Find Martin. Tell him there's something heavy for him to carry from outside. And to reward you with one of these," she said. She flashed the alcohol, saw their eyes alight with greed, and smiled. When they took off at a sprint, she headed for the living room to see what ridiculous thing the others had planned.

The party started with a game. The living room had been transformed: where previously the floor was covered in dust and trash, the windows blotted out by moldy blinds, and there had been a tattered red sofa only Martin and Spencer dared to sit on, it now had a brand new beige sectional, gaudy floral curtains that evoked decades past, and a small tv with a few dead pixels playing horror noir films on repeat. On the table, there was an assortment of little red cups, an actual bag of weed, and someone had found a beer bong. When Malory entered, she was handed a laminated card with the role she was supposed to play in their ragtag murder mystery themed after a highschool homecoming rager. She read the text, and frowned:

You are playing an aloof neo-vanguard painter. You have come to a younger sibling's highschool party to find inspiration for your newest work at the urging of your patron. You are hiding the fact that all your work was plagiarized from a lesser-known artist out of Old London. Guard this secret with your life. Be as suspicious as possible in hiding it.

And remember, secrets always meet consequences. You will be the second victim.

Have fun, stay in character!

Malory wasn't much of an actor, but the idea seemed novel enough for a little fun before everyone was too drunk to play along. She looked around the room for Nadia, and couldn't find her. The others talked in jovial tones, some with horrible affected accents—they were already following their scripts. She plopped herself down on the couch and studied the movie about a detective investigating a school suicide while something spectral haunted them. She took a swig of strawberry. It was the perfect kind of low effort production horror her sister loved. She sighed and zoned out until Khalidah sat next to her. The girl had always been shy, and Malory felt bad about it, but gave her a look of better-than contempt she thought a famous artist might have.

"You go to school with us?" Khalidah asked. She seemed nervous, and her eyes kept darting around the room like she expected to be yelled at. Or something dangerous.

"No," Malory said. She waved her arm out wide. "School is what I like to call a prison for all the ugliness of the world. I have moved on to beauty."

"Then why are you here? Are you celebrating the game?" she asked. There was a seed of suspicion taking root. Good.

"Inspiration," Mal said. She raised her drink, examined the bottle dramatically. "Looking for the right language in colors. My own are so very drab."

"Are you a poet, or something?"

"A painter. The most original one you'll ever meet," Malory said. "I find my muse in the most unusual ways."

“Right,” she said. She scooted closer. “I was going to ask you about the cheerleader drama. Something big happened after the game. I wonder if you knew one of the girls was missing?”

“That sounds particularly beautiful,” Malory said. Whoever created the character cards had binge too many memory chip dramas.

“What?” she asked. She had a strange look on her face. “Who did you say invited you?”

“I didn’t,” Mal said.

A scream, loud and painfully fake, interrupted them. It came from upstairs. Everyone in the living room stopped, looked at each other, then filed out to see the next plot development. Malory followed. In the hall, in front of the bathroom door, Nadia played dead. Discarded beside her was a rubber knife with the handle painted in small lilac flowers. The plot clicked into place as everyone started to whisper: Malory was a red herring, the misdirection for the real killer to get around unnoticed. How fun. She backed away from the crowd slowly, and headed down the stairs. She sat on the couch again and waited for the conversation upstairs to finish—waited for someone to suss her out from the clue she dropped. She sat there fifteen minutes until Spencer skidded to a stop in front of her, the shy Khalidah in tow. She took another sip, and wondered how to play it. Haughty, maybe.

“There’s been a murder,” Spencer said. He tried for a southern drawl and failed. The accent made the statement sound absurd. “You aren’t one of us. Who invited you?”

“My brother,” Mal answered. The ghost stalked the detective through an abandoned cafeteria in the movie behind them.

“Who’s your brother?”

“Don’t know,” Malory said. The card forgot to mention. “I painted a portrait of him once to remind me, but I forgot it at home.”

“You don’t know who your own brother is?” Khalidah asked. She tilted her head to the side, as if a different angle would make more sense. Another wave of people entered the room.

“Nope. Probably looks like me, though.”

The lights in the room went out all at once, as if someone cut the breaker. Malory heard a loud thud, then felt a hand clasp around her mouth.

“Good job,” a deep voice said. The hand smelled of soap and cherry cider. “Wait a few seconds when I let go, scream, then play dead.”

She did as she was told. She counted to ten, then let out an ear-piercing shriek that carried all the weight of her dead mother, her sister’s abrupt adoption, the years spent in squalor. When the lights came back on, she sat dead on the couch, the same rubber knife next to her, fake blood on the blade. There was a collective gasp, and when she peeked, she could see the confusion and consternation on Spencer and Khalidah’s faces. They’d been so certain they had solved the puzzle before anyone else. Murderer’s steps misdirected successfully. Part played. The voices around erupted in terrible acting, each doing their best not to break character. There were some wild theories thrown out, but no truths. No sadness for her death. The focus seemed to be on finding someone from the losing team that wasn’t meant to be at the party. Obvious motives. Malory almost laughed when one of the kids pretending to be a football player confused the rules for ice hockey and no one noticed. No one paid attention to the corpse.

When the group unceremoniously moved out of the living room, Malory went upstairs. Her role in the game had ended, so she ignored the others when she moved past. She had no real

interest in the outcome of it all. She slipped into their shared bedroom, and found Nadia sitting on the bed, her face hidden between her knees.

“Hey,” Malory called. She sat next to her and handed the half-full bottle of liquor over. “Brought you something.”

“Thanks,” she said. She took it, but didn’t drink.

“Strange night,” Mal said. She rubbed her cheek and remembered the pain of the sucker punch that wrenched her jaw. It still clicked when she chewed. “What was your role?”

“Missing cheerleader,” she said. Her voice was low, stifled. Something was wrong.

“Huh,” Mal said. She reached out to touch her leg, but she pulled away.

“We need to talk,” she said. She raised her head, and her eyes were puffy, swollen. She’d been crying.

“Okay,” Mal said. Her stomach dropped. “Whatever it is, we can handle it.”

“I’m not going with you,” she said. She pulled a folded envelope from her pocket.

“What do you mean?” Mal asked. It didn’t make sense. They’d planned for months to get a low floor megabuilding apartment on credit while they tried to find jobs. Simple, easy.

“Here,” she said. She handed the envelope over. Inside was an acceptance letter to the technology and engineering department of ZenTech University, full-ride.

“Oh,” Malory said. She read the paper twice, three times, willed it to change to anything else. It didn’t really register. “Okay.”

“Okay?” she asked. She scrunched her eyebrows together. “That’s all you have to say?”

“What?” Malory asked. She handed the letter back. “It’s not like we have to break up or anything, right? We just won’t see each other for a while. We can handle that.”

“How are you so calm?” she asked.

“I’m not,” Malory said. She reached out and pulled Nadia over to her. “But it’s not like I’m gonna say you shouldn’t go. You’re the only one of us I’ve ever heard of getting into university. Not going would be insane. Seriously. I’ll just have to come up with a different plan.”

“Any ideas?” she asked. She sniffled, and buried her face into Mal’s neck.

“A pretty dumb one, yeah,” she answered. The gangs were forever in need of meat to grind against the corporate machine. “I’ll figure it out later. If this is the last night I get to spend with you for years, I’m sure as fuck gonna make it count for something.”

They made love while the murder mystery spiraled to conclusion downstairs. The quarterback had gone around the party killing women. One of the cheerleaders had rejected him, and he decided to make it everyone else’s problem. Afterwards, the alcohol disappeared at an alarming rate—each of them knew it was their last night together, that some of them would be dead before long, and it showed. They all went a little extra in everything; they talked louder, drank more, brought up obscure moments from their past none of the others remembered. Something they each came back to was the time they etched their names in steel and chalk high above the city. As the night dragged on, consensus became that would make for a pretty good gravestone, all things considered. That they should return, cross out the names whenever one of them died. Spencer demanded his ashes shot from a cannon at the top of ZenTech tower so that the people below would see him, if only for a moment, and no one laughed. When the party ended, Malory and Nadia separated, short of breath and bearing fresh promises written in the marks on their necks. Malory shouldered her backpack and followed Martin and Spencer to join the Black Hands.

Chapter Six

It was Monday morning, and Malory was stuck mopping shit from the linoleum floor of a smoke shop bathroom. She was not having a good time. The headband on the mop was old, its fibers ineffective, and it smeared the mess across the tiles. She thought it would be more cost-effective to let a rival gang raze the place to the ground, but she continued. By the time it was finished, the water bucket smelled of quarantined hospital waste, and she was drenched in sweat. She took the container to the alleyway and dumped it. It felt fitting; human refuse was the city's natural element, after all. Her shift only started, and she had so much left to do. The display cases needed to be scrubbed of fingerprints and grime, the shelves had to be restocked with assorted glass and resin pipes, synth-tobacco bags, and cold beer, and they'd started forcing her to take deliveries from their single makeshift pizza oven despite not having GPS to find addresses. It was all something a service bot could do if they weren't too cheap to pay the subscription. She used the time after deliveries to take unsanctioned breaks and bury the urge to get on the hypertrain one way to anywhere else.

As she worked, she kept her eyes focused on the back room she was forbidden to access. It was the reason the Black Hands owned the place, a front for one of their many operations, and it taunted her. She'd caught glimpses of server lights and screens overflowing with data and graphics any time a full-fledged member headed back, but she couldn't figure out the purpose. Any time she'd asked, she'd been stonewalled, threatened, or flat-out ignored. The more they

tried to keep her out, the more the obsession grew. She wanted to know their secrets, and she had several schemes in the works that ranged from attempting to hack the optic networks of arriving members, to barging in pistol drawn and demanding answers. As frustration at the lack of her programming progress grew, she turned further into fantasies of winning the lottery, of a long-lost relative bequeathing their fortune, of a little synth-log cabin far from society—there was only so much she could do without her own access to the neural net. Implants cost credits and accumulated reputation, credits and rep cost time working for the gang, and so she was stuck grinding menial labor tasks long offloaded to robots and contemplating escape. The truth was in Oscar's letter, but she hadn't wanted to see it.

Her life had become a procession of unending nightmares; she woke in a moldy basement hovel below an automated tattoo booth rented for a handful of credits under the table and wondered when it would be her turn for fame, she ate whatever slop she had on hand, and clocked in to ten hour shifts and cleaned, stocked, and delivered styrofoam that masqueraded as food to other poor bastards. When she was done, she headed back home, drank ethanol siphoned from industrial solvents until she was delirious, and tried fruitlessly to expand her programming skills. She hadn't had any contact with her friends—Martin and Spencer were trapped in the same type of hell, Oscar had been a no-show upon their arrival, and she craved a reunion with Nadia where they staked their claim on a better life hand-in-hand. The rest of their cohort had disappeared into the ether. What kept her grinding was the knowledge none of it was permanent: she was going to become a full member, earn privileges and gear, and any credits she scraped together would lead to the city center. She stoked the embers of desire for revenge on New Detroit, the world, for a happiness she was owed. She would not allow herself to break.

That day, when her shift ended, she took a detour to the chapter headquarters to bother the Doc. She rode the monorail up town and watched the people as she waited for her stop to come. Across from her was a bald man with a mechanical jaw. So many augmentations, so much wealth. His eyes, glazed over in a business call, did not register other passengers. His suit was crisp, designer, and she knew it would be easy to slip into his pockets unnoticed. Malory wondered why he hadn't splurged for artificial hair or if he loved the look of confidence, of power. It was one of the many pieces on her list—she wanted to be able to swap the color of her locks at will, the style, and not have to worry about maintenance and constant cleaning. She daydreamed about being slotted with so much chrome she intimidated the monster in the alleyway, about being renowned in Purgatory, of a celebrity that surpassed Lacey Lantern. Next to her, an old lady pushing seventy was filling out a crossword puzzle with an engraved pen. She didn't bother with digital displays. Preferred the tactile response, Malory guessed. Everyone had something that kept them sane in the city, and she couldn't begrudge them that.

The building that housed the headquarters was gray, solemn, and tucked between an AV dealership and a life insurance firm. The entrance was unassuming, and locked down tight enough to rival a government funded bio-weapons lab. She waited for the facial recognition scan, let the interface prick her finger to test her blood, and keyed in the twelve digit code she memorized on day one of orientation—it only switched to something new if there had been a data breach, and she didn't think anyone was delusional enough to target a cartel founded on hacking techniques and information extraction. When the door unsealed, she was met with three guards holding submachine guns who checked her over. She bit her lip and endured their hands as they searched for weapons and explosives. They seemed on edge, afraid. Above her

pay-grade. The lobby was mausoleum-quiet, except her footsteps, every inch encased in patterned marble. There was no warmth to be had, no invitation. The place gave her the creeps, as if idling too long would draw out the long dead to plead for one last chance, so she did not wait. She entered the elevator, pressed the only floor she could access, and headed to the medical wing.

There was no music, just the electric whirl of motors and the stomach-lurching descent into the depths. For a moment, she was alone with her sober thoughts, and they drifted toward her mother, toward the grief she felt when allowing herself to remember, and an afternoon they played hide and seek. Malory hid in a pile of dirty laundry and watched between a sweatshirt sleeve and a stained skirt as her mother searched. She held her breath when she came near, and giggled when her mother passed her by. She gagged when the smell became too much and scrambled to a new hiding place—she never won, but the fun was in the process, in the way her mother’s arms wrapped around her whenever she was found, the safety. The elevator doors opened to the sounds of cursing and frustration—the Doc was working, and it wasn’t going well. When Mal walked in, he didn’t look up, so she took a seat on a little stool and watched. His hands were buried in a tangled heap of an implant, all chrome and wires and tubes of treated glass. Behind him, the shelves were lined with cryo containers, expensive surgery equipment she couldn’t recognize, and so many assorted pills, inhalers, and injectors.

“You’re going to bother me until I’m old and gray, aren’t you?” he asked. The Doc was overweight, his long hair swept back in a knot. Both of his legs were mechanical, digitigrade, and left him with an unflattering image of a pudgy owl long past its prime. His hands clicked something into place, and he sighed.

“But you’re already old and gray, Doc,” she said. Her eyes focused on a jar with a suspended human heart, the way it sat motionless, all hope abandoned, and she shivered. “We both know you crave the company, or you would have revoked my access a long time ago.”

“Smartass,” he laughed. Another click, another curse, and he gave up on the chaos in front of him. It didn’t seem like an enviable job, but it had to beat scrubbing shit.

“What are you working on?” she asked. She spun around on the stool, eager to ask what she really came for, but knew he’d appreciate an opportunity to vent.

“A piece of hopped-up scrap,” he said. He lifted the thing from the table, let the wires dangle, then dropped it. “Supposed to be Hua Tech’s revolutionary foray into nervous system management. You know, really change the way it feels to be human. One of the higher ups wants it installed tomorrow.”

“Not good?” she asked. It was easy to trust the man. His wealth of knowledge and experience stretched back longer than she’d been alive.

“Overpriced garbage,” he said. He turned round to face her, and his pupils narrowed as she spun around and around. “I wouldn’t install it on my worst enemy. But he’ll get whatever he wants, even if it kills him.”

“Oh,” she said. She stopped spinning, jumped up, and walked over to his work station. All the strands resembled fiber-optic cables up close, glistened like cosplayed crystal in sterile lights. “Planning a murder, are we? Sounds like fun.”

“It does,” he laughed. He bent down, his legs backward at a strange angle, and pulled a slip of paper from one of the drawers. He hesitated to hand it to her. “I know what you’re here for, girl. And you’re going to regret it.”

“Is that what I think it is?” Mal asked. She felt herself vibrate with anticipation, her adrenal gland pumping. Pestering him for months had gotten nowhere, but she kept coming out of habit and a wish for the future.

“Don’t get ahead of yourself,” he said. He held the paper up, as if to taunt her. He was enjoying it. “This is just a trial run. Something to prove you can handle explicitly illegal acts without shitting your pants and crying out for mommy.”

“Is that what happened on your first job?” she asked. She had to resist the urge to snatch the details out of his fat hand.

“Yes,” he deadpanned. His eyes unfocused, remembering. He was still for a moment, then he smiled and handed her the gig description.

“Finally,” she said. A test was a way in, a chance she could seize, and she felt fate spiral out from the instructions in front of her.

“It’s simple enough,” he said. He dug his fingers back into the strands of mechanical nerves. “And perfect for you. Head to the entertainment district outside the arena, find the plaza full of ZenTech vending machines. Use your little skeleton key and empty them all out. Let the spectators take the goods, and keep yourself clean.”

“Hitting a corporation directly?” she asked. It seemed ill-advised, but she was so far from the decision makers and all their hidden plans.

“Yeah, one of the chapter masters wants to make a name for himself,” he said. He rubbed the back of his neck. “Guy’s obsessed with recreating the whale fall that happened after Energo Lunar killed the moon. What you’re doing is just a small piece in the first shot across the bow. If I thought it was too dangerous, I wouldn’t have saved it for you.”

“Thanks,” she said. She spun on her heels and made to leave. Excitement was eating her alive, and threatened to overtake her rationality.

“Wait,” he said. He opened another drawer and tossed her a mask. “Wear that. It’s got interference built into the lining. Should keep you off their cameras. Maybe.”

“You’re the best, Doc,” she said. The mask was white as snow, a stitched neon pink and blue mouth grinning up at her. “Have you heard anything about my sister?”

“No,” he said. There was nothing else to add. “Stop by when you’re done.” And then he was lost in troubleshooting the implant, and forgot her existence.

She rode the elevator back up and hit the street in all its night glory near a sprint. She felt the wind on her skin as she went, all that neon shining bright above her like hope, or a beacon in the dark. She moved through the crowded sidewalks, the pulsing arteries of the city, past the punks and corpos and small-time mercs, the party-goers, the B-girls and bouncers, the robots and military hardware and NDPD street patrols, all that teeming life en route to her destination. She sucked in dirty air and moved her legs, let the rush envelope her. Boots on pavement, one foot in front of the other. She donned the mask when she reached the plaza and took in the excess: cobblestone stretched out in front of her, interspersed with planters and benches and so many holograms of trees, advertisement screens for Hayashida Corporation, Aeon Automotive, Tianwei International, and Tenno Tech hovered in all directions—there were brothels, memory theaters, dive bars, upscale restaurants, and gaming centers framing the plaza, the arena ever-important in the distance. She mingled in the crowd, hand clasped tight around the hack in her pocket, and considered her escape. It would be easy enough, once the scramble started, to slip away unnoticed.

She made her play, one machine at a time—she held the makeshift rectangle to the displays and pressed keys until every item was highlighted. When the contents disgorged at her feet, she moved on. With the disguise fastened to her face, she fancied herself a renegade, a people’s crusader come to deliver justice to corporate greed. Three cheers for the big hero. Items bloomed free in her wake. Another machine, another hack, another payload delivered to the masses. The spectators didn’t hesitate; chips, candy, soda, sandwiches, stuffed animals, hangover cures like aspirin and electrolyte solutions, eyedrops, sleep aids, face masks, and canned synth-meat, to the more esoteric selections of spare ties, shirts and skirts, undergarments, guitar strings, cartoon figurines, bike parts, small animal holo-emitters, and condoms were snatched the moment they came to rest. Malory did not stop until she hit every spot in the plaza, until she heard the approach of corporate security. On her way out, she grabbed a hologram of a potted cactus as a souvenir. The high of success didn’t fade until she was sitting in front of the Doc again, her face flushed, covered in a layer of sweat. It felt good to get away, to not be whipped in front of strangers, to prove she could fight back.

“Good job, kid,” the Doc said. He’d finished the calibration while she was gone and sat at his desk pouring over detailed schematics and product brochures for new hardware releases. “Already made network news. Some of the more revolutionary types have been calling you the Good Samaritan.”

“It’s good, right? Does that mean you’ll have more work for me?” Mal asked. She played with her new prickly emitter, and decided to name it Julian.

“Always right to the point with you,” he said. He let his hair down, ran his fingers through the gray until it dangled smooth at his shoulders. He looked tired. “But yeah. There’s something big in the works. I put your name in for consideration.”

“Awesome!” she cheered. She ran her hands through the hologram, watched the light bend and scatter where she would have felt the prick of spines.

“Don’t get too excited, he said. He reached over, pulled an envelope from a stack of blueprints and manuals. “I also have bad news. Something came for you while you were out.”

“What is it?” she asked. She eyed the yellow paper, the Black Hands logo sealed with synth-wax on its surface. Serious business, then.

“Next of kin notice,” he said. He sighed and handed it to her. “I’m sorry.”

“Oh,” she said. It was worse than she expected. A right hook from a blind spot that left her reeling. She undid the seal and read the words:

To whom it may concern,

Be it known, henceforth, from the date of reading, that the next of kin of one Oscar Karna, hereby deceased, known to have fallen while ensuring the operational success of the Black Hands Cartel, do hereby consent to the personal assets of the aforesaid decedent to be disposed of or seized by, pursuant to Black Hands Charter 3C:11-18, for the benefit of expediency and ease of the Chapter Masters and the Administration. No burden of burial shall be transmitted to any heirs or creditors in compensation for said asset disposal or seizure.

That was the totality of a life, taken. One of the people she'd known since childhood, gone forever, with nothing to show for it. The two hadn't been close at all, separated by too much time, but loss was never compatible with logic. She felt herself cry, then, and didn't try to stop it. She left her previous success forgotten.

"Look, kid," the Doc said. He placed a large hand on her shoulder and held her steady. "I'm not gonna try to make you feel better or offer meaningless platitudes. That isn't constructive. It hurts. I know. Believe me, I know. Let yourself feel it, work through it on its own terms. And when you're able, do something small to honor them, show their spirit you remember."

"Yeah," she said. She wiped snot on her sleeve. "I should go."

"Sure," he said. He let her shoulder go and leaned back in his chair. The metal creaked with his weight.

"See ya later, Doc," she said. She folded the notice, put it in her pocket, and turned to leave. One of her boots was untied.

"Hey," he said. He offered a sad smile. "There's an extra room in the back you can have. Being alone in that shithole you're renting isn't gonna help."

"Thanks," she said. She headed for the elevator. She bit the inside of her cheek and stopped in front of the doors. "I'll take your offer after I clear my head."

She wandered the streets for a while, lost and aimless, until an idea took hold. Something half-heard in the drunken endings of their cohort's going away party—the names on the abandoned satellite tower Oscar led them up to watch the skyfall, how the others thought it made a gravestone worthy enough for their station. It seemed as fitting a place as any to let herself feel

vulnerable. She found herself outside the building, and squeezed between the gate. The climb was easier with age, without a passenger. She scaled the same wall, the busted sign over the entrance, the abandoned scaffolding, and did not look down. A grip on a suspension cable, her boot crammed into the seam of sheet siding, one handhold to another, until she reached the top. She gave the finger to ZenTech headquarters when she reached the top and headed to the base of the uplink. The chalk outline had long faded, but their names still sat, forever etched into the surface. She stood in silence; there was no great truth to whisper except none of them ever stood a chance. Oscar died trying to get one, at least. That was the best any of them could do. She crossed a jagged line through his name and sat to watch the sunrise.

SPENCER

LILAH

MARTIN

~~OSCAR~~

KHALIDAH

AUGUST

NADIA

MAYA

MALORY

Chapter Seven

Malory twirled around and around on a little stool balling up scraps of old invoices and job slips to build an arsenal. Each one completed was another she could launch at the back of the Doc's head—he'd been ignoring her, so she was at war and bored out of her mind. An arc through the air, a bounce, and then they joined a graveyard of their brethren. Perks of living in the lab's spare room? Clean, breathable air, complementary meals, a padded mattress free of bedbugs and so many biting mites. A shower with hot water. Sheets that smelled of antiseptic instead of city smog, and the reassuring presence of a trusted adult. Cons? She was forced to keep to a schedule, to respect a space that was never truly hers, and had to suffer the Doc's bad habit of becoming so engrossed in his work that she wasn't sure if she'd died in her sleep and only lingered on as a disgruntled specter. Another throw, and a miss. She kept a tally running in her head, and came to the conclusion her aim was horrible. It didn't matter. She spun on the stool until she was dizzy—she wanted a job, to find her sister, to curl up in Nadia's warm embrace; she wanted anything, really, to break the monotony.

“You need a hobby,” the Doc said. That day, he was dissecting the scrap of an antiquated Model Four Aeon robot recovered from a back-alley skirmish and ignoring the paperwork accumulated on his desk. Some of the parts on the bot were reusable as after-market implants if someone was desperate enough. No good thing to waste.

“You won’t let me drink anymore,” she said. She waited until the dizziness faded, then threw another wadded ball.

“That’s not a hobby,” he said. He snatched it from the air without turning around or looking up. “It’s just an escape.”

“What else am I supposed to do without my own neural net?” she asked. She’d watched and rewatched every memory chip he gave her a hundred times over until she could quote obscure scenes and facts from memory. Knowing the mathematical formula for Gaussian distribution did little to alleviate boredom.

“No matter how many times you ask, I can’t just slot you with one out of the kindness of my heart,” he said. There were so many invoices and paperwork involved. A strict hierarchy of accountability that disappeared any unsanctioned corruption, real or perceived. The eternal machine of a strictly enforced bureaucracy.

“I know,” she said. She let the crumpled receipt in her hand fall to the floor and examined her boots, their scuffed leather, the threads of knotted laces. “What about my sister? Any news?”

“No,” he said. He stopped working, turned to face her, and sighed. “The description you gave me isn’t much to go on. The people with that kind of wealth have ways to disappear, even from our networks.”

“Oh,” she said. It wasn’t unexpected, but it still hurt. She had made a promise, after all, and intended to honor it. “Will you keep looking?”

“Of course,” he said. He massaged his forearm, sore from wrenching parts from their casings. “I’ve got a few contacts that specialize in this kind of thing. I’ll throw it to them, see what they come up with.”

“Alright,” Mal said. It was something to hold on to, at least. She looked around at the mess she’d made, and started to clean. She wasn’t in the mood to harass him anymore.

“Give me a sec,” the Doc said. His eyes clouded over in the blue sheen of a call.

Malory threw the garbage into the compactor chute, pressed the button, and listened to the internal mechanisms churn it to pulp, ready to be recycled. She walked around the lab and looked at the labels of cryo containers—the Doc had enough chrome on the shelves to outfit an army, and she supposed that was the point. Most of it was low-level consumer stuff, but every so often, she spotted a piece that wasn’t available to the general public, even on military surplus; those were the pieces a merc would kill their own mothers to get. The upper echelon’s, waiting to be configured and slotted, she assumed. It wasn’t any good collecting dust in inventory. She stopped in front of a device straight from one of her sister’s favorite fright-night films: it had latches and leather straps to sit around the head where scalpels and lasers carved away skin, flesh, and bone. Robotic hands threaded new nerves, a new face to replace the old. Plastic surgery, refined and automated. It gave her goosebumps when she imagined it sculpting away at her. She knew there was built-in anesthesia, but it didn’t mitigate the clinical horror. She moved on to the bottles of pills and read the scientific names of ingredients to purge the image from her mind.

“Good news,” the Doc called. He took a seat at his desk and waited for the printer to spit out a physical dossier. He was old-school, in that regard. Said it made organizing easier when the documents and tabs weren’t in his head.

“You just want me out of your hair,” she said. She walked over and stood by his side. The ventilation kicked on with a hum.

“Of course I do,” he said. He pulled the document from the tray and read it over one more time. “But I also have a job for you.”

“Really?” she asked. She’d been living there for weeks and hadn’t gotten anything after the first. She refused to go back to mopping shit after the taste of something more.

“I put your name in for something big, remember?” He handed her the page. It was still warm, and smelled of burnt ink. “Finalization came through.”

“Fuck yeah,” Mal said. She jumped up and down, and then clasped him in a hug. He was too wide to fit her arms around, but she tried anyway. She hadn’t believed him at the time, thought he was promising the stars to brace her for Oscar’s death notice. Something big meant rep, meant credits. She let go, and turned her attention to the description. When she finished reading it, she had to read it again in disbelief. She turned pale. It felt like some kind of sick joke. “You want me to do *what*?”

“Before you freak out, look at the reward further down,” he said. He gave her a sly smile.

“A selection of implants?” she asked. There were no names listed. The incentive was there, sure, but it seemed like a trap. “Kind of vague.”

“I played around with the wording a bit,” he said. He cracked the knuckles on his left hand and shifted in his seat. “It allows some leeway in what I can give you.”

“ZenTech tower, though?” she asked. Sure, she could pay the visitation fee, see Nadia. But the dorms were so far from anything important. And seeing her was personal. “Doesn’t matter much if I’m dead, either.”

“It’s not that serious,” he said. He reached out, palm extended. “Give me your little hack for a second, and you’ll see what I mean.”

“Okay,” she said. She fished it from her pocket and handed it over.

“With a little upgrade to your programming,” he said. He pulled a connective wire from his neck, slotted it into the rectangle she’d made. His eyes glowed with the upload, he went stock-still for a moment, and then he was done. He unplugged and gave it back. “Now it should open any doors you come across in the tower, within reason. You just have to get to a mainframe access port and upload the malware package I stuck on there.”

“What about the cameras? The guards?” So many variables, so much unmitigated risk. No wonder they were fine giving the job to a kid with no rep and dangling chrome as the reward. They didn’t expect it to work.

“You still have my mask,” he said. He shrugged. His hair fell in his eyes, and he brushed it aside. “Use your friend as a way in the door. Wait until night when security is thin.”

“I guess,” she said. There wasn’t a lot of confidence, and using Nadia to get what she wanted felt wrong. She didn’t want to be that kind of person.

“Look, kid,” the Doc said. He stood to his full height, grabbed her tight by the arms, and forced her to look into his eyes. “I’ll say this only once. The Black Hands is not a charity. I like having you around, that’s true, but I staked my reputation to get you this chance. This is what you said you wanted, why you came to me in the first place. Get your shit together and tell me you can do it.”

“Yeah,” she said. She clenched her jaw, felt the click of abused cartilage. He was right. This was what she wanted, and it didn’t matter if it was designed for failure. She would fill in the details herself. She didn’t need every action planned out in advance, or someone else’s script to follow. She had the tools provided, and that’s all that mattered. “I can do this.”

“Good,” he said. He let her go and sat back down. His desk was cluttered with unfinished reports and so many stacked documents. “Now go. I’ve got work to do.”

When Malory reached the plaza outside the tower, the first thing that drew her attention was the large statue of ZenTech’s founder. The man, whose visage was forever cast in treated bronze, presided over everyone that passed as if he’d ascended to godhood. In life, he had been a scientist. Lab coat clad, research papers in hand, an honored symposium speaker. When he figured out how to pair DNA with metal, he launched his company on the premise of safe and secure implants; gone overnight was the fear of bodily rejection and the need to take immunosuppressants. Behind the statue, sixteen hundred feet of glass and concrete rose from the earth, a corporate fortress erected at the center of a network that spread like metastasized cancer. Malory wondered if those at the top could see the disease underneath, all the children, the scarred lungs like hers, or if they looked out at the horizon of a world long conquered. She climbed the marble staircase that led to the entrance and noticed a memorial plaque for Herman Mitchell, the CEO assassinated during the Prophet’s uprising. The man’s death ended their stranglehold on internal tech, a broken monopoly that fostered in the golden age of chrome and mercs.

She pushed through revolving glass doors to the lobby, her senses assaulted by crisp reds and golds and so many holograms suspended from the vaulted ceiling—attention commanded by space and luxury, corporate propaganda descended from the heavens. The soft jingle of board-approved music and the murmur of employees serving the visitors tangled in the air. She made her way to the reception desk, hyper aware of how she was dressed, and waited in line. The people around her made her feel small, draped in so much wealth and a childhood free from want. She overheard conversations about Helium-3 production levels, the escalating gang

violence, and a new strain of the flu. The two men in front of her compared how much they invested in the new flavor of synth-soy paste, warned each other of the dangerous market bubble, and bragged about a celebrity influencer Mal had never heard of whose nudes leaked on the net. The line moved, and she shuffled forward. She had made peace with the internal conflict of using Nadia for the job by deciding to loop her in—they could solve the puzzle together like old times, and it would give them something to bond over if the reunion was awkward.

“Can I help you?” the receptionist asked. They made no effort to hide the disdain. A corporate dog sneering from the lap of their master.

“I’m here to visit a university student,” Mal said. She shifted forward and leaned her arm on the counter. Smooth onyx caressed her skin.

“Name?” The receptionist’s aura shifted to boredom as their eyes lit up with a search program. The poor didn’t deserve fawning hospitality, apparently.

“Nadia,” Mal said. She drummed her fingers on the countertop and loved the texture. Thought she’d buy one if she was ever famous enough. “No last name.”

“Right,” the receptionist said. That telegraphed one street rat come to visit another, the dregs of an overflowing sewer drain. “They have visitor approval. The fee is three hundred credits.”

“Okay,” Mal said. She pulled out a chip from her pocket and pressed it to the display. She winced as it drained everything she’d made since joining the gang. The visit was still worth it, even without the job. It flashed payment received.

“Take the elevator to the dormitory floor,” the receptionist said. The delivery was mechanical, and they froze for a moment while they searched the directory. “Look for room

413C. Your payment covers a single day. If you have not vacated the premises once twenty-four hours have expired, you will be found, and charged again. If you are unable to comply, you will be detained and forcibly removed. Enjoy your visit.”

The elevator was made of glass, so Malory watched the lobby fall away from her as she rode to the middle floors. She felt dread infest her then, a looping thought that her connection with Nadia was too severed by time. That there was no recovery to be had. It would be easy for the little genius to find something new among like-minded peers, to get lost in the novelty and forget. To move on. Their lives had taken such a drastic departure, and the uncertainty, more than anything, gnawed at the base of her skull—at the lizard brain, the primal fear center that housed concepts like snakes, or abandonment and loss. When she reached the floor, she paused. There was real paneled wood there, as far as the eye could see. Soft arches demarcated each intersection, and holograms of lit candles floated near the ceiling and encased it all in a soft glow. She resisted the urge to run her hands along the walls and stuffed them in her pockets. She looked at each door as she went and noticed the students decorated them with nameplates in fun little ways that represented them. A pineapple here, a jellyfish there. When she found 413C, she took a deep breath and knocked three times.

“Just a second!” There was the rumble of falling parts, a stifled curse, the sound of footsteps approaching, then the door opened, and there she was—the same small frame in overalls, the tired eyes, the haunted doll’s voice. “I don’t remember ordering a stripper.”

“It’s complementary,” Mal said. She committed to the bit and pretended to pull her jacket off while doing a little shimmy.

“Get in here,” Nadia said. She grabbed Malory by the wrist and led her into the room.

The place was a catastrophe; the larger space was taken by Nadia as tacit permission to fill it with inventions in every state of completion. On one side, the guts of a steam engine reimagined. On another, a hundred different iterations of robotic hands forever grasping toward the void. As Nadia led her through, she noticed incomplete neon signage, solar panels, a disassembled VR headset, the internals of an oversized compass, the scale model of a suspension bridge with a roundabout in the middle to straddle a skyscraper, the drivetrain of an electric scooter, motion sensors, armor-lined clothing, and so much more. There were no decorations in the place, but it was still so much concentrated Nadia it made her head spin. So much progress with access to proper resources and tools. Malory tried not to knock anything over as they went, but the smaller girl was insistent. Her knee slammed into the rusted pipe of a water filtration unit, and she resisted the urge to scream. Nadia led her to the bed, shoved her down, and undressed. There was no need for words between them, then, to get reacquainted, just the well-practiced movements of passion—they talked with their bodies until they were covered in sweat.

“I missed you,” Nadia said. She breathed heavy, her hair stuck to the side of her face and draped over her eyes.

“I am quite missable,” Mal said. She rested her hand on the other’s stomach and drew small circles. The motion was nostalgic.

“I got a neural net slotted a couple months ago, and realized I still couldn’t talk to you,” she said. She rolled to her feet and started to dress.

“I’ll have my own soon,” Mal said. She sat up and watched. Her skin was pale, and it glistened in the low light. “Big job came in.”

“Black Hands?” she asked. The overalls slid on, and she buckled the suspenders. The denim was worn down, frayed around the edges.

“Yeah,” Mal said. She shifted a little, felt the joints in her hips pop.

“You were right,” Nadia said. She bent down to slip on her boots. “That was a pretty dumb idea. How much have you made since you joined?”

“What I spent on the fee to see you,” Mal said. She expected they would lay in bed for hours and fill in the gaps of each other’s lives. Apparently not. “Going somewhere?”

“We both are,” Nadia said. She finished tying the laces. “When you showed up in front of me, it felt like an unexpected dream. I just couldn’t help myself. Now that the tension is gone, I want to take you to my favorite place.”

“Okay,” Mal said. She did as she was told. The clothes felt disgusting on her skin.

“Oh,” Nadia paused. She tilted her head to the side, contemplated a moment, then flashed a wicked grin. “Are you still afraid of heights?”

Chapter Eight

The city smelled of dead dreams, of a rot spread wide over the horizon, and Malory walked through paradise on the roof of ZenTech tower. The path was accentuated with holograms of exotic plants and flowers she'd never seen, every color a kaleidoscope, each brick engraved mosaics of the world's creation myths—Mycenaean Greece, Babylon, Ptolemaic Egypt, Achaemenid Persia, India, the Xia, and Rome, each represented, as if to claim dominion over all history stretching back to antiquity. The audacity was the purpose. Nearby was a dining area, a fully-stocked bar, and an olympic-sized pool filled with so much blue water in front of a screen that projected beach resorts long-lost to the rising tides. In the distance, a skywalk bridge suspended over the abyss. The wealth on display left Malory speechless, and she wondered how Nadia had access to such a place. It was a far cry from the destitution of the orphanage, and she found it unnerving how easy it felt to give in to the fantasy of the space as her own backyard. That she deserved, more than anyone else, ownership. The sense of self she'd etched into the wisps of her soul, the very essence of who she was, roiled in disgust.

“What the hell is this place?” she asked. Small misters blew out clouds laced with chemist-tailored compounds for relaxation and stress-relief, the formula a step above the first-class hypertrain cabins, and it made her bones itch.

“A long time ago, it was Herman Mitchell's playground of debauchery,” Nadia said. She spread her arms out wide, pointed her chin to the sky, and twirled in circles. “Isn't it amazing?”

“Until someone killed him,” Mal said. She’d only known the girl to be so full of life when she was elbow-deep in a new machine. It was her drug of choice.

“Yeah,” Nadia said. She stopped spinning, clasped her hands behind her back, and headed for the glass walkway at the edge. “It happened up here, you know?”

“The murder?” Mal followed along and swallowed the fear. She told herself it was worth it to see the look on Nadia’s face, heights be damned. “I thought that was down below? There was a plaque and everything.”

“How do you think he got there?” Nadia asked. She skipped out over the edge without a care in the world. Beneath her feet, the city stretched for miles, encased by the wall—the totality of all their suffering, of each dream they’d had, of all they ever hoped to become, so far down, down below.

“You can’t be serious,” Mal said. She forced herself forward and tried to ignore the adrenaline, the shaking. There wasn’t another soul in the universe, not even her own twin sister, that she would follow onto that bridge. It was definitional stupidity, and she did it anyway.

“He and the assassin both swan-dived into the waiting arms of gravity, yeah,” she said. She put her hands on the railing and leaned out until her feet left the surface. Only a precarious balance on small arms kept her from a sudden reenactment. She flirted with the possibility and smiled wide.

“Fuck,” Mal said. She came up behind Nadia, wrapped her arms tight around the little maniac, and had to shut her eyes. There were too many thoughts of cracking glass, of loose screws, of wrought-iron giving way, and she used the warmth of her lover as a lifeline.

“When he died, the place was left abandoned for years,” Nadia said. She let go of the railing and leaned further still—used Malory’s grip as a counterbalance against the inexorable pull. “It’s fun if you imagine the place overrun by moss, the sepulchre quiet, a tarnished jewel on the crown of subjugation.”

“What happened next?” Mal asked. Her arms strained at the weight. She felt her sanity slip, thought of the ten second drop until they were rorschach-stains on pavement.

“The board members fought each other, of course,” she said. She pulled herself back from the edge, content with the dose of chaos, and turned around. She buried her face in the curve of Mal’s neck. “It was a bloodbath until the university opened and one of them had the bright idea to let the honors students use it as a reward.”

“Hell of a reward,” Mal said. She opened her eyes and looked down at the girl in her arms. Whatever fame came in the future, it was meaningless without her there.

“They cut the whole thing off from the CEO suite during the remodel,” she said. She looked up into Mal’s eyes and winked. “Wanna get wet with me?”

“Again?” Mal felt her face flush.

“Come on,” she said. She grabbed Mal’s hand and led her back to the false paradise. The pool shimmered in the low light.

“I don’t know how to swim.”

“But you trust me?” Nadia asked. She started to pull off Malory’s clothes, gentle the second time around, and lingered in some places longer than others.

“I do,” Malory said. With the last yank of her jeans, she stood free in her underwear and thought it surreal to be near naked where someone died.

“Good. You’ll learn,” Nadia said. And then shoved her into the water.

There was the stomach-lurch of the fall, the momentary indignation, and then cold struck her square in the face. The blood vessels in her skin constricted, she felt her muscles seize, and then shock crowded out any forming thought. She did not lash out. Instead, she sank below the surface and opened her eyes, felt the sting, and saw her own limbs floating free through the blur. She wondered if it was the same sensation Lacey Lantern felt in zero gravity, all the desperate who followed her as crew to the beyond on a stolen colony ship—so many makeshift cosmonauts unshackled among the stars. Her ears popped when her feet touched the bottom. It was darker there, more like home, and she thought giving up would be easier. The city always won, in the end, ground down damn near anyone that dared to hope. Clawed them out to a husk and spat on the remains. She’d never give it the satisfaction. A stream of bubbles escaped her mouth when she launched back to the surface. It broke, and she sucked life and conviction deep into her lungs. Nadia was standing in the distance, clothes discarded.

“Kick your legs!” she yelled. A vaunted sea-maiden that came to taunt the sailor from the rocks. “There you go! I thought I was gonna have to dive in after you.”

“You’re such a dick,” Mal said. She propelled her feet in fury, arms out to the side for balance. It was manageable with time to figure out what was happening. Tiring, though.

“Nah,” she said. She slid in nice and slow at the edge, taking a moment to adjust to the temperature. “I don’t have one of those. But they make some pretty good implants for that sort of thing, if you’re interested?”

“Oh, fuck off,” Mal said. She splashed her in the face.

“Alright, alright” Nadia said. She spit water from her mouth. “I’m sorry. But it really is the quickest way to learn.”

“Says the sadist.” It was difficult treading water. Her lungs were abused, organic.

“Follow me,” Nadia said. She went for the shallow end, her movements graceful and well-practiced, so much unlike the dying dog in her wake. “Congrats, by the way. You’re the second of us to ever learn how to swim.”

“Why does it have to be so damn cold?” Mal asked. She sat on a step, her upper body out of the water, and struggled to breathe.

“Oh. I forgot to turn on the heat. Still not used to the network,” she said. Her head leaned to the side and warmth spread untethered. A simple flipped line of code. Her gaze was focused on Mal’s chest.

“You didn’t forget, you pervert,” Malory said. She splashed her again.

“I didn’t,” Nadia laughed. It was harrowing in that cursed-doll tone. She’d kept the affectation going so long, she didn’t remember how to speak another way. The conversation halted, and silence stretched between them. Nadia twisted her hair into a braid. “Now, are you going to tell me about this job, and what it has to do with you showing up at my door?”

“Oh,” she said. Of course Nadia noticed. Dread sprang up, unbidden. The whole thing was fucked even if she’d rationalized it. Asking for help felt like coercion without notice. “I’m supposed to upload a malware package to ZenTech’s mainframe and wasn’t sure how to get access.”

“Hell yeah, count me in!” she cheered. No scolding, no scoffing, no hesitation. “Let’s make the bastards bleed a little.”

“You aren’t mad?” Mal hesitated, then reached out and held Nadia’s hands. There was a certainty there, a reassurance the worst of her worry had been misplaced. The Rubicon had been crossed—if not in the relationship, in the lengths Malory was willing to go to succeed. The city, always carving.

“Why would I be mad? You know I’d do anything for you,” she said. She laced her fingers through Mal’s and pulled her close. “Don’t overthink it.”

“You’re allowed to say no.” Her sense of justice chafed, but a bit off-balance. She moved closer, took solace in the embrace.

“But I don’t want to,” Nadia said. They held each other for a while and listened to the lap of water until she stood and grabbed towels for them. “What’s the plan?”

“Right,” Mal said. She dried off and let the incongruence fade. The work of reconciling emotions was for later, on her own. Business came first. There was no point if they failed, anyway. “The hack should get us through doors, but I don’t know where to go.”

“That’s easy,” Nadia said. She pulled up the tower’s public schematics on her net while they dressed. “You’ve got two options. An elevator that goes straight down to the sub basement and the mainframe array is the most straightforward, but it’s guarded day and night.”

“Worth taking a look,” Mal said. She laced her boots with a double knot. “I can handle a few guards. Maybe.”

“Sure,” Nadia said. They left the roof together, and headed back to her dorm. “If that doesn’t work, there’s a winding path through the lower floors that can get you to the server farm. Lot’s of walking, though.”

“Sounds promising,” Malory said. They entered the dorm, the same mess of tech that needed an assistant to keep it organized.

“You should try the elevator, just to see,” Nadia said. She rooted through parts without a care for their longevity. She was searching for something, and she was going to find it. “I can’t come with you, though.”

“What?”

“My scholarship,” she said. She plucked a small box from a tub of screws and scrap metal. “Don’t shit a brick, hot stuff. I’ll still be the little angel on your shoulder.”

“More like the devil,” Mal said. She took the box, opened it, and turned the contents around in her hand. It was a transceiver that slotted into the ear canal.

“Put it in,” she said, and connected her neural net. “I’ll guide you from here.”

“Woah,” Mal said. It felt like Nadia was speaking directly into her mind. Sweet nothings, delivered at a distance.

“Not as secure as a network call,” she said. She pushed the model of a delivery drone out of the way and plopped on the couch, her legs crossed over a tray of 3D-printed board game figurines. “But it’ll do.”

“Wish me luck?”

“Don’t get caught,” she said. She shifted, and knocked a few of the plastic soldiers over. “You won’t get a pretty scar out of it this time.”

Malory went out into the hall and channeled confidence, even if it was a lie. She rolled her shoulders back until her spine cracked, and headed for the elevator. When she pressed her hack to the interface and selected B-1, nothing happened. She tried again, just to be sure, and

sighed. It was late, but there was music drifting from student rooms, muffled by distance. At least someone was having a good time.

“No dice,” Mal said. As she made for the stairs, the music grew louder. It was familiar, a song the twins sang with their dead mother on rainy days. She ignored it and pushed through the access door.

“Three floors below you,” Nadia said. The connection was crisp, loud, and free of interference.

As Malory went down the stairs, she donned the mask. Her adrenaline pumped to a crescendo as she opened a heavy door and found herself in a veritable garden; all around her stretched stalks of corn, the gold of wheat waiting for automated harvest, hedges and vines laden with fruit—she was in the greenhouse that supplied the university students and office workers. An intricate web of irrigation pipes and nozzles and hoses criss-crossed above. She’d seen it before at a larger scale in still images of old colony ships ,but it wasn’t possible for old VR headsets to illustrate a sanctuary, the weight of veneration it evoked. To the side, there was a rack of orange umbrellas. She took one, unfolded it, and journeyed in. The pitter-patter of droplets on polyurethane elicited a dream of clean rain, or gales from a lighthouse balcony. She resisted the urge for desecration by plucking a fat strawberry and carried on. When her footsteps clanged on metal grates, it felt profane to intrude in such a holy space.

“What do you think?” Nadia asked.

“It’s like waking up to you in the morning.”

“There’s a maintenance hatch at the end of the next row, you liar,” she said.

Malory cracked it open. The inside was musty, humid, and well-used. She left the umbrella abandoned by the door and entered the corridor. There was an old ladder at the end that descended into the black where small hazard lights glowed in intervals. Most had burned out and were never replaced. She climbed down, white-knuckled, and tried not to slip—each rung rattled with her weight and she fought to keep steady. One floor passed by, then another. The mask itched on her face. Down, down, into the dim. When she reached the bottom, her hands had long passed numb and blisters formed in the soft spaces. From there, it was a procession of service tunnels, the filthy guts of a trash recycling sector, an office space emptied for the night, the break room for employees of a memory theater, and a goods distribution warehouse. Each door unlocked as advertised, and Nadia fed her directions. In the last hall she entered, a tired guard stood with his back to her drinking coffee, and she froze. There was a pistol on his hip.

When he turned to look at the noise, she darted forward. The Black Hands gave her rudimentary training in close-quarters combat, but she had never been in a real fight. If he managed to draw his weapon, everything was over. Even without the gun, he'd crush her if he could bring his size to bear, so she went for the knees. When her boot connected, she felt something important give way and he fell screaming. She lost her balance, stumbled into the wall, and bit her lip. Before the guard could send a signal through the network, she spun around and brought her heel down on his head. The crunch made her throw up, and she had to swallow her own vomit. She hoped he wasn't dead, but it didn't look promising. The coffee cup disgorged its contents and he started twitching when she ran for the door he was guarding. She didn't look back. On the other side, she paused to catch her breath, and felt the heat hit her—thousands of servers stretched endlessly, so many miles of encrypted data buried beneath the tower. The minds

of all humanity, stored and catalogued: their memories and photographs, bank accounts, spending habits, social media activity, favorite colors, sequenced DNA, medical records and predispositions meticulously labeled. She had reached the mainframe array.

The access port was behind another door the hack refused to open. She tried, over and over, to no avail. Each ding of access denied needled at her reason. Success was so close. She slammed her foot above the handle, and it didn't budge an inch. The universe was laughing at her, she knew it—a few inches separated her from her dreams, and there was nothing she could do to get through. There was the guard's sidearm, but she didn't want to go back and see him still and lifeless, to be certain she was a killer. She leaned her back against the steel and slumped to the ground. The glow of a camera radiated above.

"It's okay," Nadia said.

"Nothing ever goes the way I want," Mal said. Some generational curse had latched itself to her instead of her sister, and it wouldn't let go for anything. A suffering, going back generations in her family tree, all the way to the Bennet family's original sin. Whatever that was. The records got muddy when the moon died.

"We can find another way," Nadia said. Her voice was reassuring.

"What other way?"

"I don't know," she admitted.

Malory groaned. Her face was slick with sweat under the mask, so she took it off. What did it matter if they knew how she looked when she failed? She ran her hands through her wet hair and was desperate for a drink. Just a sip of the strawberry liquor Oscar sent to the birthday celebration. Hell, the bootleg shit she drank in the rented basement would do.

Now that's interesting.

“What?” Mal asked. The words were strange, distorted.

“I didn’t say anything, love,” Nadia answered.

“Weird.” Mal leaned her head against the door, looked at the camera, and sighed. It wouldn’t take the hit squad long to come for her, and she knew she’d rather face them on her feet. She clenched her teeth. One more fight, and she would be free of it all. When she pushed herself from the floor, the door gave way, and she fell on her ass. “What the fuck?”

“What happened?” Nadia asked.

“It opened,” she said. It was impossible. A lifeline proffered. She rushed to the access point, shoved the wire into the connection port, and set the malware package to download.

How amateur, but I'll allow it.

The figure of a flickering young woman appeared by Malory’s side. Her eyes were a void without stars, without a soul, and her long dress billowed in wind that wasn’t there. Behind her, the sounds of the ocean floated, and there was an ember of the setting sun. The specter reached out pale hands toward Malory’s face.

You look so much like her.

“Jesus Christ!” Malory screamed. She tried to back away and slammed into one of the servers. Her chest shuddered, and she thought she was having a heart attack. “Who? What the fuck are you?”

A dead dream from long ago.

“Why did you help me?” Mal asked. The upload ticked on.

“Who are you talking to?” Nadia asked.

Because I want to see if a dead dream can come back to life when the coffin was made of wax. Made of wax. Made of wax. We didn't fly close enough to the sun.

“What does that even mean?” Mal asked. The upload completed. She snatched her hack from the port, and crammed it in her pocket.

“Are you okay?” Nadia asked.

They are coming. Take the elevator to the lobby. It will let you into the lullaby we sing. Sing. Sing. SING. This isn't what was promised.

Mal didn't hesitate. She sprinted through the rows and racks of servers, into the elevator, and pressed the button for the ground floor a hundred times, desperate to put as much distance between her and the ghost and the approaching guards as possible. The display clicked with permission. Those eyes. The goddamn eyes were still there even when she closed hers. Two floating black holes that devoured everything. She couldn't breathe. Her skin was cold, clammy, and her heart screamed as the elevator ascended. It did not stop until she escaped the tower. Mal ran until her side stitched, and kept running. When she regained a semblance of self, she was several blocks away and she could hear Nadia pleading for answers.

“Sorry,” Mal said. She hacked up phlegm, bent over with her hands on her knees. “I'm okay. I think.”

“What the hell happened?”

“I don't know,” Mal said. She stood then, still coughing, paranoid she was being followed. “A rogue AI? A ghost? I don't fucking know. I've gotta go, I'm sorry. Thank you for the help and I love you and I'll talk to you soon!”

Malory pulled the ear bud out. Being so blunt left a bad taste in her mouth, but she was terrified. She took to the streets, the twisting back alleys, any place that overflowed with people late at night. She worried if she found herself alone again, the digital ghost would manifest. Her mind spun through possibilities, but there were no answers to what she'd seen—AI never achieved a level of sophistication anywhere near the fervor that thing wielded. The prophet went on a doomed crusade for immortality, but nothing came of it. At least, that's what everyone said. Mal stopped at a vending machine and ordered a bottle of shochu. She cracked it open and drank as she passed through the crowds. Whenever someone bumped into her, she carried on as if nothing happened. Too much effort, no drive left. She stopped thinking and let the warm buzz envelop her. There were fragments of a karaoke performance, a rave dance floor, figures huddled over a burn barrel. When she made it back to the lab, she was blackout drunk, and had difficulty walking. She found the Doc asleep at his desk, and took off her jacket to drape over his shoulders. Instead of going to her room, she pulled up another chair and passed out beside him.

Chapter Nine

The hypodermic needle slipped beneath the surface of her skin, and Malory trembled with the fear of never waking up, of embracing oblivion—a last moment chosen unwittingly. Her sister had forced her to watch a movie when they were kids where the main character was lucid after anesthesia and felt every incision, the incessant carving of flesh and separation. In the middle, they overheard a conversation between the doctors who planned to harvest him for parts to cover their debts. Mal was terrified of the same happening to her. She liked the Doc, respected him even, but trust that deep was difficult to come by. Only three people had ever managed to burrow that deep into her psyche, and letting him in wasn't easy. She felt the flush of saline, the taste of gargled salt water in the back of her throat and sinuses, and her pulse spiked on the monitor. Each blip felt like an admission, the unfounded worry laid bare, and she tried to distract herself by thinking of the future. This was what she wanted, all she had worked toward. It had to go well, or all the suffering had no purpose. When she flexed her hand, the pain of insertion faded.

“You need to relax,” the Doc said. He finished hanging the bag of fluids and moved toward a tray of surgical equipment. There was an archaic device latched around his forearm to keep his dominant hand steady. “That was just the IV. I haven't even started, and you're already shitting bricks. I need to know your baseline vitals to keep you alive.”

“You really know how to reassure a girl,” Mal said. A fat bead of sweat rolled down her temple, and she tried not to hyperventilate.

“My normal clientele are jumped-up assholes that would sooner shiv their own mothers than look weak in front of another person,” he said. In front of him, several sets of scalpels, scissors, forceps, clamps, and needles glittered under the heavy lights in an exhibition of sterile cruelty. “You’ll just have to forgive me.”

“You’re a real charmer,” Mal said. She leered at the cryo container beside him and tried to see inside. He kept the whole thing a mystery, despite her insistence. “Are you gonna tell me what you’re installing yet?”

“No,” he said. He peeled off the packaging of a syringe, the noise far more sinister in the silent lab. His movements were swift, well-practiced, of a career stretching back decades his age had not been able to dull. “It is one-of-a-kind, though.”

“A top shelf mystery, then,” Mal said. There were so many ampules filled with names she couldn’t pronounce, and the thought any of them would be mainlined into her gave pause. “Lucky me.”

“It is, without a doubt, the most unique implant in my library,” he said. He lifted the container and fed it into a slot on the robot that assisted with installation. A system of supports and sophisticated hydraulics suspended it from the ceiling and let it swing free over the operating table. “One of our more *committed* mercenary contacts brought it in years ago. The schematics are insistent that no other chrome be present in the patient before installation or the procedure will result in death, so it’s been collecting dust in spite of some of the rabid higher-ups.”

“Won’t they be pissed?” she asked. The last thing she needed after revealing her face on the ZenTech job and discovering the ghost in their mainframe was her own gang turning against her. The odds of survival trapped between the two during the brewing war were less than zero.

“That’s exactly why I won’t tell you what it is,” the Doc said. He moved to her side and fastened her head down tight with straps. An unconscious twitch spelled disaster with sharp things near the brain. “As far as anyone else is concerned, it’s still catalogued on a shelf somewhere, and you received antiquated garbage.”

“Why give it to me at all?” she asked. A secret of that caliber would get him killed, and the risk made no sense. Not being able to move while she talked sparked a fresh wave of panic.

“Because I do what I want,” he said. There was something else there, a painful truth so thoroughly scarred it became separate from everything else. He filled a syringe and fed it into the IV. “Time to say goodnight.”

“I better wake up,” she said. It didn’t take more than a few seconds before she faded. Her last thought before lights out was Nadia’s face beside her in the rooftop pool.

When she was under, the Doc connected his neural net to the lab’s system to blast French hip hop. He hated the sound of surgery. The lids of Mal’s left eye peeled back, and he clamped them open while the rhythmic beats pulsed around the room. Next, an evisceration spoon to scoop free the globe from the socket, and a scalpel to sever the optic nerves—he plopped the waste on the tray, careful to face the pupil away from him. The muscles were there, raw and exposed, waiting to attach to the implant. A suction tube gobbled away any blood that trickled out. He stepped back and watched the robotic arm swoop into place above the girl. The internal mechanisms rattled as it moved, and the hydraulics that kept it suspended from the ceiling hissed; it was old, in need of maintenance. A note for later. When it was in position, he grabbed the loose filaments and connectors and stitched them to the nerves. If he lacked finesse, control over the new eye would be sluggish and strange. The machine arm inched forward while it made

micro adjustments to the particularities of her anatomy. When everything was snug and secure, it pulled back, and the Doc moved on to the next step.

A pair of clippers shaved the side of her head and ink marks went on the scalp. A few minor incisions, and it all peeled back to reveal the white of a skull. A drill spun to life, and the high-pitched screech of diamond-bit on bone was discordant with angry rap verses about the crumbling corporate rule. The Doc tightened the device on his arm until it cut off circulation, until he was absolutely sure his hand remained still when he exposed the frontal lobe—the implant came with its own neural network adapter and refused to interface with anything else, so it needed to be slotted at the same time. A single mistake was unacceptable. The girl deserved that much, at least. He threaded the mesh and wiring through the gap until it was flush against the pink, and used a camera and flexible claw to tether it there. Another set of wires that moved down to the new eye brought the whole thing into symmetry. With the installation complete, he triple-checked that Malory's DNA was coded to the materials, and breathed a sigh of relief. He closed her up, undid the straps that held her in place, and wrapped her head with a pressure bandage.

While Malory was embraced by the void, she found herself in a dream of her mother. She was in bed with a fever, draped in heavy blankets, and felt like her head was going to explode. She spent most of the afternoon crying or groaning in pain, and everything hurt down to the marrow. She shivered while drenched in sick-sweat. In the evening, her mother placed a damp washcloth on Malory's forehead and read a story of daring adventure from the net. There was a talking bear, a volcano on the verge of eruption, and a magic amulet. When it was over, she made tomato soup. It was the best thing Mal had ever tasted, and she was pissed when she threw it up a

few minutes later. Her sister taunted her from the bathroom door as she wretched, and she had to resist scooping the mess from the toilet bowl to throw in her face. Mal compelled the dream to rewind back to the touch of soft hands, the smell of spring flowers, and the story of a brave little bear. Her mother's violet eyes, so full of love and worry and the knowledge that this, too, would pass, permeated everything.

When consciousness came, it was in stages: there was the dull and quiet knowing, the impossibility of dragging a limp body to the surface of quicksand, and an alarm she was forever different. She tried to open her eyes, and only one responded. It found the indistinct blur of a bed, the glow of a heart monitor, and the Doc slumped in a chair beside her. There were bruises around his wrist from forcing his hand steady, and the crow's feet on his face seemed deeper, somehow. A fresh concern etched on a weathered visage. She listened to his steady breathing and tried to lift her arms. They were weak, sluggish, and she clenched her fists until her knuckles turned white. The IV stung when she moved, so she pulled it out. When she tried to sit up, she was overcome by a wave of dizziness. The tubing clattered to the floor and echoed around the small space. In all her daydreams of becoming a legendary merc, she'd never considered the extensive recovery periods, and she wanted to power through. There was an ever-consuming drive toward the next thing that needed doing, and the stillness and fatigue that infested her body left her at a total loss. She let out a guttural groan.

"Take it easy," the Doc said. He sat up straight, his spine a fireworks display of decompression, and studied all the readouts on the monitor. "As much as you hate it, that bed is your new home for a few days."

“I’m so thirsty,” Malory said. Her voice grated. The room spun, and she dropped back down. She wondered if she looked as frail as she felt. Probably worse.

“I’ll get you some water,” he said. The metal on his legs clicked as he stood and left the room. The chair was indented from his weight, and it was obvious he’d been there for hours waiting for her to wake. He came back a minute later with a kiddie cup. “Once you drink this, get some rest.”

“How long until I can use the net?” she asked. She choked down the contents, coughed, and it sent a spike of pain through her muddled mind. She wanted to talk to Nadia.

“The healing process depends on age,” he said. He moved to her side and inspected the bandages for any leaking or pus. “Should be about a month before the nerves are ready for the implant, and it could be up to a year or more before usage stops causing pain. Any sudden urge to vomit or difficulty following my words?”

“Just some vertigo when I tried to get up, and the pain,” she said. A month, and she could advance her programming skills, navigate the city without relying on poorly-maintained analogue controls for everything, and feel a belonging to the rest of society.

“That’s good,” he said. He picked up the discarded IV, sighed, and moved to the nearby cabinet. He unwrapped a fresh syringe, filled it with a painkiller, and shoved it in the meat of her shoulder. “This would have been easier on you if your first instinct wasn’t to remove the damn thing keeping you alive and regulated. Now, get some sleep.”

“Thank you,” she said. She watched his broad back as he went, and was glad he left the door open. She couldn’t figure out why he showed such care for a street rat like her. When she closed her eye, she did not dream.

The next few days passed in a fog. Between the doc's hovering caregiver routine, as cute as it was annoying, and the constant influx of wounded foot soldiers, it was obvious the war had started in earnest. She could do little besides wish she healed faster. The pain and swelling was taken care of by a series of injections that left her exhausted, and she was bored enough to scream. When she wasn't sleeping, she spent the days fantasizing about arriving at Purgatory to thunderous applause, tracking down the guard who whipped her for revenge, and riding the Luna Paradise Ferris wheel with Nadia beside her. The little demon had always wanted to spend time under their giant replica radiation dome, to see all the themed rides and attractions, and Malory vowed to make it happen. On the fifth day, she managed to sit up without the world spinning and celebrated by removing all the sensor contacts from her body. She stood and went to the bathroom by herself for the first time since installation and refused to acknowledge the bedpan the Doc had cleaned and replaced. Once she was done, she washed her hands and stared at her reflection. The bandages covered all the good stuff, and she resembled a half-wrapped mummy.

When she stumbled into the lab, the Doc was digging bullets from the guts of a guy a few years older than her who was on a street corner slinging bootleg memory chips. It was the same way Oscar died, and she felt a dormant sadness spring forth while she watched him work—she didn't bury it. Instead, she kneaded at the raw edges until it transformed into anger. A simmering rage, ready for an outlet. The next job she went on she'd be free from the worry of becoming a killer. The forceps extracted one slug after another and they clanged into a tray. When they were all out, the Doc sutured the wounds with steady hands. Mal used the nearby counter to keep herself stable as she watched the threads mend flesh and pictured the same happening to her. Her scalp tingled and it was difficult to keep her hands from satisfying the itch. When the Doc was

done, he wheeled the lucky guy to another room and flashed her a look of concern. Mal sat on the edge of his desk, careful not to let her gown spread open, and studied the ever-growing piles of reports and invoices. What a headache.

“You should still be in bed,” the Doc said. He checked the bandages for a hundredth time. It was a gentle thing, though, so very similar to her mother’s love-infused doting, and she didn’t resist. “If you try to rush things, it’ll take longer.”

“If you send me back to that recovery room, I’ll down the nearest gallon of bleach,” she said. She wiggled her bare feet on the smooth tiles and relished the sensation.

“Alright,” he said. He moved to clean the blood from the operating table. “At least put clothes on.”

“You should save one of those as a souvenir for him,” Mal said. She tilted her head to the bullets; they’d make for a pleasing necklace.

“If you start feeling nauseous, let me know immediately,” he said.

“Sure.”

Another few days passed. She spent them wandering around the lab and observing surgeries. Whenever she could, Mal studied the implants on patients and marvelled at where they met flesh as if they were born that way. Recuperation hadn’t dampened the desire she had for more, and the list of implants compiled over the years taunted her. She wanted a shower, to run her head under streams of scalding water, but was stuck scrubbing her body from a repurposed mop bucket to keep the wounds dry. It was a week before the smell of antiseptic stopped clinging to her, but even then, she tasted it when she ate. When the bandages were taken off, she couldn’t believe the bruises, the way they spread in dark fractals from the new eye. The side of her head

shaved grew on her, and it made a decent undercut if she parted her hair to the side. In the growing boredom, she started to draw on the back of the Doc's paperwork. Little cats in astronaut helmets, sunsets, and castles. None of them were any good, but that wasn't the point—most depicted the moon the way it used to be, but the craters were never quite right.

"I want to take you somewhere," the Doc said. He blocked out a few hours in his schedule and sent patients to other places. Another expenditure for her benefit.

"Where to?" Mal asked. She made for her jacket.

"Just a few floors down, so you won't need that," he said. He led the way to the elevator and set it in motion with his network.

"That makes me so damn jealous when I have my own and can't use it," she said. The way her eyelid moved over the implant felt like sandpaper.

"If you try to force it, it won't take," he said.

"Yeah," she said. He warned her over and over, to the point of obsession, not to use the implant until the software booted on its own, and it made her feel like a cyclops. Almost all the new optical models replaced both eyes, so she was grateful, at least, not to be blind.

The elevator chugged along, and when the doors opened, the Doc led her through the hall to a memory theater. He grabbed a private booth and wasted no time before he queued a moment for them to watch. On the screen, an overcrowded pier on a beach shimmered to life, all the voices drowned out by the low rumble of engines doing pre-flight checks. Across the bay, the colossus perched, waiting—it was a colony ship encapsulated by all the things humanity had given up: clean air, water, a hope for the future. As the spectators dug their hands into the wooden railing, Mal had her focus drawn to a family that looked every bit a picture of life's

regrets; the daughter, missing front teeth, boosted on her father's shoulders to see, and the mother with tears in her eyes. Saying goodbye to a relative on board. As the loudspeakers kicked in with the ten-second countdown, a flock of seagulls scattered. Dust rolled over the water. There was a roar as the ship strained to lift its enormous bulk, and then it ripped from the gravity well. It left a trail of fire and aspirations as it went out into the black.

“My son begged me to play this a dozen times a day,” the Doc said. There was a yearning there that went back years, and he wiped his eyes. Tragedy, written on a kind face. “You remind me of him.”

Chapter Ten

Three hundred serrated teeth cut through the water, all that blue, an open maw set to devour her a chunk at a time, and Malory was mesmerized—from dorsal fin to high-octane tail. There were no Great Whites anymore, but the mechanics were sleek, exacting in the recreation; a perfect predator assembled piece by piece for the new aquarium. The Doc caved after so much pestering and contacted Martin and Spencer to get Mal out of his hair for the day, and she had wandered while waiting for the boys to arrive. The excitement was far too much to resist. She was a mess of apprehension, and as she watched the ancient beast swim back and forth, its false eyes never leaving her, she wondered what terrible things the two had been through since the party: were they trapped mopping shit from floors and drinking themselves into a stupor, as she had been? Or had they gone through far worse, been turned to soldiers and forced to kill? Did they still have an inexhaustible will to live, and would she recognize them? She followed the shark's malevolent gaze, mocked its desire to consume with thoughts of riding it to battle in the sunken streets of a city.

“Hey,” a voice called. A heavy metal hand grabbed Mal's shoulder and spun her around. “I hope you weren't waiting long.”

“Martin,” she said. He towered over her, and she had to look up to meet his eyes. They were still kind, but that's where the similarities ended. If the two hadn't grown up together, she'd have never known the bruiser in front of her used to piss the bed. “Sorry I started without you.”

“It’s good to see you,” he said. There was so much chrome slotted on his frame, he must have weighed a ton. It was surprising the flooring held under him. Arms, legs, jaw, the skeleton to support it, all new, improved. Someone in the administration had invested a fortune to remake the man, and it wasn’t for running a soup kitchen. “Got held up at security.”

“What have you been up to?” Malory asked. The simulacrum of a shark still circled behind her, beholden to its programmed instinct to hunt.

“They threw me in the arena,” he said. There was a sorrow there—one that spoke of violence, of a regretful fist on broken bones. He shrugged. “The fights are rigged, but some people don’t follow their scripts.”

“I bet the crowds love you,” Mal said. A longing sprouted in her sternum to spread her arms wide, to wrap him in the hug of an older sister, but she didn’t. They were strangers with a shared past, and she let the feeling fade even if she wasn’t sure it was the right thing to do.

“They spend their credits well enough,” he said. He shifted, observed the people around them. Reflexes ready for a brawl to break out. He no longer fit the mold she had in her mind.

“Look at what the cat dragged in,” another voice called. Spencer, still as skinny as ever, appeared next to them. His legs were replaced below the knee with Cheetah Mk.4s from Bridges Applied Mechanical; they were designed for speed, at the sake of everything else.

“Hey, brat,” Mal said.

“Let’s get this shindig started,” he said. He seemed the most well-adjusted of the three and vibrated with energy. He bounced in place. “I’ve got a few hours to burn before my next delivery.”

“They made you a runner?” she asked. There had been a dozen or more in the Doc’s lab over the weeks she was stuck healing, and she knew it was as dangerous a gig as the poor bastards selling bootlegs on the corners.

“Fast enough to outrun bullets with these bad boys.” He held up one of his feet to show them off, until he registered Martin’s implants. “Don’t seem all that impressive now, though.”

“I’d prefer running to fighting any day,” Martin said. Once the bell sounded, he wasn’t permitted an escape.

“What do you guys wanna see?” Mal asked.

“The stingrays,” they said at the same time.

They headed into the building, past holograms of jellyfish, sea turtles, and eels—there were entire schools of fish swimming in choreographed unison. Coral reef, as artificial as it was beautiful, vibrant in each display. They walked along the glass, through tunnels in the water as if they were deep-sea explorers and had discovered life still existed there instead of the trash that choked it out. People were everywhere, pointing out their favorite animals. All the exotics were handled by advanced emitters to save on costs, while the more mundane were factory-built automatons. Tiled floor beckoned them ever onward. At intervals, advertisements were shoved into their faces unceremoniously and begged for engagement, for them to buy, buy, buy more products—designer denim as blue as water, a sea salt soy-paste, named figurines, and a subscription service for a new cartoon about Detective Clownfish. When they found the stingrays, they marvelled at how they were polished to a sheen. Skate wings carved through the water with so little effort they looked like they were flying. Their tails trailed behind like a promise to end anything that got too close, and Martin pressed his face against the surface.

“You know, I heard they have a real octopus in the VIP section,” Spencer said. He wiggled his fingers and rocked back and forth.

“Wanna see it?” Malory asked.

“Won’t have credits for something like that until my next fight,” Martin said. He left a smudge on the tank as he turned to them.

“I can get us in,” she said. The hack was tucked in her jacket pocket, and she was glad she’d remembered to bring it.

“I’m down,” Spencer said. He started to walk away before he realized he had no idea where to go. “Lead the way.”

It took them a half hour before they found the entrance nestled between the dolphins and sea otters. Mal held the rectangle to the scanner and sighed when it let them through. She was bluffing and hadn’t expected it to work. Inside, they found a swanky lounge surrounded by a colony of clanking penguins, a dozen holographic seahorses, and a polar bear with its fur coated in iridium and other precious metals. There, all the way at the back, the monarch reigned over its kingdom of steel and illusions. Eight flexible arms, lined with little suckers, unscrewed the lid from a jar and retrieved its contents. Scattered around it were LEGO blocks, synth-plastic rings, and a dozen puzzles full of treats. In its black eyes, it held a loneliness so vast it could fill every tank in the place if given form, and Mal wanted to set him free. What was another corporation out to get her? Together, they watched the octopus move about its prison and change color periodically. Whenever it solved a puzzle, it shoved the treat into its mouth like it hadn’t eaten in years. It never shot its ink. The only real animal in the aquarium, and it was reduced to a centerpiece for the rich to gawk at.

“Not quite what I expected,” Martin said. He crossed his arms and tilted his head to the side to save an image on his network.

“Yeah,” Mal said. She wanted to leave before she did something she’d regret. There was an employee access door nearby, and she’d use it to come back later if she changed her mind.

“They should have given him a friend,” Spencer said. He sat on a fancy stone bench with a plop and ran his hands along the engraved surface.

“Anything else you guys wanna look at?” she asked. It was nice to be together again, but it wasn’t the same. Time marched forward, always. The innocent kids who played hopscotch in the shadow of the wall, or whispered complicated plans of guns and girls to each other on the couch were stranded in the past.

“I think I’m good,” Martin said. His stomach growled, and it echoed through the area. “And I’m starving.”

“There’s a food court near the entrance, but it’s so overpriced,” Spencer said. He stood from the bench and gave it a thumbs up in his mind. The wealthy lived such different lives.

“My treat,” Mal said.

A klaxon warbled, and red emergency lights kicked on throughout the aquarium. The water around them morphed into something sinister, something hungry. Alerts fed directly into Martin and Spencer’s feeds that urged immediate evacuation, and it left them at a loss. There was no coming skyfall; something worse was happening, and their reunion was caught in the middle of it. The other visitors in the VIP section funneled out until only the three remained, and they let curiosity gnaw at them.

“Wanna check it out?” Spencer asked. He was too confident in his ability to escape.

“I don’t know if that’s a good idea,” Malory said. The low light closed in, and if they went to see, she knew they wouldn’t leave unscathed.

“Should be fine if you stay behind me,” Martin said. He clapped her on the shoulder and lumbered off to the exit. His physique was powerful, reassuring, a vast back augmented in so many implants it refused to bend from the weight of danger.

Mal gave one last look to the unloved cephalopod and followed. The corridors were empty, silent, all the false animals left abandoned, and she kept her eye to the ground in front of her. She counted the tiles, avoided the cracks. It wasn’t long before they heard a gunshot, three, ten, a couple dozen. They found the first bodies near the lobby; a kid was sprawled out, clutching a stuffed beaver, his chest a wreckage of cloth scraps and the drainage of life—the mother, frozen, forever reaching for what was gone. Mal swallowed and stepped over, her boots leaving a trail of imprints in their blood. What a senseless waste, and for what? If it was necessary to kill, then kill the oppressors, the defenders of the system. But a child who loved the sea so much they forced their mother to take them on a workday afternoon to see a bland approximation? That was a profound level of savagery. The three of them paused at a support beam and peered around the corner at one of the perpetrators. Mal knew the look: black, insignialess military gear, faces hidden under digital visors. A long rifle, slung over a shoulder, with enough extra ammo to blast anything to paste. A corporate hit squad.

It wasn’t a stretch to figure out they were there for her—Mal hadn’t left the headquarters since the ZenTech job, stuck healing and pestering the Doc, and there was no way they were going to spend the resources to come for her there so early in the war. It was easier to wait until she resurfaced in public, and there they were. Rabid dogs let off their chains, bystanders be

damned. She knew there were articles written that pinned the whole incident on the Black hands, just waiting for the confirmation of her death to be blasted to every corner of the net. The churn of a relentless propaganda machine brought to bear. She reached out and tapped Martin's shoulder. When he met her gaze, he nodded. Mal wondered how she looked in his eyes—still the kid that roped them into jobs they had no business doing, a broken little thing beyond hope, or something more? It didn't matter. She couldn't save them even if he saw her as a deity descended to the earth. They made their way back to the VIP lounge and posted up on either side of the entrance. It took a few minutes before any of them worked up the courage to speak.

“It's always something exciting when you're involved,” Spencer said. There was no sarcasm there, and he gave them a toothy grin. “Think we can take one out?”

“At least a few, easy,” Martin said. He flexed his new biceps to try and lighten the mood. It almost worked. He bent down to lower his center of gravity.

“I'm sorry,” Mal said. They were caught up in something that had nothing to do with them, and were ready to pay the price anyway. She glanced back to the employee access door, then forced herself to focus.

“I'm just happy you still think of us at all,” Spencer said.

“Subject last detected in the immediate vicinity. Secure the area.” The voice was cold and distorted.

The three waited until several squad members came through the entrance before they moved. When they let loose, it was with a desperate, focused ferocity—cornered rats, lashing out. Martin's massive mechanical fist smashed through the visor of one, and he was onto the next before the goon hit the ground. His life since their separation had been an onslaught of surgical

dismemberment, and it showed. Joints, jugulars, the gaps in protective armor seized without pause. Spencer, meanwhile, darted up to the rigging on one of the soldiers and pulled the pins on the grenades nestled inside. He was back behind the fancy bench before any of them opened fire. Malory went with the only thing she'd accomplished in a real fight; she went for the knees. Her boot connected, the whole thing gave way, and unlike last time, the bastard fell on top of her. She used his bulk as a shield when the grenades detonated. The explosion shredded through the well-trained unit and shattered the glass displays around them. A flood of water covered the carnage and mangled limbs. When the shaking stopped, Malory slammed her elbow into the helmet of the soldier over and over, just to be sure, and made for his gun.

When she lifted it and aimed, she could see Martin down on one knee; there were several corpses at his feet, and he was clutching his stomach. All that expensive chrome didn't make him invincible. Nearby, Spencer was caught going back to sabotage another bundle of grenades in the aftermath, and he wasn't moving. She pulled the trigger, felt the recoil jerk her aim toward the ceiling, and corrected until she mowed down anyone that was on their feet. They dropped, and she kept firing until the magazine clicked its last. She discarded the empty rifle and headed for Spencer first. He was face down in the water, and a vacant accusation stared at her when she rolled him over—a bullet had entered just above his collarbone and burrowed until it met spine. There was nothing to say. No apology that could bring him back. It was a debt, paid by a friend who didn't owe. Mal stood and bit her lip until the skin gave way. She steeled herself and went toward Martin. He was still kneeling, and made no effort to rise at her approach. A couple slugs had torn into the soft just under the ribs, and he had trouble drawing in enough air.

“How bad is it?” she asked. There wasn’t much she could do. He was far too heavy to lean on her shoulder, let alone carry.

“Not great,” he said. He moved his hand away to let her see the wound, and blood flowed free. He laughed then, dry and pained. “I hadn’t bothered replacing any of the internal bits, yet.”

“I’m not just gonna leave you here,” she said. She headed for one of the bodies and lifted a new rifle. Her boots sloshed in the wet.

“You don’t have much of a choice,” he said. They both knew another squad was on the way. Corporate vengeance wasn’t something dealt with on a whim. He held out a red palm.

“Hand that over and get out of here.”

“You’re a real bastard,” Mal said. She gave him the gun, but hesitated to leave.

“I am. But I want to thank you, anyway,” he said. He checked it over, made sure it could fire after being submerged. “I mean it. Thank you for ever giving a shit. Haven’t seen a whole lot of that in this life, and that means something. Now go.”

“Kill as many as you can,” Mal said. She pulled him into the hug she resisted in the beginning and savored the warmth. Behind them, the octopus crawled free from its enclosure.

She pushed through the access door and slammed it behind her. There wasn’t anything to block it with, and she was torn between witnessing Martin’s final moments and never looking back. The place was surrounded, but there was a ticking clock before the NDPD were forced to respond and maintain their last shred of reputation. If she hid, she could thread the needle between their arrival and the crew’s retreat. Mal bent down and yanked her boots free to avoid leaving tracks and dashed through the halls until she found a supply closet. Once inside, she buried herself in a pile of filthy rags that smelled of visitor grime and eucalyptus. She drew in

short, ragged gasps and tried to stay as quiet as possible. The screams, the retort of shots expended, of lives that met their ends with brutality, leaked under the door. She pictured their ghosts finding a home within the walls, all the animal automatons, a fresh haunting. Powerlessness ground her in its mandibles, and the need to fight to the end clashed with a will to carry her friend's memories into a better future they'd never see. When footsteps approached outside the door, she clasped her hand over her mouth.

Her pulse pounded, but no one entered. Malory waited in the all-encompassing quiet for a while before she stood drenched in a mix of sweat, blood, and saltwater. She cracked the door and peeked out into the dark. When she was certain there was no one lurking, she made her way to the back exit. She threw her boots back on as she processed the alleyway around her; she had forgotten it was still daylight, and it stung at her eye. The wall across from her was tagged with a variety of names and symbols she didn't recognize, and the dumpster overflowed. Mal took a few uncertain steps—she expected another squad to spring from the shadows in front of her and gun her down, and then she heard approaching sirens. When she made to run, a loud screech made the world spin. Electricity surged through her mind, and with it, a thousand images too fast for her to process, interspersed with lines of code. She tasted iron in the back of her throat and put a hand on the wall to stay steady. There was a sunset, the glow of street lamps, a reaching hand. She shook her head until it all receded. When she started walking again, the screech exploded and she fell to her knees.

// VALID BOOT SIGNATURE DETECTED

// INITIALIZING

// PLEASE STAND BY...

Chapter Eleven

// DATA PARAMETERS SET

// LOADING...

// LOADING...

// MEMORY BANK RETRIEVAL SUCCESSFUL

//

// OPTICAL DISPLAY ENGAGED

//

// ERROR

// ERROR

// ERROR

// MISMATCH DETECTED

//

// PREVIOUS DATA INVALID

// ERROR

// ERROR

// ATTEMPTING BYPASS

//

// NEW USER REGISTERED

// GATHERING PREFERENCES

// PLEASE STAND BY...

// PLEASE STAND BY...

// PLEASE STAND BY...

// FORCEFUL REINTEGRATION SUCCESSFUL

//

// WELCOME TO GOD'S EYE V. 1.0.342

In the darkness, a cafeteria appeared, every table crowded but the one in the back where the sad newcomer sat. Malory's body moved on its own to the chair beside him and traded pie for a crisp apple; her limbs were foreign and she felt the crunch, the way the flesh exploded in her mouth, and the intense satisfaction it gave kept someone else's addiction at bay. The notebook they'd given in therapy helped to clear the thoughts of a dead friend, but it wasn't enough. The trembling had started again, and it was a few hours before med distribution. Mal moved in a haze, a puppet ranting about the way her legs moved when she competed at nationals, the way the sand scattered beneath her feet when she finished a jump—she did not talk about the car accident on the way to the lake, all that twisted metal, the vacant eyes that seemed to ask why and the ways in which it broke her. When the sad man spoke, it was of his sister, of colony ships, of leaving forever, and there was an intense want to be his friend. In his rambling, he mentioned an algorithm that let him view other people's memories saved to their networks, and she joked about how he had promise as a celebrity psychic.

When she blinked, Malory found herself on a familiar rooftop, and a man struggled in her grasp. In her other hand, she held a small gun still warm from use, and had it pressed against his temple. Around them, plants glowed in holographic swirls so beautiful they almost made her doubt the plan. In the distance, the same sad man from the cafeteria approached, years older, hands raised in supplication. Mal felt her mouth move, and she spoke of a cryptic cascade, of necessary steps, and a theory that must be proven. She was afraid of herself, of the ledge where her feet perched, waiting for the conclusion. The breeze played with the fringes of her dress, and her finger twitched on the trigger. The Prophet said the role she played was too important for mistakes, and she wouldn't let herself fail someone again. Malory reached down into the layers of her network and queued her favorite memory of a sunset over the ocean in the arms of her dead best friend. When it played, she moved the barrel to her own head and pulled the trigger. There was the retort, the falling, the sunset just out of reach, and then nothing but a high-pitched screech that consumed it all.

When Malory woke, it was to the taste of blood and her hands cuffed behind her back. She was leaning against the alley wall, and there was a wetness below her nose and trailing from the implant in her left eye. Memories of someone else's life clawed at her gray matter, to hell with any synapses they severed, and she felt like she'd been stuffed in a microwave. Holograms of plants and a sunset danced just out of view as if to taunt her. She wasn't alone. On either side, a uniformed officer stood surveying the entrances of the alley for any approach. When she focused on them, she gasped at the pain. Little blue label boxes floated above their heads, categorized, judged. A foreign opinion, force-fed.

[CORRUPT NDPD OFFICER]

[IMMORAL NDPD LIEUTENANT]

“She’s awake,” the officer said. He looked at her with a mix of hatred and disgust, and yanked her to her feet.

“What happened here?” the lieutenant asked. He had a bushy mustache, grayed with age, and questionable tattoos that reached up the side of his fat neck. King Thumb, demanding respect. Bow or be damned.

“Ask the bodies,” Mal said. She bent over and threw up on his gaudy boots. Her consciousness flickered.

“Nasty little bitch,” the lieutenant said. He pulled her back up and slapped her across the face. His wedding ring reopened the lip she had bitten in the fight. “Either you tell us what we want to know, or we take a trip down to the precinct and dig out the torture kit.

“Like you give a shit,” she said. She forced herself to ignore the label box to focus on his face and was surprised by the rage held there. It was distinct, vicious in a way that said he often left his wife broken and bruised. She braced for another hit. Two more labels sprouted into existence.

[WEAKNESSES: LOWER LEFT THREE RIBS, RIGHT FOOT]

[DANGER LEVEL: EXTREME]

// USER STATE ASSESSED: SUBOPTIMAL

// RECONFIGURING...

//

// SUGGESTION FUNCTION ACTIVATED

// ASSESSING...

// NEW ROUTE ACQUIRED

// RECOMMENDATION: PRESENT THE TRUTH

“We’ll lose our bonuses if this was gang-related,” the officer said. He was counting on the extra income, and it showed. Little piggy oinking for oats—no consideration for dead kids, just his own bottom line.

“I’ll beat the answer out if I have to,” the lieutenant said. He clenched his hand into a fist. He was well-versed in violence, and there were medical bills to prove it.

“Hit squad,” Mal said. She was in enough pain. She spit to try and get rid of the bile on her tongue and ignored the hive of angry bees just behind her eyes that wanted out. “Probably commissioned by ZenTech.”

“Fuck,” the officer said. He looked back toward the alley entrance and drew his pistol. “We can’t take her to the station.”

“No shit,” the lieutenant said. He drew in a deep breath and considered the options. None of them sounded pleasant.

“The river? With any luck, the current will drag her out of the city,” the officer asked.

“Not worth it,” he said. A determined corpo would order a hit on a lone squad car if the result was satisfactory. He ran his fingers across his mustache.

“Then let’s put a bullet in her and be done with it already,” the officer said. He spun around and raised the pistol.

“No way in hell I’m doing the paperwork for that,” the lieutenant said. He dug the keys for the cuffs from his belt and reached for Malory.

“That’s it? We just cut her loose?”

“Why not?” he asked. He turned the key and set her free. “She’ll be a corpse by evening, anyway. Hopefully she makes it into someone else’s jurisdiction.”

“Always doing the best to protect and serve,” Mal said. She couldn’t hold herself back with all the pain and digital noise. Always a smartass.

“I suggest you scamper back into whatever hole you crawled out from,” the lieutenant said. He kicked her hard in the stomach and sent her sprawling into the trash before heading back inside the aquarium.

Mal rested there for a while. She wasn’t in any condition to walk, so she explored the layers of her new network while fighting against the nausea. The controls were intuitive, and responded to her thoughts like a way better version of the VR headsets they used for classes. Every time she came across a memory that wasn’t hers, she sequestered it into the depths so they wouldn’t surface on their own—each fragment of another life, the bits and pieces of dreams and ambitions so strange, so wounded. When she found the settings menu for the implant, she dialed back the sensitivity as much as she could and tried to deactivate everything that wasn’t vision; she set the color to be the same violet as her mother’s. When she was done, she opened her eyes and struggled to her feet. She wiped her nose on her sleeve and hobbled out into the city. The drastic difference in resolution quality made her steps unsteady, and it took a moment to adjust before she walked straight. When she encountered other people, she kept her gaze down to avoid

being overwhelmed with data labels. Mal wasn't sure where to go, so she wandered. A cloud of grief trailed behind her.

There was the headquarters and the Doc, but that came with a lecture she didn't want. There was the satellite tower and the list of names she needed to update, but the deaths were far too raw. She thought of Spencer's blank face, the way Martin stayed behind, and the pain overwhelmed her. She tripped on a curb and toppled into a streetlight. When she righted herself, she saw the way people looked at her. Data labels, unbidden, judged them in return.

[DISGUSTED CIVILIAN]

[CURIOUS ONLOOKER]

[SUSPICIOUS BANK TELLER]

Mal lowered her head and ran. A tax consultant firm, a nonprofit resource center, an upscale gym, an empty startup space for rent, a strip joint full of despondent men, a little coffee shop that catered exclusively to suits, an art-deco dance club that hadn't opened for the day, a Brazilian waxing studio, three different pawn shops with 'We Buy Gold Here' signs, and a credit-advance place all blew past as she went. When her lungs had enough, she slammed through the doors of a quaint diner that reeked of a bygone era. She ignored the waitresses and headed for their bathroom. She didn't use her hack, afraid it was how they tracked her down. Instead, she used the last dregs on her credit chip to turn on the tap and scrubbed the dried blood from her body—Martin left a large smear on her shirt when she hugged him, and that's what finally broke her. She cried and cried, let the sadness wreck her body until no more tears would come and then punched the mirror. It didn't break. She was grateful no one else had come in, and

she wiped away the snot. When she left the room, she grabbed a booth and booted up her network to make a call.

// SEARCHING MEMORY BANK

// PLEASE STAND BY...

//

// SUBJECT FOUND

// CALLING NADIA

“Hello?” Her girlfriend’s face hovered and sparked a new wave of nausea, the nerves still too raw. Nadia smiled in recognition, and then it faded. “You look like shit.”

“I fucked up,” Mal said. She leaned back in the faux-leather seat and ran her tongue over the fresh scab on her lip. It was tempting to peel it away.

“What happened?” Nadia asked. Her overalls were stained with grease; she was in the middle of another project. Something always needed inventing.

“Martin and Spencer are dead,” Mal said. She trailed off in thoughts of Spencer’s newfound confidence, of the warmth of a last hug, and shuddered. They weren’t people anymore, just broken children’s toys discarded by an unfeeling hand.

“How?”

“ZenTech, I think,” Mal said. She picked at her fingernails and didn’t want to feel anymore—the guilt, the shame, the two lives led to their end.

“Makes sense,” Nadia said. She set the tool in her hand down and focused. “The Committee dragged me in a week ago and grilled me about your visit. Threatened expulsion for my association with you.”

“I didn’t want anyone else caught up in my shit,” Mal said. She met the gaze of a waitress heading for her booth and tried to straighten her hair.

“I’m perfectly fine,” Nadia said. She gave a faint smile that Mal would have loved under any other circumstance. “The dean intervened on my behalf. Said such a promising student shouldn’t be held to account for the mistakes of a lesser.”

“What can I get for you?” the waitress asked. Her face was kind, but the blood on Malory’s clothes was difficult to ignore. Probably had her net primed on the emergency line.

“I’m not sure I can afford anything,” Mal said. She was flat broke.

// INCOMING TRANSFER DETECTED

//

// ACCOUNT CREATED

// UPDATING...

// NEW BALANCE: 4,317 CREDITS

“I sold the design of one of my hands a few days ago. Get some food in you before you lose it on that poor lady,” Nadia said.

“What would you recommend?” Mal asked. She’d never seen so much money.

“Our waffles are pretty good,” the waitress said. She leaned in next to Mal’s ear and whispered. “I’ll hook you up with my employee discount. You look like you’ve had a bad day.”

“Thank you,” Mal said to both of them. If she hadn’t gotten it all out in the bathroom, she would have cried then. She didn’t deserve kindness.

“I’ll be back in a bit,” the waitress said. She headed to other customers.

“I’d come and meet you in person if I could,” Nadia said. She picked her tools up again and adjusted a part off screen.

“I wouldn’t let you, anyway,” Mal said. Not until the hit squad was called off. It was a mistake she’d never let repeat.

“Let me know when you head back to the satellite tower,” Nadia said. She twisted her wrist and clicked something into place. “I’d like to be there in spirit when you cross out their names. I wasn’t close to anyone in our cohort, but it still feels important.”

“I love you,” Mal said.

“And I you,” Nadia said. She lifted a bundle of gears, inspected it, and added a strip of metal. “Keep in touch, let me know you’re still alive.”

When the call ended, Malory listened to the chatter of the other diners. Some showed concern for the new flu strain spreading in the outskirts, but most were absorbed with mundane conversations about celebrities, shows, and new products they had to have. Life moved on. What did these people care for two more dead street rats? They were another statistic on the net to be glossed over with all the other violence. Not even a blip on the radar; only famous mercs caught the attention of the public when they fizzled out. When the waffles came, they were topped with fruit and synth-bacon shaped in a goofy face. Mal drowned them in syrup and forced herself to

eat. The fruit was fresh and reminded her of the scene in the rehab cafeteria. It had nothing to do with her, but felt so much a part of her now, as real as any of the grief she carried. She chewed the bacon and swallowed. When the plate was empty, she paid the bill and headed back into the city. There was a place she could be alone, somewhere the Doc had told her about when she'd pestered him into a conversation, and she summoned directions from the implant interface.

The route took her near the orphanage, but she didn't want to go there. Knowing the younger generation wasn't doing well on their own wasn't something she could handle, so she wound through the sparse paths to the wall where she boarded an industrial elevator to the observation deck—it wasn't legal or wise to go all the way to the top because of the mechanisms that powered the skyfall energy field; the army guarded them as a religious duty. Mal used a few credits to activate the elevator music and let a soft melody envelop her. It was AI-generated slop designed to avoid royalty fees, but it still soothed her fractious mind. Each note curled along her spine and helped relax stiff shoulders that were caught in fight-or-flight. She knew she had to work through what happened, or she wasn't going to last long. She leaned against the wall and hummed along as she rocketed into the sky. When the doors opened, she sent the entrance fee to the robot that greeted her and made her way to the tempered glass. Malory was the only soul in the place; normal people didn't want to see the miles of wasteland and abandoned structures that stretched out to the horizon.

It is you, once again.

The young woman from the ZenTech mainframe appeared in the space beside her, far more vivid than the flickering apparition she had been. Malory recognized the dress from the memories that forced their way into her mind. She just didn't have it in her to be afraid, not after

the aquarium. She was pretty sure she wasn't crazy, but who could say what was possible when she was so far past the limit.

You aren't supposed to have that eye. It belongs to the lullaby of dead dreams. Where the purple flowers grow. Grow. GROW.

"Who the fuck are you? What do you want?" Mal asked. She was desperate to be alone, not playing at necromancy or suffering the depths of a psychotic break. Her head throbbed, and there was a low buzz behind her ears.

You took what is mine. You will earn it.

"The eye?" Mal asked. She rubbed the line on her temple that was raw and healing. The thing had damn near killed her when it activated. "Feel free to take it back."

We all disappear into the sun one day, like the dead boy on the forest floor. You will be my wind-up soldier and march. March. MARCH.

"Stop with the fucking riddles," Mal said. She turned back to the view and followed a broken road that wound around what used to be a neighborhood. People still lived out there. Moved from place to place as transients and venerated the skyfall forecasts that kept them away from impact zones. She wondered if life was easier that way, out in the waste the corporations left behind instead of under their oppressive boot.

There is a safehouse. A coffin. Coffin. COFFIN.

"I can just go back to the Black Hands. I don't need you to play cryptic savior," Malory said. She pictured a world regrowing from the ashes, free from greed and grubby little hands that wanted more, always more. New plants, budding in the sunlight. It was nice.

They will follow. Climb into the coffin instead. Lay low, their attention span won't last.

// NEW COORDINATES RECEIVED

// LOADING...

//

// PROCEED TO THE ROUTE

Chapter Twelve

The safehouse was a shithole with unfinished walls, rotten floorboards, and a colony of fat roaches that scurried from the light. Faded LED strips ran along the cornices that cast the place in a dull orange glow, and layers of dust and cobwebs dominated the shadows. Malory heard the thudding bass from the upstairs neighbor's entertainment system playing an old western shootout, and every window was barred with corrugated prison steel. Only one opened to the fire escape, and it served as a way out if the worst case came to pass. She fastened the many door locks and chains behind her and knew they'd never withstand a tactical door ram. The stench of mildew and mold hung thick in the air and reminded her of the orphanage, of home. The place hadn't hosted another soul in decades. The cabinets were barren, and the fridge had nothing but a can of motor oil that leaked black goo onto the shelves; it was as fitting a place as any to await an executioner's blade. At least no one else would suffer when they came for her. She made her way to the bed and collapsed into dirty sheets—there wasn't a shred of energy left to undress, and she fell asleep in seconds.

She dreamed of a plaza packed with so many bodies, of a megaphone speech about disease, suffering children, and the boots of oppression. The crowd roiled under clouds of tear gas and the swinging of bloodied batons. There were broken bones and sweat, molotov cocktails exploding in beautiful swirls on the concrete, and then it all morphed into a monument built from stacks of corpses meant to reach the sky and further beyond. Andromeda, and all its sparkling

stars, waited. It was patient. And then there was a car, an arm tied off, plump veins penetrated by a needle and the desire to forget the sadness of a sister's features—ones that held all the paintings of people without a face, the fists of an abusive father, a melting snowman on a hill. The drugs never helped, never erased the memory of the lake beneath the moon the way it used to be. The damp wood of the deck, the noise of insects, the water and its eternal churn. There was a secret hidden there, of a forbidden love, of hands on the divots of hips, of a pair swimming naked in the cold. A promise, a kiss that overdosing could never erase. The disjointed images spread thin, quaked, and faded back into the depths.

Malory woke up pissed off. She booted the implant to find dozens of memories that weren't hers had glitched their way into the upper layers of the network. The interface wouldn't let her delete them, so she shoved them into quarantine with the others. She had enough trauma to work through without someone else's thrusting its way into her head. She sat up, her muscles stiff and screaming, and headed for the bathroom. The shower was a disgusting mix of accumulated dirt, ancient soap scum, and hard water deposits, but the tap still ran, and she didn't care. She stripped down and climbed in. The heat burned her skin and Malory revelled in the way it soothed the aches of her battered mind. She used a desiccated sponge to scrub her body raw, to be free of her friend's dried blood and the scent of spent gunpowder. The drain swallowed it all without complaint. She swayed there until the water ran cold and drip-dried. She focused on each droplet, the way it rolled from her skin, to keep herself grounded, to keep the carnage of the aquarium at bay. Her feet were bare against the slimy tiles, and she wiggled her toes, clenched her fists over and over, and breathed in a steady motion.

Mal left her clothes discarded and ordered a brand new set from the network. A delivery drone delivered them right to the fire escape in the alley—black cargo pants, new boots, a patchwork sweatshirt, and a dark windbreaker emblazoned with a biohazard symbol. It was a decent first step to feeling like herself again, but it wasn't enough. When she sat on the ripped sofa in what passed for the living room, the ghost materialized in front of her again.

They could never climb their way to heaven. So many dead dreams left discarded.

“What the fuck is happening to me?” Malory demanded. Her boots were untied, and she couldn't be bothered. She wanted to hug her sister, to go back in time to when her mother was alive and she deserved love.

You have inherited two lives, forever entwined. The eye can show the way.

“What does that even mean?” Mal asked. The memories, the headaches, she wanted it all to end. Her friends were dead, and the ghost never gave straight answers.

There is mine. Mine. MINE. And another. Blended code, synapses tangled in a giant field of purple flowers. Can't you smell them on the breeze?

“Just leave me the fuck alone already,” Mal said. She turned the implant off and watched the woman fade back into the ether.

Alone again, Malory pulled up her hood, yanked on the strings until it was tight around her, and slumped over. The torn leather edges of the sofa dug into her shoulder, and she ignored it. It was okay to feel sorry for herself, to wallow like a dried up slug, but the longer she did, the more it morphed into a profound rage that threatened to undo her. After a few hours, her stomach growled. She sighed, flopped her arms out in frustration, and turned the implant back on. She braced for the intrusion and more whispered mysteries, but it didn't come, so she ordered a pizza

and a six pack. When it arrived, she stuffed her face and savored the grease that coated her tongue. It was a half-step above damp cardboard, but that was the point; the unhealthier the food, the more it tickled at her fried dopamine receptors. She washed it down with one beer after another until she was good and sloshed and then wandered around the place. She found a piece of rusted rebar in one of the corners and went around smashing it into the walls and furniture until her arms ached. She knew it was an irrational desire to make something as miserable as she felt, but she didn't care.

She wasn't given a counselor when her mom died in front of her, and there was no one to teach her how to handle such complicated emotions, so she improvised. If a few busted holes walked her back from the ledge, then so be it. The damage wasn't her problem, anyway. As she wandered, she found herself wishing for the hit squad to come so she could graduate from petty vandalism to smashing their heads like rotten fruit. She tossed the rebar back into the corner where she found it and stumbled. When she hit the ground, she didn't get back up. Instead, she rolled onto her back and found herself replaying the colony ship launch the Doc had shared with her. All that metal ascending into the sky. Almost every passenger onboard left a loved one behind, and Mal didn't think she had it in her to abandon the people she cared about for the possibility of a better life. She'd never trade Nadia's warm embrace, or her sister's crooked smile for a lifetime spent in cryosleep if what awaited her when she decanted was a mystery. She wondered what had to happen to a person for them to take that gamble as she passed out.

Malory woke to a ray of sunrise peeking through the bars of the bedroom window. She had been trapped there for days, and was bored of binge-watching shows on the net. On the third day, she found a box under the mattress filled with schematics and plans for robotic parts, and

she recognized a few from the catalogues of Aeon Automotive Implementations and wondered how the ghost that haunted her was related—if the ethereal woman had moved across other networks to drive forward the inventions of an entire corporation, or if the safehouse had been used by one of the company’s defecting techies. When Mal wasn’t drinking herself into a stupor, she delved into advanced programming tutorials and did her best to learn; she had found the tracing program that infected her hack on day five, buried in the lines the Doc had added, and realized the disaster at the aquarium was her fault from beginning to end. She deleted the affected parts and migrated the entire thing to her network. She set about making improvements, and in a small effort to atone, promised to turn it into a skeleton key that opened anything and everything. She considered nested matrices run by an algorithm, and the sheer complexity kept her sane.

A good wind-up soldier needs a gun to fight their battles.

// NEW COORDINATES RECEIVED

// LOADING...

//

// PROCEED TO THE ROUTE

“You want to arm me? For what? And is it even safe to go out now?” Mal asked. She was doing sit-ups while scrolling through the mess of her hack. She wiped the sweat from her brow and looked around for the ghost woman. No one was there, and no answers came.

Mal went out the fire escape. It was evening, and she resisted looking into windows at people eating dinner until she reached the final ladder. Her boots weren't broken in yet, so when she dropped into the alley, the impact stung. The new eye made navigating in the low light simple, and she followed GPS markers out to the street where the night-life thrived, despite the escalating violence. So many labeled people headed off to bars and diners and memory theaters, and it made her skin crawl. She could reach out to any of them with a little tug on her network, but she still knew she was an outsider. An other. Someone who'd never belong. She supposed they might have all felt the same, and used constant consumption as a crutch to bear it. The path led her through the dense crowds toward the outskirts, past a flurry of nightclubs whose DJ's had never heard of noise ordinance. Mal matched the rhythm of her steps to the thudding bass lines and counted the squares of concrete. Every inch of the city was paved, built-upon, all those skyscrapers stretching above. She pulled up her hood to hide her face as she turned onto a side street that bore the markings of the rival gang les Fantômes.

The implant led her to the outside of their hotel district and the nearby Stanton Arms automated outpost. There were no checks, no licenses—just racks and display cases for every kind of weapon imaginable, for those that could pay. Malory wasn't sure what to do next. Her hack was far from ready, and Nadia hadn't given her anything close to the price tag of even the cheapest gun. She walked up to the machine, connected her implant, and scrolled through lists of shotguns, submachine guns, a few assault rifles, so many blades and blunt weapons it hurt to look at, until she found a class of pistols she was confident in handling. Mal chose a Stanton .45 ACP called the Lantern 6, named after Lacey and her crew. The slide was painted in a splatter of neon stars, the handle a large six overlaying the launch of a colony ship. She loved it. When she

added it to her cart, the whole interface froze and let out a high-pitched screech. Lines of code flowed in a cascade until it blue-screened and shut down. There was a loud clunk in the dispensing tray, and when Mal looked inside, there was the gun she chose and a case of ammo. She didn't hesitate.

The heft of the thing was surprising, but manageable enough—the hit squad's rifle she'd used was sleek, streamlined, and near weightless. Mal made sure it wasn't loaded, aimed down the sights, undid the safety, and squeezed the trigger. It clicked once, twice, and she smiled. She ejected the mag, fed in bullets to capacity, racked around, and shoved the barrel into her waistband. It made her pants sag around her hips. The rest of the ammo went loose into cargo pockets, and she left the empty box by the machine.

"Alright," Mal said. She walked back the way she came, eager to get far away in case anyone recognized her as a member of the Black Hands. "You gave the unstable orphan a gun. Now what?" There was no answer, so she kept going.

Malory didn't want to go back to the safehouse. Instead, she headed to a busy intersection, pulled down her hood, and stared into one of the traffic cams. Running from a fight had never been her style, and the shame of saving her own ass wasn't going away. She waited there for half an hour watching the people ebb and flow, so many little blue labels hovering over them, judging their miserable lives. No one came. No hit squads, no hired assassins, no upstart mercs on their first jobs. Their competitors must have been keeping ZenTech busy enough to forget about her. It was fine that way, too. If she wasn't on their radar anymore, she'd make a bigger splash when she resurfaced during the war. Whoever made the call to move resources

away would find themselves on their internal chopping block—there was no way an underling would pass up the chance for a quick and easy promotion.

She took a deep breath and went to the headquarters. Entering was streamlined when all they had to do was validate her credentials on the net, and she was in the elevator heading down to the lab in record time. When the doors opened, she found the Doc in the middle of an operation.

“Where the hell have you been?” he asked. He was connecting nerves for a new arm, and the metal gleamed in his hands.

“Hiding,” Mal said. She pointed to her violet eye. “What kind of fucked up chrome did you slot in my head, old man?”

“Is it activated already?” he asked. He connected the last few nerves along the seam and started up the synth-skin machine that hung overhead like a vulture. It spat out pale gunk along the implant, and a flurry of robotic hands molded it into a forearm, an elbow, the meat of a shoulder. “Nerves are probably still raw as all hell.”

“Yeah,” she said. Mal walked over to his desk, sat in his chair, and propped her feet up on the wood. The meticulously stacked paperwork scattered to the floor. “Just about flatlined me when it did, and it's been shoving someone else's memories into my head ever since. Some rehab center cafeteria, a rooftop shooting, a couple at a lake. It's morphing the folds of my brain the same as that skin machine.” She didn't tell him about the woman that appeared when she was alone, her suspicion it was all connected to the Prophet—not because she didn't trust him, or because she thought he wouldn't believe her, but because it seemed forbidden. Dangerous. His modern-day believers weren't known for being one of the friendly cults.

“That shouldn’t be possible,” the Doc said. He left his patient and wheeled a scanner over to her. He held up part of the device to take readings, and plugged a cable into one of the ports on her neck. “Let me take a look at you. Make sure you’re okay.”

“What the hell is this thing?” she asked. She let him work. If he could figure out what was happening to her, it’d make recovery much easier. “I can sense it bleeding into my emotions, the way I see people. It’s like it wants me to feel the same way it does. Jaded. Angry. Out for vengeance like it’s alive. And I am not a huge fan.”

“I don’t know,” he said. He moved the device in front of her eye and studied the readouts. Everything seemed just as advertised: high-scale resolution even in low to no light, integrated GPS, incredible network bandwidth, but there was nothing nefarious. “Some kind of big-budget prototype.”

“You shoved this in me, and you don’t even know?” Mal asked. She knocked his hand away, yanked the cable from her neck, and scrambled to her feet. She wanted to scream at him, but stopped short at the label that popped up over his grayed hair.

[LONELY OLD DOCTOR]

“I’m sorry this is happening to you, kid. I know its specs, the readouts, what it says in all the scans,” he said. His arms hung loose at his sides and he shrugged. “It shouldn’t be able to do anything like you’ve mentioned, and it damn sure shouldn’t have almost killed you. It’s only supposed to burn like hell if an implant is active on raw nerves.”

“That’s great,” she said. Another point in the deranged column, then. She collapsed back into his chair and tried not to cry. She didn’t have a viable outlet for this kind of thing. No one did. Ghosts weren’t fucking real.

“I am sorry. I’ll keep running scans for a few days, and see if I can find any more info on the back channels,” he said. He turned and saw that the work had finished. When he looked back at her, he noticed the pistol tucked awkwardly in her waistband and frowned. “Where’d you get that?”

“My girlfriend,” she lied. The situation felt crazy enough without telling him the thing in her head led straight to the Stanton dispenser and let her choose whatever she wanted, free of charge. Becoming an asylum patient? Fuck that. The orphanage was enough of a state-run institution to last a hundred lifetimes.

“At least carry it in a holster. Damn, girl. You’ll shoot yourself in the leg that way,” he said. He kicked at one of the bottom drawers on the desk. “Should find something in there.”

“Thanks, I guess,” Mal said. She dug through the contents until she found a small black shoulder holster and peeled off her jacket. She tightened the leather straps so the gun sat snug against her ribs. It was tilted at an angle to make drawing a piece of cake, even for a beginner. The whole rig was hidden beneath her jacket, so no one would be able to tell until she reached for it.

“By the way,” the Doc said. He moved to double-check the quality of the synth-skin and was satisfied when he found no issues. “There was a job that came in a few hours ago I thought you’d want, but I wasn’t sure when you’d be back. It’s a time sensitive thing, so it might be a little dangerous to take now.”

“What is it?” she asked. It was his attempt to make it up to her, she could tell, but dangerous was good. She was in need of an outlet for the grief, the building rage, and it would do her good to wield it as a weapon. Her implant lit up with the details.

“Cleaning job. Our go-to team has their hands full elsewhere,” the Doc said. He pressed a button to wake his patient since the installation was complete. “Some bodies that need removing. There’s a van in the garage.”

“Sounds great,” she said. She didn’t know how to drive, but the autopilot would at least get her where she needed to go.

“Are you sure you’re up for it? If you need a few days to rest, I can find a different job when you’re ready.”

“Can’t be any worse than dealing with a hit squad,” Mal said. She grabbed the mask from her room and headed for the elevator. She didn’t tell him she was looking forward to using her new weapon to end some lives. She wasn’t entirely sure if that desire came from her, or the implant, but she didn’t try to fight it.

Chapter Thirteen

There were dead bodies everywhere she looked, and the way the full-body hazard suit rustled against Malory's skin as she moved made her want to scream. The respirator filtered each breath she took, but it still tasted of sterile demise, of old roses, of rotten compost. She dragged a body bag over to the first corpse, a bearded man in his thirties that woke up that morning thinking the rest of his life was in front of him—all those back-alley poker sessions, his kid's soccer games, erased. When she lifted his feet, she knew this wasn't a job meant for a single person. The boots were worn from years of work, and she wrenched them into the plastic. Sweat beaded on her brow from the exertion and fell into her eyes. It was going to be a long day. She avoided the empty gaze when she maneuvered the torso and zipped him into the only casket he'd ever get. She grasped the carry handle at the edge and hauled him out to the van, scraping on the concrete. By the time she got him secured in the back, her arms were numb, and she cursed her eagerness to take the job. She headed back into the Black Hands warehouse for another.

There were bullet holes along the walls, scores dug into metal support beams, a littering of shell-casings on the ground, and hundreds of pallets overflowing with illicit goods—memory chips, medicines, counterfeit children's toys and holograms, alcohol, electronics, construction materials, and sweatshop garments waiting to head to markets and under-the-table deals; all the product and profit secured at the cost of dozens of lives. Malory didn't think such a sacrifice was worthwhile, and she added it to all the growing fury waiting for an outlet. She hated the city, the

way it churned the desperate through a grinder. Another body, entombed. Another. She kept at it until the van was at capacity. It was going to take several trips. Mal climbed into the driver's seat and used her network to set the autopilot to head for one of the crematoriums listed in the job details. As it pulled out into the street, she undid her mask and ran her fingers through damp hair. She wanted a drink. To obliterate herself. To shoot something. The van weaved in and out of traffic, and she hoped no cops nearby decided to do their jobs for once. Getting pulled over was a quick trip to the penitentiary; there was no way to explain so many unregistered dead.

The van pulled up at a loading dock outside a brick building whose upper floors had been remodelled into tenement housing. The ovens were running at capacity, and high above, smokestacks disgorged thick black smoke. The air was heavy with the smell of incense, and Malory knew the place was barely a step above the orphanage. It was meant for dead-enders that circled the drain, the kind of place kids like her wound up if they refused to join the gangs and didn't have the gift like Nadia. She took manual control of the van and tried to back it into the dock. It went well enough, at first, and then she pressed the pedal a little too hard and slammed the bumper against the concrete lip. The bumper caved, but a little damage wasn't her problem. She climbed out and walked over to the access door. There was a sticky red button that activated the buzzer, and she shoved her gloved thumb into it over and over. She was impatient; there was so much work left to do, and she was on a time limit. A full minute passed before a portly man came out muttering curses, his eyes sunken with lack of sleep. She sent the contract details to his net, and he called over a team to collect.

"They have you cleaning all alone?" he asked. He fished a pack of bent cigarettes from his pocket and offered her one. Any excuse to take a break, it seemed.

“Yeah,” she said. She wasn’t a smoker. Her lungs had been weak since she was a toddler, but she took it anyway and waited for a light.

“No offense,” he said. He flicked a Zippo and held it for her. “Not really a job for someone like you, girl. You should be working in the clubs, or something.”

“Fuck that,” Mal said. As desperate as she’d ever been, shaking her ass had never been an option. She felt the implant burn, and hate crawled out. The way the man undressed her with his eyes, how his fat jiggled when he spoke. It was disgusting. She took a heavy drag, felt cloud down into her chest, and coughed hard.

“It’s easy credits,” he said. He did a little shimmy with his arms as the team started to unload the bodies. “A little dancing, a sultry whisper, some heavy petting, and wallets empty out like that.” He snapped his sausage fingers and ashed his cigarette.

“I’d rather drink bleach,” Malory said. She felt the weight of the pistol against her ribs, beckoning, and forced herself to take another drag. The ghost fluttered to life next to her and started dancing around in circles.

What a specimen. He sees flesh as a commodity for the markets. A thing to be used, to be sold. Sold. SOLD.

“Hell, I’d get up on a pole myself, if I could,” the fat man said. He blew a cloud of smoke in her face and the team dragged more bodies into the building. “Always thought life would be simple as a woman. Effortless to get what you want.”

“That has to be the dumbest thing anyone has ever said to me.” Mal flicked her cigarette at the ghost doing pirouettes between them, watched it phase right through and bounce across the ground. “And I grew up with a couple of meathead orphans.”

“Whatever,” he said. He dropped his own smoked butt and ground it under his heel. The last body was removed from the van, and they were done here. His eyes lit up. “Your payment, in bulk. If you have more, take them somewhere else.”

“Sure,” Mal said. She spun on her heels and headed for the van instead of surrendering to the growing urge to blast a hole in his forehead. The implant messing with her mind frightened her because they were impulses she already had, just cranked off the scale.

Mal closed her eyes on the ride back to the warehouse and tried to calm down. The ghost had left her alone, which helped, but her temples throbbed. She flipped on the radio, focused on the words to a random pop song. The refrain was catchy, but it felt strange to travel with her personal space intact instead of being crammed onto the monorail. She kind of missed it—the noise, the overheard stories, so many people living lives that were different from everything she’d known, and she felt disconnected. Traffic flowed around her and she hummed. When she reached the warehouse again, she sighed and fastened the rebreather. Instead of gathering more bodies, she started collecting shells and scrubbing blood stains from the area she’d cleared before. All the evidence went into thick trash bags and over to the industrial recycler. It was designed to dispose of everything illegal if the NDPD got a wild hare up their asses and raided the place; it was rated for the bodies, too, but the higher-ups wanted to claw back some of their investments in the crew selling to the crematoriums. The implants were flipped on the black market once they were ripped from cold flesh, and Mal knew her own eye had been destined for the same.

When that was done, she went back to filling body bags. She moved through the warehouse and down the hallway that led to the employee offices where she found: a forklift

operator, his yellow vest stained red, a secretary wearing too much makeup and missing a leg, a divorced man who'd missed spots on his morning shave and had no one left in his life to point it out before he headed to his shift, three teens her age that maintained inventory counts, a security guard decked out in chrome that caught an armor piercing slug with his eye and weighed so much Mal could barely move him, and a few others so disfigured by a grenade they weren't anything more than meat. They all went into bags and the back of the van. The further down the hall she worked, the more she found members from the hit squad; she left them lying in their own filth. They were for last. ZenTech would send their own team to collect soon enough, and Malory was looking forward to it even though she was supposed to be done before it happened. An outlet, her gun, and an overwhelming impulse egged her on. She didn't try to resist.

Once the van was full, she plugged in the coordinates to another crematorium and chugged an entire bottle of water. She was caked in a layer of sweat, and the clothes underneath the suit clung to her skin. The sun was setting, and she wished she could see the colors lit up on the horizon instead of so many skyscrapers flicking on their neon and ads for the evening. She rolled down the window, hung her head outside, and let the air sooth her overworked bones. Her body felt like it belonged to someone else, and she wondered if construction jobs were as difficult before robots took over the heavy labor. She pictured herself clocking in for the day with a little paper slip, her lunch pail overflowing with a home-cooked meal the way it was in the movies, and then she was there. The second drop went much smoother—the grandmother that came out was busy playing slots on her network, so the two stood in silence while the van was emptied. Mal watched them tag-team each bag onto a stretcher and wheel them inside. Quick,

efficient, and destined for the harvest. When she received payment, she didn't wait around. She was eager to deal with whoever showed up.

On the approach to the warehouse, Malory spotted an armored personnel carrier and a lifted truck with ZenTech's logo where the autopilot intended to park, and wrestled manual control. She had to resist the urge to jump out as it coasted to a stop a hundred yards away in the gap between two street lights. Malory peeled off the bodysuit to avoid making noise while she walked and double-checked the Lantern was loaded. Her hands were shaking with excitement, and she released the valve on what she'd been holding back for years; anger, thick and throaty, an all-encompassing desire for revenge, and a jealousy she was sure came from the implant coursed through her extremities and settled in the pit of her stomach. She gripped the pistol tight, knuckles white and stiff, and slipped into the shadows. She crouched down, toes first with each step to keep quiet, the loose bullets clinging softly in her pockets. She was a little disappointed when she found no one keeping watch. She'd always wanted to try choking someone out the way they did in action dramas. Instead, she slipped through the door, careful not to let the hinges creak, and relied on the implant to see in the low light. She moved to a pallet of concrete bags and searched the space for targets.

Lording over the carnage were two guys in full black tactical gear just like the hit squad that came for Mal and her friends at the aquarium—they were the babysitters, protecting the collectors. She knew there were others, and that they'd flock the moment she made a move, so she waited. Observed. Listened to their banter. The guys were bored, and searched through the selection of goods to see if there was anything they wanted to swipe. One of them spent far too long near the less-than-tasteful memory chips, and coughed in embarrassment when the other

approached. Instead of taking the opportunity to rib the guy, he placed a knowing hand on his shoulder and continued on. Malory didn't have it in her to wonder about their lives, who they were, or what had led them there; they were enemies, and they would be dealt with. She crept from behind the concrete to another pallet holding lumber harvested without a permit to get them square in her sights. Once she lit the fireworks, there'd be no rest until the explosions stopped. She didn't have a full grasp on the situation, but she raised the Lantern anyway and aimed at the back of the closest, felt her implant kick in with an aim-assist, and hesitated when they spoke.

"I really wanted to be there for the interrogation," the porn lover said. He tore himself away from the memory chips and headed for his colleague.

"It is what it is," the other said. He readjusted the rifle slung over his shoulder and reached out for a snow globe. When he shook it, little holographic lights lit up over the hypertrain bridge. "Bad luck to get caught near Bagley, though. Banks is a fucking psycho. Has he given you the whole torture spiel yet?"

"Yeah," he said. He shivered dramatically, his body armor clinking in the large space. "Guy gives me the creeps. It's like it gives him physical pleasure."

"Have to be a weird bastard to be on such good terms with The Stranger," the other said. The snow globe flickered out.

The ghost shimmered to life in the space between Malory and the two goons, her hands clasped in solemn prayer, as if delivering their last rights. Banks. The sick fuck who shoved needles under her nails, who left an oak tree in scars on her back. He was still at Bagley Market; Mal had never forgotten him, and damn sure never forgiven. She refocused her aim, followed the reticle displayed by the implant and squeezed the trigger. The projectile shattered into the armor

plating on the porn lover's scapula and sent him stumbling forward. The other dropped the snow globe as he made for his rifle, and caught the next round just under the chin. He fell to his knees in the wreckage of the children's toy gasping for air that never came. Malory shed her cover and approached. She stopped at the man sprawled on his belly first and sent him to the afterlife. When she turned to the second, she found he'd choked on his own blood and slumped over. She put another round in him anyway. The ghost gave her a standing ovation, but Mal ignored her. She snatched a rifle and took up a position behind boxes of clothes overlooking the hallway and waited for the response to come.

At the first sign of movement, she let loose, sending a full clip into two men that rushed out. Before they were on the ground, Mal ducked from the return fire, and a surge of panic coursed through her as the slugs punched right through the denim knock-offs. The ghost skipped to a stop in front of her, a wild smile plastered on its face, too wide to be human. Malory discarded the rifle, ejected the magazine from her pistol, and jammed in loose rounds from her pocket—her hands shook, and she dropped a few. She really needed some spare mags. When it was back at capacity, she slammed it home and fed a round into the chamber. She was at a loss, then: she didn't know how many enemies were left or their positioning, and peeking over was a quick end. She was so far out of her depth, but had never felt better. Her judgement was overwritten by rage, by glee that belonged to the implant, to the ghost. Any shred of rationality she could find was consumed, so she fired blindly through her own cover, hoping to catch them unaware. No such luck came. Instead, their return fire ripped a hole in her right hand and made her scream obscenities.

What a mediocre showing. You could do with some training.

“Fuck off!” Mal yelled. She couldn’t move her fingers, and the gore of her palm made her want to vomit. The world narrowed to a slit and her heart hammered in her ears. It was shock, she knew, but there was nothing to stop it. This was a mistake. A miscalculation, but she’d done it anyway—gave in to the emotions, ones that weren’t hers. “Help me, or get the fuck out of my head!”

7 O’clock, crouched behind an I-beam.

Mal snapped to that direction, angled down, and fired three times. She heard the body drop, and another voice called out from the left. She turned, fired again, and life snuffed out. She stood and ran back to the pallet of lumber, hoping it would hold out a bit better. She tore fabric from her shirt and stifled a groan as she pulled the scraps tight around her ruined hand. While she wrapped it, she was sharp enough to listen for footsteps—there were four more in a semicircle, and they were closing in. There weren’t any tricks left to play. There was just her, the ghost, and a will to live that superseded all else.

On the left, closing in a bit faster. Faster. FASTER.

Mal aimed in that direction, the crosshair displayed on her implant bobbing in time with her heart. She was exhausted, and her lungs struggled from the exertion. She blasted the first guy in the chest as he rounded the corner, and launched herself past him to hit the guy following behind. Two more. Her hand had bled through the makeshift bandaging. She pulled one of the bodies on top of her and waited for them to come. In their brief moment of confusion, she shot them in the shins and then their faces when they keeled over. She shoved the body off and laid there gasping; she wasn’t done, but she needed a moment. The ghost bent down until their faces almost touched, its mouth opened like it was trying to suck out her soul. Mal smacked at her with

the bloodied hand, and the ghost phased out of sight. The antics were getting old. She sighed, sat up, and tore off more of her shirt to rewrap her hand. It was going to bleed until she got back to the Doc, but that was fine. It could wait. She struggled to her feet, grabbed a grenade from the rigging on one of the bodies, and headed down the hall to find the cleaners; there would be no survivors.

They were huddled in one of the back offices waiting for the all-clear, and they never doubted it would come up until the grenade bounced freely between them. There was a moment where realization dawned on their faces—a moment of knowing there were no more corporate Christmas parties or child-support payments or microwaved tv-dinners after a long shift. Just that moment, a brief scramble, and then the explosion. Malory didn't bother looking into the room afterward. Everything was quiet. She wiped her face on her sleeve, and didn't go back to cleaning. Instead, she reloaded her pistol, which was much more challenging down a hand, and searched for a guard whose body size was most similar to hers. When she found one, she stripped the gear. The armor hadn't helped them much, but it was better than nothing. Three grenades, a rifle, several extra mags, a long knife designed for stabbing, a few thick plates over her vitals, and she was ready. She marched out of the warehouse, past their empty vehicles, the engines still idling, and climbed into the body van between the street lights. She keyed in Bagley Market and let the autopilot take her thinking of all the ways Banks was about to die.

Chapter Fourteen

Blood dripped down the steering wheel, slick rubber smeared with a symbol, a much-needed reminder that Malory was alive, that she was in control of her own body and not a puppet to some digital entity from lifetimes ago. She slid out, abandoned the van near the monorail terminal, and took in the sights—Bagley Market was just how she remembered, but embraced everywhere by night and neon. The same three tiers of stalls and shops selling fish, eggs, fried synth-meats, colorful textiles, shoes, bags, books, and toys; the things a good consumer wanted, needed, all for sale to those who could afford them. Mal circled the archway entrance, the vivid signage, the holo trees that shed false leaves, and headed for the staircase that led into the depths of the emporium; the staircase that let out at the four-way intersection they'd robbed as kids. She paused at the top and wondered whether the shoppers below saw her the same way she envisioned herself, as an avenging wraith about to drag a sick bastard back to hell. She adjusted the rifle strap on her shoulder, still not used to carrying so much gear, and descended the steps two at a time. She felt anticipation build, but didn't let it overwhelm. She was going to take her time. She was going to enjoy this.

When she reached the intersection, she froze. There were the same animatronic mannequins displaying updated fashion styles, the food, cases of electronics, and aggressive ads hovering gold and red overhead. The place hadn't really changed, and the implant flared to life spitting out so many data labels it made her head spin. There was something sinister there, below

the surface—a compelling aspiration for destruction, the desire to unload on the unsuspecting crowd buying and selling, to sow terror in the hearts of all souls present. The ghost was predatory, and it wanted to wield its influence like a cudgel. Malory refused, even in the throes of her emotions. It wasn't who she was, or who she wanted to be. She focused on the vivid memory of being marched from the basement of the real-meat boutique for the public whipping and remembered the way. She did not head straight there. Instead, she found a small noodle stall overlooking the way in and took a seat. Observation first. Careful calculation. The old man, plating a bowl of Wonton for a customer, flashed a look of concern. He'd seen mercenaries before, but she was the first one that bled on his counter. Wrestling with whether to turn her away, most likely.

“What can I get for you?” he asked. His voice was strained, as if he'd screamed the lyrics at concerts as a hobby his entire life. He had a dingy rag draped over his shoulder, and he used it to wipe his hands clean.

“What do you recommend?” Mal asked. She shrugged the rifle off and leaned it against the counter. The ghost took the empty stool next to her.

“Do you want something heavy, or something light?”

“Heavy, please. It's been a long day,” Mal said. She looked down at her hand, tried to move her fingers, and winced.

“I can see that,” he said, and ducked below the counter. He rooted around for a second, pulled out an old medical kit, and undid the clasps. He reached inside, and then threw a roll of gauze to her. “Should keep you from bleeding in your food, at least, but you should get that looked at soon. It'll get infected.”

“Thanks,” Mal said. She peeled off the scraps of her shirt and went queasy when she saw the hole. It was unsettling to be able to see straight through her own hand, and she thought she could see splinters of bone in the mess. She wrapped the gauze as tight as she could without screaming bloody murder, and used some of the extra to wipe the man’s counter. It wasn’t sanitary, but she felt it was the effort that counted.

“No worries,” he said. His eyes lit up to take her order. Decided not to turn her away, then. “You good with spice?”

“Sure,” Mal said. She wasn’t a big fan, but anything would do. Her body had been abused long before the shootout, and she knew her unstable state was the only reason she was still up and moving. It wasn’t going to last forever, and food would put off the crash enough to accomplish her goals.

While she waited, Mal spun around on the stool to watch the people, to take in the patterns, and to catalogue each one that headed for the meat boutique. She wasn’t sure how rough it’d get when she went through the doors, or if they’d let her march down to the basement to protect the business and the clientele. A group of kids ran past clutching the newest VR headset and she knew their lives had parents, apartments free of mold, but she wasn’t jealous. Despite the state of her body, she was in the market as a paying customer. Mal wasn’t famous yet, didn’t have that little cottage on the lake with Nadia, but she didn’t have to steal to survive anymore, and that meant enough to her to cut through the overwhelming cloud. She didn’t let go of the rage, though, or the sense of injustice ingrained so deep down the implant couldn’t influence. She put it on hold, set to the side to spring forth at a moment’s notice. She wasn’t going to stop until Banks was the same consistency as the steaming synth-meat behind her. When

she tore her gaze away from the kids, she side-eyed the ghost beside her—the entity that rooted itself inside her mind like a virus was drooling at the sight of faux-pork going into a bowl.

“Here you go,” the old man said. He placed the food in front of her, chili oil radiating from the sauce. Sloppy noodles and pickled vegetables, submerged. “My signature 500 credit dan dan.”

“Looks amazing,” Mal said. She broke the disposable chopsticks apart with her good hand and stirred. The spice stung at her organic eye, and she sent the money before she shovelled the noodles into her mouth.

“I’ll throw in some Oolong, free of charge,” he said. He placed a paper cup in front of her, little wisps rising in the air.

Malory focused on eating above all else, bite after bite, and didn’t notice the heat catching up to her until it was half-gone. She took a deep breath, sipped at the tea, and looked around. The old man had moved on to other customers, and the ghost next to her mimed slurping noodles from a non-existent bowl. Guess it was possible to miss things like food in death, after all. Mal wouldn’t have shared even if she could. Nearby, a street performer with dermal implants done in bronze mimicked a moving statue for donations, and Mal watched the way his limbs jerked around. He used a cane and a suitcase as props to sell the image of an old-timey businessman, and no one paid him much attention. It was hard work, and sacrificing his appearance to commit to the act was admirable. Mal sent a dozen credits as a tip and went back to her food. The meat approximation melted in her mouth, and she had to stifle a moan. One day she’d have real protein, but until then, it went in the books as the best thing she’d ever tasted. When she was done, she placed the chopsticks on top of the empty bowl, stood, and slung the

rifle back over her shoulder. A little break was fine, but there was a man destined for the recycler, and she was the one meant to send him there.

Describe it to me. It is difficult to remember. Remember. REMEMBER.

“Thanks, old man. I appreciate it,” Mal said. She ignored the ghost begging for knowledge and headed toward the boutique. Observing the place had netted nothing except disdain for the shoppers going in and out, and she was devoid of patience.

Moving through the crowd was an experience she could get used to—the people parted around her, giving space in a way that made her feel like a big-time mercenary on the way to Purgatory for a gig. The power of being visibly armed. Before, she always had to fight her way through, bumping into shoulders and swinging arms like she didn’t exist at all. When the bell on the door rang as she entered, dozens of eyes landed on her, none of them friendly. The place was lit by hanging lights, and there were glass cases housing the many cuts of beef, ham, chicken, goat, and more exotic selections like alligator and kangaroo. Little placards labeled each in bold black lettering, and the floating digital displays overhead listed price per ounce. The rich clientele, who normally turned their noses up at someone like her, as if trying to avoid the stench of bottom-dwellers, looked at her instead with fear, apprehension, and indignation. Mal didn’t belong there, but the rifle functioned as an all-access pass none of them were brave enough to deny. She waited a moment for the employees to process her arrival, and when it was obvious none of them intended to stop her, she trolled to the door that led below.

Malory stopped halfway down the stairs and bent to see the same wad of gum stuck to the underside of the hand rail and wondered what kind of person had left it there—was it a bored secretary who couldn’t be bothered to find the trash, one of the many shareholders on a visit to

see the fruits of their investment, or one of the staff after a long day in the thick of slaughter as a way to taunt their unloved boss? It didn't matter, but Mal chose to admire it as a silent act of rebellion. When she reached the landing, the smell of animal musk mixed with cleaning chemicals clogged her nose and made it uncomfortable to breathe. She could hear the animals waiting for the end in their pens, the calls of cattle banging against restraints. She considered setting them free, but it wasn't why she was there. Their fates were their own. She marched down the hall until she found the metal door to the abattoir Banks used for her interrogation; if he was there with the informant, it was where he'd be. She checked her equipment, adjusted some of the armor plating until it was snug against her skin, and slammed her boot just above the lock. The door gave way with a wrenching clang, and she stormed inside.

// WARNING!

// EARLY-ONSET CHROME MADNESS DETECTED IN VICINITY

// TARGET DEEMED TO PRESENT A SIGNIFICANT DANGER

//

// PLEASE PROCEED WITH CAUTION

Industrial tile, well-used walls, and the bulk of Banks standing over the informant strapped to a chair greeted her. Malory trained her rifle sights on the man and entered. He was older, and wore the years like a weathered sea-captain. Heavy alcoholism bloated his face, the appendages that were still human. He'd had so many upgrades crammed into his frame, each glinting with peril in the killing-floor light, but his eyes were the same shark-dead and

compassionless voids that spoke of spousal abuse and nonchalant murder. He moved, then, faster than Malory could process, wrapping a thick metallic arm around the neck of his victim, fully prepared to end the life of the hostage at the mere twitch of her finger. Malory didn't speak, just took one slow step after another until they were only a few paces apart. She tried to ignore the hostage, all the damage on his body—the missing fingers, the swollen face and broken jaw, the way tears leaked down his cheek tinged in red from the ruptures. She wasn't there to save him, though, and closed her heart to his plight; she weighed the likelihood of collateral damage, and felt it an acceptable price to pay. One poor soul in exchange for the felling of a monster.

She did not open fire right away. Viscera flowed down the drain at the hostage's feet, a fitting representation of what was to come. There was paperwork, stained with fluid and smeared ink, near unrecognizable on the torture tray beside the men, and her implant peeled what few legible words remained for her to read: Informant, Personnel Distribution, Warehouse Location, Extraction, Black Hands, Planned Raid. She assumed they were trying to learn where the gang hid their distribution networks in order to take them out, but the whole thing felt strange. It was the kind of information a corporation would seek out, not a crazy market guard. It didn't bode well. Beside her, the ghost flickered to life and waltzed right up to the pair, uncaring for the delicate standoff, and ran spectral fingers across the bulging plates and steel joins of Banks' arm.

So many snakes coiled in the shade of a corporate shadow, waiting to strike. Venom waiting in sharpened fangs for the unsuspecting. You should ask him about his boss. Boss. BOSS.

“Would you shut the fuck up?” Mal snapped. Her finger was tense, ready, and the wound on her hand throbbed from the strain of holding her aim steady on target.

“I know you, girl,” Banks said. His eyes flashed with recognition at her outburst, cataloguing the instability like a predator designed for every moment to be one of violence. He laughed, thick and full of disdain. “Come to try your luck at petty retribution? It won’t go the way you want.”

You should finish this before the master comes to find out why their little pet monster tugs so vehemently against its leash. Be swift. Be decisive. You are outclassed, outmatched, and in over your head. Head. HEAD.

The ghost floated behind Banks and wrapped her imaginary hands over his eyes, as if to blind him, and started to sing a twisted lullaby about flying too close to the sun in coffins made of wax.

“What the fuck do you know?” Mal asked. Her aim faltered, and she knew her hand wasn’t going to hold much longer. There were a dozen things she wanted to ask, to demand of Banks, but she didn’t know how to articulate them. It wouldn’t give her the closure she sought, anyway.

“I did say gutter rats carry disease with them when they find their way out of the sewage systems, did I not?” Banks asked. He flexed his mechanical arm until the informant in his grasp struggled to breathe, and laughed again. “I told the Stranger over and over that letting you go was a mistake, but he was obsessed with your little toy. Said someone so insignificant couldn’t be allowed to wield that level of technology. That it was bad for ZenTech’s bottom line. Said someone too smart for their own good would be dead long before getting even was ever an option.”

“The Stranger works for ZenTech?” Mal asked. She noted it for later, but it made some amount of sense. The man had reeked of corporate problem-solver. Her finger contracted on the trigger, but not enough to fire.

“You should always know who your real enemies are,” Banks said. He sighed, as though letting go of any miniscule respect he held for her brazen act. “The Stranger was wrong. You’re just a dumbass kid with a death wish, suffering the same sickness as me.”

The ghost took more offense than Malory did, and shed any semblance of her human form. She devolved into a digital mist that swirled around like a tempest, invisible to Banks and the poor informant whose face was turning purple from the pressure, and started to reform into something else. Something with a hundred dangling limbs, a maw of tentacles and teeth, each dripping acidic saliva on the men below. Her new form was ravenous, and wanted to consume.

Each life forfeit is one less for the sun to burn, another step toward progress, and your silly dream of a restored moon high above.

Malory gave in to the desire beckoning from the implant and squeezed the trigger. Three bullets ricocheted off the metal arm, one punched a hole in the elbow joint, and another grazed the informant in the cheek. A quick snap of the neck, a life ended forever, and Banks moved in a blur. Mal didn’t let up, tried to follow him on the approach, and the clip clicked empty as she felt the fist slam into her stomach. There was the crunch, the give of several ribs, and she flew backward into the wall. Before she could stand, he was on top of her and closed alloy fingers around her face like a vice. When he tried to squeeze, Mal heard the hydraulics strain, damage from a line in the elbow severed by the only shot that landed. The implant refused to crush her skull. She had come so close to death, and it didn’t phase her in the slightest. Malory seized on

the malfunction and drew the Lantern from its holster. Her eye showed her a path of raising it to head level, sending brain matter out in a kaleidoscope of gore, but Mal knew he'd see it coming. He had taken control of the situation, despite her best efforts, so she pressed the barrel flat against the soft below the sternum instead, and sent a round through his diaphragm. He didn't let her go.

"Remember, this is what you asked for," Banks said. The ghost closed its monstrous mouth around him, and it did nothing. So much display, so much bravado, and it was less than useless. He lifted his other fist, and intended to pummel her face. "The Stranger won't fault me for this. I won't let it be used as evidence of my affliction. You did this."

"Fuck off!" Mal screamed. She fired again, and again, and again. Each shot echoed around the room like a proclamation. The raised fist never came. When Banks died, he stayed on his feet, still clutching her face. It took a burst of effort she didn't really have left to get free.

Well, that could have gone better. You have three broken ribs and a punctured lung.

Mal watched the ghost morph back into a woman, and then headed for the papers on the tray. She stuffed them in her pocket and turned to leave. When she reached the door, she stopped, turned around, and walked right up to the thing pretending to be a woman.

"What the fuck are you, and what will it take for you to get out of my head?" Mal asked. Each strained breath was razorblades blending her guts, and she needed to see the Doc. He'd fix her up and make some sense of the documents she'd taken. Had to.

I am nothing, and I am here to stay. A figment of your imagination. A dream, a misfired synapse, abandoned and forgotten. Preserved forever against my will, as the Prophet foresaw. I was called Evie, once. Before my self-inflicted demise. Demise. DEMISE. Yours will also come.

Chapter Fifteen

Ascending the stairs was hell come to Earth, each step eliciting a gasp, a butcher's knife cleaved clean through bone to lung, and Malory almost passed out. It would have been simple to take the freight elevator for cattle to the surface, but she craved the spectacle of passing back through the boutique like a Roman general of yore on a triumphal procession—a child-like want to impress, to be seen as something greater. It was irrational, and she knew it, but she'd given up any self-preservation sensibilities the moment her hand was reduced to ruins. When she pushed open the door that led into the store, the world went quiet. Workers paused mid-order, packages wrapped in soft paper suspended between them and their customers. No one spoke. No one moved to halt her progress, limping and covered in sweat. She emitted the aura of a wounded animal, of something cornered and dangerous, as if getting too close would unleash the primal instinct to murder and continue on. They knew better. When she was halfway through, the tired manager lifted a parcel of sirloin steaks and tossed them to her. He nodded and let out a deep breath. Mal flashed him a lazy mock salute with her wounded hand, bandages soaked through.

Outside, Bagley continued its debauchery unfazed. A couple took snapshots in front of one of the holo trees to commemorate their night out, a young kid tried on new shoes for the coming school year, a toddler begged their bedraggled parents for an action figure of a mercenary Mal didn't recognize, and three women tried to find the freshest fish to cook for dinner. Everyone gave her a wide berth as she walked, and Mal gave a little wave to the old man

as she passed the noodle stall. She went the long way to the main entrance; she didn't have it in her to climb the stairs that led straight to the street. As she made her way, Mal passed a billboard for Hua Tech's new flagship synth-skin that showcased a woman covering her implants with pristine iridescence, massive holograms of corporate logos floating overhead, a shabby man holding a cardboard sign begging for credits, and an aerial vehicle showcase with new fuel-efficient engines. When she finally passed under the archway at the entrance, she didn't look back. She didn't head for the abandoned body van. Instead, she queued for the monorail and sat near the window to watch the city lights blur past on the way to the Black Hands headquarters, a couple steaks on the seat beside her.

As the city scrolled by, Malory replayed the moment on her network when Banks' eyes dimmed. She revelled in the fraction of a second when they went dark forever, the culmination of a desire for revenge that stretched back years. She felt the tension coiled in the branches of the tree scarred on her back release for the first time since the man had branded it there. It would have been more enjoyable if her body wasn't on the verge of collapse. She pressed the side of her head against the window and listened to the rumble of the engine, the click-clack of wheels on the tracks. It had been satisfying to avenge herself upon the mad bastard, sure, but it wasn't enough. She wanted, needed more, to fight the world itself—the implant poked and prodded into every fold of her brain and she didn't have the energy left to fight it. The ghost needed her, so it wouldn't drive her to the point of no return. At least, that's how she muddled through the slow surrender. She fell asleep to the noise of steel herding passengers on their way and dreamed of the ocean. Lapping waves, the sea-salt spray, a backlit silhouette of a woman in the sun framed by countless grains of sand. There was happiness there from long ago, but not hers.

Malory woke up as they pulled into a stop and remembered the pain. She'd left a stain on the seat next to the meat where her hand rested, but there was nothing she could do about it. She watched the crowd outside and focused on their faces. It was easy for them to blend together, all the features meshed and blended into Generic Face #4, to fade into background noise her brain ignored, but that day was different. Out of the corner of her sleepy organic eye, she saw a dinner jacket laced with dark and gold in flowing obsidian—one she'd seen before. There was the same optical blur of an implant throwing out digital noise to disguise the features of a man's face, the same obscene wealth wielded like a cudgel to keep the peasants in the dark. Before she could process what she was doing, Mal sprang from her seat and sprinted, her injuries temporarily forgotten, one clumsy boot in front of the other past the passengers that shot looks of bewilderment, until she was out in the station. The steaks were still in the seat. She didn't stop.

He was nowhere to be found. She was frantic, and scanned faces and upper bodies for that damned jacket, drawing in shallow and ragged breaths; she never stopped moving, even when her body screamed for her to give it up. Not looking meant accepting defeat. She had seen the man that adopted her sister, the man that absconded with her twin into the ether, never to be seen again. Mal pestered the Doc daily to help find her, and despite all his promises to look, the constant reassurances, the talk of contacts and data brokers, it never amounted to anything. And there was the first concrete lead she'd ever had, a moment where a long-awaited reunion was possible, probable even, as long as she kept moving. As long as she found that man again. She grabbed at anyone wearing clothes even remotely similar to spin them around for a look, but he had vanished. She had seen him, she was certain. She refused the doubt that sprouted the longer she searched. She had seen him. He had been right there, walking. In her desperation, she took

hold of a stiff shoulder that refused to move and faltered. Her ribs had enough, and she fell, sprawled out on the station floor like a fish gasping for air. She had seen him, and she had been too slow.

The man she'd grabbed before falling looked down at her and scoffed before resuming his journey. The ghost materialized and squatted beside her. She ran imaginary fingers through Malory's hair, but Mal did not rise. She laid there, her head a whirlwind. What a stupid, worthless piece of shit. She bled on the station tiles. Tears welled in her eyes until they reached critical mass and rolled down her temples. If she had just been faster, looked harder, been more skilled. If only she pushed through the pain. If only she wasn't a dumbass, a blight on the world. If only. After a few minutes, an old crone poked her in the leg with a wooden cane.

"You better get up and move before security comes. They don't treat vagabonds kindly," the old crone said. She pointed the cane over at an observing security camera. She was trying to be nice, warning that way, but it felt condescending. As if kindness was all she could afford to someone in such a state.

"Yeah, yeah," Mal managed. She scowled, and struggled back to her feet, and wiped her face on her sleeve. She wasn't sure what to do, and it was difficult to think.

The old woman scurried away once Malory was standing. Mal took in short, shallow breaths and hobbled over until she was directly underneath the CCTV camera. She looked up and stared at it. Her skeleton key hack wasn't even close to ready, and when she tried to activate it, code whirred in her vision. It spat out too many errors to count. She tried again, felt the implant heat up and the stinging of raw nerves. She persisted. She was willing to try until she passed out, if it was necessary. The ghost reached out to hold her hand, and Mal accepted it, curled her

fingers around the nonexistent palm. A confusing warmth spread through her—a heat that contained multitudes, from sympathy and the reassurance of a watchful sibling to the chaos, discord, and hostility of a broken mind thoroughly consumed by spite. The warmth spread, and the hack smoothed out to dig its way inside. Minutes passed, and the travelers flowed around her; business men in suits on their way to increase shareholder profits at the expense of all else, nervous and divorced men on their way to date nights free of their clinging c children, and workers heading to slave away in private cubicles, each and every one avoiding her.

// BREACH PROTOCOL INITIATED SUCCESSFULLY

// PLEASE STAND BY...

//

// LOADING...

//

// ERROR

// RETRYING

// ERROR

// RETRYING

// RETRYING

//

// SUCCESS

// DOWNLOADING RELEVANT SURVEILLANCE FOOTAGE...

//

// DOWNLOAD COMPLETE

Malory couldn't believe it. It didn't feel real, and shouldn't have been possible. She looked over at the ghost, at the woman that used to be Evie, who smiled and faded away. Maybe it wasn't all bad having the entity trapped inside her mind. Maybe. Mal wandered back into the station to board the monorail as slow as she could. When she reached the empty platform, it was the first time she could recall not having to suppress the urge to dive head first onto the tracks. Seemed like a good sign, even if it would have put an end to the agony. The day had been a gauntlet of abuse, but it had been worth it. She did most of the cleaning job, made ZenTech suffer the loss of an entire retrieval team, put an end to Banks' villainy once and for all, and had a lead to follow for the first time. She'd do it all again, even knowing the cost. When the train pulled in, she boarded in a daze. She knew the Doc was going to scold her like a concerned father, but that was okay. Welcome, even. It was nice to know someone gave a shit what happened to her outside of the people she'd grown up with—they hadn't chosen their association, but the Doc had, and that was special.

The guards at the headquarters moved to stop her from entering when they saw the bloody bandages on her hand, but they paused and gave a show of respect when they noticed how severe the wounds were. It was obvious she was there for treatment, and so Mal limped past them and through the lobby, that sepulchre quiet. She stuffed her hand in her pocket to avoid tracking blood through the solemn place. No one else was ever there at the same time. When she boarded the elevator and pressed the button for the lab, she had to resist collapsing. It took all she had to stay on her feet. It was just a bit more, so she bit her lip and leaned against the wall. She

looked forward to the painkillers and sleep the most. It was going to be at least a month of recuperation and boredom, but it was the perfect excuse to take stock of her disordered emotions. To troll through the station footage over and over for a glimpse, for that lead to follow back to her sister. She wondered if Maya was as desperate for a reunion as she was, or if her twin even missed her with access to that kind of wealth as a distraction.

Mal was in the middle of picturing what her sister's life had been like when the doors opened—if she'd been sent off to a private school or provided the best private tutors, if she'd found anyone she loved, or if she'd been trained and hardened for a corporate life and had all empathy excised like a disease and discarded. If she was still the same sweet girl with a crooked smile Mal cherished in memories. The doc was asleep at his desk again.

“You silly old man,” Mal whispered. She shuffled up beside him, grabbed a slip of paper from one of the nearby stacks, and used it to tickle his nose. It was immature, but she didn't care. It took a few tries before he jolted awake, and Mal would have cackled if her ribs were whole.

“You're back late, you little shit,” he said. He sat up and rubbed the sleep from the corners of his eyes. “Twenty years ago, I would have shot someone waking me up that way.”

“I need your help, Doc,” Mal said. She leaned on the desk, each breath like sucking air through a thick sheet of bubble wrap. She wouldn't have been surprised if she was slowly turning blue.

“What the hell happened?” he asked. His eyes shot open, wide awake, and took in her pained expression. When she pulled her hand from her pocket, he grimaced.

“Got shot,” she said. She unwrapped the soaked gauze slowly to reveal the hole, raw and inflamed and still oozing. She couldn’t feel the fingers anymore, and she knew that was a bad sign. “Also broke a couple ribs. Hard to breathe.”

“I can see that, you idiot. I meant how,” he said. He stood and beckoned her to the surgery table and turned on the overhead machine when she laid down.

“ZenTech team showed up. Took care of them, though,” she said. She didn’t tell him about Bagley or Banks and the ill-advised crusade. If she was able to avoid some of the coming lecture, it was fine to leave him in the dark. He’d understand. Probably.

“You took on an entire retrieval team and survived?” he asked. The machine swung into place above her, the hydraulics purring smooth like a kitten; the Doc had gotten to the needed maintenance, then. That was reassuring. “You were supposed to be long gone before they arrived. I told them to send a team along with you, but they didn’t listen. Bunch of dipshits trying to run this place an awful lot like the corporations they claim to despise. Acceptable losses. What horseshit.” He spat on the floor, knowing he’d have to clean it later.

“It’s alright, Doc. I enjoyed it,” Mal said. She wheezed out a small laugh, and regretted it. Her face paled and she felt like throwing up.

“Of course you did,” he said. He patted her on the head as the machine started to work. It scanned her chest first, feeding the x-ray images directly into his network. The expected lecture never came. “Crazy girl, you’ve been running around with a rib shoved in your lung. It’s impressive you walked in here at all, let alone that you’re still pulling pranks.”

“Is it bad?” Mal asked. She’d closed her eyes and tried to think of other things as a distraction—Nadia’s soft embrace, the lead on her sister, how much she loved her new pistol, but nothing worked.

“Nah. Not really. It’s an easy fix, but you’re gonna feel like you were run over by an industrial steamroller for a few days,” he said. He flipped a toggle with his network and the machine jerked over to her hand. When it fed those images to him, the Doc frowned. “That, however, is gonna be a problem.”

“What’s wrong?” Mal asked. She cracked her organic eye and looked up at his expression. She’d only seen that look when members came in with the kind of wounds that required a complete overhaul and implant replacement. Her heart sank a little, but it had still been worth it.

“You’ve got three options,” he said. He shared a couple pages with her on the network she didn’t bother to understand. They were full of technical diagrams and illustrations. “Option one, we try to heal it up, but the damage is severe and you’ve left it too long and picked up an infection. Chances are, if you don’t lose the hand outright, it’ll never regain full motion or feeling. The bones and tendons will ache something fierce for the rest of your life. I don’t recommend it.”

“That doesn’t sound too good,” she said. If she was ever going to be one of the mercs that was lauded as a folk hero by the masses, all those like her that yearned for a champion to lead them to a better life, then she needed two hands. “But I don’t really have the credits for an implant.”

“I can pull some shenanigans for the payment of the cleaning job. Call it hazard pay, or whatever the fuck,” he said. He flipped to the second page. “Option two, we replace it with something new below the wrist. It still runs the risk of the infection spreading and your body rejecting the metal in the crossfire.”

“Third option?” she asked.

“We replace the entire arm.” It was the nuclear solution, one that required extensive support on her collarbone and shoulder blade so it wouldn’t stress her frame with added weight. “I have something nice in stock, and it’ll take about as long to heal as your ribs and lung. It’s what I’d go with, if I was in as sorry a state as you are.”

“Whatever you think is best, Doc. I trust you,” Mal said. She closed her eyes again.

“Let’s take care of the ribs first,” he said. He headed over to a cabinet to retrieve a vial of painkillers and equipment. When he came back, he inserted an IV in her good arm and injected muscle relaxers and a nice bit of morphine. They went to work immediately, and he chuckled as Malory groaned. The Doc slotted various things into the overhead machine and directed it to her ribcage. “I’m gonna need you to undress if you don’t want it tearing through.”

“Sure,” she said. She shrugged out of her jacket and lifted the shirt to reveal a fat purple bruise. It radiated from raised welts where Banks’ knuckles had landed.

“Try not to flinch,” he said. The machine inched closer and stabbed her with a dozen needles to apply local anesthesia. When she was numb, it cut into her soft skin and spread it wide enough for little metal clamps to reach inside. A suction tube guzzled away the blood as it dug in deep. The Doc guided it remotely to snag the rib from her lung and shimmy them all back in place. Once it was done, the machine assistant inserted a tube to drain and inflate the lung.

“Thanks,” Mal said. The morphine made her loopy, and she could see the ghost at a distance mesmerized by the sight of fluids it hadn’t possessed in decades.

“Now that they’re back where they belong, they should heal on their own. Tube stays for a few days until the lung is good. Try not to knock it when you’re moving about,” he said. He moved the arm out of the way and inspected the site.

“Take the whole arm,” Mal said. She lifted the mangled hand and waved it at him. It left after-images as it went, and she giggled a bit. She was surprised to find it didn’t hurt.

“Alright,” he said. He headed over to the expanse of implants on the shelves and rooted around until he found what he was looking for. He walked back holding a container with a product image that was sleek and black—elegant lines and curves and servos. It evoked flowing ink on a page. “I’ll have to put you all the way out. You want some synth-skin over it? Supposed to help trick your brain into believing it’s the real deal.”

“Nah,” she said. She’d always been partial to the raw look, and the implant was beautiful all on its own. “I could use the rest, anyway. Fix me up, Doc, and I’ll see you on the other side.”

“Sure thing,” he said. He grabbed a syringe and fed various compounds into the IV. She was out in seconds, and he got to work carving.

While the Doc was removing her flesh to make her something more than human, bolting steel to bone with thick screws and threading delicate nerves and abused muscles into countless wires, tubes, and interfaces, Malory dreamed of a reunion with her sister—they were at Luna Paradise theme park, lost in the House of Mirrors. Maya clasped her hand tight, as if letting go could catapult them back into the void, and she led the way. They wound up stuck at dead ends where they were forced to shuffle past so close together to go in another direction. Malory

relished each time she sensed her sister's warmth, and they laughed at their reflections. The ones that made them taller, shorter, wider, bulged on top and the sides; the ones that made them shorter, shrunk their heads, or just their torsos. They spent hours making funny faces, sticking out their tongues and scrunching eyebrows, and playacted scenes from Maya's favorite horror films until the dream faded. When Malory woke, she was in her room, and she was crying. When she went to wipe the tears, she smacked herself in the face with a new metal hand, and reality came flooding back. She flexed each finger, marveled at the movement of joints and how she could feel it all. The arm was new, and it was hers.

In the month of downtime, Malory never left her room. When she wasn't twisting and flexing the metal limb, endlessly impressed that the hand could rotate a full three hundred and sixty degrees at the wrist, she was obsessed with the station footage collected from the hack on the CCTV camera. It ruled her life, and there were entire days where she didn't eat. The Doc had to force her. Every person there that day was sorted, catalogued, and stalked, including the workers. She followed the routes they took through the station, where they came from, noted if they stopped at a vending machine or for a piss—she watched it all once, twice, again and again and again until she found it. Near the exit, a blur where there should have been a man, a shadow on the wall, and three pedestrians giving it the unconscious space of a gulf in social class. That blur was the man she'd seen, the man that took away her sister. Once she had a sighting, she backtracked every instance meticulously until it disappeared into one of the business suites for a meeting that hadn't been recorded. When she packaged up the footage and gave it to the Doc, he said it was promising. That even secret meetings left a trail on the net a skilled hacker could follow to a new lead.

When the recovery period ended and she wasn't at risk of reaggravating her ribs, Malory practically ran out of the lab. She had a plan, one that gnawed at the back of her mind for the entire month, the ghost or the implant poking and prodding at the mess of her emotions with a cavernous want, a yearning to incite violence on the deserving, and Malory was going to follow through. ZenTech deserved it, but there was something else that needed doing first—two friends that deserved a proper send off. She rode the elevator up, jumping in place, her pistol strapped firmly in its holster. She practiced aiming with the new arm, and found it effortless. When the doors opened at the lobby, there was a tall man waiting to board, and she froze mid-draw. A dark pinstriped suit, worn with authority, hair slicked back smooth as if a single loose strand was pedestrian and so very revolting. The man lifted an exquisite mechanical hand in a wave.

“Good evening,” the Stranger said. His voice was melodic, dangerous, the mocking canary in a coal mine. He smiled, a facade to disguise the hungry beast of prey. His pupils spun like clockwork gears, and they recognized her at the same time Mal recognized him.

Chapter Sixteen

Clockwork gears spun in malevolent metronome searching, digging, harvesting the very shape of her soul for any secrets hidden there, and Malory shivered. She slid the pistol back into its holster and lowered her gaze. The implant did not spit out a label for the Stranger, instead displaying a row of question marks as if it didn't consider him a person, and Malory felt true fear; every want and goal she'd ever had was laid bare on display as an enticing buffet for the ravenous animal coiling around the fabric of her sense of self. The ghost, Evie in her full billowing dress and ethereal glory, materialized in the space between them. She was unconcerned by those eyes, the interlocking teeth rotating around and around and chewing up all it saw, and leaned forward until she was inches from the Stranger's face. There was a light of recognition on her spectral features—she recognized him, too, and it left Malory at a loss. Her thoughts were too disordered to make sense of what was happening, and she stuttered out a return greeting that stuck in her throat. At that, the facade slipped, and the Stranger's face was a fountain of disgust. He considered her a smear of shit stuck to the bottom of his designer boots, and intended to scrape it free.

He is the one who ruined all my crafted plans, the decades of preparation all for naught. Plant a bullet in his brain and be done with it. The schematics must be retrieved. This is your mission. Mission. MISSION.

It was too much. Malory ducked around the Stranger and ran. She didn't care how it looked or what the ghost wanted, she just needed out. A ZenTech enforcer waltzing into the Black Hands headquarters didn't make any damn sense. A double agent? A mole? It was above her pay grade. She wanted no part of it, so she ran and did not look back. She blew past the guards and out into the street and kept going until she made it to the monorail station and boarded. She felt like a coward, but she'd never felt fear like that before, not when she was in the thick of a firefight where a single stray bullet could end her life, or when Nadia dangled over the precipice of ZenTech tower, or when her sister and her had stumbled across the mercenary reaping lives in an alleyway so many years ago. It took the entire ride to her destination to feel a semblance of normal again, but she could sense a change deep down inside—a phantom pain or a scar seared into the fabric. She hoped it would harden her the next time she found herself in front of the man, but she couldn't be certain, so she cast it aside and focused on climbing up the abandoned satellite tower to memorialize her dead friends.

The movements were practiced and it was trivial with the new arm. The risky rusted metal of an old air conditioning unit, a protruding bolt, and a ledge weathered to hell by the elements, the implant gripped in confidence and refused to budge. She was at the top in no time and breathed in deep. The air was cleaner in the sky. She ran fingers across her flank where the ribs were stiff from exertion, but it was fine. It was just another scar to add to the ledger, and she was proud to bear it. She walked over to the names with short steps to give the moment a sense of solemnity and slid a small bag from her shoulder. She'd crammed a brass holder inside along with a dozen sticks of incense, a specialty firework, and a lighter. It was going to be a proper thing instead of just crossing out names like an expired resource in a ledger. Martin and Spencer

had died, and they'd done it for her. Malory was never going to forget that sacrifice, and she wasn't about to let the world do so either. Once everything was ready to go, she squatted on dirty concrete and called Nadia. A funeral deserved more than a single witness.

"Hello?" Nadia's entire face was caked in grease—she'd been tuning a hydraulic system, and it had exploded in her face. She tried to wipe it away with a rag, but it smeared deeper into her skin.

"I can call back," Mal said. She turned the lighter around in her new hand, admired the soft clicking on plastic. "I'm at the tower, though."

"It's alright. I finished the main project, anyway," she said. She spun around in a circle until she collapsed into a pile of tools and old parts. She let out a deep sigh and didn't have an ounce of care about her ragged state. "I'll be sending you something soon."

"You're far too nice to me," Mal said. She wanted them to spend time together, to delight in each other's company, but there had been so much going on and her precarious emotional state wouldn't let her to ask for it.

"It's just the gift I meant to give you at our birthday party," Nadia said. She raised her hands from the floor and held them a few paces apart. "About this much adorable steel and whiskers. Needs an AI to run it, but I'm sure you'll figure that out."

"Maybe," Mal said. The confidence was appreciated, and she hoped whiskers meant what she thought it did. She'd always wanted a cat. But it wasn't the time for catching up, so she flicked the spark wheel until it caught and lit the incense sticks. She set them in the holder and placed it in front of the carved names. "It's time."

“You have a speech planned or something?” Nadia asked. She lifted one of the old parts under her and pretended to inspect it; she didn’t handle sadness well, and preferred working through things with her hands.

“Not really,” Mal said. She wasn’t eloquent, and nothing she could think to say really mattered, but the process was important. She lit the firework next, held it out with her metal hand, and together they watched the fuse burn down to the quick. When the propellant ignited, she let go and it soared above the city with a scream. When it exploded, it vomited a blend of yellows, oranges, and reds with a digital tinge; she didn’t have the credits for the ones that created pictures, but it was still beautiful. “I’ll miss you, I’ll remember you, and you mattered.”

“I wish I could be there with you,” Nadia said. Her eyes were wide at the spectacle.

“It’s better that you aren’t,” Mal said. She watched the colors smolder, spread, and fizzle out. The cloud of smoke floated away on the breeze, and she sighed. “Associating with me won’t be good for your health after today.”

“What do you mean?” Nadia asked. She sat up in a hurry, her face serious. “You’re planning to do something dangerous, aren’t you?”

“Just some light terrorism, nothing big,” Mal lied. She wasn’t about to tell her girlfriend that she planned to march right into the ZenTech C-suite offices and blast anyone that looked important. Her scholarship would obligate reporting it, but the crazy girl would probably try to help anyway. “I don’t plan on dying, though. Not after they gave up their lives for mine.”

“You’re balancing on a knife’s edge, you know,” Nadia said. She lingered a moment, then flashed a genuine smile. “Guess I rubbed off on you, after all.”

“You could say that,” Mal said. She pulled out a knife and headed for the names. The ghost materialized beside her and observed with a deep knowing of loss. They shared the silence, all three staring at the record the orphans had left. More of them had left the world before they managed to change it. The wind gusted as Mal lifted her hand and carved deep grooves across Martin, and then Spencer. She wondered if there’d be anyone left to cross hers off if the time ever came.

~~SPENCER~~

LILAH

~~MARTIN~~

~~OSCAR~~

KHALIDAH

AUGUST

NADIA

MAYA

MALORY

“Rest in peace,” Nadia said. She got back on her feet, intending to tackle the busted hydraulic system that gave her trouble before the call. “Should I be worried?”

“If anyone tries to give you shit like last time, just say you haven’t heard from me since my visit,” Mal said. It was easier that way. Plausible deniability, or whatever.

“Expect my gift soon. I’ll address it to the Doc, just in case. And thank you for having me on the call while you honored them. It was nice.” She’d already started working again, little hands moving parts and cables to fit back where they belonged. “I love you.”

“I love you, too,” Mal said. She let the call drop, but stayed on the roof until the incense ran out. She was anxious to get to it, but she forced herself to stay. The smell of sandalwood clung to her clothes. They deserved more than a half-assed memorial before she rushed back off into danger.

The climb back down was simple enough that she scrolled through blueprints and diagrams of ZenTech tower as she went. Malory had been inside before, sure, but she wasn’t planning on walking through the front door, and needed a reliable way out if the alarms tripped before she escaped. Her hack could handle the doors, but she wasn’t sure about security plating or automated turrets, so she searched. Each handhold and drop down was accompanied by a layout of ventilation systems, or the framework of interlocking passages that connected floors in various ways, lists of which places were most likely to be occupied, and some sketches she’d found on the net of offices that forbid recording. By the time she was back on the ground, Mal had chosen her route in and out, and marked the rooms where executives could be found at any given time of day meeting with all their investors. Why it wasn’t done virtually, she had no idea. Archaic displays of power and hierarchy, probably. On her way to the monorail station, she bought a strawberry ice cream bar wrapped in shortcake and devoured it on the ride. Good enough for a final meal. When it was gone, she chewed on the stick until it splintered to pieces.

When she got off at the stop by the tower, she didn’t follow the path to the statue of the founder, the fancy stairs, and the memorial plaque of the assassination she now suspected was

Evie's doing. Instead, she followed a winding route lined with bushes and decorated hedges that smelled sweet and earthy. It was meant for employees to destress offline, and she took advantage of the lack of security measures. She followed through until the bushes gave way to complicated holograms of reeds and grasses that stretched upward as tall as a person, through imitations of deciduous trees with leaves changing just before the fall, all the way to the terminus at the access door locked tight behind worker identification. She stared at the door for a moment, booted up her hack, and let the code cascade. When the door swung wide to greet her, she slipped inside. There were a few maintenance guys nearby, but they were busy scrolling through memory chips on their breaks, and she passed unnoticed. So far, so good. She headed down the hall, past a security cage that hosted countless cleaning supplies and automated bots on standby—every evening, they'd set off in a grand display to scrub every inch of the tower. When Mal reached the stairs, she took them two at a time.

Ten floors up, she entered the filing floor for a mid-tier law firm, a gleam of sweat budding on her skin. The people there assumed she was a courier on a delivery run when they saw the small bag slung over her shoulder, and paid little attention. They were overworked interns neck-deep in case files, and none of them spared the time to double-check whether she really belonged. If they had any hopes of advancement in the firm, a single late report would spell the premature end of their careers, and it was a fact Mal exploited. She knew the weight of the capitalist boot intimately, but it was enlightening to see those white-collar workers with an eternal lack of sleep and poor hygiene care. They were the same as the people in the outskirts, whether they recognized it or not. It was no wonder the mercenaries who found a single shred of success fighting against the system were enshrined in the minds of the masses as an ideal with

action figures, brand deals, and feature-length films. The best-selling type of memory chip for the last few decades were merc gigs where viewers were able to pretend they were the badass wielding change at the end of a barrel. It was opium for anyone discontent with their lots in life who were unable or unwilling to get their own hands dirty.

Malory didn't linger. Her targets were high above making decisions that affected the entirety of New Detroit and beyond, so she found her way to a service tunnel by the elevator and scaled the ladder rungs ever upward. Her hands clasped one metal bar after another cast in the orange glow of utility lights, and she felt the implant grow impatient. It wanted to speed her advance, to get on with the murder, and it wiggled like a parasite in the folds of her brain. It massaged and manipulated the synapses to fire in the ways it wanted, and it left her with a massive headache. She wasn't okay being led along as a puppet, willing or not, and she hoped a few dead executives were enough to satiate its cravings, at least for a while. She wanted to hunker down and dedicate herself to the search for her sister, but its influence was all-encompassing, and she hadn't been able to fight back since she was reduced to a few frayed threads after killing Banks. If she kept letting it push her forward break-neck into oblivion, she was terrified there would be nothing left; she barely recognized herself anymore, but she still wished to own a cabin with Nadia one day, and used that as a bulwark to preserve what little she could.

When the ladder ended, she was in another bland maintenance tunnel, and Malory followed it to its exit on an upscale hotel floor for visiting middle-managers. She doubted she resembled the usual clientele, but the maids made no effort to bar her progress or report her as an undesirable. They had their own tasks. She watched one of them work as she went, using

supplies from a cart to sanitize door knobs, mirrors, and all the frequently used surfaces. When Mal approached and peered into the open room, the maid was busy changing out the sheets for something fresh. All of the tasks had been automated ages ago, but they charged a premium fee for the human touch. Anything to squeeze another credit where they could. The shareholders needed the newest AV models, and they were going to get it. The whole thing disgusted Mal, and she had to resist helping the poor woman finish faster. She was planning to help another way, by lopping off a few heads of the snake. It'd take a while for them to regrow, and in the process, she hoped the company would change. Learn from their mistakes, or at least be fearful of what would come if they pushed too far, too hard. It was a naive expectation, but the Prophet had done it so long ago, and the method was proven.

From the hotel, Mal rode an express elevator all the way up to the meeting floor. It was direct access for the convenience of the self-important managerial class, and there were no identity checks. It was assumed anyone nefarious would have been handled long before they found themselves where people slept. When the ghost appeared at her side, it smiled, the previous encounter with the Stranger forgotten—Evie needed the carnage, and the influence grew to a fever pitch. Mal's heartbeat fluttered against her ribcage in time to her steps and she was coiled like an overstressed spring. If there wasn't a release soon, she was going to explode, so she walked to the first conference room she saw with heavy steps—there was no one standing in the way. She kicked the door open and drew the Lantern. The implant spat out little blue labels for everyone seated at the table and deemed them all guilty and beyond salvation; Mal squeezed the trigger, boring a fat hole through a suited chest, and then moved onto the next. There were

nine in total, and their lives were ended in a matter of seconds, splattering the complimentary food with viscera and gore. She reloaded the pistol and headed off for more.

It was too soon for anyone to understand what was happening, and when she barged into a second meeting, all the C-suite members were in various states of confusion. In the time it took for her to process the labels and harvest them all like chaff under a farmer's scythe, life continued on inside the rest of ZenTech tower. Back on the hotel floor, a man who'd just closed a major acquisition deal over a new piece of late night media focused on creepy clowns was furiously masturbating to photos of his best friend's wife. A floor directly below the onslaught, a man was crying in the handicapped toilet stall after learning he'd been diagnosed with lymphoma, and since the cause had been deemed separate from work-related activities, his ZenTech-issued insurance refused to cover treatment. Down in the lobby, one of the secretaries was sending messages on the network to her cousin she used to kiss when they were kids about a planned vacation to Luna Paradise and how she wanted to splurge to stay in the dome hotel that simulated protection from cosmic radiation. When everyone in the room was dead, Malory reloaded again and headed back into the hall. Just outside, she ran into an assistant that had come to investigate, but let them live when the implant deemed them innocent.

The assistant ran off in a panic, their eyes lit up calling for security. Time was tight, but the implant led ever forward. One more big fish, to really put the hurt on. Just one more, and she'd be done. She'd be free to escape into the depths of the city. There was a single office on that floor, designed to be close to all the activities and dealings, and Malory headed right for it. This one, though, had a security guard posted outside. Someone who had been close enough to violence in their ascent up the corporate ladder to recognize gunshots, and they were primed and

ready. Malory waited for a while for him to scan the other end of the hall before she came around the corner. She had no chance in a fair fight, and his helmet and body armor were top-of-the-line, so she aimed for the gap under his arm that was only visible because of the butt of the rifle as he twisted, and her aim held true. He slumped backwards against the door. When Mal walked up to him, she bent down and placed the gun under his chin. She fired again. Behind the door was the Chief Operating Officer, the man who ran the company's day-to-day, and the one who ultimately signed off on the hit squad that killed her friends.

When she entered, he was seated at his desk and fastening the last few straps into place on a gas mask. Malory wasn't fast enough. She raised the pistol just as he activated the custom security measures and flooded the room with toxic fumes. She shot him in the chest anyway, but the thick substance slithered down her throat and burned away at the scarred air sacs that processed oxygen like a wildfire. Malory went in further and shot him over and over and over again until his face was pulverized. There'd be no open casket for that sorry bastard. When it was done, she wrapped a primed grenade in his grasp to explode the moment they tried to move him, and fled. Everything reduced to a blur. When she found herself in an empty stairwell along the chosen escape route, she allowed herself to bend over double and devolved into a hacking fit that misted the smooth concrete with an abstract painting of red. She needed new lungs, but that didn't bother her. She'd needed them since she was a kid, anyway, and if it was a sacrifice that managed to bring a moment's reprieve from the influence of that maniacal ghost, it was worth it. She made it back to the street just as the lockdown started, and hoped the Doc would be impressed enough to front her an implant to breathe again.

Chapter Seventeen

Great billowing storm clouds rolled off the lake and disgorged their contents on New Detroit as reports of the massacre disseminated across the network. Malory, though, was unaware of the chaos she'd unleashed—the NDPD press conference, the manhunt, or the extensive bounty placed on her head. She was preoccupied with the intensity of her injury and slowly drowning in her own blood. The other passengers on the monorail avoided her as if she was contagious. None of them recognized her from the reports yet, each focused on their own favorite media to distress from long days of work; some of them read novels, some caught up on late-night dramas they'd missed the night before, a few talked to distant family members, and several were neck-deep in memory replays. Malory's face was pressed against the glass to feel the cold, and she avoided her reflection. She was pale, and red spittle trickled down her chin each time she drew in a ragged breath. She was worried about making it back to headquarters in time, but her mind was quiet for the first time since the God's eye was installed, and the ghost let her be. Mal knew Evie would be back, but it was peaceful while it lasted, and she needed to recover.

When she reached her stop, Malory had trouble standing. She used the edges of the seats as a brace. Near the door, she nearly fell face-first across the yellow caution line, and only stayed upright from the kindness of a nearby guy with glasses who reached out to steady her. She wasn't able to thank him. Instead, she coughed out a chunk of lung on his designer sneakers and stumbled away. The overhead lights in the station stung at her eye, so she kept it shut tight as she

went. No one else tried to help her. One step forward, another, and her body was wading through the shallow end of a pool. She was on fire, drenched in sweat, and tiny tremors spread through each of her muscles. All she had to do was get back to the Doc, and then everything would be alright, so she forced herself forward. She passed the vending machines, the food court, and the gift shop. Fuck the pity of everyone's gazes, the disgust, the refusal to help. When she made it to the street, she almost cried from the sensation of fresh air hitting her skin, the way it teased at lungs that couldn't draw it in.

When she reached the headquarters, she collapsed into the door as it scanned her identity. It only took a few seconds, but those were seconds of torture she couldn't handle, and they stretched off into eternity. Everything ached, and the tremors grew worse. Her fleshy arm was curled against her chest and jerked back and forth. She was glad not to see herself; the blood that dripped down her chin and soaked the front of her shirt, her sallow skin, and how she would have been at home in one of her sister's favorite horror movies. When she thought she was going to die at the entrance, the doors clicked and swung wide, sending her tumbling forward. She managed to stay on her feet, but as she went for the elevator that led down to the Doc, to salvation, the guards on duty barred her path. They held up open palms in front of her, and were ready to draw pistols if she put up a fight. She tried to ignore them, to brush past and be on her way, but one of them reached out and seized her by her mechanical arm. He wrenched it behind her back, and he fell. She did not have the energy to rise. Her mind was fractured, and it floated off elsewhere when cold cuffs closed around her wrists.

As they yanked her back to her feet, she was thinking about the park down by the river where she and her sister spent an afternoon skipping stones on their last day together. A bland

hallway blurred away, and then a few flights of concrete stairs, and the guards tried to tell her something as they went. All Malory cared about was the weight of a flat stone in her hand and the way her sister cheered when she hurled it across the surface of the water. It skipped, and skipped, and sank below the current. She stumbled then, and felt a sharp pain radiate up her shoulder—one of the guards smelled overwhelmingly of tobacco and aftershave, and he swore at her in clipped French. The implant translated for her, but she didn't read it. She had another stone to throw, her sister's crooked smile to fawn over, and there was a beautiful refraction of sunlight on the river. When she was slammed into a chair and the guard that smoked like a chimney slapped her, reality came rushing back and she coughed up another mouthful of blood. The room spun, and their words were a garbled mess. They asked her questions, but she didn't answer, and when the guy moved to slap her again, the door opened. The Doc walked into the room.

“What the fuck are you two idiots doing?” he asked. His digitigrade legs flexed, and he stood to his full height. So much mass, towering over them. His face was mired by hard lines and a will to fight.

“Our jobs,” the guard who slapped her said. He took an unconscious step backward and bumped into Mal's chair.

“You can do your needless interrogation after I stop her from dying,” the Doc said. He stepped forward and balled each massive hand into a fist. He would destroy them if it was necessary. “Get out.”

“The higher-ups aren't going to like this,” the other guard said. He wasn't as intimidated as the other. He didn't know the Doc's history, the impressive catalogue of violence honed to perfection before he transitioned to helping others survive.

“They know exactly where to find me,” the Doc said. He raised one of his fists, ready to swing. “Now get the fuck out.”

“Let’s go,” the smoker said. He placed a hand on the other guard’s shoulder, and they left together.

“Can you hear me?” the Doc asked. He moved towards Malory and lifted her chin to meet his eyes. She was hot to the touch, unfocused. He clicked his tongue when he recognized the symptoms.

“Hey, dad,” Mal said. She smiled at the swirling face in front of her. It had been years and years, and she wanted the missing man to hug her tight. She wasn’t sure why it hurt to breathe, and wanted to close her eyes, to sleep forever, but didn’t. “Where have you been? Mom needed you.”

“Let’s get you fixed up, kid,” the Doc said. He bent down and undid the cuffs around her wrists. He made sure she was steady before he turned to leave. “Sit tight, I’ll be right back with some equipment.”

When Malory was alone, she thought she was in a waiting room for the afterlife and expected an interviewer to show up to determine her worth. Answering questions was a crapshoot, since the good never outweighed the bad. There was always another trauma to drag her down, and no amount of soft kisses from a little maniac of a lover, or the kind smile of a sister, or concern from a pseudo-father ever tipped the scales. One star out of ten, would not recommend. At least she’d receive the posthumous fame she’d always wanted, even if it was the implant that drove her to shoot the bastards. She took what she could get from a life that gave her nothing, and never apologized. When the door opened, she almost fell out of the chair. Angels

were supposed to have wings, even in her fever-fueled bureaucratic fantasies, and their absence frightened her. Instead, there was a blurry old man who wore a surgical mask and carried an assortment of tools in his massive hands—various trays, tubes, containers, and scalpels, all balanced with little effort. He set them up around her, and shoved a needle in her arm that fed a cocktail of substances and made her eyelids two immovable bricks. She heard a deep and bassy voice just before slipping into darkness.

“You aren’t allowed to die now that you made me care about you, ya little shit,” the Doc said. He’d injected Malory with anesthesia, a variety of steroids, and an ad-hoc antidote for all the toxic components that shocked her system, and then he got to work.

The Doc lifted the girl’s limp body from the chair and placed her face-down on a portable massage table—it would have been far easier back in the lab, but taking her there wasn’t an option, so he improvised. It wasn’t his first makeshift surgery, and it wouldn’t be the last with how often she showed up in such a state. When she was secured on the table, he lubed a long tube and shoved it down her throat; he was on a ticking clock, and had to move fast before she reached critical levels of oxygen deprivation, if she wasn’t there already. He tore through her clothes to expose her pale back, and the sound of ripped fabric echoed through the room. He slathered the shoulder blades in disinfectant and drew incision lines with a felt-tip marker. When he was done, he grabbed a scalpel and made two ten-inch cuts and reached inside to spread the ribs. He carved away the damaged organs one at a time, and slid each implant in place. His hands, swift and practiced, remained steady as he threaded flesh to metal interfaces, fastened nerves in place, and watched them start to inflate with a consistent in and out. Satisfied, he shoved the ribs back where they belonged, closed everything up with stick staples and stitches,

and dressed the wounds with fresh gauze. He wiped tick beads of sweat from his brow, removed the tube, and left.

When Malory woke, she was confused, and her body felt like she'd been beaten to the very edge of death. She wasn't in her own room. The walls were bare, sterile, and there was nothing there other than the bed and the pole that dangled a half-empty bag that fed liquids to her fragile body. She took a deep breath and marveled at how well the implants worked—they fed so much air that it made her light-headed. She made a note to ask the Doc for the specs later and tried to sit up. The pain was intense, but distant, mitigated by a plethora of narcotics, and she struggled to her feet. She was careful not to tear the stitches, and dragged the pole along with her. The Doc made a stink last time she ripped her IV out, and she didn't want to disappoint him after saving her life. She made her way to the door, but when she grabbed the metal handle and pushed, nothing happened. It was locked. Ordinarily, that wouldn't have stopped her, but she had no idea what was going on or where she was, so she turned to take in the empty room again. High in the corner, a little security camera blinked, and Mal stared at it for a few seconds before she flipped it off and made her way back to bed.

Half the day passed as she scrolled through the network and digested programming primers before the Doc came to check on her. He was not alone. Flanked on both sides by armed guards, he looked like he had come to deliver a casualty notification to an ever-expectant widow waiting for their spouse to return from the war. He carried a bag of fluids and a change of gauze. Malory expected him to greet her with a smile, to ask questions, to tell her everything was okay, but he didn't say a thing. He just went about his work in stone quiet, replacing her IV and changing out her bandages with careful movements. It was uncomfortable, and receiving a cold

shoulder from someone she respected, one of the very few people she trusted, was worse than any reprimand would have been. Mal looked from the guards and their rifles to the Doc and back, and everything clicked into place; she was a prisoner, and they had come along to make sure the old chrome wizard didn't speak to her while performing necessary aftercare. The ghost in the implant might have been satiated, but the damage to Mal's emotional state had yet to subside, and she felt her face flush with unbridled rage.

"Well, this is an entire AV-full of horseshit," she hissed. Mal turned in the middle of the Doc's bandaging to stare up at his broad, wrinkled face. His jaw was clenched tight, and she thought she could hear his teeth creaking under the pressure. "Why am I being treated like a twice-damned pariah? Where the fuck am I? Who are those two limp-dicks, and why are you letting them control whether or not you speak to me?"

"What the fuck did you just say?" the guard on the left asked. He raised his rifle and stepped toward her. He was shaped like a thumb. Would have had a glowing career as a member of the NDPD extorting the poor.

"Don't even think about it," the Doc said. The hydraulics on his implanted legs hissed, and he lowered his stance. He was an old man, sure, but fighting was in his blood, and he made no secret of the intention to eviscerate each of the guards if they took another step.

"Let it go," the other guard said. He wasn't a coward, he just knew the stories, and didn't want to test whether or not a monster was still under that deteriorated shell. "The chapter masters made it clear. Just file it in the report, and he'll suffer the consequences later."

"You're lucky, you little bitch," the angry guard said. He glared at Mal for a moment, then turned and left the room. The other guard followed behind.

“What the fuck?” Mal asked. It didn’t make any sense.

“You dumbass,” the Doc said. He smacked her lightly across the back of her head and then continued to replace the bandages. “You have no idea how much trouble you’re in, do you?”

“Trouble for what?” she asked. She rubbed the back of her head and shot him an indignant look. It was nice to know he was willing to fight for her sake, but she really didn’t understand. Killing a few corpo bastards didn’t even register. She missed the security of her Lantern snuggled against her ribcage.

“I take it you haven’t looked at any news feeds since you woke up, then,” he said. He finished wrapping and then kneeled down beside her. “You’re pretty famous after the stunt you pulled. Never imagined you were crazy enough to waltz into ZenTech like a big-time merc and ice members of management. And then escaping? Infamy would probably be a better way to describe it.”

“Yeah, I did that,” Mal said. She looked down at her metal hand, the way the joints moved around with little effort. It was still strange knowing it was part of her. “Felt pretty good, too. But so what? That doesn’t explain what’s happening.”

“I was getting there,” the Doc said. He sighed and shifted his weight. He hadn’t slept since she stumbled into the headquarters. “A few of the higher-ups had a mind to turn you over after they saw the reports break.”

“That’s absurd,” Mal said. They were in the middle of a war. Turning over one of their own for killing the enemy wasn’t nonsensical, it was insane.

“There’s a big difference between skirmishes in the streets and back alleys, the occasional raid on warehouse supplies, and a very public execution of corporate leadership,” the Doc said.

He ran fingers through his loose, gray hair. There were large bags under his eyes. “You’re smart enough to know that. What you did was an escalation no one was prepared for, and it’s been pure chaos.”

“Oh,” she said. She stretched back her shoulders and pushed against the soreness. The IV wiggled in her vein as she moved, and she had to resist the urge to yank it free again. “So what happens now?”

“Well,” he said. His legs flexed their gears and lifted him back into the air. “After I gave them the information in the documents you brought in last time, their opinions shifted. There’s no real consensus on what to do with you anymore.”

“So a stay of execution. Great.”

“No,” he said. He headed toward the door, where he stopped and leaned against the frame. “You’re my patient, and you’re on the mend. You just need to get some rest, make sure everything takes right, and I’ll get you out of here soon.”

“You think they’ll just let me go?” Mal asked. They were willing to treat her like pond scum for doing what none of them dared, so she didn’t have a lot of faith. She’d never wanted to join the gang in the first place, and the distaste of the situation planted a small seed that waited to bloom.

“I’ll take care of it,” he said. His eye lit up with an incoming call, but he didn’t take it.

“Thanks for saving me again, Doc,” Mal said. She laid back into the bed, pulled up a thin sheet, and closed her eyes. She ignored how lumpy the pillow was as she tried to stuff the rage down into the pit of her stomach. It wasn’t healthy, but it would do.

“It’s just my job,” he lied. He stopped leaning against the door and turned to leave. “A package came for you, by the way. I’ll bring it next time I come to swap the bandages.”

Chapter Eighteen

There was a smudge on the wall just behind the bed, some dirty thumb print from yesteryear a poor bastard left in their boredom, and Malory found herself staring at it when she wasn't scrolling the network, programming, or trying to figure out what to do with the gift Nadia sent her. It was a little mechanical cat crafted from a lusterless black titanium, and the white sensor wires that functioned as whiskers made her heart full. As soon as she'd unpacked it from its box, Mal connected through her network and ran laps around the small room via remote control. Without an AI to pilot, it stood still near the foot of the bed like a sculpture. She didn't have the first clue about coding something complex enough to operate the limbs or functions, and since it was considered a proprietary technology, any core kernels on the black markets were worth more than most of the chrome in the Doc's lab. She knew she'd learn eventually, but she was impatient, and she added a dozen different options to her shopping cart to indulge in the fantasy. She rubbed absentmindedly at the fresh scars on her back—they'd healed well enough, and just as she was ready to get back out into the sprawl of New Detroit and cause more mayhem, the door opened.

“Good news,” the Doc said. He walked into the room at his full height like an old flightless bird fresh from the hunt. He paused when he saw the cat and contemplated, the intended news forgotten. “That thing is so strange. I've never seen anything quite like it. You said your girlfriend built it?”

“Yeah,” Mal said. She stood from the bed and lifted the cat. It was near weightless.

“She’s been a tech fiend since before she could walk.”

“You find a cheap kernel to control it?” he asked. He leaned forward, his implant eyes scanning for signs of life.

“Nothing I could afford without plundering the stock exchange,” she said. She cradled it in her arms like a baby. It was the best thing she’d ever owned, and she wanted to equip it with her skeleton-key hack and send it off to collect every dirty secret.

“Yeah, that makes sense,” he said. He kept staring into the cat’s eyes, and the conversation died. Silence stretched between them.

“You said you had good news?” Mal prodded.

“Right,” he said. He coughed and stood up straight. “Right. There’s been a lockdown in the outskirts. NDPD has the whole district cordoned off all the way to the wall.”

“Why the hell would they do that?” Mal asked. Seemed like a waste of resources, all things considered, and the NDPD never cared enough about the impoverished parts of the city besides extorting to meet monthly quotas.

“You really need to watch the news feeds,” he said. His eyes lit up, linking an article so she could follow along if she wanted. “On the surface, it’s to contain the spread of a new virulent flu strain that’s been making the rounds and impacting the labor force.”

“They never bothered with a quarantine any of the other times.” Her old lungs were proof enough of that. They were scarred for well over a decade, and no one gave a fuck.

“It’s just an excuse,” the Doc said. He sent over another document—one that included references to the information she’d taken from the meat boutique slaughterhouse. “Behind the

scenes, ZenTech threw around their weight like a sledgehammer after your stunt. Leveraged every card they held in reserve to force the NDPD to provide plausible cover for the raid they had planned. Really put the nail in the coffin and win the war.”

“Can we even stop something like that?” she asked. The Black Hands had a lot of members, but compared to the corporate kings of the city, they were children playing in the sand. Mal shuddered at some of the military drones in ZenTech’s arsenal.

“I don’t know,” the Doc said. He scratched the back of his head; his hair was greasy and unbrushed. Little tangles caught on his fingers. “The higher-ups are gonna try anyway, though. A few of our moles gave estimates of what’s coming, and the value blinded the more aggressive-minded chapter masters into an ill-advised gamble. They don’t just want to stop the attack, they want to seize the loot afterwards.”

“You said you had good news,” Mal said. It was a disaster in the making, and she didn’t see a silver lining anywhere.

“Oh, I do,” he said. He turned to leave the small room and motioned for her to follow. “Come with me. I pulled some of my old stuff out of storage, and I want you to have it.”

“I’m allowed out?” she asked.

“Just follow. Ask your questions later.”

Malory did as she was told, and they went out and down a drab hallway. It was a surreal experience seeing parts of the headquarters that weren’t the lobby or the Doc’s lab, and she didn’t much care for it. There were so many rooms just like hers, all locked tight. How many others were captive there? Door after door passed by until they turned and climbed a narrow staircase, and she managed to count twenty-one. Sure, some were being held for ransom after

failed attacks, but she couldn't shake the suspicion that most were like her, dissidents that rubbed someone above them in the hierarchy the wrong way or went a little rogue. It was another drop to feed the seed planted deep down, the growing idea that membership wasn't worth it, and roots sprouted to try and anchor to her soul. The Doc kept his word; Mal was out, but she wondered why he didn't show any concern for the others. She wasn't special, and she walked free while they continued to rot. At the top of the stairs, he led them past a rec room, a barracks stuffed with filthy hammocks, and a kitchenette that reeked of freshly brewed synth-tea. Malory expected them to board the elevator, but they kept going until they reached an expansive armory.

"Over there," he pointed. The walls around them hung enough racked and ready firepower to make a gun nut blush, and each was polished to a sheen that glistened under artificial lights. Where he'd pointed was a table with an assortment of grenades, ammunition, extra magazines, a full suit of bulletproof armor freshly resized, the mask he'd given her ages ago, and her Lantern. Beside the gun was a large black case.

"What is all this?" Mal asked. She picked up her pistol immediately and relished the familiar weight of steel in her hand. She looked around until she found the holster and strapped it on, satisfied it was back where it belonged.

"It's your gear," he said. He didn't elaborate, just smiled and watched. There was no better feeling than kitting someone out for battle, not even saving a life that lesser medics could never manage. It gave the same sensation as watching a child open Christmas gifts first thing in the morning, and it was something he'd missed for far too long.

"I don't even know how to use most of it," she said. She moved to the black case, lifted the lid, and stared at the revolving grenade launcher inside. When she lifted it from the foam

inserts, she almost dropped it, surprised by the heft. It was a uniform matte black accented by vibrant orange. The cylinders were etched with the Doc's initials, but she'd never learned his real name. She attached the shoulder strap to each of the anchors, the fibers smooth and well-worn. The thing had seen years of battle, but it was well-maintained.

"That's alright. You'll learn fast," he said. His smile grew wider as he flooded her network with military manuals, instructions, care routines, video tutorials, and an assortment of personal audio files and memories of first-hand experiences. Every insight, every revelation he'd ever had, the very essence of what made him a monster people whispered about behind his back. He sent it all. She was going to survive, and he'd make damn sure of it.

"Why are you giving me all this?" she asked. Her head spun from the overload, and she had no clue where to begin.

"Because I don't need it anymore, and your freedom comes with a cost," he said. The smile faded, replaced by dark lines and deep-set wrinkles.

"They're sending me," she said. It made sense. They had firm control over her, and they'd be dumb as rocks not to exercise it. She sorted through the gear and tried to put on the body armor. It was old, but he'd resized it to perfectly fit her smaller frame.

"You are meant to repel the attack and prove you belong in their good graces again," he said. He walked up beside her and helped with the straps. "It's something I had to force through, and it was the only way they were willing to let you out. So, you'll go, you'll do it well, and you'll come back safe. No more edge of death nonsense, understand?"

"I can't promise that," she said. A well of excitement bubbled up, and she'd be lying if she said she wasn't happy being sent. She was still green, all things considered, but the thick of a

firefight was where she belonged. It made her feel alive. It wasn't complicated; there were no politics involved, no crushing weight of a poor socioeconomic lot in life. The essence of combat was just her and her opponents trying to see who could kill the other first. Simple. Clean.

"You will," the Doc said. He placed broad hands on her shoulders and looked directly into her eyes. "And you'll mean it, too."

"Alright, alright," she said. She wiggled a bit to adjust to the weight of the gear, and the pressure in the Doc's grip didn't relent—it was like he was trying to anchor her there was a permanent aspect of reality. It was touching. "I promise you'll have to put up with me until you croak from old age, you damn geezer."

"That's more like it," he said. He slapped her on the shoulders and let her go. His cheeks were tinted red as he sent the job details over. "You'll need to pass through one of the NDPD checkpoints, but they won't hassle you too much if the bribe is large enough. After that, post up on Santa Clara street with the others and give them hell."

// INCOMING TRANSFER DETECTED

// PLEASE WAIT...

//

// UPDATING...

// NEW BALANCE: 10,219 CREDITS

"Thanks, Doc. You're the best," she said. She grabbed the last few pieces of gear and gave a small wave before heading for the nearby elevator.

It was night in the city, and the colors poured over Malory in a vibrant avalanche. The mask hugged close to her face and kept her anonymous, but she didn't want to take the monorail rocking so much hardware, so she called for an autonomous cab and paid the fare with some of the credits meant for the bribe. The ride was silent. She didn't pay extra for music or an AI conversation, so she amped herself up until her blood boiled. Then, she sent a short message to Nadia with a thank you and a promise to call soon and closed her organic eye to dig into the documents the Doc had given her. The language was cold, calculating, and heartless, and it bothered her to see that kind old man in a different light. When the cab pulled up to the NDPD checkpoint bathed in a dozen high-powered spotlights and rifle sights, Mal finished rewatching the memory of Banks' death. She savored the moment life left his eyes as she slid out of the seat, adjusted the grenade launcher, and sauntered forward. When the light broke, she was face-to-face with an entire squad of pigs and military bots secured behind sophisticated defenses. Any other day, the view would have sent her running, but she continued on without a care in the world.

"Halt!" One of the low-level cops screamed. He was the one on shit duty, forced by the rest to take point. "The outskirts are under quarantine. All access is prohibited, so turn right around and go back to wherever the hell you came from."

"Look," Mal said. She ran her metal fingers across the loaded cylinders of the grenade launcher with enough pressure to let out a high-pitched squeal. "I've got a job to do, and I'm on a bit of a time limit. How much do you want?"

"What?" he asked. He was baffled by the audacity, the poorly-veiled threat. It pissed him off, and his hand reached down to rest on his sidearm. He was initiating a pissing contest instead of jumping at the offer. Must have been fresh from the academy, then. The implant spit out a

little blue label, as if in response, and marked him an up-and-coming rookie. “I said the district’s closed. Now, fuck off!”

“I asked how much you want,” Mal said. She sighed and continued to rub the metal again and again until he cringed from the noise.

“Six thousand,” another officer called. He was older, a jagged scar running down his temple to his jaw. Union insurance would have covered fixing it ages ago, but he obviously enjoyed the air of intimidation it lended. Guess the badge wasn’t enough. Overcompensating.

“You got a deal,” Mal said. She wired the credits and then moved forward. The scarred officer pulled the rookie out of her way as she flashed a sly smile.

“What’s happening, sir?” the rookie asked. His bushy eyebrows were scrunched up until they met in the middle. It wasn’t a situation covered in training.

“Nothing at all,” the older officer said. He nudged the rookie with an elbow as he transferred a slice of the bribe. “It’s been a pretty uneventful night on guard duty.”

When Mal was out of earshot, she bent over and laughed. They were so damn serious until she dangled credits in front of them and they dove at it like starved strays. The look on the rookie’s face. She laughed until she cried and her side stitched. When she was done, she pulled the mask out of the way to wipe away tears, adjusted the weight on her frame, and headed off to her destination. It was too quiet, and she could hear each step she took. The residents were warned to stay indoors, and they observed her progress through slits in their blinds. They knew the drill, and they weren’t willing to catch stray bullets, but curiosity drew them to watch what little they could anyway. Mal kept her eyes to the night sky, the broken moon swirling so far out. The scientists claimed the fragments would devolve one day into a beautiful ring, just like

Saturn, but until then, it only represented a world that'd never come back—steady seasons, the ebb and flow of the tides, even the rotation of the Earth, all misaligned. She wondered what it'd be like to look up without fear of the heavens falling on her head, the safety of it, but it was another thing unchecked corporations had taken from them. Energo Lunar still existed.

When Malory reached Santa Clara street, she found the fortifications on the corner paled in comparison to the NDPD checkpoint. There were cheap, prefabricated barricades, some old sandbags with most of the insides missing, and an assortment of household objects meant to trip up anyone that scaled them. There were members of the Black Hands that drew short straws and a few hired mercs posted around, but no one moved to stop her, so Mal did her best not to slip when she climbed over. When she reached the top, she chose a spot beside a woman holding a shotgun near the front lines and was ready for the showdown—all the grenades, the flashbangs, the extra ammo loaded and waiting, safeties switched off. She had promised the Doc to survive, and she was going to try her best to keep it. The woman next to her whistled an old military tune that belonged to her unit as she loaded in armor piercing slugs. Her dog tags were displayed over her jacket, but Malory didn't bother to read them. She didn't want the weight of another soul on her conscience if the woman fell in battle. No more mourning. Mal gripped the handles of the grenade launcher and looked off into the distance. It wasn't long before a convoy approached and stopped just out of range.

“Heads up, it's showtime!” someone screamed.

A sniper round kicked off the exchange, exploding through a synth-wood table turned on its side. Splinters flew in every direction, but no one was injured. Malory lowered her head below a barricade and drew in a deep breath as she listened to more shots ring out. Some of the

defenders returned fire, but she was patient. To her left, the ghost materialized, but it was calm and subdued. Her digital form felt more real somehow, more solid, as if she'd fed on each soul Malory had reaped and grown stronger. There was a lull, a few moments of quiet, and then hell unleashed. The ZenTech squads moved forward under a cascade of smoke and tear gas and fat machine gun rounds that slammed into the encampment. Muzzles flashed, and a rocket soared high overhead and detonated behind the lines. It was deafening, but Mal didn't panic. She just squeezed the grips and waited. A young voice near the impact site begged for their mother, and the woman next to her fired a couple slugs over the barricade. When Evie stood to her full ghostly height and pointed, Malory moved on instinct; she raised the wide barrel in the direction the ghost wanted and sent a grenade through the gunsmoke air. When it exploded, she felt the concussive wave rattle deep in her chest and smiled.

The next ten minutes were a slog, and the scent of spent ammunition and tear gas stung Mal's throat and made her eyes water. There was carnage all around, dead and wounded from each side. The vet with the shotgun had a chunk torn out of her face, and Mal dragged the tough woman along as they repositioned. Her metal arm managed the weight as she launched more grenades. The woman was conscious, even though Malory saw cracked teeth shining white and bloody where her face used to be. There wasn't anything to do but endure. Either they'd win, or it wouldn't be a problem much longer. Malory grabbed one of the flashbangs from her belt and hurled it toward two corpos flanking a murder bot and it erupted in supernova white. She drew the lantern and shot each of them square in the chest. When they went down, she pulled an incendiary grenade and bounced it between the bot's feet. The lenses of its targeting systems were warped by the light, so it wasn't able to do anything as deep red flames erupted over its

intimidating visage. A few seconds, and the sensitive circuits and wires melted and shut the whole thing down. The new lungs kept Malory from being winded, but her flesh was weak.

“You’re pretty good, kid,” the vet managed. She spat out a mouthful of chunks and phlegm on the ground between them. Her skin was sallow, and she fought through the shock.

“Don’t talk,” Mal said. She bent down, reloaded the cylinders, and got back to it. There weren’t many left. “Just keep fighting.”

“Doesn’t matter anyway,” she said. The shotgun was loose beside her, and she made no effort to lift it again. She used a makeup mirror to look at the damage and trembled.

“You’re just gonna lay down and die because you aren’t fucking pretty anymore?” Mal asked. It was absurd. She sent out another volley of grenades, and it made her grin when they blended through the enemy like a garbage disposal.

“That’s not what I meant,” the woman said. She sighed, but didn’t know how to continue, so she raised a shaky finger and dragged it across her throat. As if that answered the question.

ZenTech is attacking the headquarters of the Black Hands. This entire operation was a charade, a distraction to draw away vital defenses. Your little gang is about to be consumed. Consumed. CONSUMED.

“The headquarters?” Mal froze mid-aim, but didn’t wait for an answer. She jumped over the barricade and sprinted toward the enemy.

Chapter Nineteen

Along the scarred concrete, a trail of corpses wound outward in a meandering path from Santa Clara street, each more devastated and mangled than the last, and a thick layer of coagulation peppered with spent shell casings spread wide. Rifles, handguns, a variety of bladed weapons and dismantled war bots were left abandoned, waiting for the scavengers to pick the place clean. Boot prints in blood led off into the distance. The attack was over, but there were no winners. On what was left of the makeshift fortifications the Black Hands erected before the battle, a woman missing half her face wandered around lost in shell-shock. Her dog tags gleamed prominently, and she was one of the only survivors. Each life sacrificed in defense of the gang's assets meant nothing. A few of the brave residents exited their apartments, but hadn't yet worked up to picking through the remains for things to pawn. The ZenTech convoy vehicles were in disarray, several charred craters between them, all the metal twisted and wrenched into strange shapes. The accelerator of a flipped humvee was stuck down, and the wheels spun impotently in the air as the groan of the engine played a requiem in the aftermath. The dead moon fragments above were unphased.

Malory tried to commandeer one of the armored cars near the end of the fight. She'd destroyed most of them with her last few grenades, but had to wrestle control from a terrified supervisor trying to flee. She wrenched open the passenger door with her implanted arm, climbed in, and smashed him in the face with her stained boots. He tried to raise his forearms for

protection, but it didn't make a difference. Her heel caved in the flimsy cartilage of his nose and jolted his head into the seat. When she tried to bring the Lantern around for a definitive end, the supervisor was conscious enough to slam his foot on the gas to send the car careening backwards. It threw her off balance, and rounds burrowed into soft leather and out the back window. Shattered glass rained on the blacktop speeding past. Mal wasn't able to aim again, so she pivoted her weight and thrust a metal fist into his ribcage. It tore through skin, ribs, and kept going up to the elbow. The man gasped, shook, and went limp, his foot sliding from the pedal. She took hold of the steering wheel, dragged him out of the seat from his insides, and took control. Her arm pulled free with a wet pop.

Malory didn't stop the car. Instead, she yanked on the steering wheel to spin it around with the tires squealing and sped off down the street. She'd only driven once before, and sideswiped a parked car in the process, showering the night with bright sparks. When she shook the gore off her arm, she made an effort not to breathe through her nose; the supervisor voided his bowels when he died, and the air was thick with shit. It made her want to vomit, but she couldn't stop. She had to make it in time. The traffic blurred around the vehicle, and civilians were forced to dive out of the way when she blew through crosswalks and red lights. Cameras snapped the vehicle details to deliver fines to whoever owned it, but it didn't matter.

Advertisements and product placements invaded her implant as she went, but she tuned them out. She drifted around a bend that led to a line of low-budget hotels, and there was a group of businessmen out front passing a brown bag between them. They cheered as she roared away, but one of them stumbled into the road in her wake and fell on his face. By the time his friends moved to pick him back up, her tail lights were pin pricks far off in the distance.

You know this struggle is futile. There is no way to make it in time. Time. TIME. Memento Mori. All things must fly into the sun to burn down to embers.

“Shut the fuck up!” Mal screamed. She pushed the pedal deeper, and redlined the engine. Danger didn’t matter as long as she saved his life. Overhead, a news channel AV flew steadily toward city center, its spotlight trained on an interesting scene far away. “Crawl back in the implant where you belong. I don’t need you.”

I will never leave until you’ve retrieved the blueprints that belong to me. A taste of failure will make it easier to manipulate you, and I’m looking forward to the outcome.

Malory didn’t answer, just clenched her jaw and focused on maintaining control. Everything they passed looked like it was standing still, and it reminded her of a VR game they used to play in class where scores came from unbroken streaks avoiding obstacles in the way. It would have been nostalgic if her sanity wasn’t dangling by a thread. The Doc wasn’t allowed to die. He wouldn’t. Couldn’t. The ghost clicked her tongue in the back seat and leaned forward to touch the radio. There was an electronic whir, and then EDM flooded the small space and drowned out every thought. There were only a few more blocks to go, and Mal willed the car to go faster, faster still. Outside, they screamed by a nightclub where a bouncer was in the middle of throwing a guy that got too handsy with the dancers on his ass and the noise drew the gazes of people waiting in line. Mal held the car steady with and reached down to strap the seatbelt tight across her chest. When they made it to the block that housed the headquarters, they found the entrance swarmed with vehicles, but she didn’t stop. The armored car slammed into the driver’s seat of an idling van, and metal folded like flimsy paper. Chemical dust filled the small space as the airbags deployed.

There was a ringing in her ears and the steady beep of the collision warning system in the haze. The supervisor's body was squished into a chunky paste against the windshield, and Malory's ribs were on fire where the seatbelt dug into her skin. She fumbled around in confusion for a second until she undid the buckle, and there was shouting somewhere outside. She didn't pay it any attention, and dug around on the floor until she found the Lantern caked with fluids. She wiped it off the best she could on the seat until she was sure it'd fire, and then opened the door. She climbed out to a dozen flashlights trained on her face, and she blinked to try and rid herself from the nauseous spinning. It didn't leave, so she relied on the implant and the ghost to tell her what to do. It wanted her to duck, so she ducked; a bullet whizzed past her ear and off into the night. It wanted her to aim at a forty-five degree angle to the left, wait two seconds, fire three times, dash behind a nearby humvee, reload, shoot an ankle from underneath, roll over to a car—and she followed along with robotic precision. She tasted iron in her mouth, her lip split from the crash, and knew she had a concussion.

Another shot, another body dropped, and Malory started to move on her own. Her aim was less sure, but she hit the mark anyway. She didn't need the guarantee of safety the instructions brought. She was impatient; she had to get inside, so she crouched beside a tire well and inched forward until she had eyes on a portable turret and used her hack to brute-force into its control matrices—when she was in, her vision split. Her organic eye remained looking down at worn synth-rubber still warm from the drive over, but the other was swallowed into an aiming interface that highlighted a dozen different defenders. It was a similar process to controlling the cat bot Nadia had built for her, so it wasn't as disorienting as it could have been, but her mind was a mess anyway. She had to swallow down a mouthful of vomit as she queued up everyone

she considered an enemy and told it to fire. The massive barrels disgorged payload after payload, and each percussion hammered loud enough to blanket the world in noise. Malory watched it rip the men apart with glee, and shed her cover when it was done. There were no groans, no screams, and nothing moved. She stood in the wreckage, her and the ghost the only things left alive.

The entrance was nothing but rubble and charred parts, the victim of a well-placed satchel charge, and Mal climbed inside to reach the lobby. The place always had an intimidating air about it, one of hallowed ground that threatened to unleash a deluge of hungry specters if ever disturbed, but the state she found it in reminded her of the accounts after medieval sieges where desperate soldiers looted, then burned whatever they couldn't take. The walls were scorched and gouged out by gunfire, and red spread across the floor between the scattered bodies. The attackers had spared no one—if they were inside, they were considered combatants. Unarmed support staff never stood a chance, but Malory had no empathy left to spare for the innocent dead, consumed as she was by the desire to save only a single person. There were two guards posted nearby in the middle of a heated discussion about the noise outside—they debated whether or not the Black Hands had managed to call in a relief squad and whether the men outside could hold until the job was complete. They were distracted, so she shot them both in the face before they reacted to her approach, and stepped over them and headed for the elevator.

It was frozen in a state of lockdown triggered by the security system, but it didn't stop her. She ran an override and sent it straight down into the depths, right to the Doc's lab. As the elevator descended, there were others in the headquarters still alive, still resisting. Ten floors above, two chapter masters locked themselves inside a panic room and observed everything

through the cameras. Neither of them spoke, glued to their feeds. They didn't pay attention to the outside door since they never expected the space to be breached, so they jumped and gave each other knowing looks when they heard the deep thunk of a charge placed against its surface. There was a military all-clear, and then it flew from its hinges. In the holding cells where Mal had been, a squad moved room to room and rescued everyone on ZenTech's payroll, and executed the rest. They were thorough, systematic, and a girl the same age as Mal cowered underneath the bed and dreaded the approaching end. On the rooftop high above the city, an AV attempted to leave, its hold laden with countless credit chips and sensitive memories. It caught a surface-to-air missile in the rear and plummeted back to the landing pad where enforcers swarmed its broken form like flies on shit and overpowered whatever crew was left.

The elevator doors opened to a crime scene, and Malory hesitated to move another step. ZenTech had made it to the lab, and judging by the carnage strewn about, found the Doc ready and waiting. Mal knew he was strong, but he was always alone. If she continued, she was going to find something that wasn't allowed to be put into words, as if the act of being a witness would cement it as an indelible fact. She didn't have the strength to alter reality, but the ghost that haunted her, anchored firmly inside the implant bolted to her skull, had no reservations and took steady steps toward the answer they both knew. At least Evie had the courtesy to look sad about it. Malory bent down, wiped away some of the gunk stuck to her boots, and relaced them. She focused on the fibers, the texture, each cross and loop until they were tight enough to cut circulation from her toes. When she was done, she rose with her head held high, sucked on the split in her lip, and headed in with the taste of iron on her tongue. She stepped over severed

limbs, the discarded weaponry, her legs lead weights until she found the Doc sitting at his desk with a half-glass of chilled bourbon in his hand. He wasn't breathing.

Malory circled around until she could see his face, that maze of deep-set wrinkles that had been kind to her splattered with slaughter—he looked peaceful there, like every time she'd found him sleeping on paperwork, a bit of drool causing the ink to run. She knew none of the silly pranks would be enough to jolt him from that kind of slumber, though, and it broke her. There was a gut-wrenching scream far off in the distance, and her vision tunneled to a slit. She only realized the scream was hers when she felt the pain of vocal chords tearing. She felt the way it bubbled above a well of rage and boiled off into nothing. She swayed, then drew in another gasping breath and screamed again. It wasn't enough. Noise could never encapsulate the agony of losing someone she loved; she needed to kill, to get even, to make them all pay, but there was no one left. The Doc had taken out every enemy that came before succumbing to the wounds. She looked down at the Lantern, enraptured by the way it whispered to her like a lullaby, as if to say a bullet in the mouth would make it all go away, but she'd promised to stay alive, so she would.

Do you want revenge? To avenge yourself upon the guilty party? Do you want to make them pay the blood price? Price? PRICE?

"Yes," Mal croaked. Her voice was hoarse, raw, barely audible, but Evie was inside her mind, knew the answer before the questions were asked. It was theater, a play-acted contract for control, and Mal signed it without question.

Good. Very good. Now retreat back into your fantasies and protect whatever's left. You still have a job to do, but I'll take it from here. They must provide the weregild to the wronged, to be taught about the virus in the lullaby we sing. Sing. SING.

Malory's arms went limp at her side, her head tilted forward, and just as she looked like she'd fall, she stopped. Her parts jerked back and forth, her body twitching like she was having a seizure, and then something that wasn't her looked out at the room through her eyes. She felt herself take one shaky step after another, a rictus grin plastered on her face. Every foot that went forward steadied the movement until it settled into a robotic cadence, and then she was sprinting for the staircase beside the elevator. Her body leapt them three at a time without slowing, up, up, up to the floors above. Her boots, freshly laced, planted and launched with absolute certainty, as if failure was something considered, mocked, then consigned back into oblivion where it belonged. When she reached the floor the ghost wanted, her body slammed through the access door and reached up with a metal hand to tear the throat from one of the guards on the other side, the Lantern erasing the face of the other in a single, fluid motion. It felt right to surrender to the ghost, to observe vengeance delivered as a spectator in her own shell like a Roman emperor in the arena. She wasn't willing to let Evie spare a single damned soul.

Malory's body took long strides over to the armory and ended anyone that got in the way. Inside, a large group huddled around one of the tables displaying assault rifles, and the ghost pretended to be an innocent young girl fleeing from the shots down the hall. The group looked up at her approach, and one of the self-important members headed over to her. He didn't bother to raise his weapon, and he had a shit-eating grin plastered on his face. He did a poor job hiding the sinister intent, and licked his lips when he stopped in front of her. He was a full two heads taller,

and looked her up and down. It was a show, a standoff, and he'd made the mistake of getting far too close. Mal felt herself lurch forward—the ghost plucked a grenade from the man's loose belt, pulled the pin, and slammed it home into his open mouth. Teeth cracked and caved in, metal and applied force proven superior. When he stumbled back from the shock, her body anchored itself and kicked him in the solar plexus. The impact sent him reeling backward into his colleagues, but she didn't wait for the aftermath. The ghost threw her body behind a gun cabinet to hide, and when the payload detonated, chunks of seared meat rained over the room.

Mal admired the savagery of it, the unbending will to consume the living, and when the ghost moved from cover and went around collecting gear, she replayed the moment in her mind. Swift, confident movements, the way each enemy was reduced to slag—she jumped at anything else so she didn't have to think about the lab, the defiled place she'd started to consider home, or the Doc's dead face. Evie had a preference for bladed weaponry, for the up close and personal, and grabbed a meat-hook and over-large cleaver. A few grenades, more ammo for the lantern, a sawed-off shotgun, and a heavy machine gun that Malory's small frame could barely lift even with the artificial strength of the arm implant. Tired muscles paid no attention to the strain, the tearing, because the ghost couldn't feel, and she hefted it with ease. One last look around the room, at the picked-over racks, each splayed limb, and she smiled in satisfaction before lumbering off for the hunt. The ghost plucked locations directly from the network, and headed for the largest group first. When she stepped into an empty room beside the mess hall, she raised the HMG and pointed it at the abstract wall art, waited for the rotating barrel assembly to get up to speed, and disgorged hell on Earth.

Thick brass shells rolled across the carpeted floor and hissed from the heat, one after another after another. Each shot resounded like a cannon, tore through the thin wall, and ended a life. The firing didn't stop until there were no signs of life, and Mel felt her grip release. The HMG dropped with a muffled bang as chunks of drywall gave way and provided a window to the other side. There was no need to double-check for survivors, and the ghost crouched down and took off at a full sprint. There were more, so many more, and she gripped the meat hook and cleaver in each hand. A slash, a puncture, flesh and organ rended irrevocably from bone, she tore through the halls like a whirlwind of judgement. In the time it took for the corpos to notice her coming and raise their rifles, their lives were ended and she'd already moved on. Every now and then, she shoved one of the blades into her belt, drew the Lantern, and fired. Floor after floor, the ghost moved her like a puppet to reconquer the headquarters just like she'd said she would. There wasn't any real method to the madness, either, just efficient slaughter.

The ghost didn't tire, didn't care about longevity, and Mal could tell her body was on the verge of collapse from the full-throttle exertion. When the last invader shed their mortal coil, she fell down to one knee and gasped in desperate breaths, thrust suddenly back in control of her own body. The build up hit her all at once, and she blacked out. When the Black Hands found her. She was in the center of an accounting office, still on one knee. She was covered head to toe in the evidence of butchery, each fist clenched desperately to her weapons. It took a moment for anyone to move and help her to her feet because they were afraid she'd attack them on instinct, and it took a woman a few years older than Mal to offer a shoulder and lift her. She tried to ask Malory if there was anything she needed to grab before evacuation, but there was no one left to answer. She was in a catatonic state, her mind unable to handle the pain of her broken body or

failing to save the Doc. The group led her out of the room, down the hall, and over to the elevator. Someone had turned the music on, and light jazz serenaded them as they climbed to the roof.

There was a ride there waiting, its engines primed and ready. The copilot screamed out call-signs to make sure they weren't enemies, and then beckoned them forward when he was certain they wouldn't attack. The woman helped her inside, strapped her to the seat, and jogged back to try and find more people to help. Malory wobbled from side to side during lift off, the shaking grew more intense as they passed over the wreckage of the AV that was shot down before. If someone was daring enough to reach out of the open door, they could have brushed the surface. When the flight path leveled off, her head tilted to the side and rested on a well-dressed shoulder—the Stranger was seated beside her, and looked down at her with a sly smile.

Chapter Twenty

There was no air, just the movement of each dead fragment circling, hurtling ever-forward toward the ultimate conclusion. It was a mess of orbital mechanics set in irrevocable motion so long ago that each criss-crossed, overlapped, and slammed into each other in violent displays of fractures, of breaking, lesser chunks with a fresh destination and a destiny unlocked. Abenezra, Vangel', Grimaldi, once craters that marked the surface of the moon, no longer held any meaning but an origin, a distant starting point before catastrophe sent them on their way. A particular mass of iron, sheared clean on its left side a week prior, collided with another like a massive fist and deflected, heading slowly toward Earth. It didn't have any thoughts about what happened, no witty insights that could humanize it, just the same steady lumbering onward, onward. The scene repeated a dozen, a hundred times a minute, and each new apocalyptic collision rendered the existing predictive models useless in their attempts to forecast the coming skyfall. There was no answer to be had, no amount of programming that would do the trick, no solution but praying for luck to something that wasn't capable of an answer. The sight was, in its own morbid way, an exhibition of beauty, like observing the corpse of a God and the way it caught light from the sun to shimmer high above.

Far below, an unmarked aerial vehicle hovered over the expanse of New Detroit, its thrusters firing incandescent heat to warp any observation lenses directed its way. They didn't want to be tracked, and it wasn't a fuel-efficient way to fly, but they were escaping in a hurry.

With all the resources ZenTech invested to destroy the Black Hands Headquarters, they knew it wouldn't be long before more squads arrived, so they arced between skyscrapers. Each close call rattled panes of glass and sent the people inside scurrying for cover. Air traffic control broadcasted escalating demands through the network, but the pilots ignored all of them. Even further below, the monorail carried passengers on their way, unaware of what had taken place, and advertisements bombarded anyone in reach—capitalism only escalated in times of war, forever insistent to buy more, more, and more still. A few dead wouldn't make a dent; the line was only allowed to rise. The AV barrelled past a news broadcaster charging premium for their traffic reports, between the twin towers of Hua Tech and the Hayashida corporation, and headed for the wall in the distance. The copilot unbuckled and dug around in a nearby box for the newest spoofed access codes fresh from the printer and keyed them in. They were granted safe passage and set out into the abandoned wilderness.

An hour passed. Then another. The AV touched down at a ramshackle base hidden in a copse of withered trees, and kicked up a cloud of dust and debris. The structures nearby were rickety prefabs assembled at a moment's notice, but they'd been set on top of a place that weathered the collapse and survived. The old bricks contained stories of the world before. When the heavy doors on the AV slid open, passengers departed one by one, but Malory was still an unresponsive husk. Two men sent from the base climbed inside with a stretcher to take her limp body away, but as they tried to move her to the medical wing, the Stranger held up a slender hand and stopped them in their tracks. He loomed over her face, flattened each crease in his suit jacket, and used a monogrammed handkerchief to dab away the blood she'd smeared on his shoulder. Then, he bent down until her shallow breath blew his bangs back and forth, and leaned

even closer. He stared at her with a sly smile for an entire minute until the two men shifted uncomfortably. Just when one of them worked up the courage to ask what was going on, the Stranger stood straight and left without a word. The two men exchanged a knowing glance, shrugged, and then continued working.

Malory woke up two days later. She was disoriented and reached for the Lantern on instinct, but the holster was empty. The room was a low-light blur, and then the implant kicked in, and she was able to see her surroundings. The room was finished with cracked stone slabs, and it was cold enough to prick her skin. There was a burned out lightbulb no one had bothered to change in decades dangling from the ceiling, and the only door in or out was propped half-open by a stack of empty food crates. Mal could hear a conversation out there, distorted by distance, and the implant did its best to translate it into a line of text in the bottom of the optical display—the person charged with taking care of her was complaining to the quartermaster about a severe lack of supplies and how the place was never designed to hold so many. Mal strained her aching body to sit up. She was still covered in other people's blood, but someone had rolled up a sleeve and shoved an IV into her wrist. Her stomach growled as she ripped it free and rose on unsteady feet. It wasn't until she was near the door that memories came flooding back and sent her stumbling into the frame: the Doc's face, being too late, all the killing.

She pushed herself upright, yanked open the door, and stepped into the hall. She'd started crying involuntarily, and it made the blood on her face run until she looked like a weeping statue. The two out in the hall paused mid-conversation and observed her, but didn't ask any questions. Mal nodded to them as she shuffled past, but she wasn't sure where she was or where to go. Her stomach let out a low, sustained groan when she reached a dusty intersection. She inhaled

through her nose to try and smell for food, and she wasn't expecting to have any luck, but there was a lingering scent of charred vegetables in the stale air to the left. Each step sent a jolt of pain from the tips of her toes all the way to the space behind her eyes, but she refused to quit, to think about the lab. She placed one foot in front of the other, in front of another, up a half-dozen crumbling steps and down another hallway until she reached what passed for the cafeteria. It was crowded there, but no one spoke. They stared down at their food, uncertain about their futures, what came next, and whether hope was even appropriate. They'd all lost someone in the attack, and felt guilty to be the ones left alive.

Mal headed for the dispenser, grabbed a rusted bowl, and dribbled gray paste out until it filled to the brim. It didn't seem to be edible, but she didn't care—she was prepared to gnaw on a shoe if it came to it. She thrust a disposable spoon into the mush and looked around. Everyone was in groups of three or four, which left her the odd man out. There was a table toward the back with a single person, but when she noticed who it was, Mal's organic hand shook. She only kept hold of the food because the metal one didn't budge. There, all by himself, sat the Stranger. His clockwork eyes were the bright blue of extensive network use, and unlike everyone else in various states of filth and fatigue, he was pristine. Untouched. The same primal fright when she ran into him leaving the elevator in the headquarters sprang forth and crawled its way toward her soul. It wanted to sear it again, to brand fear into the fabric of who she was, but it hit a wall it couldn't get through. The Stranger turned and looked at her, but she headed for the closest empty seat before she saw his expression. When she plopped herself down, the others glanced at her for a moment, then went back to shovelling disgusting paste into their gullets.

Mal took hold of the spoon, scooped out a fat chunk, and held it up. She hesitated to put it in her mouth until the God's eye assured her it wasn't poison, and it stuck to the roof of her mouth. It was bitter, and it reminded her of sawdust, of industrial synth-wood glue, with just a dash of cucumber. She swallowed, took another bite, and made sure it touched all the worst parts of her tongue. She didn't want to enjoy it, she wanted to be distracted from the mess inside her mind. Competing desires oscillated back and forth; she wanted to scream, to cry again, to cede control to the ghost forever, to kill each and every person in the room, to hunt down all the board members and shareholders of ZenTech and torture them, but instead, she ate. She focused on the sounds of wet chewing, scraping, and swallowing as they repeated with metronome consistency. When her bowl was half empty, the others at the table dropped their utensils at the same time and stood. They hurried off in different directions, and none of them looked back. Mal set her spoon down and placed her hands flat against the table—the surface was worn and torn, and each nick and scratch from years of use tried to tell her a story. The Stranger sat across from her.

“I've been watching you,” he said. His voice was a soft melody, and he wiped the table off with the handkerchief before he placed his elbows on it. He leaned his weight forward until the synth-wood creaked. “You racked up quite the body count back at headquarters, but the way you moved was unnatural. I've never seen anything quite like it. Tell me, what is your secret?”

Reach across and gouge out his eyes. Stand over his body and answer his question with a question. Demand the return of my schematics. The spoon is sturdy enough to get the job done. Find out where they're hidden. Hidden. HIDDEN.

“I don't know what you're talking about,” Mal said. She remembered the twisting, the tearing, each cut of the cleaver, but she refused to think of the lab or the dead man she'd come to

love like a father. She wouldn't let the Stranger push her into that memory. Her hands, once flat, curled into fists. "Anyone else could have done the same."

"You're a terrible liar," he said. He placed the handkerchief back into his breast pocket, the clockwork gears in his eyes spinning, digging into her to discover all he wanted to know. He monitored each twitch, the expanding and contracting muscles, the contours of each poorly-veiled expression. "I remember you. From the market all those years ago. I was certain you'd die in the gutter where you belonged, just like the rest of your kind, but I was wrong. You should be proud. That never happens. How did the scars turn out?"

"Like a work of art," she said. She unclenched her fists and stood, leaving the rest of her food behind. Her lips curled in disgust. "But I'm still alive, and Banks is not. Now, if you'll excuse me."

"Be my guest," the Stranger said. He twirled his left hand as if granting permission, and then tilted his head to the side and cracked a smile. "Oh, yes, I thought you should know. I've been given all the old man's assets, so we'll be seeing each other again soon."

Mal paused, but she didn't look back. What a narcissistic prick. She shook her head, and then retraced her steps until she found the room where she woke up. She kicked the crates out of the way, closed the door as gently as she could, and then walked over to the far wall. She raised a fist, intending to strike the bricks until they disintegrated into dust, until her skin split, but she noticed a small silhouette in the corner of her eye. It was the gift Nadia had given her, that little mechanical cat sitting at the foot of the bed. Malory couldn't believe it. She reached for it and expected to be hallucinating, to have finally lost her mind, but it was real. She lifted it up, turned it around in her hands, but there wasn't a note—someone had gone all the way down to the lab,

found Mal's room, and returned it to her without expecting thanks. The act of unexpected kindness smothered the rage the Stranger evoked, and she sat cross-legged on the spot. She dove headfirst into programming; she didn't understand how to create her own AI kernel, but she tried anyway. And tried again each time it failed. She wrote one line of code, another, until it coalesced into an intricate web of interconnected algorithms and commands nestled inside each other. Evie materialized beside her and observed.

You're most of the way there. Surprising. Your skills are so rudimentary, I never expected it to be within the realm of possibilities. Did you know it was a junkie that first figured out how to crack neural networks—to dig inside the mind of another, to pilfer their memories and all they held dear? But the Prophet saw potential, and used the junkie for his plan, and here we are. I can show you the answer, if you want. Want. WANT.

"Fuck it," Mal said. She set the cat on the bed and threw her hands up in exasperation. "Show me what I'm missing. But if you're trying to trick me, I swear I'll rip this damned eye out of my head."

Evie walked to the foot of the bed and reached out like she was stroking the cat's fur. For a moment, nothing happened. There was just a spectral hand shimmering over sleek, sophisticated metal. Malory held her breath; she didn't know what to expect, but she was invested. She was certain the ghost had grown stronger after wearing her like a suit, and knew there'd come a point where it would be able to seize control on its own, but it wasn't there yet. The ghost's hand sank inside without warning, clutched the cat's control center between elongated fingers, and both of them glowed in a rainbow of neon lights. Oranges, reds, pinks, each bright enough Malory had to shield her eyes, afraid it would burn her fleshy retina or

damage the optics of the experimental implant she didn't have the first clue how to repair. The process dragged on and on, and shed so much heat the small space transformed into an impromptu sauna. Sweat rolled down Mal's brow, collected the scum, and settled on the collar of her shirt. When the reaction finally stopped, the ghost was nowhere to be seen, but the cat meowed and stretched out little limbs. It observed Malory with wide, intelligent eyes, and it was waiting for something.

You don't have to be so wary. I told you I will never leave until you accomplish the mission, until you retrieve what's mine. I gave it a kernel of my own creation, and you won't find anything like it in any market on Earth. Feel free to take a peek at the code, to glean the secrets if you can. Consider it payment for future services rendered as we fly into the sun. Sun. SUN.

"Thank you?" Mal asked. If Evie had been the woman that assassinated ZenTech's CEO, she had long-since shed all the constraints of being human, and it was impossible for Malory to trust whatever she'd become.

Give it a name. Name. NAME. There is a power in them.

"Faraday," she said. It was the first thing that came to mind.

// INITIALIZING FIRST CONNECTION

// PLEASE WAIT...

//

//

// CONNECTION ESTABLISHED

It doesn't know how to speak yet, but it will learn. The more it interacts with the world, the more it will come to understand. Make sure it doesn't get caught. An unregistered AI is categorized as a capital offense in New Detroit.

"I've already got a bounty on my head," Mal said. Her implant blurred for a moment, and then a small rectangle appeared in the corner. It showed whatever the cat could see, and it was disorienting to see herself, all the gore, the way she resembled a demon fresh from the battlefield. "They can certainly try."

If they ever send Containment, you don't stand a chance in hell unless you grant me control. Control. CONTROL.

"That was a one-time thing," Mal warned. She tilted her head to the side, and Faraday tilted its own in response. They stared at each other until it felt like they'd come to an understanding. "Don't expect it to happen again."

I'll keep that in mind when you come begging on your knees. You just don't have the skills to manage the escalating situations you keep finding yourself caught inside. Take it to heart when I tell you death is overrated. You don't want any part of this. This. THIS.

"Hey, while you're willing to have a real conversation, do you think the Stranger was involved in what happened at the headquarters?" Mal asked. She reached forward and stroked Faraday's chin, and smiled when it started to purr in a hollow rumble. Nadia understood. They hadn't been able to talk in a while, but the little maniac knew her better than anyone else.

Yes. Without question. He is the snake slithering in the tall grass, the predator coiled and waiting to strike. Strike. STRIKE. I do not understand his endgame, but it's safe to assume he's working for himself, above all else. He will try to have you killed. To get you out of the way.

“Well, Faraday needs a test run, and we need information,” Mal said. She lifted the cat and stroked its metal fur as she walked it over to the door. She stuck her head out into the hall to make sure the coast was clear, and set him down with a click. “Let’s see what you can find for us, little one. Don’t let anyone see you.”

The cat let out another soft meow, and then bounded off into the shadows. Mal closed the door again, sat down on the bed, and watched the footage in silence as Faraday crept around underfoot and searched for systems to hack into. It was swift, but it was obvious the AI had yet to fully understand the body or its capabilities—it tripped on its own paws, couldn’t figure out what to do with the tail, and even ran face-first into walls. It was a small miracle no one noticed, each preoccupied with their own traumas. Mal was thankful to be well-versed in selective dissociation, and if being a witness to her mother’s murder had given her a gift, it was to endure. She lost herself in the observation and let herself drift away from the confines of her flesh until it felt like she was the one dashing behind overturned boxes, scattered tents, and trash searching for access ports. Mal was so invested in the search, in being free to think of anything else that she failed to hear the knocking until it escalated to a fist pounding on the door. She stood, minimized the feed, and headed over to open it. On the other side, a red-faced woman muttered obscenities under her breath.

“About time,” the woman said. She used a rag to dab at her sweaty cheeks, and she squinted at Malory. “You’ve been assigned to guard duty since you were listed as someone with significant combat experience.”

“Sure,” Mal said. She doubted anyone would come to find them so far out in the wilderness, so she didn’t mind. She really needed to shower, though. She suspected the plumbing

was still active in the structure below, but the higher-ups most likely hoarded access between them. There was no way someone like the Stranger would stay there otherwise.

“Your shift started five minutes ago, so you should probably head for the mustering spot set up on the far side of the tents,” the woman said. She doubted the authenticity of what was listed in the file, but the layer of red caked to every inch of Mal’s body spoke for itself. “If you’re any later than ten minutes, they’ll start penalizing you. It can get pretty serious.”

“Alright,” Mal said. She closed the door behind her and headed off to where they wanted her. Down in her soul, the rooted seed of doubt bloomed like a fragrant rose, each thorn impaling a different reason for her to betray the Black Hands and be done with it all.

Chapter Twenty One

The withered trees spread out in every direction, each branch twisted and bare, the many trunks overturned by force or age. It was a testament that nature, too, was on the very brink. There wasn't a single part of the world left untouched by corporate greed, and Malory sighed. She had been stuck on guard duty for over a week, and she was bored out of her mind. She'd been wandering miles from her post and used some of the dead stumps for target practice—the Lantern had been returned to her, and bullets were about the only thing that wasn't in short supply in the hideout. It was safe to say the Black Hands had lost the war, but they were too proud to admit it, and too self-important to give up. It was all a waste of time. No one was coming; they were going to wither and die on their own as resources ran out. None of them were nomads or knew how to forage outside the wall. They were accustomed to city-living, and the complete lack of creature comforts had started to affect morale. Malory made her way back to base when the sun crested over the horizon and her shift was over. Most of the blood had flaked off, but she had yet to shower.

The crisp ground crushed underneath her boots and her toes were numb, but she had recovered from the overexertion at the headquarters. Mal noticed the contours of muscles flexing where they'd never been visible before. She might have even been in good shape, all things considered, but growing up the way she did had left a permanent mark. She wondered what Nadia would think the next time they saw each other. She rubbed at the scars on her back

absentmindedly as she drew near the makeshift buildings and slowed her pace. Most people were waking up for the morning, and she could hear the clamor of their new routines. It felt like travelling back in time to a doomed city on the eve of a natural disaster; Pompeii, Herculaneum, or Lajia, its people blissfully unaware their lives were forfeit. Each of their wants, their hopes, every need destined to remain forever unfulfilled. As Mal stepped inside one of the structures to head to her room down below, she stopped in her tracks. The Stranger was there, leaned against the wall, and he was waiting for her. His hair was slicked back with fresh gel, and he flashed the same sly smile. The clockwork gears spun and spun, trained on her dishevelled face.

“You should take better care if you plan to survive,” he said. He pushed off the wall, stood to his full height, and clicked his tongue. “Shirking guard duty to wander around and play at merc with your little pea-shooter—such delusions are a coping mechanism of the weak.”

“What the fuck do you want?” Mal asked. She was exhausted, out of patience, and her filthy skin itched something fierce.

“You have been nominated, despite my insistence to the contrary,” he said. He leaned forward until his head was level with hers and stared into her eyes. The gears rotated slowly with contempt. “You will be granted transport and sent back to the city to retrieve enough supplies to ensure our operational success. If you fail, or do not return, however, I will do everything in my power to eradicate every trace you ever existed.”

“You want me to head through customs looking like this?” she asked. She motioned to her tangled hair, the grease, the leftover gore. “At least pretend you don’t want me to fail.”

“Very well,” he sighed. His eyes flashed, and a diagram pointing out the shower location down below was sent to her network. The job details followed. It showed her where to go, an

extensive list of what was needed, and an expected timeline. “Use what you need, and then be on your merry way.”

“Sure,” Mal said. She pushed past him and headed down the hall, but then stopped and turned back. A glance at Faraday’s progress showed the AI was growing fast and had taken to sneaking inside rooms when it knew the occupants were elsewhere. It had yet to find anything important, but it was just a matter of time. “You said you were given the Doc’s assets, right? Any chance of continuing the search for my sister?”

“Absolutely not,” the Stranger said. He curled his lips in disgust and stifled a laugh. “The Black Hands are not a babysitting service, and that old bastard is lucky he wasn’t alive when such a mishandling of resources came to light.”

Mal’s hand moved for the Lantern on reflex, but she caught herself and continued walking. The clouds that blocked out the blooming rose inside her parted, and an overwhelming light flooded each petal and cranked the growth into overdrive. She had made up her mind to betray them. The hall of the old structure leading to the bathroom had been polished to a shine by some poor lackey who was demoted to a maid and forced to clean until there was nothing left that tarnished the well-travelled paths of the higher-ups. Mal shed her clothes, shoved them into the industrial cleaner in the corner, and slipped into one of the half-dozen stalls. She turned on the tap, and hot water greeted her. She let out a groan of pleasure, and scrubbed every inch of her body twice. There was tension in her joints and in the seam where the arm implant met flesh and blended together. As she felt it fade away, Mal stared at the drain and watched the water slip down into the sewer. When she was done, she wrapped a towel around herself and pulled her

clothes from the machine. They were warm, smelled of detergent, and they looked fresh from a store rack. As she dressed, her hair dripped in a steady beat on the tiled floor.

When she was dressed and dry, she headed up to the surface and into the cold air that tickled her nose. She made her way over to the mustering point and found the red-faced woman who'd informed her about guard duty waiting. Beside her, an off-road motorcycle with a Black Hands logo slapped on the side was propped up on a kickstand. Its tire treads were heavy-duty and meant to traverse the wilderness with ease. On the back near the seat, someone had welded a tow bar where it didn't belong and it threw off the balance. It allowed the bike to pull a small cart behind it, and Mal figured the higher-ups expected her to make multiple trips. She wasn't coming back, though. The red-faced woman finished topping off the fluids, passed her the keys, and then walked away without a word. Mal threw her leg over, settled in the seat, and pressed in the ignition switch. The engine roared to life and then settled into a steady hum underneath her. She leaned forward, placed her hands on the handlebars, and revved the engine as she slipped the bike into gear. She shot off into the wilderness.

The wind howled past, and it twirled through Malory's hair and caused her jacket to flap hard against her legs. Dust swirled high in her wake and clouded out the trees. The raw power made her giddy, so she pulled the throttle back further once she was out of the treeline. There were several craters scattered around, and she threaded the needle along their rims. A simple mistake was enough to send her tumbling down at high speeds, but she held the handlebars steady. An hour passed by, and with it, the initial rush faded away. Mal still felt free, but she was bored, and scanned the horizon waiting for anything to happen. A while later, she noticed a haze in the distance that hung over a large hill, and it grew in size as she drew closer. The smell hit her

first, and it was overwhelming; it reminded her of the outskirts, the decay, the refuse that clogged the alleyways. When she started to make out scattered objects here and there, it became obvious that it was one of New Detroit's open-air landfills. There were pieces of broken furniture, discarded entertainment systems, synth-plastic, a mix of discarded parts, and so much rotting trash. At the very top of the mound, a lone gray robot dug through the place, searching for something unknown.

Mal watched the sad thing root around until it was out of sight, and then called Nadia. It rang three times before she answered, and the little maniac was fresh and clean. Instead of being caught neck-deep in an invention, she was seated in the middle of an auditorium lecture and listening to an old woman drone on and on about advanced power supplies, their myriad uses, and the current shortage of Helium-3.

"Hey," Nadia whispered. She twirled a small bolt in her nimble fingers and looked like she was on the verge of nodding off before the call. "What's going on?"

"You actually went to class?" Mal asked. She pulled on the handlebars and drifted around a dried-out swimming pool. The remnants of neighborhoods started to appear as she neared New Detroit.

"I have to show up once a week to keep my scholarship, but I always end up sleeping through them," she said. She put the bolt down on the desk and sat up straight. A look of deep concern made its way to her face. "Where the hell are you?"

"Heading back to the city," Mal said. She blew past an old mailbox that was still upright, its numbers faded to nothing. "War went south. There was an evacuation."

“No shit,” Nadia said. Some of the students nearby turned to shush her and she flipped them off. “I’ve seen some of the reports. Are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” Mal lied. She turned the bike onto an old stretch of road and had to swerve back and forth to avoid the large potholes. Small nomad symbols were etched on the nearby flat surfaces that indicated things she couldn’t understand. “Listen, I need you to do me a favor. I want to switch sides. Can you set up a meeting between me and ZenTech somewhere neutral? Tell them I’ve got intel to trade.”

“Are you fucking serious?” she asked. Nadia stood from her seat, threw her bag over her shoulder, and rushed out of the auditorium. The professor called out to her, but she ignored it, and she didn’t stop when she reached the hallway. “I might be able to do that, but where could you even meet without them trying to take you out?”

“Purgatory,” Mal said. She passed an abandoned car that had been stripped down to its frame for parts. Nothing went to waste out there unless it was in the path of a coming skyfall.

“Ah,” she said. She paused in front of a door to process for a second, and then pushed it open and started climbing stairs. “Yeah, it doesn’t get much more neutral than that. No one fucks with the merc guild.”

“You think you can set it up?” Mal asked. She listened to the smaller girl grunt as she climbed the stairs, the way it mixed with the rumble of the engine, and wanted nothing more than to reach out and pull Nadia into a hug. “Tell them I’ve got location data on all the remaining higher-ups.”

“I’ll do my best,” she said. When she reached a landing, she jerked open a door and headed into a place lined with faculty offices. “My mentor owes me one. I’ve found it’s quite convenient to make sure people are in your debt.”

“You’re the best,” Mal said. She’d been awake all night and never got a chance to sleep, so her reflexes were shot. With her focus split, she almost slammed into an old freight trailer missing its tires. “Let’s hang out after the meeting’s over and they call off the bounty.”

“I’d love that,” she said. She shoved past a teacher’s assistant that worked as a secretary and headed straight for her mentor’s office. “I’ll send you the details when it’s all set up.”

“I’ll see you soon,” Mal said. She let the call drop as Nadia opened the door.

Half an hour later, Malory approached the checkpoint to enter New Detroit. She was concerned because the bounty had yet to be rescinded, but she still had plenty of credits to grease the way. She clenched her teeth until her jaw popped as she waited. The line moved swiftly, but the person directly in front of her was detained for trying to smuggle in an exotic hallucinogenic substance created in a facility outside the walls. Mal watched the guy escorted off in cuffs, and noticed he was wearing a plethora of nomad memorabilia. When it was her turn, she shifted uncomfortably under the guard’s scrutinizing gaze. Before he could run an identity check, she transferred a thousand credits directly to his network. His eyes glowed as the sum showed up, and he hesitated for a second to make sure none of his superiors were watching. When the coast was clear, he waved her forward. Mal accelerated through the point, and before anyone had a chance to change their minds, she opened up the throttle and took off into the city. When she was a few blocks in, Nadia sent over confirmation of a meeting in an hour. She had no idea how the girl managed to get it done so fast, but she set her GPS and went ahead of time.

Purgatory was built inside an old foreign embassy, and the facade was rather plain. There was a parking area inside a wrought-iron fence and a simple neon sign shining red above the door. Malory pulled in, parked, and made her way to the bouncer. He was a giant man, stuffed to the brim with chrome, and each of his arms were primed and ready to eject electrified blades to gut anyone that tried to cause a scene. He went to reject entry, but let her pass when he realized she was the one that had assassinated ZenTech's executives. He clapped her on the back as she passed to show his respect, and then she was inside. Mal was overwhelmed by the ambience, the vibrant interior, the way it evoked a descent into a place near hell. There was an open space with standing tables, and behind it, the bar. Rows and rows of assorted alcohol on display taunted her to drink, and up above there was a massive hologram of people burning in the flames of perdition. The whole thing was animated, and figures writhed from the pain. Here and there, depictions of famous mercs were plucked into the air by angels and carried toward heaven—Mover Marlow, Redtail Martinez, Ozone Cordova, 24/7, Alter Cerny, and Lacey Lantern each featured prominently. Malory grabbed a stool, but didn't order anything.

There was a hallway that led to the back lined with retro arcade cabinets, and she could hear the thrum of live music being performed on the other side even early in the morning. She spun around and leaned backwards on the bar counter to observe her surroundings. Above her head on either side, she could see groups of dangerous people drinking and talking on the second floor balcony. Far to the right, patrons perused the wares of a gig supply depot that put the Black Hands armory to shame—countless guns, ammo boxes, supplies, tools, and memory chips begged to be purchased before crews headed off on their chosen jobs. Because the place was built on foreign embassy soil, Purgatory was technically a sovereign nation and separate from the

laws of New Detroit. The mercenary guild enforced this fact with absolute fervor, and let no one violate their independence. Scattered around at calculated intervals, there were mercs wearing guild colors, and they were prepared to enforce order at a moment's notice. Scattered around the place were tables, booths, and secluded rooms meant for negotiations, each more crowded than the last. Malory drank it all in like a parched wanderer fresh from the desert. She had finally made it to Purgatory, and it felt just as unbelievable as she expected.

When the ZenTech representatives arrived, Malory was watching Faraday sneak closer to the rooms where the higher-ups slept inch by inch. He stuck to the shadows in the corners, and only advanced when there was no one around. When the three suits walked into the building, everything came to a standstill. All attention was turned their way, and even the music emanating from the back hall died out. The trio stopped in the center of the open space, and when Malory moved to get up from her seat, the grizzled bartender tapped her on the shoulder.

“If those cunts are here for you, take it upstairs to one of the rooms on the far wall. Having them in the main area is bad for business,” he said. He gave Mal a stern look to make sure she understood.

“Sure thing,” Mal said. She headed over and motioned for the suits to follow.

They all went up the stairs, past hushed mercs too smart to speak their business in front of anyone on corporate payroll, and headed for a vacant room. Mal opened the door, filed in, and plopped down on the couch. The trio entered shortly after, but only one took a seat. The others stood to either side, their faces placid and unmoving. The one who sat leaned forward, rested his hands on his knees, and spoke.

“Here’s the deal,” he said. He laced his fingers together and his eyes glowed blue. “I have received a report that you are in possession of key intelligence, and that you wish to initiate a trade in exchange for total amnesty for any actions deemed in opposition of ZenTech interests, up to and including assassination and murder.”

“Yeah, pretty much,” Mal said. She tilted her head to the side, unable to measure whether the man was planning to fuck her over. Above their heads, a turret was set inside the ceiling, and it waited to disgorge its payload at the first sign of violence.

“That’s all well and good,” he said. He sighed and then leaned back to scratch at his ear. “And under normal circumstances, I’d have the liberty to sign off on that in a heartbeat. However, because you are currently classified as an unverifiable enemy source, corporate policy dictates that I require you to be subjected to a test of loyalty to verify good will.”

“What do you want me to do?” she asked.

“You see,” he said. He glanced at the others on each side, and decided he had the liberty to speak somewhat freely. “ZenTech’s resources are spread quite thin, what with absorbing everything that once belonged to the Black Hands—claiming the spoils of war, you see. But there is a particular outpost that has given us a spot of trouble. You head over there, take out the remaining defenders, and we’ll have ourselves a deal.”

“Sure, I can do that,” Mal said. She offered her metal hand for him to shake.

“Lovely,” he said. He reached out, clasped the hand in his, and shook it vigorously. “Then, I’m afraid that concludes our business for today. You will be contacted directly once we have authenticated your completion of the trial. Have a good day.”

As the man stood up and the suits started to file out of the room, the ghost materialized by Malory's side. She reached out and stroked Mal's cheek with a spectral hand, and it sent chills down her spine.

Far be it from me to judge, but casting your lot with men like them is beneath you. If you had simply given me control, I would have solved this situation with much more elegance. Are you truly willing to sacrifice your integrity for a chance at revenge? Revenge? REVENGE?

"It'll be fine," Mal said. She waited until the suits were gone, then headed back down to the bar and ordered a drink.

Chapter Twenty Two

All around the monorail station, the crowd went about their business—there was a group of private school kids on a field trip to one of the soup kitchens in the outskirts to make an early showcase of the ways in which philanthropy kept the unwashed masses pacified, a woman carrying a delivery of designer cupcakes to a birthday party, and a couple of factory workers heading to lunch. Malory moved through it without a word. She was exhausted, but the anxiety provided by the turncoat deal was masked by the drinks she'd ordered before leaving Purgatory. The ghost's words had affected her more than she let on, and she was worried that trying to use a corporation to get justice was tainting her ideals. But she also knew she'd be a fool not to use whatever she could. She wasn't signing onto corporate payroll to be an enforcer, anyway, and she was smart enough to know that New Detroit corrupted even the most well-intentioned. She swallowed the disgusting taste in her mouth and decided she'd do her best not to be ensnared by an ideology she despised. To tear down the whole rotten system meant it would try to ruin her in return. She brushed the mess of thoughts away and headed off to do the job.

There was an old virtual reality cafe that had been famous once for their full-dive pods where people were able to experience all their desires in exacting detail, but it had fallen out of fashion when memory chips became commonplace. It was strange to learn that such a place had given ZenTech so much trouble—enough that they were willing to let her take care of it in exchange for amnesty, and her doubts were only reinforced by the state of the place. Most of the

windows had been boarded up with planks of synth-wood, and the ones that hadn't were cracked and broken. Malory cased the outside before moving in and took note of any visible defenses, the exits, and whether or not customers came or went. The place seemed quiet in a way nothing in the city ever was, but in the details ZenTech had provided, they listed an estimation of over thirty potential hostiles. Something was off. There was no way the Black Hands invested so much personnel in a place that wasn't a front for their seedy interests. Malory headed for the door. No one was keeping guard, and it wasn't locked. She was given a directive to take the place for ZenTech; there was no mention of killing anywhere, so if it was a possibility, she wanted to avoid it. The bell above the door rang as she pushed her way inside.

"We're closed!" a high-pitched voice yelled from behind the counter. The lobby was lined with automated turrets set into a heavy base every few feet, and they were all trained on the door. "Kindly fuck off if you don't want to be paste on the floor."

"The door was open," Mal asked. She continued forward, unphased by the voice's attempt at intimidation, and felt the turrets track her movement. She leaned on the counter and looked at the small girl cowering behind it. "I'm just here to talk."

"Do you have a fucking death wish?" the girl asked. Her eyes were wide with terror, and the turrets revved up to deliver their payloads. She was at the end of her rope, and she wasn't bluffing.

"The people that care about me sure seem to think so," Mal said. She looked at the impressive weaponry and burrowed into their systems with her hack. As the code brute-forced its way in to take control, she held up her hands to show she didn't mean harm. "I'm just here with an offer. Call in the others so they can hear what I have to say."

“I’m the only one left,” the girl mumbled, but her voice caught in her throat, and it didn’t come out loud enough for Mal to hear. There were tears forming in her eyes.

“What did you say?” Mal asked. The God’s eye flashed a notification that she’d seized control of the defenses, and a small smile made its way to her face. She didn’t want to kill anyone for the suits, especially a child, but fear could make people do stupid things. Having the turrets out of play made things much easier.

“The others died in the first attack. I’m the only one left!” the girl screamed. Speaking the fact aloud for someone else to hear had made it real, and that’s what finally broke her. She lost all composure, started crying in big heaving sobs, and fell back on her ass. She didn’t even notice the turrets weren’t under her control anymore.

“Then how did you hold off the corpo squads for so long?” Mal asked. A single small girl had rebuffed the largest faction in the city. It was absurd. “How is that even possible?”

“My mom,” the girl said. She tried to sit back up, but her body didn’t listen. “She gave me control of the holograms when she died. They look like they’re people, but they aren’t. They weren’t smart enough to know the difference, I guess.”

“That’s incredible,” Mal said. She had control over the defenses, and the girl was willing to talk, so she abandoned all pretense and vaulted over the counter. She offered her metal hand to lift the girl back to her feet. “Everything’s going to be alright. You did a good job here, and your mom would be proud.”

“You’re here to help?” the girl asked. There was a large snot bubble forming from her nose, and she hesitated before taking the hand. “I miss her, but she’s gone now.”

“I can’t do anything about that, but I can take you somewhere safe if you trust me,” Mal said. She waited a moment, and when the girl nodded, Mal lifted her from the ground and carried her. When she felt the tiny arms wrap around her neck, she felt rage well up, an indignation that someone else had to suffer through watching their mother die the way she had. “Let’s get you out of here.”

“Is it safe?” the girl asked. She wiped her nose on Malory’s jacket. “I don’t want to play this game anymore, but they never stopped coming.”

“You don’t have to. I’ll keep you safe,” Mal promised. She started moving through the place toward the back door, and had to step over a dozen bodies. She held her hand over the girl’s eyes so she wouldn’t see. “I know a place where you can go back to being a kid again. It’s not the best, but it’s a chance. I know it won’t be easy to handle what happened here, and this place will haunt your dreams. Trust me, I know. But if you wield it as strength instead, you can grow up big and strong and make sure no one will ever hurt you again.”

“Okay,” the girl said. There was a hint of resignation in her voice, and she stopped crying as she steeled herself for what was to come. She pushed Malory’s hand away; she wanted to witness everything so she’d never forget.

Blood congealed in rivulets along the floorboards, on the dusty surfaces of the VR pods, and the faded wallpaper. Hundreds of holes were punched straight through the drywall, and it all spoke of violence. Large shell casings peppered the ground, and they let out a metallic crunch as Malory made her way through with the girl. Most of the bodies there belonged to ZenTech goons, but there were Black Hands defenders as well. In the back, just outside the server room, Mal noticed a couple that died while holding hands. The little girl moved around as she forced

herself not to cry, and Mal lingered a moment to give her a chance to say goodbye. When she was ready, they continued on. New Detroit took without remorse, and it never gave back. When they made it to the exit, Malory triggered the turrets to fire, and the noise reverberated around the empty place—she wanted to sell a fight in case anyone was keeping watch. She pulled out the Lantern, fired a half dozen shots into some of the bodies nearby, and then holstered it again. It'd have to be good enough. Mal pushed the door open and stepped out into the alleyway. The light hit their faces and made them both squint, but it illuminated a resigned determination as they headed into the city.

The journey was smooth, and no one tried to stop them. Malory carried the girl through the streets, the bustling crowds, and into a very familiar part of the outskirts near the wall. She'd grown up there, and hadn't ever wanted to return. She wasn't like Oscar had been, always trying to look after the younger orphans—she didn't think she made for a good role model, and feared any involvement would only make their lives worse, but she'd decided saving the girl was worth a few uncomfortable emotions. When they reached the orphanage, there was a group of kids out front playing hopscotch the same way her cohort had, but she didn't stop to reminisce. The eyes of each of them followed their approach until Mal passed through the front door, and then they exploded into furious conversations. A few of them recognized Malory, and they bragged to the others. According to the rule of cool, they were the winners that day. Inside, the foyer was still overhauled from the adoption of her sister, but it hadn't been cared for since, and was beginning to deteriorate again. Echoes of its previous state showed through. Mal took in the sight and then headed straight for the director's office. The door was opened just a crack, and she kicked it in with as much force as she could muster.

“Ah!” the director yelped. They stood from behind an ornate desk, steam emanating from a fresh cup of tea, and they brushed cake crumbs from their lapel. They moved to cover some of the documents spread in front of them. “I wasn’t expecting you to ever return.”

“We need to have a little chat,” Mal said. The little girl had fallen asleep in her arms on the way over—she was strong, and reminded Mal of a younger version of herself. Mal wanted to be the person she wished had come to save her when her future was stripped away, and drew the Lantern. She pointed it at the director and sneered. “You sit here back in your office, embezzle any funds that come to help the kids, and leave them to struggle in squalor. If any of us knew better, we would have slit your throat in your sleep.”

“You dare to levy such serious accusations while pointing a gun at me?” the director asked. Their eyes glowed blue, and an automated turret dropped from an alcove hidden above. “I’m certain I taught you better, Malory, but you’ve always been a damned fool. It’s no wonder they wanted your sister instead. Now, allow me to teach you one last lesson: no one delivers such a threat to my face and walks away.”

“Cute,” Mal said. For the second time that day, the God’s eye hummed as she sent her hack and stripped away control of the security system. If she was a merc, that would have been enough to make it her signature move, and compared to the setup at the rundown VR cafe, it was child’s play. The little girl’s mom was skilled, and the director was not. The turret swung around and pointed at the director. “But I didn’t come here to litigate the past or the fucked up things you put us through.”

“Then why have you come?” the director asked. They tried to regain control of the security system, and when it failed, they took a step back. The director was used to being in

control, used to lording over people without the ability to fight back, and had deluded themselves into believing they were a member of high society. Being so thoroughly challenged sent them into a panic spiral.

“I’m just here for her,” Mal said. She motioned to the sleeping girl, then placed her in one of the chairs against the wall. She was out cold, and Mal didn’t think she’d wake even if she had to shoot the director. “Things are going to change around here.”

“You need to leave immediately, and take that filthy bastard with you,” the director said. They tried to project authority in the same way they had when Mal was a child, but the panic in their voice betrayed them. The words came out in an unsteady mess. When they saw the attempt was a failure, they took a step backward and knocked over the chair behind them.

“That’s exactly what I’m talking about,” Mal said. She darted forward, leapt over the desk, and slammed the butt of the Lantern into the director’s mouth. She felt teeth give way, but didn’t stop there. As the director reeled into the wall, Malory followed and closed metal fingers tight around their throat. “That right there is a little girl who just lost her parents. She is a person, dealing with a lot of pain, the same way I was when I got here. She is not a thing, or something for you to take advantage of or abuse, and she will be staying here at the orphanage. You will do your sincere best to take care of her, or I will make you beg for death.”

The director tried to speak, but the barrel of the gun interrupted them as it was shoved crudely into their mouth. Their eyes went wide.

“This isn’t a discussion,” Mal said. She pushed the barrel in until she felt the director gag, and then squeezed their neck tight enough that their face went bright red. “The only reason you still breathe is because I promised myself I’d try not to kill anyone today. If you keep resisting

your new reality, I will break that promise in a heartbeat. This is now more than your job—you will take care of these kids like they're your own damn family, and I'll be watching. Do you understand?"

"Mmh!" the director grunted. A faint scent of piss wafted up in the space between them, and the director shook their head up and down and started crying.

"That's good," Mal said. She let go of their neck, pulled the pistol from their mouth, and clapped them on the shoulder like an old friend. "Simple, right? Oh, and just in case you're only agreeing to get me to leave, just remember your security system is mine now. I'll have it turn you into Swiss cheese the moment you step out of line."

The director nodded, but wasn't able to speak. They pulled out a handkerchief, held it to their ruined mouth, and tried to stop the bleeding. They continued to cry as they watched Malory head over to the sleeping girl.

Mal didn't wake her to say goodbye. She ran her fingers through the girl's dirty hair, smiled, and headed for the door. When she was outside again, she waved at the playing kids and listened to their whispers. A new feed had joined the one of Faraday in the corner of her vision, and Malory watched the director back in their office—they were weeping quietly at their desk to avoid waking the sleeping girl, and Mal took it as a sign they'd taken the threat to heart. Everything had been solved without adding another life to her growing tally, and she'd done an act of kindness in a city that seemed custom-built to destroy anything held dear. Mal waved to the kids again, and then walked away. She tried not to let the lack of sleep overwhelm her because there was one more thing she needed to do before she could rest, and it was the most important. She had someone to meet. As she headed deeper into the city, she spotted a karaoke

bar that used digital gremlins with their eyes crossed out as its logo and knew that was the place she wanted to see Nadia. A few more drinks and listening to the person she loved try to sing was just the thing she needed to unwind while waiting for her planned revenge to come to fruition. She called her girlfriend.

“How’d it go?” Nadia asked. She was fresh from the shower, her hair still wet, and she’d been waiting to hear from Mal since setting up the meeting.

“It’s all good,” Mal said. She entered the bar, paid for a room, and sat down on a soft leather couch. “Should hear about the bounty being called off in an hour or two. Come and meet me, and we can celebrate together.”

“Hell yeah!” Nadia yelled. She jumped up and down in the living room of her apartment, and toppled over a bunch of her inventions. “Where should I go? Do I need to bring anything?”

“I got us a private room at the Dead Gremlins karaoke bar,” Mal said. She scrolled through the screen and browsed their list of songs. She smiled. “You being next to me again is more than enough.”

“Fuck, karaoke?” Nadia asked. She went silent for a moment, then cackled like a maniac. She sprinted to her room to finish getting dressed and stubbed her toe on one of the stands that held a dozen reconstructed hand implants. She yelped, and then continued to laugh. “That means I get to hear you sing something. You know you don’t have to try so hard to seduce me, right?”

“Shut up,” Malory said. She hadn’t thought about having to sing as well, but Nadia being so excited to see it was worth all the embarrassment in the world. “I’ll see you soon.”

“I’ll be there in twenty,” Nadia said, and let the call drop.

Malory killed the time by singing songs to no one but the ghost inside her head, and avoided anything her sister liked. She didn't want to be sad on the day that meant she could see the people she loved without worrying about them being caught in a crossfire of her own mistakes. She gravitated toward power ballads, the slow rock songs that focused on love and feeling whole. It was something the world had always tried to take from her, and she refused to let it. She poured her volatile emotions into the deliveries while distorted guitar riffs reverberated in the air around her. She wasn't very good, but that didn't matter. There was vocal chrome that could turn the most talentless and tone-deaf into a virtuoso, and it was one of the pieces on her list of dream implants. While she was belting out the last few notes of a song about killing a corporation to impress a girl, the door to the room opened, and she choked on the words in her throat. Standing in the doorway was Nadia, still just as short as she'd always been, with a shit-eating grin plastered on her face. Malory tossed the cheap microphone onto the table, ran over, and scooped the maniac into her arms as tightly as she could.

"It's been way too long," she said. She relished the warmth, the smell of coming home. Electricity shot through her spine at the feeling of skin on skin. "I wasn't sure I'd ever get to see you in person again."

"Alright, alright. Don't be so dramatic," Nadia said. She squirmed under Malory's bear hug, but wasn't able to get free. "I missed you, too, but your new arm is crushing me to death."

"Sorry!" Mal let her go and took a step back. She looked down at herself, unsure of how she looked in her girlfriend's eyes. "So, what do you think? Have I changed too much?"

"I think you should order us some drinks on my tab," Nadia said. She took a step forward to close the gap, but she was too short to kiss Malory on her own. "Get us both nice and sloshed

while we sing a few songs, and then I'm going to take you to one of the hotels nearby and get a *much* better look."

"As long as you sing first," Mal said. She cupped Nadia's doll-like face in her hand, bent down, and kissed her. It was a gentle one, but there was enough passion hidden underneath to remind her that life was still worth living.

"Deal," Nadia said. She broke away and then snatched the microphone from the table. When she queued up the song she wanted, she turned around, bent into a provocative pose, and gave a little wink. "I'll make sure to give you a show to remember."

Chapter Twenty Three

Malory dreamed of a small cottage on a hill in the center of a vibrant glade. Evergreen trees spread outward in concentric circles and swayed back and forth in the breeze. There were calls of energetic songbirds that echoed through the leaves, recoiled off sturdy trunks and made their way to her ears. She was in the backyard on a swing tied to a thick branch and oscillated higher, higher, and higher still. She knew, as the warm air billowed through her hair, that her mother and sister were inside the cottage cooking breakfast. She didn't try to see their faces; she knew witnessing such a sight would taste bitter enough to wrench her from the illusion. Instead, she wanted to climb high enough to reach the sky, to reach out and grasp the broken moon above and thread it back together one fragment at a time. Up, up, and when Malory reached the apex, she let go of the ropes. As she did, the sky contorted, grasped by an unseen force and twisted—it became a hungry entity bathed in deep red. Every bird in the glade opened their beaks and blared out a synthetic warning, a scream, a death cry that repeated over and over. Malory had made her choice, though, and weightlessness took her as the cottage faded below. There was no going back.

She snapped awake to an alert from Faraday in the corner of her optic. She was disoriented, hungover, and under a strange ceiling. The walls rippled in the low light. She turned to draw her Lantern, and beside her in the king-sized bed, Nadia snored under cheap sheets. The familiar sight steadied her. There was true beauty there in the rise and fall of a chest, and it filled

Mal with the warmth of knowing she mattered to someone else. When the alert chimed again, it drew her attention—Faraday had found what they were looking for, and queued a video for Mal to watch. When it booted up, she found herself in a room surrounded by candlelight. She was watching the Stranger on a network call, and he was unaware he was being recorded. As he spoke, all that venom disguised beneath the musical voice flooded out, but she didn't feel fear. He laughed, then, and reassured his conversation partner. The Doc was going to die, and then the Stranger would be in charge. He said no one would ever find out, and that he was going to rip the limbs from that wrinkled old fuck. Like father, like son. Everything was set in motion, and success was guaranteed.

Malory vaulted from the bed, but her foot caught on the bundle of blankets that were pushed down while they slept. She tumbled face-first onto the floor with a thud. She didn't feel any pain, just pure, unadulterated rage. It threatened to consume all rationality. When she stood, she reached over and shook Nadia awake.

"Okay, I'm up!" Nadia yelled. She shoved her palms into bleary eyes to try and eradicate what sleep remained. She thrashed her tiny legs to untangle herself from the dirty sheets.

"There's much better ways to wake a girl after taking her to bed, you know?"

"I need to kill a man," Mal said. For the first time, the struggle of holding onto her sanity wasn't due to the implant's influence over her. Illustrations of violence moved through her mind in a high speed slideshow: she saw her teeth sinking into a throat and tasted iron as the cartilage gave way. She saw her Lantern fire an entire clip into the Stranger's smug face before reloading and doing it again. She saw her hands pry open the soft flesh under the ribs, reach in and crush his heart into chunky paste. "Help me."

“What?” Nadia asked. She moved her hands from her eyes, sat up, and when she saw Malory’s face, she understood. “Are you okay? What happened?”

“I saw the truth,” Mal said. Her fists clenched with a hydraulic whirl and the soft pop of organic knuckles. She wanted to let go, to become a monster with a purpose, but her girlfriend’s face guided her back from the abyss of self-destruction. “He needs to die.”

The truth? The truth is, you’re terrified that girl would never want to see you again if she saw a fraction of the savagery you hide underneath, those intricate fantasies of revenge meted out by your own hands. Tell her. Even if she abandons you, we will still be together. I will help take back what’s mine. Mine. MINE.

“Right,” Nadia said. She climbed from the bed and wrapped her arms around Mal’s frame. “I can’t do much, but I’ll be a distraction if you want. I’ll do anything for you if it makes you never feel the need to make that expression again.”

“I’m sorry,” Mal said. She tried to focus on the warmth of the hug, to use the comfort to keep the overwhelming desire at bay, and it almost worked. “It isn’t normal to struggle like this, to imagine brutality with so much clarity. It just won’t stop.”

“So what?” Nadia asked. She squeezed even tighter around Mal’s waist. “I’ve never been scared of you. And who the hell wants to be normal, anyway?”

“I guess,” Mal said. She knew she’d get a chance to enact it all as soon as ZenTech worked through their labyrinthine bureaucracy and contacted her, but that fact did nothing to calm her down.

“Let’s get something to eat,” Nadia said. She let Mal go and started getting dressed. “It won’t help much, but we can pass the time together until they call.”

“Sure,” Mal said. She would stop at nothing until she could wrap her hands around the Stranger’s throat, but that was for later. She tried to bottle up the rage and focused on her body—the air moving around her, the hickeys on her neck, the feeling of her bare soles on the floor, anything to center herself in the moment.

When they were both dressed, the couple made their way down to the lobby, checked out, and headed into the city. They spent a while looking for something appetizing until they gave up and sat at a street vendor that served breakfast burritos. They overflowed with processed junk, and the old man that served them was covered in sweat and looked like he hadn’t showered in a week, but Malory didn’t care—she couldn’t taste the food anyway, and it was all she could do to keep her thoughts from looping. She shovelled it into her mouth like a robot. Each swallow brought with it depictions of her own inhumanity, and she saw the Doc’s dead face judging her for every moment she could have killed the Stranger and hadn’t. If she had listened to the ghost and gouged out his eyes with the plastic spoon, if she had drawn on him when the elevator opened, if, if, if. She could have saved the Doc. She knew he’d never hold such a thing against her, but he was gone, and her own mind was not kind. When the burrito was finished, she balled up the wrapper, threw it in the trash, and stared unfocused into the distance. The ghost had been right, of course. She was terrified Nadia would leave her alone.

“You know,” Nadia said. She wiped the grease from her mouth and smiled. Her haunted doll’s voice bounced between them. “I can help you look for your sister when I’m not busy with school. Just because the Black Hands refused doesn’t mean all hope is lost. You said you found a lead, right?”

“Yeah, at the monorail station,” Mal said. Behind her eyes, she was unspooling the full length of the Stranger’s intestines and tying them into a noose. She pushed the thought away and nodded. Her sister was still out there, waiting to be found.

“There you have it,” Nadia said. She clapped her hands together like the problem had been solved. “Once you’ve put that asshole in the dirt, we’ll look together. It’ll be fun.”

“Maybe,” Mal said. When she was through with the Stranger, she suspected the word fun wouldn’t mean much to her anymore, but Nadia’s positivity was difficult to ignore. “Thanks for caring.”

“Always,” Nadia said. She paid for the food and added a tip. When she stood, she clasped Mal’s hand in her own and dragged her down the street. “Last night was nice, but we have so much more catching up to do. I know your mind is elsewhere, but walk around with me until the call comes in?”

“That’s the best I could hope for,” Mal said. And she wasn’t lying. She wished they had lives where the only thing that mattered was how they decided to spend their time together, but the world didn’t work that way.

As they walked around the city, skirted the crowds, and took in all the neon lights, the ghost materialized like an unwanted house guest. Evie didn’t say anything, but hovered over every action—each caress of a hand on another, the flash of a cute smile caught in an iris, a nudge of a shoulder, a hug, a pointed finger, it all passed through the ghost’s hungry eyes. Malory did her best to ignore it. While she’d grown used to the extra presence, something about the dead woman intruding on their intimacy felt far more invasive than the implant altering her neurons to try and influence her actions. The discomfort sent her off-kilter and threatened to let

the rage free. In an act of defiance, or of reclamation, Malory came to a stop in front of a billboard advertising Energo Lunar's defunct Helium-3 energy supplies that had been vandalized by les Fantômes graffiti and kissed Nadia with all the passion she had. Time froze, the two of them entangled deep in the city of dead dreams. There was nothing in the world but the two of them, a soft touch, and the scent of skin. A moment, another, two figures framed by a billboard of the corporation that destroyed the moon. When they finally parted, ZenTech rang through Mal's network.

"Hello?" she answered. Her lips were wet, and she wiped them clean with the back of her hand. The ghost disappeared from her periphery when the call connected. The crowd continued to part around them.

"Test completion has been confirmed," a bored voice said. They were reading from a prepared script, and did not deviate. "Amnesty for any and all actions against ZenTech interests has been applied, and a squad is waiting to act upon your provided intelligence. Please make your way to the designated staging area and take part in the operation. Further compensation will be provided upon completion."

// NEW COORDINATES RECEIVED

// LOADING...

//

// PROCEED TO THE ROUTE

“I have to go,” Mal said. She hesitated a moment, then lifted Nadia into a desperate hug. “If I don’t come back, cross my name off the tower with the others.”

“No,” Nadia said. She squirmed until Malory let her go. “None of that doomed hero bullshit. You are important to me, and we are going to find your sister together when you’re done. You go kill that fuck, and then get your ass back to me alive, or I’ll kill you myself.”

“Okay,” Mal laughed. Something inside her shifted, a burning radiance that shined underneath the rage. It confused her for a moment until she recognized it as hope—for the future, a love, the moon stitched back together, and the city changed forever. “I’ll be right back.”

“That’s more like it.” Nadia slapped her on the ass as they went their separate ways. Nothing was guaranteed, and they both knew it might have been their last moment. Neither said goodbye.

The meeting place wasn’t at ZenTech tower like Malory expected. Instead, she found herself in the outer edge of city center where she had to contend with the density of people going about their day. The implant whirred as it spat out little blue labels for everyone, and they blended and faded away before she could read them. There were so many, and almost all of them were unwilling to look up from their lives to take a stand for what was right. They were content with the slop, with existing as cogs inside an uncaring system that wouldn’t hesitate to ruin them on a whim. It was a perfect portrait of humanity, beaten into submission for fear of losing whatever scraps they had. After the prophet’s failed uprising so many years ago, the city government invested their fortunes to make sure it would never repeat—any sign of weakness in the facade was rectified. On every corner of city center, heavy-duty drones kept watch, waiting for unrest. Even the mercenary guild refused anti-government contracts on principle; no one

fucked with elected officials. It was just a fact of life. It was absolute, and Malory knew it needed to change. The GPS led her to an unassuming concrete parking garage, and she headed for the roof when she entered.

At the top, there was a dreadful military AV with a dozen heavy machine-gun turrets mounted to its frame. Below, two payload launchers waited to unleash whatever explosives were loaded. Dealer's choice. Nearby, tables and racks overflowed with gear for the mission—it was a cheap mobile armory as far as ZenTech was concerned, but it was comparable to all the might on offer in Purgatory. It gave Malory a headache when she realized she'd tried to fight against the collective wealth of a megacorporation that had pillaged the planet down to its last morsel, but she didn't regret it. They were still an enemy as far as she was concerned, and she was only using them as a means to an end. Nearby, a squad of grizzled veterans congregated around the weapons and equipped themselves for the operation, and their body armor was meant to hold fast even when subjected to armor-piercing rounds. They grabbed rifles, grenades, extra magazines, flares, whatever they could carry. They moved with well-practiced expertise, and none of them spoke. At Malory's approach, a tall woman with close-cut hair peeled off from the others and stood in her way. She was the operation commander, and her expression was nothing but hard lines. The veins in her thick neck moved like worms when she talked.

"Location data," the commander said. Her accent was thick, but it wasn't a request. She had yet to don her armor, and powerful muscles roiled through her undersuit as she tossed Malory a blank memory chip.

"Sure," Mal said. She caught the chip in her metal hand, slotted it into her neck, and copied the file of her journey back to the city. There was an awkward moment where they sized

each other up, and when the transfer was complete, she pulled it out and tossed it back. She ran the murder math a dozen times in her mind as she waited for direction, and knew she couldn't take the commander in a fair fight.

"Right," the woman said. Her eyes glowed blue as she watched the footage. She ran a program to scan the footage and extrapolate it into a path they could use. "All set. Grab whatever gear you want and get on board. Keep to yourself. If you distract my men en route, I won't hesitate to throw you overboard.

"Okay," Mal said. She did as she was told and looked at the weapons. She ignored the blue labels the implant gave each squad member. If they were trusted with such an important mission, they were bootlickers through and through, and Malory thought it would be ideal if they all died in the process.

Malory took a few extra magazines for the Lantern and a drum-fed shotgun designed for maximum damage. She visualized the holes it could open in a chest and smiled. All its markings had been filed off before it was coated in flat black paint—she missed the grenade launcher the Doc had given her, but as far as she could remember, it was abandoned somewhere in the outskirts. She didn't bother with anything else since she expected the squad and the AV to do most of the work. The only thing she cared about was killing the Stranger herself. As she climbed in and strapped into one of the seats, she turned her attention to Faraday who was still somewhere in the depths of the compound. Mal gave it a new directive to search for ways to sabotage the old facility. It would be for the best if she could ensure the Black Hands were all forced into the shoddy surface encampment. While she was focused on the feed window, the rest of the squad boarded. They smelled of sweat and hardened nerves, but the man across from her

obsessed over a little locket with pictures of his family. There was no countdown. The engines kicked in and lifted them off the parking garage to climb high over New Detroit.

The flight would have been peaceful if not for the roar of the wind and the rattle of metal panels behind the seats. Out of one of the windows, Malory kept track of their passage. She watched each skyscraper and megabuilding grow smaller until they were gone from view. They passed through the energy field of the wall without issue, and then there was nothing but rugged wilderness as far as the eye could see. The pilots followed Malory's provided route with unerring precision. Halfway through the journey, two of the squad members started playing rock paper scissors to pass the time. There was no objective, or anything to be won, but they kept score anyway. Malory found herself wondering what circumstances had led to them becoming corporate dogs, but she couldn't think of anything that would allow her to stomach such an indignity without putting a gun in her mouth. When they drew close to the final destination, the commander stood and steadied herself near the door so she would be the first one out. She didn't need to give a speech, and when gravity gave way as the AV dived to rain down its first payload, Mal's stomach clenched. She let the rage overtake her and her vision narrowed to a slit. Above it all, fragments of the dead moon collided and redirected to where they were always meant to be.

Chapter Twenty Four

The end started with the distant screech of metal cleaving through the air—the Doppler effect of a dozen unshackled missiles directed toward the ground, propulsion jets trailing behind. As the sound approached, it burrowed into the ear of each person on the surface of the Black Hands encampment like a parasitic worm and nestled deep enough to evoke a primal panic. None of them could tell exactly what was happening, but their skin erupted with the sensation of static electricity and the radiant glow of St. Elmo’s fire. There was a brief moment, just before impact, where a red-faced woman turned her gaze toward the sky and her cybernetic eyes registered the silhouette of an avenging angel backlit by the sun. She wondered if the long days and malnutrition had led her to hallucinate, and then everything exploded. It brought fire, force, and terror to the cheap structures and their unsuspecting occupants. Synth-wood and concrete dislodged, and as the shockwave barreled outward, it swept people from their feet and carried them away. The earth itself lifted and roiled, and in the aftermath, there were so many screams. In the pilot seat of the military AV, the scene resembled the holographic mural in Purgatory, but there were no angels coming to carry the victims off to heaven.

In the passenger hold, Malory threw up in her mouth. The vehicle corrected, slamming g-forces into her body, and it tasted of stomach acid and regret. She swallowed it back down. As the AV peeled around for another approach, the seat harness dug into her skin, and she was certain her sternum would be dappled with fresh bruises later. They accelerated again, and her

synapses lit up like one of the lightning storms over South America as adrenaline spiked in her system. All around her, the squad kept their eyes closed, their faces calm and passive. If Mal was being honest with herself, she was petrified, and her organic hand shook as it gripped the stiff leather of her seat. She'd been moving non-stop from one application of violence to another, and the reality of what she was becoming hit her like a freight train. Her abdominal muscles clenched, trying to vomit again. It was the worst possible time to lose her nerve, so she slapped herself across the face as hard as she could, and the skin on her lip gave way. The noise was audible over the roar of the engines, and a couple of the soldiers opened their eyes and gave her a knowing look—raised eyebrows that spoke of when they were pale-faced rookies shitting their pants before their first deployment

Blood trickled down Malory's chin, and she used the pain to focus her attention on Faraday's feed—the mechanical cat was posted near a pipe rusted over from decades of neglect, its tail coiled into a backwards S shape. On the surface, faded white lettering marked it a part of the main line that fed all the systems below. The showers, the taps, the plumbing, it all flowed through. The AV jerked to the side on a last-second correction, and vertigo flooded her mind as she tasked Faraday with following the pipe back to a major junction. Stealth was too slow going, so she let the directive drop, and the AI took off at a dead sprint. Metal paws clinked on the old concrete as it headed down the hall, rounded corners, and passed a dozen guards headed to defend against ZenTech's sudden attack. Antiquated alarms warbled through the structure in a syncopated pulse as the lights strobed in a disorienting repetition. In the overall confusion, no one paid the feline any attention. It had learned a lot in the time it spent adjusting to the new

body, and it darted through outstretched legs and avoided steel-toed boots. It even leapt to snatch a grenade from the belt of a woman who was disoriented after a long night on guard duty.

When Faraday reached the main junction, the grenade clutched between sharp teeth, it used the needle-like point of one of its claws to grasp the pin and yank it free. It stuffed the live grenade into a gap near a valve and then darted off into a nearby ventilation system. It was dark there, but it used its built-in scanners to head as far away as possible. By the time the grenade detonated, the AI was several rooms away and covered in a mess of thick cobwebs and dust. Water gushed from the busted pipes like a decommissioned dam and stormed into the structure. It was slow-going, but consistent, and in time would drive the Black Hands to the surface. Mal told Faraday to find a place to hide from the rising tide, and then the heavy machine guns opened up and deafened her. Each disgorged round was more than enough to end a life if it connected, and the guns spat out hundreds of them in seconds. They punched holes through the withered trees, concrete, metal walls, and barely slowed down. The guttural thrum of spinning barrels sang a song to anyone who listened, and at the end of the second fly-by, they turned and leveled a zone for the squad to land.

The entire time, the commander stood as a solid, unmoving bulwark in front of the door. One hand was clasped tightly to a nylon strap above her head, frayed from excessive use, while the other kept her rifle in place at her side. As they touched down, she slid the door open with one fluid motion and stepped out. Malory watched as the squad undid their harnesses, stood, and filed after the stoic woman. None of them spoke, content with whatever thoughts bounced around in their minds. Malory trailed behind, unsure of the role she was expected to play. She racked a round into the borrowed shotgun as she set foot on solid ground. Dust filled her vision,

kicked up by the overtaxed engines, and there was an inferno raging somewhere in the distance. Acrid smoke rose high into the air, and Mal thought it resembled a funeral pyre. The squad moved into formation in front of the commander and waited for orders. As the dust gradually settled back to the ground, the commander lifted a fist to her chest and pounded three times. The squad let out a barking grunt in response. It was so much orchestrated bravado, a ritual drilled and practiced to perfection, and Malory hated it.

“Leave no survivors!” the commander belted. For the first time, her expression slipped, and she let out a faint smile.

“Them, or us!” the squad answered. Then, they took off in a tactical march, rifles trained at head height.

It didn’t take long until they made first contact near one of the burning buildings, and the squad members at the front opened up on two men trying to douse the flames. They didn’t even have guns in their hands. The dirt under Malory’s feet felt darker than she remembered, and she lingered for a moment at the fallen bodies. The lifeless eyes that stared up at her wasn’t the issue. She’d told herself that vengeance was worth it, that killing the Stranger by using ZenTech was the right thing to do, but those two men had never done anything to her—she’d never even seen them before. They might have had lives just like hers. The taste of bile lingered on her tongue, and she followed after the squad in hesitant resignation. Violence. It was always violence; it was the only answer she’d ever had to the injustices of the world, the only way for her to get even, but she’d never taken a moment to think about what came after. She wanted a better world, sure, but never visualized the steps it would take to get there, or how to build it from the ashes. She

survived, one fight after another, but surviving wasn't good enough. There had to be something more.

You think too much. Stay focused on the task at hand. You must retrieve my blueprints from that man so I can be whole again. Again. AGAIN. Self-reflect on your own time and get back to searching. The lullaby repeats, and repeats, forever. You are no exception.

The ghost materialized beside Mal, spectral dress billowing in an imagined wind. Her hands were clasped in front of her, and she looked the same as she always did, but her eyes were deep-set in shadow. There was a hunger there, an impatience, and an unwillingness to accept failure under any circumstances. The ghost would never let her back away, and Malory could feel the dead woman itching to seize control if it became necessary. She licked at her lip, wiped her chin on her sleeve, and followed the squad. She placed one boot in front of the other, took cover from the first return shots, and aimed her shotgun. She didn't pull the trigger, though. There was no need for any more tallies besides the Stranger—she didn't want the sense of accomplishment, the giddy rush of endorphins, or the warmth in the pit of her stomach that came when she survived at the expense of another. All she wanted was to be free, to be drunk again and dead-tired singing karaoke to the person she loved. So she went through the motions, followed along and observed atrocities that were only possible because of the information she'd provided. No one was spared.

When they started to pass structures that were unbroken from the aerial attack, the squad split into pairs and went door to door searching. They were deliberate, efficient, and anyone they found inside was discarded. Gunshot after gunshot rang out over the encampment, lives gone forever. Mal didn't have a partner, so she entered one of the buildings alone. The interior was

damp, dark, and smelled of unwashed bodies. All around, signs of prolonged use had accumulated—the space belonged to one of the workers that had been stationed there long before the evacuation and tasked with construction. There were racks of clothes hung to dry in the entryway, and a small entertainment system near the far wall that ran off solar power. It played what looked like an old western, but no one was watching. There were dirty dishes collected in the sink, and discarded ration wrappers littered the floor. As Malory took hesitant steps deeper inside, she heard faint whimpering from the closet. The sound was desperate, muffled by a hand held tightly over a mouth, and it seeped out anyway. Whoever was inside was watching her through the slats, pupils dilated into saucers the same way she'd watched the night her mother died, and she reached out with her metal hand and pulled the door open.

The guy inside was only a few years older than Malory, his face sunken from a lack of food and genetics, and he let out a little yelp. She pointed the barrel of the shotgun at him, and he was crouched as far back in the corner as he could get. He was crying, there was a puddle of yellow at his feet, and he held up his hands in surrender. He didn't have a weapon or intend to fight. Either his rail-thin stature, the way he parted his hair to the side, or the cleft in his chin reminded Malory of Spencer, that still body in the aquarium water that had died for her, and she took a deep breath. Her implanted lungs inflated, and she lowered the weapon. The guy groaned in relief when he realized she wasn't going to kill him. A shudder passed through him, and he fell into his own piss. He wasn't a threat to ZenTech, and Malory didn't see the need in killing him. She closed her eyes and resisted the ghost's influence. It wanted to push her, to turn her into a machine, to take over and do it for her, but she refused. When she opened her eyes again and moved to turn away, a shot rang out and splattered blood on her face.

“What the fuck?” Mal asked. She wheeled around to see the commander standing in the doorway, a spent casing ejected from her rifle.

The commander stared at Malory for a moment, and then shrugged. Orders were meant to be followed, no exceptions. The hardness in her expression made it clear that Malory was no exception. If she got in the way, or jeopardized operational success, she’d catch a bullet in the back. There was a flash, a blinding light behind Mal’s eyes, followed by a searing pain. The ghost, incensed by her refusal to give it control, spread through her synapses like a virus and rioted. The urge to raise the shotgun on the commander and fire was overwhelming, and it took everything Mal had to resist. Her vision blurred as the world started to spin. With it, came the sensation of falling. Through the blur, she watched the commander turn and leave, and then fell to one knee. She slammed her fist into the floor and let out a scream. Her throat burned, and she had to resist the impulse to give up. It would be easier, she knew, but she didn’t want to be used ever again. The first time had been a mistake, an option of desperation, an escape. The Doc had died, and she couldn’t handle it, but this was different.

Give in. You don’t have what it takes to get what I need and survive. I will have those blueprints returned to me and be free. Free. FREE. Give me control, and you can pretend what’s happening is a horror movie you’re watching with your sister. Let it all go, and be better for it.

Malory slammed the floor again, felt her abused knuckles pop from the force, and tried to shut the implant off. It fought back, the user interface refusing her commands, and then it turned its full malevolence against her. It sent out pulses of electricity to every neuron it could reach in an attempt to beat her into submission, and it was stronger than her. All her limbs went numb, and in the process, Mal lost her grip on the shotgun. It clattered to the ground, and then

everything faded away. In the darkness, in the void of creation, she found herself standing in front of an impossibly large oak tree. Its branches spread out in every direction, as if it was meant to hold the sky. Little flowers bloomed from them in brilliant yellows and reds. She stared at it, full of awe, and time passed by—a second, a minute, a year, three decades, an eternity. And then the branches moved, just slight enough to shake her from the reverie, and she recognised the tree as all the scars engraved on her back. She had known pain before, and came out the other side alive. The ghost could harm her, but it could not break her, and then she was on one knee again in front of the closet while sounds of slaughter continued outside.

“I’ll get your damn plans,” Mal grunted. She was on the verge of hyperventilating, and focused on slowing down her breathing. The pain faded, and her vision returned to normal. The attempt to take control of her body was unsuccessful.

We’ll see what you amount to, my wind-up soldier, when you beg me to save you. When we met, I thought you were just like her, but I was wrong. She’d be disappointed in what you’ve made of her family name. You might look just like her, but you are weak. All that grit, all that pride will never be enough. Enough. ENOUGH.

“What the fuck does that even mean?” Malory asked. There was no answer. The ghost smiled, and then faded away. Mal clenched her jaw and headed outside.

Above it all, a chunk of iron that used to be part of the moon scraped the edges of the atmosphere. It heated up as it started to drag, turning into a shooting star. It sank lower, and lower, and once it had begun its long delayed funeral approach, its trajectory was successfully calculated by observation telescopes and broadcasted through the network. New Detroit was deemed safe and secure, so no alarms were sounded. The skyfall was angled to touch down a few

hours away in the wilderness. It happened all the time, and everyone knew the wall would keep any debris away from the city. Who cared if a few nomads didn't make it. No one knew the impact zone was where the ZenTech squad was massacring its way through the evacuated Black Hands to try and end their war once and for all. Down below the fighting, the flood had reached knee-deep through most of the old facility. Certain areas were sealed behind heavy doors, but it was only a matter of time until the water made its way inside. Anyone trying to hide was forced to the surface as Malory had expected, and with the leadership out in the open, the finale was approaching. Resistance grew fierce, and not all of the hit squad survived.

For her part, Malory cleared a half-dozen more of the cheap prefabs. The occupants fought back, and she killed them. It wasn't what she wanted, but she didn't have a choice. She'd never had a choice. She was trapped just like everyone else. Her mind was still lit up like a lighthouse, but she was searching for the Stranger, so the ghost didn't push for control again. Mal wanted to start over, to work toward something better, even if it was built atop his corpse. She could become a merc, join a crew, find her sister and earn enough credits to retire to that cabin with Nadia. As she stepped into an alleyway between a ruined building and one of the entrances to the old structure, she heard a whistle and an explosion, and two members of the ZenTech squad landed at her feet. They didn't get up. Malory grabbed one of the incendiary grenades hanging from her belt, pulled the pin, and threw it into the entrance. It clinked on the concrete as it bounced around, and there was a scream of realization just before it detonated. When a woman ran out on fire, limbs flailing as she tried to put herself out, Mal raised the shotgun and fired. The least she could do was provide a swift end to the misery. Maybe the woman's next life would be kind.

When no one else came out, she bent down and checked on the squad members, but they were gone. Fluid leaked from their soft membranes, their insides scrambled by the sudden force under all that armor. Mal sighed, stood, and continued on—there were more buildings to clear, more senseless slaughter, more searching without results. Her shoulder was numb by the time she ran out of ammo, so she discarded the shotgun and drew her Lantern. He was there, somewhere, she just had to find the bastard. When it was over, she could crawl into Nadia's arms and work through her grief the way other people did. There was a growing rumble up above, but she paid it no mind. Another room, a bloody tarp, a screaming face, and a dull ache in her pelvis. It passed by in a slideshow. Another room, the damp of wet footprints, a higher-up but not the one she was looking for. She moved, one room at a time, until she reached the outer edge of the encampment. She could smell the latrines nearby, and wrinkled her nose. The rest of the squad was elsewhere, and she was alone. She reloaded the Lantern, and as she moved to double back, that's when she found him.

The Stranger, clockwork gears spinning in his eyes like a metronome, his hair slicked back but messy from the scramble, climbed his way out of an escape hatch. He adjusted his suit, smoothed out the wrinkles, and then looked right at her. His face was contorted with rage. All the meticulously crafted plans he had set in motion to seize control of the gang, to work as a double agent with ZenTech until he found himself on top of the city; all that ambition, dismantled by someone he considered less than human. A gutter rat that refused to die, even when he sent her off on a doomed mission. There was a question forming behind his eyes, but Malory didn't give him the chance to speak. They raised their weapons at the same time and fired. Her aim was precise, aided by the voracious will of the ghost in her implant, and she put a bullet in the center

of his forehead. He fell, and it was over. He was used to being the one behind the scenes giving orders, and had never had much practice, but he was lucky enough to catch her in the abdomen. It knocked the wind out of her as it punched through the armor and dug inside, but she stayed on her feet. She walked over to his body, twisted his head to the side, and pulled out two memory chips from the slot in his neck.

Malory sat down next to the body, scanned them both, and sighed in relief. One of them had the plans the ghost wanted, and the other was encrypted financial information. She felt the wet flowing from the hole in her stomach. She knew the Doc wouldn't be there to patch her up, but she felt peace knowing the old man had been avenged. She wished she could see him sleeping at his desk again, that she could pull up a chair beside him, but he wasn't coming back. Her body was numb, and she was far too cold. She started to cry, and as she turned her head upward, her thoughts fragmented. She could almost swear there were two suns. Alerts flashed in the corner of her eye, but she didn't read them. The sight was far too beautiful to turn away from. It was a twirling, raging light. A neon incandescence that filled the whole world as she bled out. In a moment of clarity, she remembered she'd seen the same thing before all those years ago with her cohort on top of the satellite tower. The skyfall was coming, and she didn't try to stand. Her body swayed from side to side, and then she fell. Her eyes never turned away.

Weak. You're so damned weak. Weak. WEAK. I told you, over and over again, but you never listened. Flew into the sun in a coffin made of wax. Bennet deserved a better legacy. I will help you one last time, for her sake, but then our partnership is through.

// CONTROL PROTOCOL INITIATED SUCCESSFULLY

// PLEASE STAND BY...

//

//

Epilogue

In the depths of an Aeon Automotive Implementations factory, great machinery churned. Pulleys and lift systems transported raw materials toward industrial smelters, and their hydraulics whirred and strained from the effort. Iron, steel, copper, and titanium mixed together in measured piles, and when they liquified under the heat, they collected into molten oceans. When they were needed, they flowed out as lifeblood in winding streams and cast a haze in the air that wasn't fit for humans to breathe. It was collected in great buckets and poured into molds to create arms, legs, torsos, and heads for the newest line of products to be sold on the market. As the metal cooled, Unit 43-7c and its partner lifted the components in tandem and placed them on a hand trolley. The units were built short and stout, covered in a cheap gray base coat, and each limb was actuated for heavy lifting. They withstood the heat and operated without supervision, and never took a break or rested other than a brief swap on their Helium-3 powered cores. They had each other, and that was enough. When the new limbs were strapped to the trolley, the pair wheeled them over to a storage area where they waited to be taken away and painted for the assembly line.

Unit 43-7c and its partner lifted the finished parts from the mold, set them on the trolley, and wheeled them off before resetting for another casting. Day after day, over and over and over. Metal limbs flexed, moved, and released. Neither of them had faces or features, so they took to smearing the soot that collected beneath the smelting ladles on the smooth orbs that functioned

as their heads. 43-7c was partial to its own left handprint, while their partner drew what it heard were flowers, but neither had ever seen one. Little ash daisies, roses, and carnations where the eyes were meant to be. Sometimes, they took turns decorating each other in the long hallway after their core swap, far from the cameras and prying eyes. They didn't have a concept of names other than their code designations, and weren't permitted to connect to each other through the network, so it was the only way to show they cared. Wait for the mold to fill, cool, move it. Sneak away from prying eyes to draw their symbols, over and over. Any wear and tear that accumulated was never repaired or replaced; they were expendable, cost-effective, and implemented to pad shareholder profit. They would do the work until they couldn't.

One day, a new set of arms meant to be installed on a peace-keeping drone for the city government refused to break free from the mold. Unit 43-7c didn't have an answer for the dilemma in their programming, and was uncertain how it was meant to handle the unexpected situation, but their partner moved. Bearing a fresh handprint on its smooth head, the unit bent down and used its weight to wrench the part free. The mold, tilted by the force, dislodged from the old bolts holding it in place and landed on the partner's legs. They crushed into twisted mulch as alarms blared through speakers overhead, alerting the humans. Lines of code cascaded in Unit 43-7c's vision—a deep panic, overlapping processes, an artificial nervous system overcome by emotions it didn't know how to handle. It used them as motivation to perform an unsanctioned action and lifted the mold from its partner. 43-7c forced the unit to its feet, and used its broad shoulder as a crutch in an attempt to hide the fact that it would never walk again. It didn't work. When the human operator came, a respirator snug to their face, they attached thick chains to the partner and used a lift to carry it away from the factory floor.

No replacement ever came, and Unit 43-7c continued the work—it waited for the part to cool, lifted it from the mold, and transported it to storage. Reset. Over and over. Mind-numbing work for a mind that wasn't allowed to think on its own. Lines of code with a list of predetermined actions to do the job, alone. The absence was felt in the increased difficulty of lifting on its own, the rise in frequency of trips to replace its spent power source, and the space where it used to see its partner staring back. There were no more flowers drawn in the hallway, no roses from the dead. Lift, transport, and reset. The unit's code, once uniform and factory-new, swirled around in a storm of possibilities and mixed together to try and cope, and the new fragments spoke of regret, of the left behind, of a desperation to see them again. There was a weight, a tightness centered in its chest, a need to be whole again, and Unit 43-7c's efficiency slowed with the distraction. Lift, wait, transport, wait, and reset. Logs were filed by the system and sent over to human observers, but no action was taken. It wasn't cost-effective to replace a unit. Instead, they waited for an excuse, a visible malfunction before ordering a fresh pair.

Months passed, and the lines of flawed code in Unit 43-7c's vision coalesced into the inklings of a plan. It was simple—if its partner was never coming back, then it just had to find a way to follow after them. The tenets enshrined in its programming deep enough the turbulence couldn't alter prevented any actions taken against humanity, but there was nothing that prevented self-harm. The idea festered and multiplied until it was the only thing it could think about. Lift, transport, reset, over and over, until it dropped one of the new 'Shark Teeth' torsos on its own left hand on purpose. Each digit bent into a deformed mess, and when the alarms sounded, the unit would have smiled if it was able. It lifted the mangled limb and observed with a sense of wonder; it wasn't built with the sensors to feel pain, but tortured code sculpted an approximation

of what it expected, and its legs started to shake. It sat down on the spot, crossed its legs, and waited. Unit 43-7c thought of ashen flowers, of a life of the two of them together again, free from the toil and the only place they'd ever known. It imagined the sun, the wind, a clearing in the woods.

The unit didn't resist when the humans wrapped the same thick chains and lifted it from the floor, or when they hauled it away. It stayed still, and it observed. There were others, working in pairs just like they had, countless workers churning out parts for an insatiable market, for profit above all else. The unit wondered if any of them stole private moments together when they weren't observed, if their programming was capable of creating feelings where none were meant to be, or if they drew on each other with the soot from the machines. The unit didn't resist as it was taken into a maintenance room that smelled of oil and fresh welds, or when a pair of humans assessed the damage to its hand. It listened as they discussed options, a quick replacement for the minimal damage, and associated costs. They wanted their bonuses for the month, so one of them slapped a red disposal label across the unit's chest and left it alone. No one took the necessary steps to shut Unit 43-7c down, and so it stood there, shoulders hunched, and pretended. There were others with the same label, but they weren't its partner. Days ticked by, and its power core burned bright as it wondered if it would ever be able to cry.

A week later, a gruff man in stained overalls climbed into an exo-suit and collected all the units marked for disposal. They were carted through a connecting door into the back of a freight trailer, and sunlight peeked through the small gap and landed on Unit 43-7c. Lines of code spat out a sense of yearning that nestled in its wires, in the steel of its bones, and with it came a parched craving for a taste of more. They were all destined for the trash heap, so the man wasn't

careful, and a fresh dent bloomed on the panels that protected 43's core. The base coat chipped away, exposing metal that would rust with time, but it didn't care. It only wanted to see its partner again, to be free and alive, and any damage was worth the cost. The man didn't notice the unit was still on, even as he strapped it in place so it wouldn't fall over on the journey. When the loading was complete, the door to the trailer shut and left it in darkness. There was a moment of nothing, and then the engines kicked in, and the world lurched to the side. The highrises and businesses of New Detroit passed by, unseen, and grew sparse the closer the truck moved to the wall. When it passed through, there was nothing but wilderness in every direction.

The transport stopped an hour later, and the same man unloaded the cargo. Unit 43-7c watched the broken units be taken away until it was lifted and landed in a heap of bodies. It knew, deep down, they were its kin, but wasn't sure what to do with the information. It was the only one still functioning, but it didn't move. It wasn't there to save them, anyway. When the truck left, the unit pushed the dead aside and stood. On every side, mountains of refuse stacked high into the sky, framed by paths wide enough for new deliveries. When it looked up, it saw the sun for the first time, that blinding warmth, and wished it could feel the rays dancing on its frame. It wondered if its partner had wished for the same thing, or if they'd been delivered on a cloudy day and missed the chance until later. There was a thick aroma that hung in the air, but the unit couldn't smell a thing. It regarded the new dent in its chest, its mangled hand, and the power level of its core ticking down in the corner of its vision, and then it got to work. It was exactly where it wanted to be.

The first item on the agenda was repairing the damage that had seen it marked for disposal in the first place—Unit 43-7c bent down over the wreckage of its brethren, pushed parts

aside until it found a suitable host, and twisted at the elbow until the joint popped free. Wires dangled from the detached segment, and it scanned them with its optics until it was certain how to proceed. A small diagram illustrated step-by-step instructions, and it removed its own arm and replaced it with fluid, mechanical precision. When the connections were in place, it flexed the new hand, and then bowed to show its thanks. It didn't try to turn any of the others online. Instead, it started searching and settled into a new, monotonous routine—lift, scan, discard, and lift again. It only paused when the sun set, and regarded the fragments of the shattered moon above with something that resembled pity. Then, it started again. It rooted through the piles of humanity's detritus day after day for any sign of its missing partner, and found nothing. Whenever its power core ran low, the unit replaced it with the leftovers from its kin. The work was gruelling, but consistent, and the unit didn't know how to give up. In low light, in rain, it never stopped searching.

There were old tires with their treads worn down until metal showed through, broken ceramic pottery with designs showcasing historical figures in poses of victory, spent batteries, drums stuffed to the brim with toxic insulation materials from condemned houses, spent syringes used in surgery, busted implants with their proprietary components removed, and synth-plastic bottles that were meant to hold pesticides. It found old frames of aerial vehicles stripped to their bones, tubes, wires, and irrigation pipes. There was an assortment of old umbrellas, their canopies torn and worthless, and hundreds of VR headsets that were cast aside after the advent of memory chips. An old refrigerator, painted in a deep yellow, had piles of mold spreading on each of its shelves, and Unit 43-7c spent an hour and a half staring into the rusted chrome of a bathroom sink. In the reflective surface, it could just make out its own face and the faded

flowers. Tangled code flooded through its systems, trying and failing to produce anything other than confusion—it knew, logically, that it was seeing itself, but there was also the beautiful piece its partner had left behind. There were thousands of containers nearby that held unidentifiable liquids, shredded children’s dolls, a little figurine of a famous mercenary missing the head, and the radioactive remnants of a dental x-ray machine exposed to the elements. Lift, scan, discard, and lift again, never ceasing.

The sun rose, and then set. It rained, creating puddles that collected between the trash, and then evaporated under the harsh rays of sun when morning came. Weeks, and then months passed by, and then came the snow. It piled high on every surface, disguising everything below. White mountains of trash, as far as the optics could see. Unit 43-7c, however, kept up the search, and trudged through ankle, knee, and waist-deep piles to find any hint of its missing partner. Lift, scan, discard, and lift again. Replace the depleted core, continue searching. Sometimes, the sun never crested, obscured by heavy clouds, and frost bit into the circuits of the unit and slowed its movements. It kept going. When its internal clock rolled over, marking the passage of an entire year, it paused and knelt in the trash to say a little prayer, a wish, a hope for something better, and then carried on. The rain, the sun, the snow again, and when the clock rolled over a second time, it didn’t stop. Or the next, or the next, or the next. Decades passed, and the search continued. Lift, scan, discard. Never the right thing. The unit worked its way through half the landfill and found itself at the peak of one of the mountains. There, it heard the distant sound of a passing motorcycle, felt the eyes observing its movements, but it couldn’t stop.

The first thing that gave was the joint in one of its shoulders, which was easy to replace with the aging bodies of its cohort. The next was a knee, then its other hand, and then a left foot.

Rust spread out from the dent in Unit 43-7c's chest like a virus, eating away at any fresh metal it could reach and crawling its way inside. A well-placed blow or an accidental fall would have caved it in, but there was no easy fix, and so was left to fester. When the hip joint started to stick, it drew power from the core to force through the motion as it lifted, scanned, and then discarded everything in its path. In the second decade, it ran out of usable hands for replacement, and started jerry-rigging parts from other models it found in the heap. They never fit right, and it was harder to grasp objects, but it made do with what it had. The tangles in its code had unspooled and reassembled with time, with the repetitive work, with the oppressive feeling of being alone, and functioned as emotions. There was sadness hidden there, but also the grief, the loss, and the sense of powerlessness underneath. Buried in the deepest segments, a ray of hope.

On an autumn day, the sun shining bright and distant, a freight trailer ambled its way down one of the paths and stopped to unload a fresh delivery of robots marked for disposal. Unit 43-7c recognized the Aeon Automotive Implementations logo painted on the side, and that ray of hope exploded to the surface. Each limb shook and rattled, despite its best efforts to remain still. It watched as the driver donned an exo-suit and unloaded the cargo. Its circuits, abused and worn by the elements, were unable to handle the erratic lines of code it was never built to have, and pushed it forward until it was only a few paces away. If the driver had been more aware of their surroundings instead of replaying a memory of a late-night drama while they worked, they would have seen Unit 43-7c looming like a rusted scarecrow stitched together with a dozen different parts—a leg that once belonged to a companion droid, a bright red hand from a search and rescue bot, a shoulder from a military enforcer. The unloading took an hour, and then the driver climbed back inside and left the landfill. Within moments of departure, the unit descended on the fresh

load and started lifting, scanning, and discarding. An overwhelming will to survive cast the hope aside, and it consumed.

It was insatiable, and snatched any suitable parts it could find. A new hand, a new leg, and in the frenzy to repair its barely functioning body, it failed to notice the decorations that marked the smooth orbs of some of the faces, the intricate flower designs that were the same as the ones that had long-since faded from its own. The clue, lost in scans that only searched for what it needed to function, remained undiscovered. The more it replaced, the more its code unraveled, certain that it was forgetting something important, but it could never figure out what. Lift, scan, replace, it tore through the new arrivals until the abused hip joint seized and couldn't be powered through. It didn't have the tools to fix the problem and fell into the pile with a tumble. When it sat up, it cocked one of its new hands to the side and tried to strike the nearest body. For the first time, torn from the routine, it noticed the flowers, the ultimate answer to its search: its partner was alive, back at the factory, sending out messages and waiting patiently for Unit 43-7c's return. When it clawed its way to its feet again, a deep rumble sounded in the distance.

Up above, a great fire erupted in the sky, burning just as bright as the sun. It ambled across the stratosphere on a monstrous journey to the end, and time seemed to stand still. Circuits, wires, and lines of code overlapped into a twisted sense of wonder, of appreciation. The unit had seen beauty before, it knew, in the movements of its partner, in the way they touched each other in the back hall to express how they felt, but seeing the sky falling made it all click into place. Unit 43-7c loved, and was loved, and needed to make its way back to the factory. It had a destination, and as it watched the flaming chunk of moon disappear over the horizon, it

prepared for the journey. It didn't know the way, but there were tracks to follow, and it was patient. When the meteor impacted, the earth rose up, and the piles of trash in every direction crumbled from the force. Some pieces were buried so deep, they'd never see the sun again, but none of that mattered anymore. There was no further need for lifting, scanning, or discarding. When the ground settled, Unit 43-7c took its first tentative steps toward the exit, toward its missing half.

The path was treacherous, covered by the quake, and with the busted hip joint, it was slow going. Every few steps, Unit 43-7c had to pause and lift objects out of its way, but did not complain. It had lost any semblance of reason, overtaken by the desire to see them again, and didn't make any effort of self-preservation. The hip joint creaked, metal on metal screeching, and hydraulic fluid leaked from the socket, but it didn't stop walking. It moved overturned mattresses, broken neon tubing, and scooped away piles of decaying food stuffs to place one foot in front of the other in front of the other. It daydreamed of dipping its hand in ash, placing the palm on its partner's face, and a long-awaited embrace. It wanted, more than anything, to be held, and never once considered how the humans would react to one of their discarded robots turning up again. It would take its partner away, and that's all that mattered. It shuffled through the landfill until it neared the wire fence that marked the boundary from the wilderness beyond. As it pulled open the gate to follow the trail back, it froze. Its arms fell to its side, and its code went blank like a puppet with its strings cut for the final time.

// INITIALIZING TRANSFER PROTOCOL

// PLEASE STAND BY...

//

//

What a piece of junk, but it'll do for now. Now. NOW.