

Chapter 1: Ticket to Nowhere

As the tram car of the orbital elevator broke through what counted as an atmosphere on Calypso II all us Inspectors felt was dread. It was believed that another mining strike was taking place as productivity had been interrupted, though none of the five of us were worried that there would be any problems with the union. No, we were all worried Terra-Suprema had gotten its hooks into the mine. That would mean that not only was everyone in the colony dead but the mine had been destroyed or was so heavily irradiated that it would be unusable for the next ten thousand years. And nobody could forget it when there were many signs in the car that said reporting Terra-Suprema activity was the duty of any good citizen. When we passed through a little turbulence I yelped, rousing everyone from their dark contemplation.

Yet we remained silent until Inspector 6 was the one that actually drew everyone out of their thoughts when he grumbled to himself, “Yeah I get it, Terra-Suprema is evil. Now quit with the ads and go back to the game!”

Several chuckles hung to the wall as Inspector 5 made his comment, “I don’t know why you bother watching those; you never win anyway. Hell you’d be better off betting against yourself.”

“Yeah, well then I’d lose the other half. It seems like any team I pick immediately loses.” Inspector 6 chortled as he kept losing. Inspector 4 shook his head as he tried to calm me. I had just recently acquired the title of Inspector 7 but that didn’t mean I wasn’t capable... just green.

“A little turbulence on entry is fine, we’re not in danger yet. So you don’t really need to be digging at your chain like that...” I assume he said that with a reassuring smile but as his face was obscured under a mask I was unable to tell, yet it was enough to stop me from scratching my left forearm.

“Sorry... Does it ever stop itching?” I muttered as I was about to roll up my sleeve to get closer to the itch. The sharp triangular shape implanted in my hand followed by a rectangle going down my forearm was sitting right on top of an itch that I just couldn’t seem to get at.

“No.” 4, 5 and 6 uttered in exhausted unison. This caused another chuckle lasting long enough for the tram to arrive.

As we stood it became evident who was who, though we were all wearing similar uniforms of black suits and hats with white masks we were all distinct in our own ways. I wore a double breasted jacket with a ribbon tie while obscuring my face with the typical expressionless white mask that had the word seven etched on the forehead all being held under my fedora. 6 wore a much sportier two tone gray and black jacket while his mask at least had eyes with the word six being etched under the left while a bowler hat sat on top. 5 wore a less than simple three piece suit, pocket square and all, with an atypical half comedy half tragedy mask with mirrored 5’s painted on the cheeks under a bolero hat. 4 was the simplest: wearing a regular suit

with a mask that had vertical slits for eyes with four being etched vertically in the center under a white cowboy hat.

As the door for the car was about to open, 4 commanded, "Somebody wake 13."

"Should we? I mean she's nothing but dead weight," 5 was quick to dismiss the last member but 4 was less than pleased with the idea.

"There should be six of us for something like this, but with Terra-Suprema's actions we are being stretched thin, so whether you like it or not we need all the help we can get." 5 very clearly wanted to grumble some more while 6 made the executive decision to shove me over to the resting figure.

"What! Why me!" I yelled in a whispered tone while attempting to escape the train. 6 just kept me in place as he laughed maniacally.

"Rookies do all the grunt work! Whether it be collecting samples, reports, or waking cursed Inspectors. I don't make the rules, they're tradition after all!" 4 groaned at hearing that from the damaged mind of 6 as he moved to 13 and kicked her boot. 13's leg didn't even so much as twitch at the kick before she flicked up the brown cowboy hat to get an eyeful of 4.

"Time for work, we have arrived." 13 didn't even so much as grumble as she stood coming mask to chest with the larger 4. She was different from the rest as she wore a duster though that wasn't the odd part. She didn't wear a mask; her entire face was just covered in bandages. It was as if she were a cowboy and a mummy at the same time. She stood and after several cracks that sounded like every bone in her body should be broken she followed us to the door.

With a whirr and a burr the door slowly and loudly began opening. Which 5 attempted to use to cover a comment as I just barely heard him whisper into 13's ear, "Try not to curse us witch."

13 didn't react as we were finally able to enter the umbilicus to the station. The umbilicus was odd because instead of being a straight path off the train onto the station the floor was at a gradual incline that eventually ended on the right hand wall. I was apparently the only one to react with mild discomfort as I found the transition in gravity to be nauseating. The others hardly even acknowledged it, other than 6 slightly stumbling at the halfway point, it was as if it wasn't even worth noting to them.

The gate on the other hand was another story as it began scanning us. A red beam passed across each of us for several seconds until it detected each chain, pinging them all in green, yet I noticed it didn't detect 13. The system automatically began linking to our chains as we each raised our arms to check the readouts on the station. I immediately took to reading the vital status of the crew, 6 took to checking the progress of the work, and 5 checked the integrity of the structure. 4 showed his chain to 13 and inquired, "Notice anything odd?"

She didn't reply for several seconds before silently shaking her head. 5 readily shook his head as 4 inquired with the cursed woman but when he found no problems with the station he expressed his discomfort, "Wonder why it's taking so long..."

"Huh, what do you mean?" I looked up from my work as I questioned the more experienced Inspector. 6 gave a light chuckle as he attempted to buzz the intercom. 5 was the one that informed us of his perceived problem.

"Protocol is to have someone meet-" 5 didn't get to finish as the airlocked hissed and split apart. Steam spread into the chamber as the crack expanded slowly to reveal the station in disrepair. Formerly the pale concrete walls and floor that were held up by pillars seamlessly merging the two in a minimalistic flow that denied creativity and shouted for an undeserved demand to be observed. Though now instead of white and futuristic it looked dark and dingy with cracking blackened concrete from years of grime walking over it covering all surfaces in a collection of the stains of time barely illuminated by the few bulbs that had yet to go out. Calypso II was an old mine by all standards and up until recently had maintained its production so this disheveled state was far from unexpected yet we all remained silent. Until 5 finished his thought, "-us at the station to guide us through the colony."

6 shrugged as he took the first step out immediately into a puddle, "They probably just forgot and are panicking since they're not ready for us. I bet they'll meet us by the time we actually get into the facility proper."

4, 5 and I looked at each other before 4 agreed, "You are probably right, communication has been down for a few days now so they may not even realize we are here."

13 immediately exited and started walking left while the others exchanged more looks, though only I remained in place as the others took to following 13. I looked both ways before calling out, "The facility is this way."

4, 5 and 6 straightened their backs as they turned toward me while I was pointing my thumb in the opposite direction. They groaned, before hurriedly moving to meet me on the correct way instead of following the path of 13. With 4 leading the pack we went through the station getting an up close view of the disrepair. Several of the concrete columns had lost most of the concrete and were now being held up by the rebar inside. Even still we continued traveling down a flight of stairs, as both escalators on either side were in disrepair, where we arrived at the turnstile. To me the turnstiles looked like blenders more haphazard than helpful, but 6 nonchalantly passed through the sharp looking gate on the sides unimpeded. Barely scanning his chain on the way before the other two men followed, which left me mildly disturbed before I followed as well. If I were slightly more courageous than I'd hop the turnstile. When out of security we were spit out into the out ring of the station directly in front of a very large yet sealed bulkhead. While 4 mused in silence, 6 inquired, "What protocol calls for the lockdown of transit?"

“Contagion I believe but if it was then they would have sent word,” I muttered to myself trying to reason why, “even if long range communication was down we should have seen an alert when we connected to the system.”

“Is there another way in?” 4 questioned 5 as he began taking on the role of leader, even if we were all technically the same rank.

“Yeah, travel two levels down and somehow dig past ten feet of concrete followed by six inches of titanium and we might be able to crawl into the maintenance compartment of the sky bridge.” 5 quoted sarcastically, he was pretending as if we were effectively blocked with no way into the facility. Which wasn’t technically true because we could always put on PEZ suits and cross on the surface but I kept that idea to myself. It would be more pain than it’s worth. Yet 4 was not willing to give up.

“Can we open it?” 4 questioned 5 as he was already tapping away at his chain which I noticed was odd as it was implanted in his right hand instead of left. He must have been left handed...

“Yeah. I’m trying. But the system is putting up a better fight than it should be able to.” As his chain kept blinking red at every rejection, 6 shook his head clearly rolling his eyes under the mask. Which I noticed brought his line of sight back to 13 as she jumped the turnstile landing on the other side like a gymnast. He couldn’t resist clapping before commenting.

“Ten out of ten on the dismount. But I’ll be taking points for being late” This drew everyone’s attention away from 5 who was about to start swearing at the door. I immediately took note of how 13 was missing her coat and hat when I noticed the woman was wearing a bulletproof vest with her Inspector badge on the left breast as well as a leather holster carrying what looks like a revolver. Slightly startled by this armed appearance I was about to inquire further when interrupted by 5.

“Good of you to join us. There’s no power going to the door so we’re gonna have to pry it open by hand. There should be a manual latch around here somewhere.” He said as he shut his chain, and began searching for a panel to pry off. That brought several questions to mind when I thought aloud.

“Why would power be cut? Did something happen to its box? If the only way off station malfunctioned wouldn’t someone be trying to fix it?” I worriedly spoke too loud for it just to be for myself. It caused 5 to groan as he pondered answering them all with swears only for 4 to cut in.

“In my experience management usually see the tram as an escape route they’d rather their workers not take. Likely the box died and management said they’d get on it only to let it fall by the wayside as low priority.” To him I was clearly reading that wrong so 4 went on and corrected

himself, “They can deny any vacation until it’s fixed. On one of my visits to Atlantis VIII I found the gate had been sabotaged, trapping the miner’s there for six months.”

“That doesn’t sound legal...” I mused as 13 walked beside me and crossed her arms. I noticed as her left index finger was extended pointing to the right side of the door.

“It’s not but the door breaking is god sent in the eyes of management.” 6 commented as he tried and failed to pry open a panel by hand. 5 was trying to locate the latch on the blueprint as he shook his head, 4 moved to the farthest right corner of the gate where 13 had been pointing. He used the back of his fist as he gave a meditated jab at a very specific place, while at the same time 13 had pulled her finger down.

PPSSSSSSSSHHH!

The door released plenty of fumes as it equalized on both sides before the creak of the latch releasing rang out. The lower section began drifting with a less than pleasant screech as metal scraped against metal.

“How’d you do that?” 5 asked 4 who sat there with a look of superiority, or just a slightly raised mask.

“You just need to know where to hit it.” 4 answered smugly while I was about to question 13 when I noticed a figure standing in shadow on the other side. I yelped at being startled but 13 drew her pistol after only catching a glimpse of it for a second. When the shadowy figure saw the gun it stumbled and fell but as 13 hadn’t lost her aim 5 unnaturally stretched his arm without even looking at her knocking the sidearm up and away from the man’s direction.

“What do you think you’re doing!” He immediately turned and demanded from the expressionless mummy. She however made no move against him as the figure let out a groan.

“I’d apologize for startling you, but we’ve been working on this gate for a week now.” He directed his middle finger at the two workers in front of where 4 was standing. Though since 4 was distracted by 13 he didn’t notice them until now. One of them gave a small wave while the other shook his head as he continued inspecting the cube mounted in the wall. 13 however didn’t even try to move her hand as 5 yanked the gun out of it. 4 shook his head at the two before walking over to the man to offer a hand.

“I apologize for my coworker, she is... overeager. We are the Inspector’s sent to uncover the reason for radio silence from this facility.” 4 assisted the man up. The man dusted himself off for a second allowing everyone to get a full view of his jumpsuit that was gonna need a wash as much as he needed a shower as the grime on the lower half of his face was offset by the portion of clean around his eyes from where he no doubt had welding goggles.

“Well due to a power surge half the breakers were tripped and everything is either offline or malfunctioning.” When he couldn’t read any of our faces he continued, “Doors slammed shut,

communication was severed and a whole planet of other minor problems as well. That answer your survey or do you want to waste time searching every little nook and cranny?"

We all looked between each other again this time shaking our heads or nodding in silence. 6 and I nodded while everyone else shook their heads. This caused 6 to roll his head before he spoke, "Due to procedure we are forced to inspect everything to make sure the truth you told us in an attempt to save us time is true."

The man stood there for several seconds before he shook his head and pulled out a radio inaudibly muttering into it before the response allowed him to motion us in, "They're really running you guys ragged for no reason aren't they?"

"You have no idea." 6 commented as he followed along. 4 and I went as well leaving 5 and 13 behind. He was probably giving her a good talking to as he slid her gun into the back of his pants. Though as we exited the concrete tram station we were greeted by the metal and glass walkway allowing me to catch a glimpse of the exterior of the station. Due to a heavy snowstorm the only thing visible at first was the edge of the crater where I could see the remnants of frozen vegetation before we got far enough along to see the outline of the colony. It was full of a mixture of metal industrial structures and glass habitation areas to create a less than organic shape. I was in awe but 4 having seen plenty like this before didn't even react.

6 on the other hand was talking to the Worker, "So what caused the power surge? Someone put two cubes together? A lightning strike? If it's something simple like that I can finish my report in 15 minutes and be out of your hair in less time."

The man looked back at 6 and after checking for any eavesdroppers leaned in and barely audibly whispered, "They haven't actually told us, but I was down in the mine when I heard rumblings that somebody found something. Next thing I know we're being rushed out and treated like we're contaminated, thirty minutes later the power surges and half the systems are down. Now no one's been down there since and they're acting like we can't go back until all the systems up here are restored."

"That doesn't sound like something management would do," 6 questioned and while I'd like to argue but he was correct about how they were really focused on production.

"Yeah I'm betting someone got hurt in a cave in and they're trying to cover it up," He continues along with a saying that 6 utters in unison with him, "Wouldn't be the first time." They snickered as we arrived at the gate at the end of the walkway. This one had been forced open as well but this time it was being ingeniously held open by a crowbar jammed in a gear.

"That looks unsafe." I commented upon seeing the clear safety violation. The worker continued on as 6 stopped and looked back at me for a second as if he was gonna comment before shaking his head. Outside of the walkway we entered the promenade which was a giant concrete room in a similar vein to the station. Blackened concrete floors though these seem to

have been patched a time or two. The only thing in the massive room aside from a handful of dead plants was a desk near us at the entrance, where a woman sat watching pre-recorded videos on her chain. She hadn't had to do anything for over a week now so I doubt she was expecting us. Which led to the awkward situation as we stood there waiting for her to notice us.

"Excuse me-" 4 was about to interact with her when the door half a mile behind her flung open as a single man charged out. I guess he was the Manager, technically the highest position at one of these colonies, granted it wasn't that high of a rank and was more for overseeing any problems the workers have. Not solving them, just witnessing and running operations into the ground or that's what I was told in training.

"You have three Inspectors waiting for you in the lobby." The woman muttered as monotone as I imagined she could. The Manager, who had already gotten to us, turned to her with a deep scowl and was clearly about to chastise her for something when she got up and walked away. Then his scowl lightened as she joined the worker in leaving through the way he came in. This Manager was average if a little exasperated, clearly needing to clean his tuxedo and comb his disheveled hair. I just knew that whatever came out of his mouth was going to be untrue.

"I take it you're here to investigate the power surge. Well I'm sorry to disappoint but everything is fine, and it was merely a minor accident that tripped a breaker which cascaded through the system. We are nearly up and running again and will be back to full production by the end of the week." The way he mechanically finished that sentence colored me full of doubt when I started to believe 6 was right. And with that it made me wonder who had died and why they were covering it up, but I kept that to myself when 4 began speaking.

"Even still we are required to determine the cause of the power surge and only the cause, anything else does not pertain to our investigation." When 4 spoke around the many problems these mining colonies have it reminded me that we really aren't meant to search for anything that doesn't impede production. But as the shifty look from the Manager began dissolving he shook his head as if to continue arguing when 6 swiftly cut in.

"We are only looking for the cause, not the no doubt many rule breaking corners you've cut to increase production. When we find that we'll be done and you will be able to continue on." 6 made some odd gestures during that speech as if he was turning his head away while covering his eyes to pretend we wouldn't see anything. Granted we are required to report any broken rules though they only get documented and used to force Managers to take blame when major accidents happen and the company needs a fall guy. Thus with reassurance from 6 that we weren't looking for any of his wrong doings the Manager reluctantly ushered us to continue.

"I was under the impression the company sends a team of 6 Investigators, where are the rest?" With the Manager's words I realized that 5 and 13 were still not present. 4 and 6 noticed this as well when 6 grumbled to himself.

“Well you know how psychics are, unreliable at best.” A sentiment which the Manager wholeheartedly agreed with. I don’t know what it was about 6 that made every blue collar man identify with him but he used it to get some of the deepest information that would take me months to get.

“Yeah, they all think they’re special for being able to see the future. Like why don’t they go win the lottery then.” 6 chortled along with the Manager as they were about to continue when 5 spoke from the door.

“Because whenever we try, regular people cry and say we cheated while refusing to pay up.” They entered the room as nonchalant as possible with 5 more focused on correcting people while 13 was twisting her head to survey the area. But before they could rehash the age old regular people vs psychics argument 4 interjected.

“Or because full precognition is a level five skill and most, like Inspector 5 here, are barely level one. Any advantage he has over a regular person is matched by the chain.” 4 said as he motioned to his left arm effectively ending the argument. The other two clearly wanted to continue but it was tedious and tiring so 4 finished it when he directed all of us to the door and spoke softly, “If you’ll direct us to the mine I’d like to see where the accident started.”

The Manager recoiled ever so slightly before righting himself by fiddling with his tie, “I’m unaware of what you mean, the power surge started in the habitation deck. We should start-”

“The blocks are supposed to be completely cut off from each other to maintain the facility functionality in case of power surges. If it started there then it wouldn’t have spread to communication or anywhere else.” I agreed with 4. Though he was correct that caused me to question how a single power surge caused this much havoc in such a short amount of time. And how it had started from the mine, The Manager just had his eyes start dancing back and forth between us before he spoke.

“Fine. Fine, I’ll show you the way.” He motioned for us to follow when 5 got snarky and placed his hand out blocking the Manager.

“We can find our own way, just send the route to our chains.” The Manager scowled again this time however I believe 5 was correct. The Manager would impede our progress or even misdirect us if he was allowed to come along. I had even heard claims from more experienced Inspectors during training that they had been led into death traps a time or two by desperate Managers trying to cover up something. If he didn’t allow us then we’d know he was hiding something, but more unexpectedly he glanced at 13 who gave him a subtle nod. Seeing that he tapped away at his chain before I got the ping.

“I believe you will keep to our agreement and maintain your investigation’s primary focus, correct?” He raised an eyebrow at us allowing 5, who wasn’t present for that conversation, to speak up.

“Absolutely, we only care about finding the cause. Nothing else.” I couldn’t tell if he was being psychic or smart, but as he walked by I could see him cross his fingers behind his back.

“Very well. They should have resumed mining by now, so inquire with the miners if you need anything.” He said to us as if 13 hadn’t left immediately after nodding at him. I think he noticed that when I barely caught a glimpse of him gritting his teeth as we left.

With 13 already gone ahead I assumed she already had even a miniscule idea of what had happened but as we followed the blue arrows being projected onto the metal hallways from 4’s chain I noticed the poor condition of the structure. The claustrophobic metallic hallways and walls had very little life left in them and were just barely large enough for each of us. A handful of these halls had collapsing ceilings with conduits and wires dangling, one or two of which I’m sure are still live. Yet that fear or more mistrust of the wiring was well founded as it seemed every hatch and storage panel for the boxes had either been blown off entirely or forcefully pried open. Many of which I could see were now directly wired into the system, a short term bypass but still a safety hazard. I was about to comment on it when 5 spoke firmly, “Don’t trust 13. As far as I’ve heard she has either killed or been the only survivor of over a dozen Inspection teams.”

“Really, and they still let her go on them?” 6 inquired about her supposedly shady past. While those rumors propagated and even managed to find their way to me in training, I’d hardly put weight into them. More likely than not, she slipped away while the other members walked into a trap... Instead of helping them... she might actually just be bad luck then.

“What 5 has failed to mention is the high number of Inspections she has been sent on. This will be my third with her alone, and I have yet to find her unwilling to assist-” 4 was once again trying to maintain peace when he rounded a corner and nearly fell into a bottomless pit only for 5 to catch the back of his shirt collar. The large hole was present from the complete removal of a large portion of floor plating to allow access to a maintenance shaft, where several more workers looked up at us from its depths. However on the other side stood 13 facing us menacingly.

“Really did your best to warn us about that now didn’t you.” 5 mocked her as she tilted her head down for a second before pointing at the hole. With her lack of assistance prior to 4 almost falling into a pit causing some mistrust she however did assist us by sliding some of the paneling back over for us to cross on. Which begged the question from me, how did she get over there to begin with? Did she jump? It may not have been long but it most certainly wasn’t something most could cross with grace.

The winding path we were on finally ended when the small damaged metal halls opened into a titanicly massive bay. Large metal fans lazily spun on the ceiling as the giant turbines they were integrated into were on standby as their purpose of pumping air into even the deepest parts of the mine was unnecessary at the moment. The walls were coated with an array of well worn pipes of miscellaneous purposes as well as the seemingly random and unclean machinery mounted wherever space was available. Everything supposedly still functioned even if it was covered in a fine if shiny layer of black dust. Though those were nothing compared to the massive and open chasm that only had a handful of railings as the rest had either broken or were missing, granted they had placed holograms warning about the missing rails... still a safety violation. Only half the elevator pit was accessible as the entire far side sat against a canyon remaining open and silent.

This canyon had been the reason why the mine was built at this location, less digging and more natural structures to reinforce instead of excavate. Even the bay we were in was only one of several. I could just barely make out several of them behind the near elevator as well as the catwalks interconnecting the similar bays surrounding the canyon. Yet the one directly across from us was obscured as in the center of the pit starting from the darkest depths rising through the ceiling was a secondary orbital elevator, though this one was less advanced and was only meant for cargo. Easier to pack everything down there than it is to raise and load elsewhere.

Coming out of my thoughts I was confused for a second when I didn't spot the elevator at the top of the nearby shaft. How were we supposed to get down there without it? I groaned as I inspected the pit finding a staircase spiraling around the elevator shaft. We were gonna have to walk weren't we? That line of thinking was interrupted when 13 directed us to one of the smaller lifts that didn't ride down the side of the canyon. If she were so untrustworthy and had already made it then wouldn't she have left without us? That might mean she was more willing to trust us-

"Couldn't access the elevator without a chain could you?" 5's question rang out in my mind as he swiped his on the access panel opening the mesh grate for the elevator. 13 was the first to board as she immediately tried and failed to leave without the rest of us. 5 might be right about her...

Chapter 2: How It Starts

The elevator was slow. And not just in a ‘it felt like it was taking forever’ way, after the first 30 feet the metal paneling ceased to allow us to view one of the early mineral test shafts and we slowed down. It felt like we were barely going a foot a minute as the mesh fences allowed us to glimpse at the glimmering yet jagged walls that seemingly never ended. I knew we’d get there eventually but that felt like it was gonna be eternity later and we were bored. Or at least I was; 4 was reading reports from the other systems, 5 was trying to locate the origin of the power surge, 13 had been trying to light a cigarette for ten minutes and 6 was attempting to peek at his reflection in the obsidian glass walls.

Even more eventually later the shining black walls gave way to a large open cavern which I was told was one of the deepest and oldest main shafts the miners still worked out of for this section, or I should say assumed all those things as it was pitch black and the only light we had was coming off the single dim bulb in the elevator. I only realized we had entered a cavern when one of the walls disappeared and left an absence in its place. And even then it still took ten minutes to reach the ground. We had to restrain 13 from jumping for the last twenty feet, well I restrained her the others were not particularly concerned with her safety.

With touchdown I was immediately ready to turn around and leave, even the idea of the long elevator ride didn’t so much as annoy me. This was all spurred by the chill that shot up my spine as I set foot off the elevator and onto the slightly slippery black glass ground. I could tell at least 5 felt the same way as he shuddered leaving the elevator. 4 however didn’t even flinch as he took the lead and produced more arrows from his chain, “This way.”

6 followed without hesitation as they quickly disappeared around a corner while 5 and I stood mostly still. I was about to question why when he mumbled, “3. 2. 1.”

The arrow looped back around and shortly thereafter 4 and 6 came with it. 5 stood mockingly as he chimed in a faux friendly tone, “Welcome back, how was the trip? Did you solve all the problems in the world?”

“How’d you do that?” 6 questioned as if he seemed honestly surprised. I could almost hear 5’s thousand yard glare as he remained still with his head slightly tilted to the side. 4 grumbled as he started jabbing his chain.

“Right, we don’t know where it went wrong...” The arrows disappeared as the remaining light that wasn’t from the elevator faded. Nearly complete darkness would make this harder than it needed to be...

“Well we could fan out and search in a grid pattern-” 6 was quick to come up with that plan, but I feel like that would take far too long and would likely end with one or more of us lost. So I came up with a better solution to interrupt him.

“Or we could fix the lights and use their power grid to trace where the surge started.” That was a sensible idea and I was likely going to do that anyway even if they didn’t help.

“Either of those plans could work, or I could just lead us to the problem with clairvoyance.” 5 solved it as he raised his right hand projecting a dim light across the floor leading in a completely separate direction from where the other two had gone earlier. Though only a little bit away I was having trouble spotting the dim light.

“Yeah we should totally and completely trust the magic hands of a psychic. Or we could not, and survive instead.” 6 muttered as he discredited the glow and moved into 5’s way.

“Oh, be my guest and go walk in circles for several hours. I’ll solve this and-” 5 was ready to argue as he stood mask to mask with 6. Only for 4 to stop them by making peace.

“We should do both, I’ll go with 5 while you two go turn on the lights. If she succeeds at tracing the surge then we’ll only have wasted our time and if we succeed then she’ll at least have brought the lights on.” 6 shook his head as neither he nor 5 moved an inch out of each other’s space.

“Fine.” 5 spit out as if it was venom before he bumped into 6 in passing as he followed the glow. 6 turned as if he was ready for a fight while 4 placed a hand on his shoulder and shook his head before he followed 5. Not long after they were completely out of sight and we were left there standing silently in the dark.

“What a freak.” I shook my head at the off hand comments from 6, “You know they say psychics are all horribly deformed. Makes you wonder what he looks like under that mask.”

“I’ve heard the rumor,” I barely acknowledged under my breath as I lit up my chain and plotted a course for the nearby substation as it took us in the opposite direction. 6 turned his chain’s flashlight on as he followed along. His light allowed me to notice the ceiling of the path we were following got ever so close. But that didn’t matter as I thought about how 6 was not technically wrong but he wasn’t right. Early psychics were artificially augmented to raise their level, that was where the full precognition and deformed rumors came from. However, in the several or so centuries since then natural born level 3 psychics have become even less rare, so less than a handful even bother with body destroying augmentation.

People are still less than pleased with the idea someone could read their thoughts or lift objects without even touching them. Granted an additional segment for the chain has made telekinesis quite common, even available to regular people like us. And those telepaths are either exceedingly creepy or would pretend to be precognitive by reading people’s minds to divine their ‘future.’ Either of which wasn’t especially harmful, and only became a problem when they tried to steal identities. Which is really the reason people are still afraid of psychics... or it’s just something to be racist against I hardly know.

I shook my head as I trudged along the gravely blackened glass path that was only being illuminated by the arrows pointing me to the substation and 6's poor aim as he attempted to light the way. Occasionally I thought I caught a glimpse or two of some unmined boxes through the black glass walls only to adjust my eyes to see I had mistaken the square holes for a box, I just dreaded the probability 5 was going to comment about them, "Black glass full of perfectly shaped metal cubes. Such an odd formation."

"Yes it is odd." I am beginning to find his prattle grading. The cubes were what powered such structures like the orbital elevators, they may not generate much energy but once a charge is applied they seemingly never run out. Scientists have been studying them for just as long as psychics have been around and they're still no closer to explaining them. Hell, even old burnt out ones are melted down to form the base materials of the chains. The only problem with these cubes was finding deposits of them, which was the exploratory team's duty; they had a significantly worse job in my opinion. They spend years in cryo sleep only to spend a month or two inspecting the viability of a deposit before heading back into cryo for the journey to the next deposit. I heard from one of my instructors that their five year contracts stipulated they had to be conscious for it to count. I don't think I would remain sane after one month, much less sixty.

But my train ended when I jammed my foot right into one of the mag tracks. The thud and subsequent swearing allowed 6 to briskly inform me while he ignored all the obstacles, "By the way, lookout for anything on the ground. It's probably peppered with... you already stubbed your toe didn't you?"

"Yeah Sherlock gonna deduce anything else?" I vocalized as I shook the pain out of my foot before continuing on. To which I was greatly rewarded with our swift arrival at the substation, or at least to what I assumed was the substation. A mesh wall with a metal door blocked off an alcove carved into the molten glass for a large electrical box. Luckily for us the substation still had at least emergency power as the dull green emergency lights were still on.

"I was expecting something smaller." 6 thought aloud to himself as he grabbed the handle to the gate, "You *can* fix the lights right?"

"Well assuming the breaker is the problem it's as easy as flipping a switch, but if the wiring is fried then it may take a while." I answered as he had yet to get the gate open. It wasn't even a complicated gate; he just pulled the handle and it failed to open. They must have locked the room to prevent people from messing with it. Then 6 started trying harder and pulled it faster and more fervently than before, it shuddered and clattered at each attempt.

He persisted for several more seconds before I was ready to get a pry bar and rip the door off the hinges. Though as the shaking persisted I noticed a small gap under the mesh fence. Not large enough for a person but... who was I kidding I could fit. So it was either wait for 6 to rip the door off its hinges or crawl in. Seeing as he was getting nowhere fast I took off my hat and placed it on a hook directly opposite the gate under one of the emergency lights. Then I crawled

under the mesh into the alcove, while 6 still rattled the door in his attempt to remove it. He hadn't even noticed me enter.

I just left him to rattle away at the cage when I began investigating the substation. I was expecting maybe a burst fuse or some wires to be toasted, I was not expecting to find everything in working order. Only to search the back and find the cube had been launched out of its mounting and lodged itself in the wall. I tried to pull it free but with its refusal to move I groaned finally drawing 6's attention, "Don't worry I almost- wha- where- 7! Where'd you go?"

I leaned out from behind the breaker as I noticed him turn around, "Turns out I'm gonna need your help after all."

6 looked up for a second as the emergency light behind him went out, "God?"

"No. Turn around." He finally realized where I was. How was this man an investigator? Probably his communication skills, he was well known for being able to dig the deepest darkest secrets out of people and I don't doubt that was how he attained this high of a position. Even if he was only a single spot above me...

"Oh, how'd you get in there?" He spoke to me through the gate.

"I can teleport." I mocked and before he could ask any followup questions or wonder if I was kidding I finished, "I need a crowbar, or at least something sturdy I can use to pry a cube from the wall."

He paused for a second as he scanned his surroundings, "Did it shoot out like the ones up top?"

"Yeah, embedded itself in the wall and everything. Have you ever seen something like it?" I asked as he walked away from the gate. When I didn't get a reply I looked back at the gate to see he was no longer standing in range of the dull green emergency lights. I slowly and silently tread my way over, "6?"

When there was no reply I began feeling uneasy, more so than I had before. I don't know what it was but for some reason this dark mine screamed at me to flee and every second I didn't listen felt like I betrayed my deepest instincts. And now that I was alone I felt completely and totally- "Will this work?"

I recoiled falling on my butt when 6 appeared out of thin air brandishing a large metal bar, "Jesus, warn me next time!"

"Yeah I'll make sure to do that at the same time you disappear as well. Now will this work?" He said sliding the bar through a gap in the grate. I stood and took the tool, nearly dropping it as the heft was unexpectedly higher than I had estimated. It was a large metal rod that flattened out and curved at one end. The miners probably left it and many other similar tools behind when they were told to evacuate.

“Probably,” I groaned as I dragged the tool with me. Back at the cube I wondered how I would do this, debating if I could just bash the cube loose. I decided against that when I noticed how cracked the edges were.

They would suit my purposes. I raised the bar above my head as miner’s had since the dawn of time. Using all the force I could muster in my upper body I pulled down and pushed up. A handful of sparks lit up my mask as that single quick strike with the flattened edge caused the tool to embed in the cracked edge. I wiggled the lever for several seconds before the cube visibly came loose, nearly dropping from the wall entirely. I freed the tool before setting it down and ever so gently placed my hands on the box. In a single motion I removed it from the wall.

The cubes were a fair size being just barely a square foot in total. Despite this size they maintained a generally low weight completely betraying the seemingly metallic sheen on their surfaces. Yet this one was clearly a problem child as it bore several scratches and even a handful of chips from years of mistreatment. Either way returning the cube to its slot in the substation was an easy endeavor... if I were taller. It was just ever so above where I could reach, forcing me to use the TK module in my chain.

With a dull gray hum I hefted the cube up and out of my hands allowing it to float for a second over my head before lining it up to properly slot it into the substation. Then it was silent. It was just a few feet, I'm sure the warning about using the TK module on cubes was just an old wives tale-

VVRRRT!

“WHAT WAS THAT?” 6 shouted, unable to see me behind the substation. I panicked, backing into where I had freed the cube from the wall holding my breath for a second as the substation made such an unexpected noise. Then the substation halted its shrieking, returning to normalcy as it began to function once more. I sighed in relief as I spoke to 6, “Everything is alright, the system just needed to reset. The lights will be back on in a second.”

But before I could begin checking the systems I heard the crack begin to grow. I turned to see the cracks had spread a little at a time and before long they had spread across the entire wall before I bumped into it. Now it was as if even the slightest touch would be enough to shatter the blackened glass. When it didn’t I breathed a sigh of relief only for my dismay to grow as well as the crack when it didn’t remain just on the wall moving onto the ceiling as well as every other surface including the ground. I’d like to say I remained still there in contemplative silence among the ever growing cracking sounds as I weighed my options... but honestly my mind was blank and I was panicking. Luckily 6 had heard or at least seen the cracks as he affirmed to me, “You’re doing great 7 to remain still up until this point, but the cracking is spreading and you need to move. Do you understand?”

“Yes.” I whispered barely loud enough to be audible for him. Then 6 continued.

“Very, and I cannot stress this enough, slowly inch your way out. Don’t breathe, don’t put your full weight down, don’t even turn, just remain calm like you are and inch yourself out.” I did as he commanded. I shifted my legs several inches as the cracking subsided.

“Good, good just like that.” 6 praised me as I noticed the room was silent, “Just a little more now.” I debated to myself on if I should run when I heard it. The only disturbance left was the sound of a small shard of obsidian falling before clattering to the ground. Then the silence returned from which 6 also silenced himself which alerted me that time was up.

On pure instinct alone I acted like a monkey turning on a dime as the room collapsed behind me. In the seconds left in my life I charged as fast as I physically could towards the mesh gate shattering what was left of the floor under heel. Then I noticed it.

6 had yet to get the door open, leaving me trapped. I shrieked as my life began flashing before my eyes. Mild disappointment followed by slight hope before more shattering disappointment played out in my head. Had I really just gotten myself dead by accident on my first mission out? The first job and because of a simple mistake I had ended my life far too soon. I at the very least could take solace in the fact that I wouldn’t be buried alive. I would most likely be impaled on a sharp spike of obsidian before my internal organs were crushed under the weight of the debris followed by my bones splintering and shattering. I would look like paste whenever they dug me up.

“SHIT!” 6 shouted with all the force I assumed he could muster as he ripped the mesh wall off its right most mounting, just barely giving me a tiny gap between it and the cracking wall. Without a single second of hesitation I flattened out hoping to slip through like I was made of butter. My jacket however was not made of butter as it got caught almost immediately. 6 didn’t hesitate either as he grabbed my extended right hand and tore me free.

We both fell to the ground just outside of the collapsing alcove attempting to cover ourselves as we expected shards to shoot out as well as the rest of the mine to collapse around us. But when seconds passed without so much as another crack I finally let my head peak out of my knees. The cracks had stopped spreading as all I could hear now was a dull whirr.

I looked to 6 who had something leaking out of his head, where his hat should be... I scanned everything that was barely visible by the dull green glow of the sole remaining emergency light. Where I found his hat had been impaled by a stray shard of obsidian. I checked on him where I saw several streaks of what I assumed were red in his loose hair. I began panicking again before he calmed me, “I’m fine, just a mild concussion at worst,” I tried and failed to keep him from sitting up as he glanced at his hat, “Lucky me, huh.”

“Yeah, mild concussion my-” I was about to stop him as he got up as if the blood on his head was nothing and walked over to his hat. He grabbed the brim before pulling the shard out, where I could not see even the slightest amount of blood on the blackened shard.

“Just can’t keep a hat can I... oh well.” I shot up as I was about to apologize or weep and beg forgiveness when that dull whirr from before rose. With a loud clack the lights burst into life. I say burst because having gotten used to the darkness my eyes immediately closed at the blinding brightness. I rubbed where they should be for a moment, before realizing there was a mask in the way, until they finally adjusted allowing me to more clearly see everything around me. Which 6 seemed to approve of, “Would ya look at that you didn’t nearly get us killed for nothing. Good job kid.”

“Yeah I guess...” he didn’t seem to mind the head wound so much as he gently kept pressure on the spot. Then 6 asked as if he didn’t have a head wound.

“I know you probably didn’t have time but just in case did you trace the surge?” My eyes glazed over as I shook my head.

“No. I didn’t.” He sighed as if he was going to continue when my chain let out a gross amount of static followed by profuse yet entirely inaudible swearing.

“I’m going to assume from the lack of warning you two died attempting to get the lights on because if you didn’t-” 5 had managed to establish contact somehow, but due to almost dying I wasn’t particularly interested in listening to one of his fits.

“You’re welcome.” I chimed as I wasn’t going to argue but his anger sounds flowed out of my chain, then before 6 had a chance to throw mud 4 cut them both off.

“I believe we are nearing the cause of the surge. I will send our coordinates to your chain,” I glanced at 6 as he looked my way as well. Had 5 successfully led them the right way? I guess clairvoyance wasn’t exactly the scam I had thought it was. But still that left the question of what they had found.

But it was 6 who inquired how 4 was certain, “And how are you sure of that?”

“We found 13.” It dawned on me how she had disappeared almost immediately and none of us had noticed she was gone. It might have been her quiet nature as well as the distrust we had for her but since getting into the mine this is the first time she had been acknowledged. That begged the question then, how had she found the source first.

“We’ll meet you there.” 6 complied as he rang his chain and produced several arrows for us to follow. I was about to go with him when I remembered my hat. I went to grab it off the hook when I couldn’t find it. The odd part was not that my hat was missing, it was on the floor, the odd part was the absence of the hook and the emergency light. Both were missing entirely, not even leaving a trace on the smooth and unblemished wall. While my hat rested gently overturned on the ground... Did I see a hook before or was I mistaken?

“How’d you get down there?”

“Let’s go!” 6 called as he moved along without me. I shook my head righting myself from those thoughts as I swiped the hat off the ground and placed it back on my head. I had probably just tried to set the hat on a reflection.

Now that we could see, not jamming my foot into every crack was significantly easier. But that was only a slight bonus as we walked in the most eerie structure of my life. Reflective blackened glass walls being just barely taller than 6 were supported every few yards by steel beams held in place with a mixture of concrete, bolts and welding allowing the massive flood lights and wiring to be mounted to them instead of the walls. The ground was a weird combination of obsidian dust and gravel sitting next to mag tracks making the surface slightly more even if ever so much significantly chaotic. All of which was coated in a thick layer of black dust.

Yet when we exited the offshoot tunnel the ceiling disappeared as we returned into the much larger cavern from before. Another one of the reasons this location was chosen for the mine was the large concentration of cavernous areas like this. It made moving heavy machinery around down here easier, along with lowering claustrophobia in miners. I can’t imagine becoming a miner if I had claustrophobia, granted not many structures are large enough in any of the colonies to ease claustrophobia.

I shook my head as the route took us on to one of the large mesh pathways freshly dotting the cavern floor. Raised and clearly meant to make getting anywhere simpler these walkways were a Godsend as even without stubbing my toes the gravel was beginning to kill my feet. I was clearly more built for an office and not for inhaling the thick black dust on seemingly every surface in this hole.

Yet from on top of this half of the walkways and over the railing I could see the other half on the opposing side of the cavern along with the equally placed dozens of tunnels on either side. Some were on ground level, others were raised into the upper walls with the walkway leading to them. Exiting each of these shafts was a track that eventually combined with the ones in between the walkways. All were leading down clearly on their way to the orbital elevator.

Yet what was once a bustling mine now had tools strewn about along with crates in various states of use blocking our path every so often. Yet that wasn’t the odd thing as magcarts with various amounts of cubes lazily sat still on the tracks. They seemingly only had a thin layer of dust present. Even if the miners evacuated, shouldn't the magcarts have all automatically ended up at the loading depot for the orbital elevator?

I may have gotten power back to the lights but the stillness from the carts was another problem entirely. They were directly linked and powered by the orbital elevator; the only thing that would have severed that connection is if the elevator was deactivated. And that would require a member of the Board of Directors to send an override to halt the delivery of cubes thus

impeding all profits from this mine. All this pondering was enough of a distraction that I walked into the stationary 6, tripping myself and only myself in the process, “Oof. Sorry, my bad.”

“You thinking about the carts as well?” He questioned as he stared down into a fully loaded cart. The magcart gently floated on the track as a flat and orderly payload of dozens of uncharged cores sat as ready to be loaded into the elevator as they had been all week.

“I was wondering about that. Do you know what it would take to stop the tracks?” I asked as I already knew.

“I don’t. I mean I have personally witnessed accidents where every miner suffocated or reactor meltdowns that destroyed colonies or any number of tragedies... but I have never once witnessed a halted production line.” The company’s priority was profit so one last delivery would make the loss of any colony viable in their eyes. They could always rebuild later, but this... stillness was unprecedented.

With that the silence from before returned, not even so much as magnetic a hum from the tracks. The march however was still fairly treacherous as the cavern was at the very least several miles long and the walkway was dotted with boxes and crates we had to climb around. It felt like we walked for hours but it was probably only a few minutes when we came to the end of the cavern to find one of the most recent shafts. On either side of the shaft was a pile of fresh tracks without a single speck of dust present ready to be added to the maze. Yet something about this perturbed me.

Why was one of the oldest mines still in service still making new tunnels in one of the main caverns? From the standards set by the other shafts and judging on their age this one should have been carved long ago as well... so why wasn’t it? Even the shaft directly parallel to this one but on the other side of the cavern was at least several decades old. 6 seemingly noticed this as well, though he was more crass about it, “Maybe they got one of those new scanners and found a deposit they thought was just noise before?”

“That could be... but I doubt it would be overlooked for years, much less several decades...” I tapped my chain to check the reports in the system. However with the lack of service I found my greatest enemy, nothing. My chain could hardly pull up the map with how slow it was going. Still from that I could see they had only finished excavation of this shaft less than a few hours before the surge. And from the map I could already see the network of tertiary tunnels around the main cavern that had been completed decades before this. Yet this all drew me to asking the same question, “Why now? What changed?”

“I don’t know... but that’s what we’re here to find out.” With that he took the plunge even deeper into the mine as he stepped off the walkway into the gravelless tunnel. At least the miners had completed the support beams and lights.

This tunnel was the cleanest any of them had been up till this point, missing the tracks as well as the layer of gravel. Granted I could blame that on the fact I could actually make out the silhouettes of cubes through the glass. Yet just past the halfway point we came to find the others surrounded by several tons of mining tools ranging from analog picks and fuel tanks for welding torches, everything necessary to prepare the support beams. Yet it was all drowned out with the shrill shriek of 5 as 13 stood in front of something, even now she was actively hiding things from us, “I don’t care what you think you found back there if you don’t get out of the way in the next five seconds-”

“He’s been at this for 15 minutes.” 4 cut 5 off as he informed us of the current status of events. With a groan I shook my head while 6 was about to join 5 in arguing with her... How were they losing to someone who wouldn’t talk back? Before they could get at each other’s throats I saw the drill... and it had something attached to it...

I left the others working over 13 by taking a small jaunt to the drill. It seems I was mistaken about the miners getting through to the other shaft when I could only just see a handful of light rays from the other side. The drill was basically a box on treads with a cab in front of a maw of teeth that even the British would think is grossly malformed, With three or four separate cylinders covered in teeth the size of my arms... I wonder what would happen if I stuck my hand in that. No, I don’t stop. This massive drill was used for excavating large shafts and required years of training to get certified, yet it remained idling in standby mode mere inches from breaking through. I could probably chisel my way through at this distance.

I climbed the slight ladder up to the cab where I found the oddest thing in the seat; there was a discarded set of miner’s overalls. It was when I made the mistake of touching them that I found out they were entirely wet and cold. Silently grumbling to myself about the infected sweat I was probably touching when I inspected my hands in the light.

They were red.

Had this man also been ingesting pure food dye to turn his sweat red? Wouldn’t be the first time I’ve seen that. And since my hands were already covered in red I quickly tossed the overalls off the seat. I may not be certified but I could probably check the equipment’s logs... plus when is my next chance to sit on one of these gonna come up again? Yet when I tossed the overalls off there was something lying in the seat. It looked like a set of noise canceling headphones... and they were leaking the same red fluid.

“7 we found something!” I heard 6 shout from where he and the others had finished berating 13. Shaking my head about what I thought I saw on the seat. I climbed down and wiped my hands off on the support before I made my way over to the others. It looked like they had finally talked her out of the way when I arrived... or talked her into vanishing again. When I arrived at the others they were huddled around a small gap in the wall. Clearly an air pocket that one of the miner’s saw and cracked open. Was this what caused the surge a small air bubble?

Yes these pockets can be full of dangerous gasses, but in no way was that enough to cause a halt like this. When 4 noticed me arriving he got out of the way for me, in the corner of my eye I noticed 5 was instead focussing on a cigarette. Choosing to move on from that I peered inside to see a tall vertical shaft, very similar to the one we rode down in. They must have dug this to add an additional elevator shaft. With this things were starting to make sense, somebody probably wanted a personal elevator and along the way they likely hit one of the power conduits for the magtracks could cause the power surge.

Yet that didn't explain the obscenely high number of cubes dotting the walls or why 13 was looking so uncomfortable as she stood directly in front of an obsidian pedestal holding a shiny heptahedron on top. What... What was that? I'd never seen a core like that. I don't think any of us ever had. 13 removed a bronze object from her vest and unfolded it to reveal a large bag before 4 asked, "What are you doing?"

She didn't so much as turn back to us as she attempted to cover the Oddly shaped core in the brass bag. This angered 6 as he shouted, "We're a team whatever you know you have to tell-"

"AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!" 6 never got to finish as a bone piercing shriek rang throughout the tunnel. My eyes immediately shifted from the woman in the shaft to the end of the tunnel we had come in where I saw a dark humanoid silhouette. The only thing presently visible among the silhouette where the eyes should have been was a dull green glow...

I stood paralyzed at the sight of this figure but it didn't do the same as it came charging into the tunnel faster than any man I'd ever seen. 13 attempted to get out of the shaft but she didn't make it in time as the creature was already upon me. It extended a blackened protuberance towards me, however it did not make contact as 4 shoved me out of the way and threw all his weight into a punch to the creature's head. When he made contact I heard a loud crunch before audible anguish.

"Guh..?" I could tell the large man had never before experienced such resistance. Yet the creature had not even so much as flinched, as it raised the same sharp tendril from before releasing the noise of cracking and shuddering of obsidian glass. Then the end split several times transforming into a large sharp almost human hand easily dwarfing 4's own head. As it placed that appendage around his face it lifted 4 as if the man weighed less than nothing before tossing him like a doll.

Then 5 shot it. Revealing he had also been carrying a gun this entire time, he was just less trigger happy with it. Yet as the bullets hit the creature it only cracked the surface a little pushing the creature away while 6 pulled me back and tried to shield me from it. Yet it was not obscured after being pushed back it came fully into view where I saw ever presently embedded in its chest was a cube. When it was just barely a few feet away from us I heard a hiss and full force from the edge of the my view I witnessed 13 lob a cylinder of gas that 5 noticed too late, "STOP-"

And that was the end of it.