

The Ever-Expanding Bunker Novel (WIP)

Chapter One

One of Many

It was uncomfortably warm inside the cell. The air felt used up and stale, and the stench of sweat and unwashed laborers did it no favor. The only relief for the prisoner's aching body was the cool concrete slab he slept on. It was hard and uncomfortable, yet as he stretched across it, he slept soundly enough. It seemed like a luxury to him, for sleep was not a common privilege.

He drooled, dreaming of a table filled with warm, solid food rations all to himself. He didn't have to share anything with anyone, there were no masses of famished people around him, and hunger wasn't even a concept. He sat in a grand dining hall fit for a king. The walls were clad in jade, gold, and velvet, and beautiful music added to the opulent atmosphere of the room.

As he prepared to take a bite out of a steaming bun, a sinister rumbling shook the room. A powerful earthquake trembled the dining hall, causing large cracks to spread through the walls and floor. A giant rupture in the ceiling split the hall, and a wave of black sludge flooded in from the outside, consuming everything in its path. Before the prisoner could do anything, he was fully submerged in it and unable to move.

Then, he opened his eyes and he still saw nothing. Before him lay a vast emptiness, a dark void that replaced the beautiful dream he had just experienced. He spoke, but no sound left his mouth. He commanded his limbs to move, and yet they refused. No matter what he did, nothing changed.

An infinite amount of static flooded the endless void– an impossible sight to behold. Bit by bit, the void was replaced by an ever-expanding flood of ear-piercing sound.

“Get to the cloudroom,” a crystal-clear voice whispered to him from within.

“Get to the cloudroom!” another voice commanded.

“Get to the cloudroom!” yet another joined in.

A cacophony of sounds and voices of cosmic magnitude probed the prisoner’s mind over and over again. They all flooded into him, filling his body with unbearable noise, until he himself became one with the void. Only one thought formed itself in his mind.

He had to get to the cloudroom.

Before he could fight back against the onslaught of sound, something pulled his spirit back into his body with otherworldly strength. It dragged him deep below the ground, somewhere far beneath the static.

Outside, a team of armed guards strolled by. The leading officer took out a long steel baton and repeatedly hit the iron bars of the cell, creating a resonating, ear-piercing ring.

“Wake up, you sorry sacks of scum! You’ve got work to do!” shouted the man at the front.

The prisoner let out a deep groan, his aching body refusing to get out of bed. Hearing this, another guard gleefully jumped over to the cell, putting his face through the bars.

“Having trouble waking up, prisoner S-1M0N?” the person remarked.

He muttered something unintelligible.

“Need I discipline you again?” said the grinning guard, playfully turning his stun baton on and off. “Hmm?”

“Fuck you,” the prisoner mumbled.

“What was that?”

“Nothing, Senior Officer Hanlon. I said nothing.”

“Good,” said Hanlon, his expression turning cold and judgemental, “Now get to the mines, twit.”

Groaning in protest yet with no other choice, the convict slid off the slab and onto the floor. After a brief test of strength to get up, he exited his cell and moved towards the growing herd of people. The bruises from yesterday’s beating sent a wave of pain throughout his body with every step he took.

One by one, doors of each cell block opened, and waves of people inundated the halls, still groggy and exhausted from yesterday’s shift. They headed towards the mining dock, some stopping to spend their hard-earned credits at the ration vendors lining the walls. Their monotone screens, flickering with dull light, displayed a variety of Computer-themed snacks, none of which the unfortunate prisoner could afford. The only thing he could afford was the amalgamation of unknown ingredients that poured out of the nearby food pipe – lovingly dubbed the “food paste” by those unfortunate enough to have to consume it. The paste had enough chemicals and nutritional value to sustain a person. That is if they could force themselves to ingest it.

Colorless, odorless, and tasteless, its thick and uneven texture made it more akin to a solid than a liquid. But necessity triumphed over desire yet again as he pulled the lever and poured it into a paper cup. He looked at it uneasily, then slowly pushed the liquid down his throat, chewing it more than he did drink it.

“Oh sweet, the food paste is lukewarm today!” someone cheered.

Amid the mishmash of sounds, a particular voice seemed to call out to the prisoner.

“Hey!” the voice yelled. “S-1! Over here!”

A group of prisoners looked with confusion at the voice.

“Not you, him!” he pointed somewhere further down the hall.

The prisoner looked behind him for a moment but did not respond.

“Hey! Wait a second! S-1! S-1!”

The voice grew increasingly desperate, trying to grab the prisoner’s attention while drowning in a sea of people. It called out to the prisoner again and again before finally giving in.

“Simon!” it shouted.

The prisoner stopped, turned around, and waited for the voice to navigate through the swarm of people before it finally reached him. It was the only person whom he thought of as an acquaintance, and perhaps a friend. Prisoner S-05A1P from cell block 5.

A few seconds later, Simon felt a hand on his shoulder, and the familiar face of S-05 appeared in front of him.

“Hey, you deaf or something?” S-05 asked.

“No, my hearing’s fine. I wanted to hear you call me by my name.” he answered.

“You do understand how stupid that is, though, right? With all the guards around here? And it’s not even your—” S-05 stopped mid-sentence, feeling the weight of Simon’s stare on his shoulders. “In any case, how—“ S-05 recoiled in shock, “By the regulations! Hanlon really did a number on you, huh? You’re looking like a pack of blueberry ration surprise!”

Simon nodded.

“Way to rub the salt in, prick.”

“Shit, that’s not what I... Ugh, just take this. I was hoping I could use it myself, but it looks like you need it more than me.” S-05 extended his hand, offering him a gift.

Simon stepped back, then raised an eyebrow.

“...pills?”

“A baggie of painkillers, yes. Had to trade what’s left of my ration credits for it.”

The beat-up prisoner gulped down a pill and smiled. “Not bad. Not bad at all.”

The two prisoners continued walking through the stained, grimy hallways littered with wrappers, posters, and the depressing grimaces of their fellow inmates.

Simon bent down and ripped off something stuck to his shoe. It was one of the numerous propaganda posters hung up by the loyalists.

"Good workers earn more rations! The Computer wants YOU to contribute! Blessed be the regulations!" it said.

With a disgruntled look, he curled the poster up into a ball and threw it towards the nearest trash can, missing.

“Crud.”

Simon couldn’t stand the loyalists. He saw them as nothing more than a group of leeches who abused their power for their own gain. The bruises from yesterday’s beating were only the fuel for his hate of them and the Computer.

The Computer was supposed to be the ultimate governing force—an ever-present, all-seeing eye that would regulate fairly and efficiently, yet it allowed such injustice to happen? It seemed preposterous to him, but he couldn’t do anything to change it, not today.

Every dozen steps of the hallway stood masked guards clothed in black and green uniforms. The Computer's sigil, an uppercase lambda with three dots below it, shined proudly on top. Some of them, the larger and more menacing-looking, were clad in shock-absorbing armor meant to take on riots. Like hunters stalking their prey, they eagerly stared down the passerby, ready to pounce at a moment's notice. They would be compensated greatly for every "disturber of the peace" that they neutralized.

They passed by the scarlet-red doors of doom that led to "The Red Room," also affectionately known as "The Calming Chamber." Nobody knew what truly happened behind them, and nobody dared to find out. All that was known among the prisoners was that no matter who you were, even if you were the most rowdy, stubborn, and rebellious, once you're sent through those doors, you become a broken shell of your former self, hard-wired for obedience to your masters. It was rarely, if ever used, but it was the only place that caused Simon's hair to stand on end. He was so terrified of it, he vowed to take his own life if he were ever selected for the procedure.

For a minute, they stopped to look at the large screen on the wall. A significant crowd pushed and shoved their way through to get a better view of the screen. Today's episode of "Bunker News" was starting.

After a brief and uneventful title sequence, two newscasters, a man and a woman, appeared on the screen. They stood behind a tall, grayish-white glass table that curved around them. A pleasant color-changing background made the room look more comfortable. They both gave the camera a wide, warm smile.

The pale-skinned woman with long hair was the first to speak.

"Hello, hard-working residents of the bunker! My name is Margaret Moore."

"And I'm Chase Carter," the man added.

"Welcome to today's episode of Bunker News!" they said in unison.

“So, Margaret, what do we have today for the hard-working populace of the bunker?”

“Well, Chase,” she looked at him for a second, then turned back to the camera, “I am pleased to announce that the horrible separatist takeover of level 100 has been successfully liquidated!”

Chase feigned surprise, then gave the camera a wide smile, showing his shining white teeth.

“Oh! That is absolutely great to hear! I was so worried! This is truly a huge weight taken off my chest, and probably the chests of every honest member of the Bunker’s workforce. However,” he paused for dramatic effect, “who were the heroic, brave people who liberated that level from separatist hands?” Chase asked.

“It was just one brave liberator, actually,”

“Just one? Against an entire army of separatist terrorists? How can this be? Those savages managed to take over level 100, for regulation’s sake! Our biggest and most prosperous agricultural level! How could a single soldier face off against an army big enough to take over such an important position?”

Margaret laughed, “You see, this level’s hero was no ordinary soldier, in fact, it was no other than the Computer’s newest elite guard unit!”

The camera turned to focus on the large screen located behind the newscasters. “Elite Guard Unit-03!” they said in unison, as confetti burst from off-screen. But just as the shiny plastic drifted to the floor, an image of the aforementioned Elite Guard Unit (EGU) appeared on the big screen, and the newscasters excitedly discussed the parameters of the new model.

Simon’s attention was instantly caught by the EGU’s soul-piercing gaze, using all of its six neon-green glowing eyes to intimidate the viewer. Its face was covered by a skull-shaped face plate, behind which small green tubes could be seen.

Simply looking at the EGU caused Simon to shudder, and it was almost as if a hole was being burned through his very core. The figure stood over seven feet tall, clad in pitch-black and gray armor that covered every nook and cranny, appearing impenetrable.

A few older men sat to the right of him murmured something about it. Talking about what the armor is really made of, no doubt. Rumors about it were plentiful, but few made much sense. Some spoke about previous elite guard units, insisting it was made out of boron carbide mixed with diamond powder and titanium. Others said it was an alien material sourced from a meteorite discovered years ago in the depths of the bunker. Even fewer said it was simply reinforced plasteel, but nobody had the slightest idea of what it truly was. The formula of the EGU's power armor was a secret known only to two people in the bunker: the head of the IT department and the R&D head.

The screen cut to the EGU taking chaingun fire head-on, showing no visible damage in the process. It then demonstrated its inhuman proficiency with all types of weapons, from standard ballistics all the way to pulse vaporizers.

After completely annihilating its target, the EGU moved on to a close-quarters combat demonstration. Four enhanced troopers surrounded the EGU, two of them armed with COR-525 automatic assault rifles and the other two with thermo-kinetic crushhammers.

In the blink of an eye, before Simon could realize what had happened, all four troopers fell to the floor; only the EGU remained standing. Before anyone had managed to react, the EGU had put them to sleep and disarmed their weapons. Pre-recorded cheering filled the studio as Margaret prepared to give the viewers one final surprise before they headed to work.

“And now,” she began, “it is going to demonstrate its effectiveness in a real combat scenario.”

The fake walls of the studio that the EGU was in suddenly fell to the floor, revealing a gigantic metal airlock that had been welded shut from the outside. The EGU approached it before turning back to receive the go-ahead signal. As soon as it did, the footage cut to the EGU's built-in body camera, allowing the viewers to see for themselves just how powerful it really was.

With one punch, it blew right through the airlock, leaving a gigantic hole in the steel behemoth.

"Its six eyes all operate on different modes of target detection." Margaret explained, "It can use regular, thermal, infrared, ultraviolet, low-light, and x-ray vision at the same time!" she said with astonishment.

The unit detected two guards standing behind the airlock, unsure of what was going on. Moving at speeds incomprehensible to the naked eye, it cleaved through both of them, decapitating them both with its bare hands. The separatists met their end before either of them understood.

It sped through the extensive network of halls and rooms of level 100, eliminating all that stood in its path. Someone had activated the alarm, and a roaring security siren reverberated through the halls.

The unit came across a barricaded hallway with a defensive gun nest on the other side. Behind the sandbags and crude, welded together hedgehogs, a long-barreled weapon stuck out. The unit identified the weapon as a 7.62mm M8 Gobson automatic heavy belt-fed machine gun.

As a hailstorm of bullets filled the hall, the EGU slowed down and leisurely walked towards the defensive position. The bullets did nothing to it, and it knew that. As it strolled towards the nest, thermal vision revealed the separatist soldier abandoning his post and attempting to run away. Before he could take even two steps, the unit was already in front of him, holding him by the neck.

The soldier, a young man of about nineteen years, had beautiful, blue eyes and attractive, although clearly famished, facial features. He begged the machine to stop, tears running down his boney cheeks as he pleaded to the lifeless, metal monster. With one swift twist, the soldier's neck broke, sparing him a prolonged visit to the prisoner camp, where he would be forced to confess to everything he had and hadn't done, before being publicly executed.

A loud shouting came from deeper into the hall, "Position 1 is breached! Open fire!"

More lead came flying towards the unit, to which it responded by ripping the heavy machine gun off of its position and sending its very own hailstorm of bullets right back at the rebels. After a few seconds of sustained fire, the shooting ceased. The EGU looked at the hole-ridden bodies of its targets, making sure that they were no longer breathing. It then continued its rampage, ripping and tearing apart anything that it detected as the newscasters cheered.

Eventually, it located the command room where the leader of the separatist troops had hid in. With one kick, the unit sent the metal door flying straight into a nearby separatist, killing him on the spot. The other three guards attempted to fight back, but their struggle was over before they could even realize it.

The only person left in the room was an older, white haired man with a short beard and a green beret. A long, uneven scar line was visible on his right cheek. It was Thomas Weswell, the commander and leader of the separatist fighters. He sat behind a large wooden desk, using his right hand to smoke his last cigar, paying little attention to the killing machine standing in front of him. He pointed at the lifeless, broken corpse of the soldier killed by the door, his body still spraying out blood onto the floor.

"He was a good man. Such a shame he had to go through this."

After a prolonged period of silence, the machine spoke with a metallic robotic voice.

“Thomas Weswell, worker number 549230, you are under arrest for grand crimes against the bunker, your charges include: Inciting a riot, Unregulation of possession of military-grade firearms, Unregulation of behavior, Multiple counts of assault on security personnel, Multiple counts of murder of security personnel, Theft, Grand Theft, Mutiny against the computer, Attempted takeover of—”

“Shut it,” said Thomas, looking up at the unit, his eyes defiantly staring right back at it, “I know why you’re here, you’ve made that quite clear already. Sadly, I don’t think I’m going to indulge you.”

As he finished his sentence, a single shot rang out from underneath the desk. Thomas held a pistol in his left hand, pointing it at his head. Unfortunately for Thomas, the bullet did not make contact with his head as he had hoped. In an instant, the EGU reached out and caught the bullet in its hand.

He tried again, and again, and again to fire the weapon, but he was only met with a clicking sound. Before him, on his desk, laid the magazine of his pistol, the bullet he had fired, and the bullet that was supposed to be left in the chamber.

“W-what?” He fell backwards in his chair, hitting the ground and crawling back closer to the wall. The unit slowly approached him, closing the distance between Thomas and a lifetime of torment.

“No! N-no! Get away from me!” He desperately pleaded, “Stay back! Stay back damn you!”

But there was no point, there was nothing that he could do about it. He reached for one of the weapons dropped by his comrades, but a pair of cold hands already held him by his spine.

“Please! No! Anything but that! Anything! No! No!”

The hydraulic fingers dug deep into his bone, severing the connection between his upper and lower body. Thomas’s deafening screams of pain were broadcast

throughout the bunker, his separatist allies on other levels likely watching or listening to his helpless bellowing.

After a few more minutes of pained wailing, Thomas fell unconscious, likely passing out from the pain.

“Well!” Chase stated, “That was great to watch! I’m so glad that we have such amazing protection from hostile forces!”

“Indeed, Chase.” Margaret agreed, “It is through the monumental struggle of our brothers and sisters that we are able to live such comfortable lives here!”

Margaret corrected her posture, and turned to face the camera.

“So, this has been today’s episode of bunker news! Tune in next time to hear about the heartbreaking story of EGU-01! Goodbye, and blessed be the regulations!”

Some prisoners cheered loudly, “Yeah! That’s what those separatist scumbags get!”

Some prisoners cried, devastated at the magnitude of death and destruction that they had just witnessed.

Most were silent, unable to make a single sound, they simply stared at the screen with an unblinking gaze, attempting to rationalize the actions of the guard. Such displays of violence were common, everyone understood why they were being shown such things. And yet witnessing it happen live on television never got easier.

With a click and a snap, the television screen turned off, and the guards ushered the prisoners back towards the mining dock, but some refused to go. They sat rooted to the floor, motionless. When the guards tried to force them up, they fought back. Multiple patrolmen saw the commotion and rushed to help the other guards to “motivate” the prisoners.

Simon and S-05 stood up and walked in complete silence. Simon's eyes welled with bitter tears, which he refused to let flow down his face. He soldiered onwards towards the mining dock, silently mourning the lost lives of those he sympathized with. S-05 seemed horrified, but there was little to no grief on his face. Their deaths did not affect him, why should he be sorry for them? The horrors fresh in their mind, they simply walked forward.

As they strode, they stumbled upon a hysterical man arguing with a guard.

"I see them. You see them. We all see them! Except for those that don't dream or those that don't sleep." He argued, "Why must we be quiet about this? Why must we deny the ones that we see in our dreams? Why must the Bogs be denied their rightful praise?"

The masked guard stared at the small man with unkempt hair, silent.

"You're not even listening to me!" The man continued, "Why do you deny the blatant truth? You!" He pointed at a prisoner passing by, "You see them, right?" There was no response. "And you!" He pointed at Simon, "You definitely see them! I've heard how you speak in your dreams! You've definitely seen them, right?" Simon remained silent, and the man grew impatient. "Why won't any of you answer me!?" He shouted, "Why am I the only one who sees the truth!?"

The guard finally reacted to what he was saying.

"That's enough, come with me. It's in your best interest," a muffled voice said behind the mask.

"What? Why? What did I do?"

"You know what you did, now follow me."

"No! You can't do this! You can't keep hiding the truth from the world! This isn't what the Bogs would have wanted!" the small man protested.

"I said, come with me."

“And I said that I will do no such thing!”

“Hmph,” the guard grunted as he unholstered his stun baton, and another two guards came up behind the small man. With a flick of a switch, and a prod to the chest, the man’s muscles seized up, and he fell backwards into the strong arms of the guards behind him.

“No! Unhand me at once! You cannot do this!” He pleaded, “We must find the cloudroom! It’s the will of the Bogs! The cloudroom must be found! You don’t understand!”

The man continued his senseless yapping as he was dragged back towards the prison cells, likely about to be beaten or given discipline.

“Another man falls to Boggist madness,” S-05 said.

“Aren’t you a follower of the Bogs yourself?” Simon asked.

“I am, but not to the extent of insanity!”

The two men continued walking; they almost made it to the equipment storage room, but one of the guards stepped in front of them, blocking their way.

“You two, with me,” he commanded.

Simon looked at him suspiciously, quickly imagining the worst case scenario. The guard was most likely going to detain him for being a separatist sympathizer, and then lead him straight to the red room. “What’s the deal?” Simon said, “We’re just on our way to the mining dock.”

The guard looked down, staring into Simon’s hazel eyes through his gas mask.

“Comply. It’s in your best interest.”

Both prisoners stepped back, still tense and stressed from what they had just witnessed.

“We aren’t going anywhere without an explanation,” replied Simon, putting his fists up.

The officer chuckled at the sight of Simon’s bruised hands. “You sure you want to be my ticket to a promotion, punching bag?” he asked, undoing his holster’s buckle.

Before Simon could answer, S-05 stepped in, giving him a concerned look. “Don’t mind him officer! He doesn’t know what he’s saying. We’ll go, just tell us where.”

The officer held his hand over his holster.

“Please,” pleaded S-05.

The guard let out a disappointed sigh. “The Foreman wants to see you. Now come with me.”

“The Foreman? Why would he want to see *us* out of all the people stuck here?”

“It’s not my job to answer your questions, and it’s not your job to ask them. Now, you will obey and follow me,” commanded the guard.

Before Simon could answer the guard with another defiant sentence, he noticed S-05 staring daggers right at him. He gave him a pleading look that only he could see as if begging him to just do what he was being told to do.

Simon clenched his teeth and tightened his fists before spitting out a single word.

“Fine.”

They reached the heavy-duty airlock separating the restricted area from the rest of the gulag. Though it was not the first time they had seen it, the two prisoners felt dwarfed by the sheer size and might of the door. As Simon took a good look, he realized it was the same kind of airlock the elite guard unit broke in one punch.

With a swift swipe of his ID card, the magnetic lock deactivated, and the steel giant obeyed. With a loud swoosh, the doors retracted into the ground and ceiling, and a gust of cool air hit the faces of the prisoners.

In an instant, it was as if they crossed into an entirely new world.

The soft, cool air caressed their bodies and soothed Simon's pains. It wrapped around him like a gentle blanket and comforted him.

They walked past the cafeteria, where the sweet scent of freshly made rations filled the air. Rows of guards sat at long tables, waiting to receive today's breakfast. Workers dressed in sparkling-white uniforms hurried like worker ants to deliver freshly-made muddy brown liquid straight to the guards that wanted it. As they discussed today's episode of bunker news, Simon thought about the people who worked there. Being allowed to work in the cafeteria was a rarity, and a highly sought after one at that. Working in the cafeteria was widely regarded as the easiest and safest job on the level, but getting there required plenty of bribing and scratching the right backs.

"Boot lickers." Simon thought.

They passed by the sleeping quarters of the guards. Some of them were still open, allowing for a peek inside. A soft, sheet covered bed stood in the corner along with a personal sink and a toilet. In the opposite corner stood a small table with a lamp, and some of them even seemed to have books. Simon's eyes widened for a moment; he hadn't seen a proper bed in so long that he'd forgotten that people sleep on sheets.

He was filled with envy but tried as hard as he could to ignore it. Still, he couldn't keep it all inside him. He chuckled.

"This is what you get for all the work you do? These tiny rooms?"

The guard pointed at a nearby sign. "Junior Officers" it said. "You should see the quarters of the senior officers." the guard said.

After an awkward walk through the quarters of the senior officers they arrived at the foreman's office.

The guard pressed a button on a nearby intercom.

"They're here, as you requested."

"Good, come in." replied a crackling voice.

With an audible click, the door's lock opened.

The three of them walked into a spacious room. It was bigger than any of the quarters they saw before. Simon looked down; his reflection stared right back at him. Various golden trophies shined atop polished silver shelves. At the back of the room stood a sizable hardwood table, much like the one that Simon saw on level 100, behind which sat a thin, wrinkled man with slicked back hair and a clean-shaven beard.

The man smiled, beckoning the two to sit down. They obliged, each sinking into a soft velvety chair. The accompanying guard also moved towards a chair, only to be dismissed by the foreman.

"Leave" he said, his imposing deep voice resonating in the room.

Without question, the officer left.

Despite his frail appearance, there was an air of power around the man, and his piercing glare instilled doubt in those he spoke to. Cracking a soft smile and speaking with a softer tone, the gentleman began the conversation.

"Gentlemen, I'm glad you could make it. How's life in the pits been treating you?"

"Pretty good sir, thank you for asking." Said S-05.

The foreman looked over at the other prisoner.

"And you? Not particularly good, eh S-1M0N?"

He sat in silence, unwilling to respond.

“Hm, not very talkative. Don’t worry, I have something that’ll grease up your jaws.”

He walked over to his cabinet and opened drawer after drawer, searching for something.

“There you are!”

The foreman took out a bowl of snacks and placed it in front of the hungry prisoners. Their mouths salivated at the sight of the assorted sweets; all wrapped in colorful and vibrant packaging. It was just an arm’s length away from them, and Simon eagerly reached for it. To his disappointment, it was further than he expected.

He shifted to the edge of his seat and bent forward, but it was still somehow just a finger’s length away again.

He looked up to see the foreman grinning with glee, staring down at him. His finger was on the edge of the bowl, and he was slowly moving it away from him.

The shriveled hand of the foreman leisurely reached into the bowl and pulled out a single rectangular cracker.

“Ah ah ah!” the gentleman said, “Not without my permission!”

Both prisoners watched, enthralled, as the cracker disappeared into the man’s maw.

“I bet you must be wondering why I called you here, yes? It’s not every day that you people get to see what is on the other side.”

They did not answer, while Simon kept his mind away from lunging at the foreman, S-05 might have simply not heard the question from how focused he was on the sweets.

“Ah, the confectionaries. You seem to be interested. Have you not had your portion of food paste? I’ve heard it’s quite good! Although you have to forgive my

lack of experience with it, all these special meals I've been eating lately have made me forget such simple pleasures."

"No, sir foreman. We... have not." answered S-05.

"Well, you should! It is a great source of everything that the human body needs and is always available at your nearest vendor!"

S-05 nodded in compliance, keeping secret the fact that he had nothing left to buy it with.

"May we take some of the, uhm, confectionaries?"

"Hmm" the foreman looked up at the ceiling and off to the side, "Depends, do you wish to hear what I've called you here for?"

"Of course, we do!" answered S-05, shooting glances at Simon, who seemed uninterested. Seeing this, he gave him a sharp elbow to the chest, motivating Simon to emit a grunt slightly resembling a yes.

"Then sure, indulge yourselves."

The impatient two dug into the bowl at once, stuffing themselves as fast as possible.

A sound resembling a question came from the direction of the foreman, but they did not answer. It's possible they didn't even hear it due to how focused they were on warding starvation off for another day.

In a minute, the bowl had gone from brimming to barren, and they both felt slightly less hungry than they were before.

Simon belched, then turned his gaze towards the observing foreman.

"I'm all ears." He said, leaning back in his chair.

"Well, something unexpected has come up. A highly trusted engineering and excavation team sent to sublevel -18 have failed to return on time." the foreman

checked his watch, "Their shift ended precisely two hours ago, and yet there is no sign of them returning any time soon. All attempts at communication have failed, and their clean record leads us to believe that something other than an escape attempt occurred there."

"Two hours is a lot?"

"Indeed. Although I appreciate workers who put in overtime, our schedules are strict for a good reason."

"And this is our problem, how?"

"I feel like the nature of your... situation answers the question, no?"

Simon frowned.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

The foreman flashed a sly grin as S-05 drove his elbow towards his fellow inmate in one swift movement. Unlike the last time, a single hand was more than enough to stop the incoming blow dead in its tracks. Simon only turned to look as he squeezed S-05's arm with unprecedented strength. By the time his friend yanked it away, there were deep pressure marks hiding under the orange jumpsuit.

"Gentlemen." the foreman addressed them, his voice calming them with an almost hypnotic power, "There will be no fighting in this room."

"You still haven't answered my question." Simon responded, burning his eyes deep into the silvery irises of the wrinkled man.

"I see no reason to answer this. You hold no power over me; why would I humor you?"

"Because if you don't, then I won't go." Simon replied, unblinking.

The foreman put his hands together, sending a loud, gunshot-like clap that flooded into the ears of the two prisoners. The sound echoed over and over in

Simon's ears, making him dizzy to the point of vomiting. The foreman smiled once again, though his brows furrowed ever so slightly.

"Great. It's settled then! I'll schedule your visit to the red room for... what do you think? An hour from now? Maybe that's a bit too much time. How about in five minutes?"

Thick beads of sweat formed all over Simon's body as he shook from the mere mention of the red room. His heart sank deeper than during any disciplinary beating he had endured before. Five minutes? No way, he was bluffing. He had to be.

He attempted to shout, but all that came out of his mouth was a shrill shriek.

"What!?"

"Shall I take that as a yes?"

The chair next to Simon suddenly pulled back with a loud screech.

"Sir foreman!" S-05 pleaded, "PI—"

"Quiet."

A single word was enough to send both prisoners into a deep state of silence. Something inside them, as if a sixth sense, begged them to stop.

"I ask you again. Does five minutes from now fit into your schedule?"

"Wait! I... I—"

"Five. Minutes. Yes?" he stressed his words with great pressure.

"I'll do it, alright?" Simon said as he felt his spirit shatter into pieces and crumble under the weight of the man's words.

"Say the word." the foreman commanded.

"What?"

"The magic word."

An uncomfortable silence filled the room.

“...Please.” he uttered in defeat.

Another thunderous clap rang out as the unnatural force behind the man’s words dissipated.

“Perfect! Glad you agree. Now, let’s continue where we left off.”

The silver-haired gentleman fixed his suit’s cuffs, briefly raised his eyebrows, then continued.

“Given the mysterious nature of the event, we can’t send any teams until we know what happened. And, as luck would have it, your... field of expertise is perfect for this particular assignment. And you’ve been on similar assignments before! Quite a bit of experience indeed! Five successful missions! Truth be told, most laborers go missing after the first one or two assignments, but you two are doing quite well! Due to this, you have been given the honor of being our recon.”

S-05 flinched and immediately jumped up from his seat.

“But sir! You can’t do this! Not again! Please! You promised us that our previous assignment would be our last one!”

“Silence.” The foreman commanded, sending the worried prisoner back into his seat, “You have no say in this matter, and if I may remind you-“ he pointed at the bowl, “you’ve agreed to the contract.”

As S-05 sweated and fidgeted with his fingers, Simon feigned a calm face.

Although he remained motionless on the outside, a storm brewed inside him.

Something had removed a squad of workers from the radar, and he would be the first one to see exactly what it was. Was it another one of the afflicted? A whirler? No, that wouldn’t be enough to wipe out an entire squad. Maybe a group of mutants? Or did they actually find a way out? No, they wouldn’t escape even if they saw an exit, they probably put collars on them. So, what was it?

“Sir foreman, with all the respect that I have for you and your position, I need to ask you to reconsider. You know very well how dangerous these assignments are, and so far we’ve, or at least I’ve done my best to complete them without question. Please, answer me, why? Why send us to another one?”

As S-05’s heart lurched and beat like a drum inside his body, he stared deep into the foreman’s unnatural eyes, trying to find some kind of glimmer of sympathy in the man’s disinterested eyes.

“Tell me, prisoner S-05A1P. What do you hope to achieve by refusing to comply like you are now?”

“I just want to stay alive, sir foreman. I don’t understand why I’m being punished by being sent into the depths! I have been nothing but cooperative, and yet it seems like I’ve only been getting further from safety!”

The shriveled man stood up from his large comfortable chair, and strolled over to S-05, then placed his hand on his shoulder and gazed deep into his terrified eyes.

“Safety, you say?” he snorted, “There is no such thing as safety for those in your position, my dear fellow.”

“Then let us prove ourselves! Haven’t we... Haven’t I done enough to be pardoned? Haven’t I done enough to warrant a break from this?”

The foreman rubbed S-05’s shoulder, then looked off somewhere into the distance. His wrinkles straightened out a bit as he thought about something he hadn’t remembered for a long time, then nodded to himself and turned back to face S-05.

“Safety, you say? Our self preservation instinct... it truly is what has kept us alive through it all, isn’t it? Quite amusing really. You probably wouldn’t even think of such a thing, but that very same wish has gotten me to where I am today. Since, what can be safer than managing your own level of the bunker?”

He walked around the room but continued talking, though mostly to himself.

“The sense of self-preservation, it’s what drives us, motivates us to push through the obstacles that this world throws at us. It forces us to adapt and overcome the difficulties of life; It even motivates us to betray those that we used to hold dear.”

He turned to face S-05.

“Tell me, prisoner S-05A1P, how much are you willing to sacrifice for safety?”

“Everything.” Tensely replied S-05, frequently looking back at Simon.

“Everything?” The foreman laughed to himself, “Very well! How about we play a simple game then? I’ll name something, and you answer whether or not you would exchange that for safety, yes?”

S-05 looked around the room, searching for something to focus on other than the foreman’s observant eyes, then nodded.

The foreman listed off several mundane objects in S-05’s possession, such as his clothes, hair, shoes, and bed. He agreed to all of them. Then, the foreman moved on to more interesting questions.

“Would you kill a man if it meant that you could walk free, and be safe?”

He nodded.

“Would you give up your freedom if it meant that your safety would be guaranteed? Not that you have much freedom now, but still.”

He nodded, albeit slowly.

“Your eyes, would you accept to be blinded if it meant that you’d be safe?”

He thought about it for a moment, then nodded.

“Interesting, how about this then? Your fellow prisoner, the one you’ve become acquainted with, would you give him up for safety?”

A thick drop of sweat dripped from S-05's chin and onto the floor as his hands shook. He looked back at Simon, who weighed down his soul with the power of his stare alone.

"I can't answer that, sir."

"Why not? Are you feeling shy all of a sudden? Or is it that he's sitting close enough to hear your answer?"

His lips stayed shut.

The foreman turned his observant gaze towards Simon and scanned him from head to toe, then gave a very satisfied smile.

"Plug your ears for a moment, would you?" ordered the foreman.

"What?"

"Just do it." pleaded S-05.

Feeling pity for S-05, Simon did as he was told, and faced away from the two.

He heard nothing from what had been said, but he didn't have to. When he turned around, the foreman smiled ear to ear as he returned to his desk. S-05 formed another sentence, this time puffing out his chest and looking back at his conversational opponent with purpose. The gentleman foreman raised his eyebrows and widened his eyes, surprised by the prisoner's newfound boldness, then searched for something inside of his desk's drawers. As he pulled out two pieces of paper, he motioned for Simon to unplug his ears.

With great speed and efficiency the foreman filled out two special release forms, then slid them over to the other side of the hardwood table.

"Scary, isn't it? But don't be afraid my dear S-05A1P, we aren't all heartless! As a favor, I will grant you this wish. If you manage to do this assignment well, your safety will be guaranteed for a while. You won't go in there as ill-equipped as before, far from that really. To aid you in this endeavor, I have authorized the issue of two hydraulic suits."

The two remained silent.

“Not interested?”

“Of course, we are... it just takes a moment to take it all in.” S-05 replied looking over the documents, “What type of suits are these?”

The foreman scoffed.

“Hydraulic. It’s in the name. Hydraulic exoskeletons, you get the idea. These are your permits, signed and stamped. Hand them over to the equipment supervisor, you’ll be issued your required gear for the job.”

“But... We’ve never had any training with them, are you sure?” queried S-05.

“Am I sure?” the foreman looked at the ceiling for a moment, thinking, then shrugged, “Not really, but it is what it is. You’ll get the hang of the suits, I’m sure; they might not be new, but they say they’re quite pleasant to operate.” the man paused for a moment, “At least the previous operators said they were.”

The silver-haired gentleman pressed a button on his desk.

“You may come in now.”

The guard keeping watch outside came into the room.

“Escort these two to the mining dock’s special equipment section post haste, the supervisor should be waiting for you. Blessed be the regulations, gentlemen.”

“Blessed be the regulations, sir foreman.” Replied the guard.

S-05 nodded in agreement while Simon made his way out of the room.

After a brisk walk through the sleeping quarters, past the cafeteria, and through the airlock, the two were back to where they were an hour ago.

“You know what to do. Do not disappoint.” Said the guard, before returning to his post.

The two prisoners entered a large hangar-like storage room, lined wall to wall with the personal equipment lockers of the miners.

However, unlike how they saw it every day, it was completely empty. It was an hour past the deployment time, meaning all workers were already deep in the mines.

The two took a moment to take in this uncanny sight. It was a rare, if not almost impossible thing to see without being immediately hauled off to the disciplinarian, a job that officer Hanlon often volunteered for.

“Let’s go, we’re on the clock, no time to ogle in awe.” said S-05.

The two took a sharp right into a hall leading to the special equipment section, where a balding, slightly overweight man impatiently paced back and forth.

“You two! Where have you been? You were supposed to be here-“ He paused to look at his wristwatch, “You were supposed to be here an entire minute and 37 seconds ago! Come on, we don’t have time!”

With two swift moves, he grabbed both prisoners by the collars of their jumpsuits and effortlessly hauled them towards the special storage room.

“Hey wait! Wait damn you!” shouted Simon, scratching and clawing at the inexplicably powerful arm.

Like a gust of wind, the supervisor flew through the hallway and past the orange double doors, revealing two tall cylindrical containers.

He dropped them onto the floor and pulled out his ID card, then swiped it through the container locks.

With a high-pitched swoosh the locks disengaged, and the cylindrical doors retracted inwards, revealing two degrading skeletal cage-like suits of interconnected alloys and tubes.

The suits had enlarged hydraulic arms with elongated fingers meant for moving boulders, thick metal soles, as well as a rectangular counterweight, or battery attached to the back. Signs of wear were very apparent, with scratches, dents, and the occasional spots of rust marking the once painted and polished exterior of the suits.

The supervisor took the suits out of their containers and gently placed them onto the floor, he seemed to vibrate with excitement just standing next to them.

S-05 examined the suits up close, and while Simon tried to conceal it, he couldn't help but stare in disbelief.

"We're going to be wearing...that?" Simon asked, standing up and dusting himself off, "What is that abomination of a suit?"

"Abomination?!" exclaimed the supervisor "You take that back!"

"Well, what the hell is it if it's not an abomination?"

"This is a Mark I battery-powered general purpose exoskeleton, designed to enhance the strength and durability of the user, allowing them to perform their work more efficiently AND safely! This exoskeleton was a major breakthrough in the development of all artificial skeletons, both internal and external! I have this magnificent suit to thank for the development of the very hydraulic skeleton currently inside my body! After a quick and most definitely not excruciating procedure, my former, no good, brittle bones were replaced by the complete and utter certainty and power of titanium alloy! Although I won't ever get used to the constant shifting of metal underneath my skin, it allows me to be more than 300% more efficient! Blessed be the regulations!"

A single tear escaped the supervisor's robotic eyes. He turned around and saluted the giant sigil painted on the wall behind him.

"I got distracted," he whispered, "this isn't supposed to happen."

In the blink of an eye, he snapped back.

“Alright, step into the suits for calibration.”

Simon looked at the open exoskeleton with uncertainty, to him it seemed like yet another cage that he would be unable to escape. Still, with repeated encouragement from the supervisor, he stepped into the suit and slid his arms into their respective slots. The interior of the metallic arms felt cold and difficult to move; in fact, he could not move his arms inside of the suit at all!

“All limbs inside? Good.” The supervisor flipped a switch at the back of the suit, turning it on.

With a click, the suit sprang closed and tightly coiled around Simon’s body. S-05, a slimmer and much less muscular fellow than Simon, fit inside the suit perfectly. As air was forcefully pushed out of his lungs, Simon grunted and gasped.

“What the hell- I can barely breathe in this thing!”

“Hold on, don’t be a baby, they just take a second to adjust.” Said the supervisor, rummaging around in his bag.

“I think they fit pretty well, actually. I don’t mind it.” Added S-05.

“Says the one built like a matchstick.”

The supervisor took out an old manual and flipped through the pages while scanning them with his eyes. He turned a few knobs at the back of the suit, loosening it slightly.

“Alright, this model is meant for smaller folk, but you’ll have to manage. Now, remember this: The suit is designed to do the work for you, so when you move, the suit moves with you. That is coincidentally the reason why I’m so much stronger than the average human! My hydraulic skeleton does the work for me!”

“That sounds... nice.” said S-05.

“Uhuh, yeah.” Chuckled Simon.

Walking in the suits took some getting used to, especially for Simon. He felt no resistance whatsoever, disorienting him greatly. Unlike Simon, however, S-05 seemed to be a natural at operating the suit, walking and running with very little difficulty.

“Now, come here and turn around.” commanded the supervisor.

He switched off and unlocked the exoskeletons, letting the two prisoners out.

“Alright, go to your lockers and get your gear. Then meet me at the elevators. Fast.”

“Of course, supervisor! We will not disappoint!” enthusiastically declared S-05, taking Simon by his sleeve.

“Whatever” Simon thought, “What the hell’s gotten into him?”

The two hurried over to their lockers, changing into their ragged old mining suits riddled with holes. They put on their helmets and checked their bulbs. They also grabbed a couple emergency flares, as well as their two standard issue pickaxes, folding shovels, and safety goggles.

S-05 seemed to be in a hurry, urging Simon to take his things as fast as possible. Simon looked at him, puzzled, “Why are you so raring to go? Can’t wait to crawl around in the tunnels?”

“Don’t you get it? This is our chance!”

“Chance to what?”

“To get on their good side!”

Simon frowned, “Why would we want that?”

“You don’t see why? I mean, look at yourself! You, of all people, should know why it’s better to stay on their good side. We do this well, get in and out quickly, then we won’t have to do anything like it again.”

“What is that supposed to mean?” Said Simon in a displeased tone, “Did you forget why I look like this in the first place?”

“I know why you do it, I respect it, but you have to see things for what they are. If we find the missing team fast, maybe we’ll be able to trade this for safety. That would be nice for once, not getting sent into the middle of a death zone.”

Simon and S-05 walked out of the equipment storage area and took a sharp left into a long hall leading to the elevator room.

As the name implies, the room was filled wall to wall with elevators of varied sizes, purposes, and materials. An incredibly vast and complex system of tunnels, shafts, pipes, and anything in between laid below the elevators, dug out over decades of arduous work by the prisoners.

The supervisor stood by one of the smaller metal elevators which led to a relatively new area of the mines. The elevator was wide open. Seeing the two prisoners, the supervisor waved at them to come over, nervously checking his watch every so often.

“There you are. I was beginning to think you got lost! The foreman should have briefed you on this, but I’ll tell you just to make sure you’re up to speed:

You’re going to go down to the in-progress level -18, into tunnel B. That was where the missing team was assigned to work. You are to find out what happened to them and immediately return to us with information. Do not attempt to engage any living threats, if they happen to be present. Try to avoid expiring, those suits are... not expensive but it would be unfortunate to lose them.”

“Of course, supervisor. You can trust us to do it with no problem!” Eagerly replied S-05.

They exchanged nods and the two stepped into the elevator, meeting the balding man’s gaze one last time before the doors closed.

With a sudden crank and a whizz, the motor of the elevator came to life and roared silently, starting its slow descent into the pits below.