

AD 2160. 5AM.

Outside Lincoln, Nebraska.

The whine of the motor on his belt hissed to a halt as the carbon fiber rope stopped spooling. Rand Clarke had descended 3 miles of glass and steel in 212 seconds: a new record. Another 12 miles of darkness gaped below him. Twelve more miles into humanity's new salvation.

The night sky leaked through the perfectly circular opening above him. The moon hovered off-center, a soft yellow aura radiated through the clouds rolling over the former breadbasket of America. Only at twilight could the upper levels of the WELL see the sky: solar radiation was too high near the surface during the day. Opaque liquid crystal glass shut out most of the residual radiation from the sun during the day, but at night the glass turned translucent, opening a new world.

Rand reveled in the night. While everyone's eyes were gazing upward at the stars or stoically down at their work, Rand kept looking forward. He pressed a spot on his wrist revealing a low-light display populated with a series of options, selecting Grip. He raised it to six, or six times the normal human's grip strength, then lunged forward and pressed his fingertips against the glass. He slipped down a few meters before his fingertips and boots stuck to the wall. His heads up display told him his suit was currently at a tactile adhesion rating of six. Using his suit's eye tracking, he raised the rating to nine.

Climbing the three meters he had slipped, Rand stopped in front of his destination, unhooked his harness and waited. When many of the windows above him had gone from opaque to transparent, the window in front of him and the two below it had remained opaque, just as they had for the past three weeks. Using the eye tracking of his cowl again, he opened the vision menu and selected thermal. He blinked and the screen in front of his eyes switched to a black and white vision mode. He scanned the room in front of him; there were no significant heat signatures, only what seemed to be three candles about a half meter off the ground. Reaching to a small pouch on his lower back, Rand pulled out a small metallic sphere about 15cm in diameter. Once he grasped the orb with his hand, his glove created a small magnetic charge that held it in place.

The glass pane, most likely no more than 5cm thick, was electrically charged to give it the frosted appearance. Typically the power source, about 2.5 volts, was nested in one of the corners; however, this particular window was electrically charged throughout. A double redundant system kept the window safe from power outages while also electrifying the interior piece of glass as an anti-intrusion deterrent. Rand couldn't enter with the window receiving power. He pressed the orb against the window and pushed. Slowly, the orb melted the glass behind it and slipped into the glass. A perfect circle of melted glass was left. The orb dropped to the floor. After twenty seconds the orb returned to the hole in the glass. It opened like a small flower, four independent petals stretching beyond the hole on the inside. Emerging from the middle, a thin rod of metal moved outward. Rand turned his head and reached another gloved

hand out to the rope dangling a few meters behind him. Switching on the electromagnet in his glove again; the rope came closer until it was in his hand. He connected the charged rope to the small rod that dangled just outside the window.

Rand selected the “Engage” command on his HUD.

Two of the minor charges the small orb had placed fired quietly, blowing out the clasps on the bottom two corners of the window. One second later, the top two clasps were blown out. Half a second after, the rope tensed and began to pull the window upward. The push of the explosions and the pull of the rope shot the window swinging outward away from the wall, the bottom edge swinging upward. Rand moved with the momentum of the window and pushed the window downward; he rolled forward, releasing the tactile adhesion from his feet, then his hands. He somersaulted into the room, landing on his feet in a crouched position. He pressed the screen on his wrist removing the magnetic charge from his rope, sending the window plunging downward. The rushing wind from the change in pressure blew out the candles.

He stood in a slight crouch, bent with his right hand hovering over the touch interface on his left forearm. Rand moved quickly through the apartment, finding the stairs where he knew they were, silently descending the two stories to the bottom level. Standing behind the door leading into another open space, Rand looked at the door with thermal vision mode still engaged. No signatures registered; there wasn't even a slight variation of color, just fuzzy black. He pressed his hand to the door. It was cold to the touch. He switched vision modes to a pale green night setting and blinked.

Most locks in higher-end apartments near the WELL's bottom, ironically called the “Apex,” were complex and touch specific. They were programmed with tenant finger and palm prints so lockable doors would lock and unlock with the touch of a hand. The technology was cutting edge and a lot of the penthouses adopted the system before they realized the effect it would have on their partying lifestyle. After one too many people couldn't enter locked bathrooms, the upper-class began to swap the securer locks for older physical locks that didn't automatically lock.

Telling from the spacious entertaining areas seen on early stage blueprints and the large flow of people Rand saw leaving the penthouse nearly four hours previously, odds were good that the doors throughout were keyed. With a bit of optimism, Rand loaded the palm print of the tenant into his right glove and tried to move the door handle, but, as expected, it was locked. Using his thumb, Rand pulled a piece of the handle back to reveal a hidden keyhole. It looked like an early 2000s six tumbler lock. Higher level security in its own time, even more so now since lock picking had been primarily replaced by upper level programming and computer lock breaking. Six tumblers was no problem for Rand.

With the lock opened, Rand put his picks back with other tools on his right thigh. He pulled down on the handle once more and the magnetic pins almost silently withdrew from the doorframe,

allowing the surprisingly light door swing inwards. The light of a candle flickered about fifteen feet away. On all four walls were a multitude of paintings ranging in age, style, and rarity. The walls around the art were a subdued steely white, matte. The walls and doors were most likely sound dampened; an obvious choice for a collector hoping to entertain an exceptionally special guest.

A series of eight half pillars ran down the center of the room in two rows of four. Completed pieces of Greek and Roman pottery rested atop each, enveloped in cases of tempered glass. A ring of candles surrounded a stack of furs and blankets. Two wine glasses stood half full next to a bottle with a label that looked to be dipped in tea; it most likely was. The furs rustled and a handsome man's face sleepily emerged. Another body moved, entangled with the first. A slender foot stirred, slipping out of the blankets and knocking over a third unseen wine glass. The red tainted dregs of the glass spilled on the floor in front of a well-lit piece mounted on the wall. A woman was posed, nude, in a semi-contorted position. She was passionately kissing a beautiful, fair-haired knight, silver hair flowing from his helm. One of the woman's hands was placed on the side of the knight's face, the other grasping the hilt of a thin, ornate sword. The blade was slicked crimson and grimly pierced the back of the knight. The knight hung nearly limp, the woman's kiss being the only thing holding him in life. A stream of blood flowed from the wound and the sword and splashing on the petals of white lilies, pooling in the fertile ground.

The painting, an early work of Walther Brenvin, was titled "Love's Last Embrace." The exact date of origination was unknown, although most scholars speculate, based upon the style and lack of Brenvin's later intricate details, the painting is from around 1585-1587. Rand carefully circled the sleeping couple on the furs and moved closer to the painting, trying to spot the tell-tale shimmer of the laser grid he knew was there. He pulsed two puffs of smoke from a series of small nozzles on his wrist, lighting up the tight-knit bunch of lasers running horizontally from one end of the wall to the other.

Rand pulled a small hexagonal plate about six inches in length from a sealed pouch on his back and placed it on the ground beneath the lasers. It was light in his hand and nearly an inch thick. He armed it with a simple eye command and immediately it stood on end and unfurled. Several six inch hexagons emerged from the first until it reached the ceiling of the room. As each piece received the unseen light and minuscule amount of heat from the lasers on one side, it replicated the laser on the other side. With another command the plates divided, leaving a small gap that Rand adjusted to just beyond the width of the painting.

The average penthouse has from seven to ten security measures meant to thwart minor thieves. If those penthouses contain anything of extreme value, such as a priceless painting, sculpture, or ancient urn containing the ashes of a bygone philosopher, the security systems increase based on the item's market value, purchase price, and sentimental value. Obviously, either one of those items may countermand or supersede the others; an item of significant personal value may have drastically increased security, though the item may be nearly worthless. Nonetheless, arrogance or foolishness can overpower all of these considerations.

The beauty of acquiring a priceless piece of art from an arrogant playboy in an average penthouse is simple: the mark in question believes that behind their vault all safety measures are unnecessary. A small army of personal guards, pressure sensors throughout the main entrance and front rooms, acoustic sensors placed throughout the rooms with easiest entrances, and a series of automated closed-circuit cameras throughout the penthouse can lull the most paranoid collectors into a false sense of security. A multitude of unsuccessful robbery can do that too. The one tragic flaw of the penthouse's security was that it wasn't equally distributed. The sensors, cameras and guards, were removed in the most private inner sanctum. Every few evenings, he would entertain women in his private gallery, or any one of the several "entertaining" rooms. Acoustic sensors would be useless. Pressure sensors would track their movements, but without cameras (which were necessarily removed for private reasons) bodies could not be correlated with pressure sensors, thus useless. The only security systems between the wall of windows in the penthouse's rear was a series of steps, an early 2000s analog lock, and sub-par out of the box laser grid.

After a cursory look around the ornate gilded frame of the painting and a series of vision scans (infrared, electric, and sonar-derived simulated depth), Rand deemed the painting completely unsecured and slowly removed it from the wall. Testing for any sort of pressure or pull from behind, he was surprised to find there wasn't any type of pressure adhesive or a stunning edge to the frame. With well-versed fingers, Rand quickly removed the painting from the wooden frame and its stretchers, placing it between two translucent sheets of a plastic-cotton hybrid fabric. The corners magnetically adhered to each other, locking the painting in its place. He rolled it quickly; luckily the piece could easily bend and it rolled nicely. He removed a small curled up circle from a pouch on his leg and let it expand into a meter tall tube with a series of small sensors placed throughout its length. Rand gently placed the rolled up painting in the tube, sealed the top and triggered the vacuum setting, silently removing all air from the tube. He slung it onto his back with the physical strap and engaged the magnets embedded in the back of his suit.

As he backed out of the protection of the hexagons, they combined then collapsed down to their original single form. Rand reclaimed them and began to leave the room the same way he had come. The forms on the ground moved again. The man stretched, yawned, and then turned back into the woman. She made a sleepy moan and readjusted her legs, tucking them into her chest and moving them away from a large lump in the furs. On closer inspection, Rand saw a third set of hands lackadaisically limp from the pile of furs that he hadn't seen before. Flashing a smug smile, Rand noiselessly crept through the gallery, out the doorway and through the rest of the penthouse.

Rand made it to the room he had entered in without incident and stood at the precipice of the window he had removed. Above, the night sky twinkled as it had earlier, but, nearing 5:30AM now, the sun's rays could be seen leaking over the WELL's ring above. The sun was beginning

to rise, though no one had seen a real sunrise in over a decade, most hadn't within their lifetime. It was the dawn of a new day, another new beginning.

Rand heard the sharp intake of breath one hears when someone stubs their toe: a half wince, half scold. For two seconds, Rand locked eyes with a mostly nude woman, beautiful, sculpted even. Her hair was tousled and fell as a waterfall of copper over her shoulders. He hadn't heard her shuffle in and wouldn't have, had she not bumped her foot. She had draped one of the blankets around her shoulders like a robe, her thin fingers poking out near her shoulders. They were the same thin, manicured fingers of the third woman. The one he had not seen. For two seconds he looked into her groggy and hazy blue eyes. Then he stepped forward and dropped from the window into the piercing darkness below.