



CITY
OF
THICKET
a t veatch



c. 2011

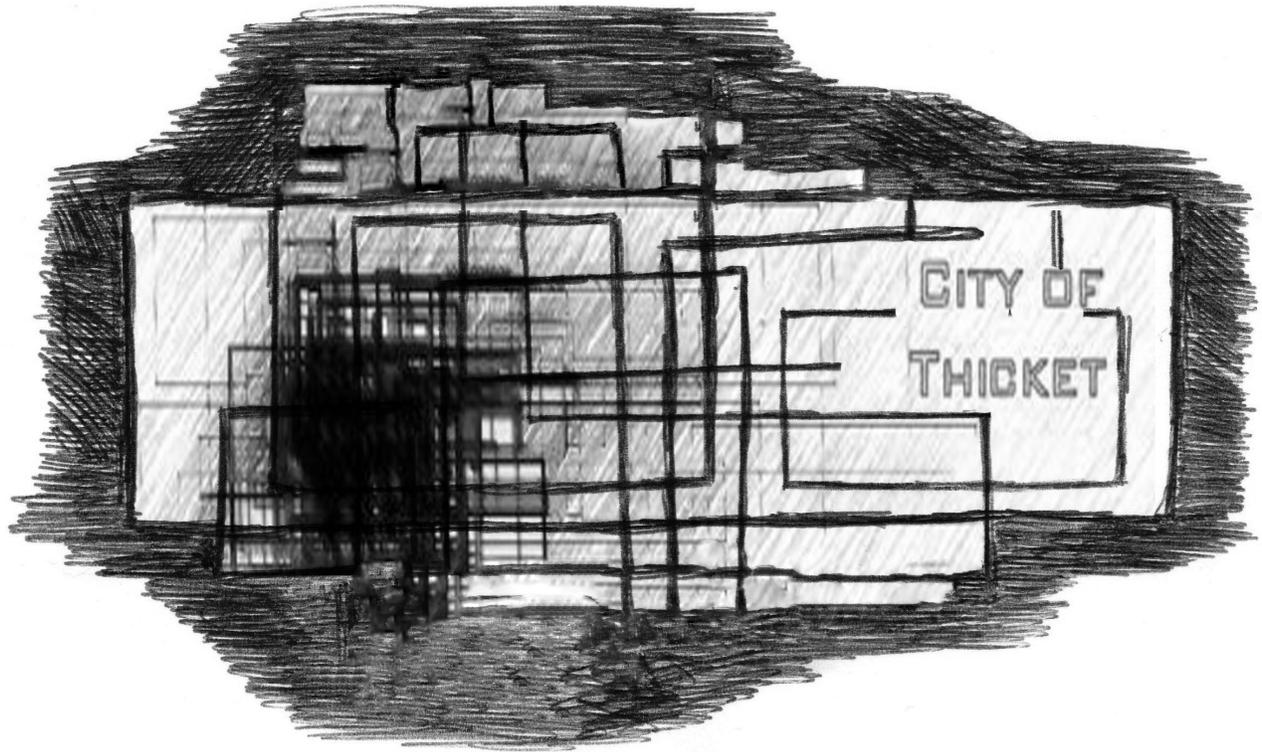
Also by A T Veatch

City of Thicket

Born in Silver

Divided by Metal

Tome of the Resewn





**NB 157 (2218 A.D.)
Somewhere in the West Sector**

Chapter 1

Celebration of Change

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“For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us.”

Romans 8:18

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The scalpel is extremely sharp and the slightest movement in the wrong direction could paralyze Shentel's entire left arm. The pain is on the verge of becoming unbearable and Shentel is now wishing she had gambled for the anesthesia. An embarrassing tear appears in the duct of her eye. She could have gone into the government health tower to miss this pain in a much more public way, and risk getting arrested. Shentel bites down on her lower lip, suffering through the next couple of hours, and will most likely never get caught.

She looks down along the landscape of her arm, that lays alongside the operating table, also known as a kitchen counter top. Her left wrist, and the blood that quickly leaks from the many large incisions, fills the air with the taste of a familiar metal. She closes her eyes, trying to block out the pressure and immense pain of having someone dig a surgical blade into her flesh, removing sections of skin and muscle for a benefit that slowly slips from memory.

The tiny room is extremely bright. It is illuminated by numerous archaic light fixtures that hang from cables, as well as a carpet of LED light bulbs across the entire ceiling, as if the room was originally built to gradually lighten the human race's pigmentation. An inconspicuous array of copper pipes line the inside of the walls that generate an electrical hum, creating a white noise that Shentel uses to keep her worries at bay.

Uncomfortable and capable of passing out from the pain, Shentel mumbles to the surgeon standing next to her. The surgeon's gown is made up of white cloth matching the off-centered paleness of the walls, blending his features, almost allowing him to vanish completely into the moments of Shentel's hysteria. His rubber gloves are dowsed in patches of splattered blood, accenting the shaky scalpel that dives back and forth against Shentel's wrist.

Shentel must remind herself why this is for her benefit. She must look at the surgeon through her newly watery eyes and trust his skill with connecting her consciousness to such a small device. She must think of something else to block out the pain. She tries to remember her mother and the way she held on to her hand. She tries to hold on to the

feeling of having someone who can make everything better again. A kiss on a scrapped knee, a palm on a troubled shoulder, and a gentle hug to melt the hard times is all Shentel wishes to endure.

She must realize that once this procedure is over, she will be able to connect to the rest of the city. Soon, she will be able to blend in. Soon she, like her friends, will be able to pay for meals, record her dreams, make cellular calls, and monitor her health with less than a touch of a button. She will be able to use the new device in her wrist as a multimedia platform to enjoy, or at least digitally preserve, the last of her teenage years for others to remember her.

She will have to remember the positive outcome of such a risky operation. She cannot compare it to another tattoo without thinking she could possibly die from this operation alone. She could have invested the time and credit to get her implant professionally installed, taking the chance of being caught and thrown in with the rest to be exiled. Instead, she has chosen to have her comp-uzync installed in an unlicensed medical apartment by a man who has more scars on his arm than Shentel would like to see.

The surgeon ties off the last stitch and Shentel jerks her entire shoulder back in pain. The skin surrounding the dark metal in her wrist is bright red, throbbing in pressure simply by the neighboring air. Shentel straightens her back and tries to look around the still room, but her attention is quickly redirected to her wrist. She reaches with her available hand, unable to hold back the urge to rub the bareness of her stitches, or maybe pick away at the puffiness of her scanty skin.

“Brave as you may be, you shouldn't be touching that.”

The surgeon laughs as he grabs her right wrist before it meets the exposed incision, pulling her arm backwards, away from reach.

“You can't tell me what to do!” Shentel violently pulls her arm from his grip, and tries again to touch her wound. “You don't know me.”

“Your system isn't clean, and neither are you.” The surgeon sarcastically states, bringing about another level of awkward silence in the room, and Shentel's massaging fingers to a halt.

He wraps the open wound on her wrist with several passes of white cloth that quickly saturates in several points along her stitches. He immediately removes his bloody gloves. After dropping them into a waste receptacle, he pulls a tablet from a nearby bin of random electronics, pressing a button on its side and smudging his thumb into the

glass surface. "I gave you a second injection of HDCV. As far as this surgery goes, you need to keep it clean for the next 48 hours."

"Is that what my chart says?" Shentel leans forward, trying to see the illuminated screen that he is reading.

"No, it's what science says." He flicks his finger across the screen several times without looking up. "Did you bring the replacement update?"

"What update?" Shentel repeats the surgeon's outspoken internal dialogue.

"Yeah, the replacement update." He looks up and corrects himself with a quick shake of his head. "No, wait. Imprint."

Shentel stares into the distance, blank to remembering any replacement update, nor any Imprint.

"I need the replacement update and Imprint Drive to finish up."

"My unit's not going to be ready?"

"Not really," he smiles as he tries to distance himself. "Ready blank units are not easy to find."

"What did you find?" Shentel straightens up, pulling her injured wrist into her lap. "Don't tell me this is someone's harvested."

"Well, your harvested, now." He tries to make a joke out of the moment but is silenced in Shentel's look of anguish. "Look, there's no damage. I tied it off the best I know. The ligaments just need time to be properly anchored. Maybe another software update. Maybe another patch. Definitely need to tweak my Cleaner whenever I get the time." He starts to trail off in volume as he criticizes his own work.

"What does all that mean?"

"Well," he looks down at the tablet screen and scrolls through another 4 pages. "It means that you need a cleaning, reboot, and-" he pauses, "Imprint Drive."

"I better!" Shentel gestures to her bloody wrist. "I'm not doing this again!"

"Yeah, true." He acknowledges the implant with a nod of his head, hesitating to answer honestly. "That's an old model. If you want those automatic updates, you'll need a new OS."

"You're cheap. You know that?"

"Funny, I did know that. You'll have to get it activated too. I hear it's like getting someone to sign off on your sovereign citizenship. Good luck with that."

Bordering the urge to scream and cry, the pain in Shentel's left wrist is becoming more than she can withstand. She wonders what sort of mess she has brought upon herself. She thinks back to her group of rebellious friends who encouraged her to get this implant. They assured her that this surgeon was the best in the underground market. They told her that once she became connected like everyone else, she would feel closer to her creator.

Shentel tries to justify the throbbing pain with the circumstances surrounding the

outcome of the procedure, focusing on her friends and everyone's attempt to get back into the city. She feels as if she has no one left to trust.

“Then use the Cleaner and let's get this thing going.” Shentel holds her wrist up with determination in her eyes.

“If I remember correctly,” he turns away from her, heading towards a large machine. “I have her right here. Fresh out the box.”

The surgeon drags a metal piped contraption on wheels across the kitchen floor. The dull shine in the metal surface does little to reassure Shentel of its recent maintenance check and its own cleaning. Hanging from a canopy of wired mesh are two mechanical arms that look to devour human arms, with the intent of cleaning the comp-uzync system. The mechanical arms lead into a large liquid filter, and separation chamber, connected to a computer station.

“I thought you were joking, being an asshole.”

“Oh, science is never a joke. It can tease, and force its way into your head, but in the end, it's all about the bottom line.” The surgeon grabs one of the mechanical arms from its home on the vine. “It's not like you have another way.”

“With that?” Shentel looks at the mechanical arm, raising her brow and voice to carry her shock.

“Of course.” He looks up at the nest. “You got something newer?”

“I'm going to pass.”

“Pass?” The surgeon hangs the mechanical arm back on the vine. “Skip step one and go directly to step two and three?”

“Yeah.”

The surgeon slowly approaches Shentel, tracing her figure with his eyes.

“Show me your Imprint Drive.” He smiles, revealing for a single moment, a glint of insanity in his eyes.

“I don't have one.” She nervously answers.

He chuckles once, “Pity.”

“Why?”

He grabs another tablet from a different crate of electronic devices. “You'll definitely need one.”

“Can't I get one from you?”

“Do I look like citizen registration?” He lifts the tablet and his hand, holding up her rhetorical question like a banner of stupidity. “Just turn yourself in,” he goes back to looking at his tablet, ignoring her question. “They'll hook you up.”

“Now I know you're joking.” Her tone deepens, sounding sarcastic.

“Okay!” He smiles. “I know a guy who owes me a favor.”

Shentel rolls her eyes and drops her eyebrows, thinking of the logic behind his suggestion. "I'm not meeting your friends. Just fix my arm and let me go."

"You're pretty and smart," he pushes his glasses higher on the bridge of his nose, looking at the dirty nature of her clothes. "Definitely going to help my reputation."

"What reputation? You butchered my arm! You told me you had experience in this type of thing. I trusted you!" Shentel hops down from the kitchen table and shuffles her footsteps forward. "You told me it would be ready to go and now I have to get it fixed because you can't finish? What kind of doctor are you?!"

"Hey. I never said I was a doctor." He holds up both hands as a gesture to prevent Shentel from seeing him as a threat. "I just use the guy's name."

Shentel grabs his coat, tightening the fabric around his collar.

"Okay," he starts as if conceding to the confrontation. "Fine. No charge. You can keep your credits. That's fair, right?"

"What's fair is that you lose more than what you've done to me." She releases her grip on his coat, pushing him away.

"Look," he quickly moves away, taking a seat in a nearby chair. "My friend will clean you up and give you an Imprint Drive."

"Why should I believe you? So I can let him have a go at me too? Be another link in the chain? I can take care of myself!"

"You're not going to be able to get past SCS," he shakes his head in disapproval to his own offer. "But I know this chick with blue-"

"I said I can handle it!" Shentel cuts him off. "You've done enough. I'm pretty sure that I can stay on my toes for two days without a crutch like you."

"Okay. That's fine." He casually throws his hands up in acceptance, standing from the cushioned seat and walking past her. "Don't be surprised if you forget who you are," he mumbles.

She watches him walk away, "I'm not broken."

Shentel shuffles past the surgeon, knocking her shoulder into his arm. He steps to the side, turning to witness Shentel headed for the door. His impulse should be to confront her and demand she pay for the job he completed. His impulse should be to turn her into the authorities for seeking him out and asking for an illegal installation of a device given only to those born within city limits. He should stop her before she runs off, perhaps warning her of the dangers behind an infected wound, susceptible to airborne disease and bacteria.

He should also stop her before she decides to turn him in to the Silver Collar Society herself. Before he can say a word about anything in his thoughts to make his decision, Shentel is pulling a lever near the door, accessing the internal mechanism of the apartment's entry-port. The twisting gears grind against a metallic surface and the

harmonious chirps of a locking code resonates from inside the walls. The circular door opens by unraveling at the center, pulling apart like a star burst of cement and reseeded-steel.

Shentel steps outside of the surgeon's room, which is in the guise of a residential flat, adjacent to several other apartments of Thicket's legal citizens. The décor of the floor's hallway is doused in a dreary color of beaten down brown. The ceiling is lined with thick silver pipes which run in the same direction, branching off into a compartment above each entry-port, exchanging heat, water, and oxygen into hundreds of apartments.

Shentel staggers down the hallway, holding her operated wrist close to her stomach. Her healing pains are stronger now that her rapid heartbeat is no longer distracting her from the throbbing of an open wound. With her free hand, she reaches for a button on a nearby wall, calling the elevator up 16 floors. The sound of an approaching transport reminds Shentel of the time she usually spends with her friends. Their shenanigans would always upset the registered adults around her, sickening them to the point of ignoring her, forcing Shentel and several thousands more like her to fend for themselves against those who would take advantage.

Shentel remembers an episode which included her best friend, Thumbs, and the two sisters who went everywhere together. Everyone was on board an elevator headed toward the penthouse floor of an upper elite district. Thumb's plan was to follow the unsuspecting registered woman in the same elevator and fake the idea of being separated from their parents. As soon as she let them into her apartment, the thievery would begin. Shentel and her friends saw no boundaries when it came to survival. They figured, if the city was to consider them as outcasts of society, scavengers of the outer wastelands, their compensation came in the form of thievery and fraud.

When Shentel steps into the open transport to take her down to the surface level, an eerie feeling stretches across her shoulder blades. She thinks about her father and what he could be doing at this very second. She thinks about the years she slaved to make sure she could survive without other people needed validation for her existence.

The monitors on the walls of the elevator splash the words WELCOME and PLEASE MOVE TO THE CENTER OF THE TRANSPORT, capturing the literal demands of a voice Shentel has always considered more robotic than human. The elevator's gravity drops and for a second the blood dripping from her surgical wound stays in her wrist. The transport plummets to the surface level in less than 10 seconds, gliding into a cradled stop at the bottom.

The monitors splash an exit message for Shentel to HAVE A GLORIOUS DAY,

reminding her to adhere to all SCS rules and regulations, and to get her cycled Compuzync check-up. For the first time in her life, the latter reminder pertains to her. The elevator door opens with a pressurized release. The smells of the city streets invade the tiny transport, clouding Shentel's senses with the memory of rusty metal and a heated meal. She begins walking away from the elevator and the door behind her seals shut, returning to the upper levels of the building.

The city of Thicket is crowded, jammed with thousands of pedestrians who wander the streets, commuting back and forth from their homes to the workplace. Woven like a tapestry, the alleyways and suspended walkways in each sector connect different cultures and religions. Marketplaces are like zip codes that weed through the city like a loose thread, stitched into the fabric of Thicket's elaborate design. The center of the city is the population's focal point that takes the form of an extravagant cathedral, shoehorned by the encroaching towers of the East and West Sector. The cathedral is rumored to be constructed entirely out of gold but it has never been a stopping point for Shentel or any of her friends.

Against her deafening judgment, she marches on, ignoring the cathedral and keeping her wrist tight against her stomach. Knowing that she is dragging her feet in the right direction is all the faith she needs. The blood, still seeping from her stitches, begins to create the feeling of her arm loosening at the seams. She feels the need to begin running to numb out the pain, but the energy she had last night was more than she can claim now. She reaches the far corner of the East Sector, feeling the weight of her decision to leave in anger.

Most of the East Sector is dirty. The steam-exhaust vents in this part of the city are not hidden, but built on the surface of the neuro-metal pavement for pedestrians to step around. These machines are necessary for survival, supplying the people of Thicket with oxygen and heat. They accent the city's need for repair with an abundance of rust and flammable grease that collects off the vent's openings.

Shentel walks past dozens of these vents on her way, each machine in the East Sector dirtier than the last. She counts her steps to an alleyway that is known by many as the place to be at night. The pain in her wrist keeps her eyelids fluttering as she approaches a large circular door, guarded by a muscular man who refuses to let her in. He holds out a hand, preventing Shentel from taking another step.

“Not tonight, Hopper. Please?” Shentel cracks her neck with a tilt of her head, positioning her wrist closer to her stomach.

“Can't let you in this time, Lips.” He lowers his hand, crossing his arms and gesturing to the line that has formed around the corner.

“Are you serious?!” She looks at the line of young adults who are waiting patiently to get into the club. “But I don't have time for this!” She raises her arm to Hopper's face, splashing several drops of blood against his clean, white shirt and freshly shaved chin. “I've got to get in now!”

The brutish man of a bouncer lets his shoulders fall back, rolling his eyes into the back of his head and letting out a huff of acceptance. He reaches behind him and pulls a long lever built into the door frame. The pressurized seal of the entry-port releases a gust of steam, twisting and turning gears from the inside of the structure.

“You owe me a shirt,” he remarks.

“I'll get you two.” She slaps his chest.

The sounds from inside the venue pour into the street, giving those waiting in line a glimpse to the excitement awaiting them. One girl, who is standing at the front of the line turns to the man behind her and compliments the repetitive music with her high levels of expectations, anticipating that once inside the ESC experience, it will only get better.

Shentel enters the East Sector Club and is immediately bombarded with a sea of dancing figures who occupy the center of the large room. The darkness of the entrance works well with the dull hue of the city streets, but the club opens with mirrored walls and strobe lights of cycled colors tracing circular patterns along the floor, up the walls, and across the ceiling. In the darkness of the club every color flickers, and the salvaged disco ball that spins from the ceiling returns the same brilliance.

Shentel makes her way through the crowd, keeping her wrist elevated and protected from those with a violent dance routine. Lining the club's dance floor are bustling tables, hovering above machines that suspend their flat surfaces with a series of magnets, giving off a floating effect. Around one table is a group of young teenagers who Shentel recognizes as her friends.

She approaches and Thumbs is the first to speak over the conversation already taking place between the three of them at the table.

“Shentel!” He opens his arms, hoping to get a long-awaited hug. “Where have you been?”

“Take a wild guess.” Not appeased with the way her day is going, Shentel slumps past Thumbs and his open arms to an empty seat near the other people at the table.

“Okay, okay.” He lowers his arms and returns to his seat, raising his eyebrows at the two girls who are speechless.

“Did you get it done?” Anneli, a brunette who looks identical to the blonde sitting beside her, leans in on the table, directing her question to Shentel who has her eyes closed.

“You mean, did I get it over with?” Shentel holds up her bloody wrist. “Yeah, and he did such a good job that I thought I'd go back and get my chest modified.”

Anneli cringes at the sight of Shentel's wrist and the blood dripping on the floating table between them. Anneli's black vest with white netting down her chest implies she is at the age when her sense of style is more important than the quality of her friends. Her arms are covered in garments of sheer black cloth, tightened above her comp-uzync. Dark brown and red bangs cover her eye brows, framing her long face with the intense matching color of her cosmetics. Her lower lip is pierced with a single metal pearl, glistening in the dance club's colored lights.

Thumbs raises a hand to his chin, scratching the stubble that will soon become a beard.

“I get it, Shen,” Thumbs moves closer to Shentel, swinging his chair in her direction and placing his hand gently on her left shoulder. “You can't hold it against him for trying.” He lightly squeezes her shoulder which would not normally cause pain.

“Damn! Ease up will you!” Shentel pulls away, rubbing the tendons in her collar. “I should be blaming you for forcing me to get it done.”

Shentel looks down at her swollen wrist and the bandage that is soaked in blood. She lays her arm on the table, allowing the weight of her appendage to be carried by the floating structure. Laci, the blonde and younger of the two girls, leans across the table with an open mouth, gawking at the intensity of the wound.

“Don't take it out on me! I didn't force you.” Thumbs raises his voice, scooting his chair back to its original position. “I told you that you needed to get it done. I pointed you in one direction. What's the matter? Can't come up with your own plan?”

“Damn it, Thumbs!” Laci backhands Thumbs in his chest. “Can't you see that she's in pain?”

“Yeah, Thumbs!” Anneli harmonizes with a look of disappointed sympathy. “Shentel needs to get that thing fixed.”

“Okay! Okay!” Thumbs throws up his hands like he wants no part in the conversation. “I'm sorry. He should have done a better job!”

“Maybe he can finish if we go back?” Laci suggests with a innocent smile.

“That won't work.” Shentel looks off into the distance, depressed by her own answer. “I need to get it cleaned.”

“That's ridiculous!” Thumbs interrupts. “What did you pay him for?”

“He didn't charge me.” Shentel looks across the table at the two girls who sit close enough to be identical twins sharing a hip, and then back again at Thumbs. “You didn't tell me I needed an Imprint Drive.”

“I thought you knew,” Thumbs smiles.

Anneli and Laci share a troubled look.

“Okay, this is what we'll do.” Thumbs scratches his chin, thinking of a plan to settle the disagreement. “I know a guy in Wesec who owes me a favor. He built his Cleaner out of-”

“I'm not going with any more of your ideas!” Shentel looks up from her wrist and the white bandage that is now bright red, barking at Thumbs and his opinion. “I'm going my own way! I'll find a Cleaner myself!”

“Yeah, sure.” Thumbs laughs under his breath. “You can't do anything without me. Where are you going to find a Cleaner? You can't even convince the one you had to complete the job. What makes you think you'll be able to find someone to let you use one?”

“Because!” Shentel stands from her seat abruptly, slightly wobbling from the lack of blood. “I know who to trust!” She departs from the table and wanders into the crowd, pushing against thrown up elbows and tossed hair.

“Whatever.” Thumbs leans back in his chair, stretching his arms around Laci and her older sister who is not happy with the way Shentel is leaving on her own.

“You're an asshole, Thumbs.” Anneli moves out from under his arm and follows Shentel onto the dance floor.

The club is packed full of teenagers who are dripping in sweat and fed up with authority. Their raging hormones keep them dancing into the early hours of the morning. The more they all dance, the more popular the East Sector Club becomes. Half way across the dance floor, Anneli reaches Shentel who is moving slowly through the rhythmic mob. She places her hand on Shentel's shoulder, directing her to turn around.

“Shen,” she tries to speak up over the loud music. “Don't listen to Thumbs. He doesn't want anyone to be successful. If he can't have it his way, he won't let anyone else find a way. It's just who he is now.”

“I don't care about him, Neli.” Shentel holds her bloody wrist close to her stomach. “He could wander the wastelands on his own and it wouldn't make me want to help.”

“I know how you feel.” Anneli looks back at the table and her younger sister who is tightly snuggled into her boyfriend's chest. “I can't get Laci away from him.”

“Doesn't she see through his games? I would think your sister's smarter than that.” Shentel tries to stand on the tips of her toes to get a better view of the overly attached couple, but shuffles her steps forward and back into place.

“She's smart, but-” Anneli looks away from the spectacle, focusing on a couple

dancing close to her who are just as intimate as her sister in the corner of the club, and then watching Shentel's balance.

“But what?”

“She doesn't know what she wants.” Anneli steps closer to Shentel, bridging the space. “She's too young. I don't think she's doing the right thing.”

“You're five minutes older than her!” Shentel cannot help but mock Laci's older sibling. “Don't act like her mother and tell her what she can and can't do! You're starting to sound like him.”

Shentel leaves Anneli and makes her way through the dancing crowd. With each step, the room continues to spin but for the wrong reasons. The bright lights begin to cross in fading colors, blending together in a blinding reaction to Shentel's loss of blood. She reaches out and grabs the shoulder of the nearest dancer, leaning on a tall, slender boy with long black hair. Anneli rushes up to catch the other arm of Shentel's collapsing figure.

“You're in no shape to do anything on your own.” Anneli adjusts Shentel's arm to carry her weight. “And I don't care if you say no. You need help. I don't care what Thumbs says, or even my sister for that matter,” Anneli takes a step toward the club's exit with Shentel's arm over her shoulder. “I'll take care of you.”

“The lights are hurting my eyes!” Shentel uses her hand to block the strobe of colors in the dance club.

“I'm taking you to someone who can help.”

“My head hurts.” She can barely let the word escape her lips.

“I know a Cleaner.”

“I'm not going with Thumbs.” Shentel tries to form a complete sentence but she can hardly find the energy to lift her head.

“Thumbs doesn't know about this one. It's about finding the people who can point you in the right direction. Thumbs has been giving you advice for as long as you've known him. I think it's time for a change.” Anneli carries Shentel to the front exit where the circular entry-port opens with the pull of a long handle. “You have to trust me.”

“I trust you.” Shentel can barely keep her eyes open.

“Thanks.” Anneli smiles, accepting Shentel's compliment. “It may not look like it, but I don't have all the answers. Sometimes, I have to look up for guidance.”

Anneli carries Shentel past the line of people waiting outside. She passes Hopper at the entry-port who sees Shentel's limp condition and uncrosses his arms. Anneli shakes her head, redirecting him from helping.

“What are you talking about?” Shentel looks back at the outside of the East Sector Club while focusing her walking strength on the steps Anneli supports with a shoulder.

“A little bit of hope. A little bit of salvation.”

Anneli spots the crowded marketplace ahead, picking up speed as she carries her weak friend through the streets of vendors opening shop. She knows that if they slow down or stop to catch a breath, they could be caught up in an unnecessary sale. She recognizes salespeople who offer the same merchandise but at different prices. The longer they walk through the marketplace, the higher the prices climb and the harder the vendors push their products on unsuspecting customers.

“Salvation? I don't know. The whole thing seems-” Shentel pauses. “A bit strange. I don't want-” Shentel pauses again, rapidly blinking and taking a deep breath. “I don't think-” She stops again, unable to finish her sentence.

“Are you okay?”

“No, I think I'm going to be sick.”

Shentel steps forward from Anneli's support and huddles toward an exhaust vent that drains into a grate in the street. In a series of bursts, Shentel vomits, expelling the contents of her stomach into the drain. With each pause, she gasps for air, crying into her hair that has fallen around her face.

The loss of blood from Shentel's wrist continues to hinder her health, causing her headaches, blurred vision, and now an upset stomach. Anneli rushes to her side, grabbing Shentel's hair and tucking the dirty orange strands behind her ears, wiping the sweat that is accumulating on Shentel's forehead.

“Shen,” Anneli tries to find her eyes in the web of dangling hair. “You don't look good. We need to get you inside.”

Anneli looks around at the people who stare at the two young girls who are huddled in the corner. She sees the expression of disgust plastered on their faces, wondering if the hypocrites in them are oblivious to the mirrors they take for granted. In the distance, Anneli recognizes the tall steeple of the city cathedral. She then focuses back on Shentel, positioning her bleeding arm over her shoulder to support her weight again.

“We're not too far. You can make it.” She shifts her hip to strengthen her back.

“Home- Can't- Go- Alone-” Shentel mumbles into Anneli's neck.

“You won't be alone, Shen. I'll make sure of it.”

Anneli walks past the crowds who are gathered around the steps of the cathedral, past people of different ages and religions chattering on different levels of the elaborate staircase. She shifts the weight of Shentel's limp body a second time, making it easier to

ascend the steps without making it more difficult for the one who is not capable of walking on her own.

At the top of the steps, a young man dressed in a black robe and a Silver Collar around his neck calmly invites Anneli and Shentel inside. Suddenly, he is witness to the blood soaked in Shentel's bandages and alters his movements with a sense of urgency, rushing to help Anneli carry her the rest of the way. Anneli takes a step back and watches the young priest take control of Shentel's journey through the 14-foot entry-port.

“Neli!” Shentel notices that she is no longer being carried by her friend but by a stranger in black attire. “Don't leave me!”

“I'm not leaving you, Shen.” She watches as Shentel is supported by the young priest's arm, leading her deeper into the cathedral. “I'm going as far as I can.”

“As far as you can? I don't know what's going on!”

“You'll be fine!” Anneli raises a hand to wave at Shentel. “They'll fix you up. Just don't fight them. Believe them. Find me when you wake up.”

“Anneli?” Shentel looks back with nervous tears in her eyes, ignoring the young, attractive priest who is smiling optimistically at her situation. “Don't leave me with these people!” She starts to cry into her words. “You got to help me!”

“Remember me.” Anneli keeps her hand up for Shentel to see.

“Don't leave me!”

With Shentel safely past the cathedral's threshold, six reseeded-steel blades emerge from the floor and fan the entry-port in a circular pattern. Shentel's words are cut off by the sound of a mechanical turbine tearing through the air between them.

Chapter 2

Stones of Kenya

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“Just as Sodom and Gomorrah and the surrounding cities, which likewise indulged in sexual immorality and pursued unnatural desire, serve as an example by undergoing a punishment of eternal fire.”

Jude 1:7

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A hundred forty miles from the city of Thicket, lightning crashes toward the desert floor. A red hue illuminates the night sky, casting a devilish shadow behind the ruins of Sacramento, California. Even after three centuries of devastating floods, destructive forest fires, shattering earthquakes, and the rising of the Pacific coastline, this center of the commercial district remains a home to the last of the 1848 Gold Rush.

Spanning the rough terrain of a scorched earth, the midnight storm blankets the only known passage between Thicket and its anchor. Rain containing a corrosive, falls in sheets over the land, erasing the footprints recently set by an elder capered in black. With each heavy step, he retraces the journey that saved his life. His silhouette cuts through the lunar fog, bringing to motion the only living creature on the recently drowned west coast.

Girdling the shores of Lake Tahoe, are the petrified figures of vultures, ravens, and bats. Once irritated long ago by the moon's reflection in the strong Alkali waters, these creatures now highlight the fate of humanity. With each burst of lightning, these stones of Kenya gleam like the immortal gargoyles of the ancient world, laying witness to the destruction of Thicket's future.

The stain of burning sulfur remains in the topsoil. Like the pillared ruins of a biblical stronghold, the rubble identified as old Sacramento illustrates the severity of neglect. Sandstorms wash in from the east while acidic rains tilt in from the west. The cloaked shadow braves the storm like a casual stroll, fearing nothing of the weather's arsenal. To many, he is thought to no longer exist. To more, he is deemed still a threat. To a select few, he is called the life-giving Father.

Chapter 3

Gradient Shades

..

“He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you.”

John 16:14

..

In the middle of the city, Shentel abruptly wakes in the back pew of the great cathedral. Anneli is nowhere to be found, having left Shentel to recover in a building she assumes to be her shelter, her refuge, and to those like Anneli's naive sister, a home close to the end of all things.

Shentel's arm still throbs with the pain from the prior day's botched surgery. She looks around the crowded cathedral, rubbing her left wrist. Looking down she notices the bandage is no longer soaked in red, but bright white and freshly wrapped. Her chin perks up as she hears words spoken not from the hundreds sitting quietly in every pew before her, but from the solitary man singing from the balcony above.

“Through him- With him- In him- With the unity-of-the-Ho-Oly-Spirit- All glory-and-honor-is-yours, almighty father- Forever and ever.”

The occupants of the cathedral seem to harmonize a response, collectively acknowledging the priest. Shentel watches people on her left fall to their knees, clasping their hands in prayer while people on her right remain standing with arms outstretched in praise. As if in a trance, they begin mumbling.

“Take your day in strength.” The priest above holds out his hands.

“Have a glorious day!” The people reply.

Those around Shentel begin to vacate the pews. By clusters of devoted patrons, the people exit through the large 14-foot door, leaving behind a silence that Shentel finds unsettling. She watches the priest abandon his balcony, dragging the train of his black robe down the staircase. He acknowledges her remaining presence, and as he approaches, Shentel shifts in her seat.

“My child,” the tall, elderly man, wearing a Silver Collar, speaks in a raspy voice. “Why are you still here?”

Shentel looks up at the balcony, hoping to make sense of his presence. Assuming a godly demeanor, she would rather him return to a safe distance. The balcony is assembled with pillar pieces of reseeded-steel, arranged in a haphazard pattern that

resembles the living vine. Her attention is drawn to the stained retro-glass murals that showcase the cathedral's exterior balance of light.

“I didn't ask to be brought here.” Her hands shake as she looks around.

“All God’s children are welcome. But you stay when all others leave. Why?”

She cannot help but break the seriousness of the situation by finding a slightly lighter approach. “Because someone else thinks I need help.”

“Is that why?” He raises an eyebrow, cupping his hands together. “How's the wrist?”

“Feels better.”

“You know, surgical tampering is a serious offense.”

“What?!” Shentel's voice cracks as she begins to deflect, thinking back on her unprofessional operation. “I didn't do this!”

“We can't take any chances,” he turns and begins walking toward the staircase.

“Wait!” She reaches out to grab the priest’s robe. “I mean, you're not going to call SCS, right?”

“Where SCS is warranted. They are the scientific ones who can save us all.” He removes her hand from his robe.

“It's not about all that. Please, no more Collars. No more people like you.” Tears start to form in her eyes.

“People like me?” He looks offended.

“Well, I was hoping to avoid that,” she lowers her head. “I go my entire life not wanting to be taken in by a Collar and I wake up being lectured by one. If I can get my Implant Drive, I can forget all this and disappear.”

“Implant Drive?” He hesitates, touching a wrinkled forefinger to the Silver neuro-metal that circles his neck. “To install your new ID?” The priest starts to chuckle. Soon the chuckle intensifies like he is thoroughly amused by the thought of helping another illegal runaway.

The priest’s Silver Collar and thousands like it can be found in almost every corner of the city. Trusted as an accessory of authority, the Collar identifies those of extreme importance. Awarded to those citizens of Thicket, who have shown SCS the skills and mentality of a better tomorrow, the Silver Collar of each sector refracts light on a different spectrum.

For Mico, his Collar represents priesthood and communal hope, refracting a slight green tint in the sunlight. To Shentel, the Collar symbolizes a staple of political insurgence, no matter the color on the spectrum. To Shentel and the thousands living outside, a Collar is just another Collar when they all come out at midnight.

“But you’re here.” Mico shakes his head and looks back at the two humanoid statues near the entry-port. “Safe for now.”

“I still need to find a Cleaner.” Shentel gazes up at the stained glass. “I'll have

nightmares about that torture machine, but I don't think I can make it another day.”

“My child. Your medical needs are not without wanting. If you get caught without an ID installed, we can't help you.”

Shentel's shoulders fall forward as if disappointed in his words. She stands from her seat and slumps over to one of the statues, placing her dry hands on the cold, gray stone. The smooth surface compliments everything about the city, including the Collars that reside within its walled limits.

“Then what's the point?” Shentel looks up at one of the statues, staring into the stone's vacant gaze. “I can't get an Imprint without turning myself in.”

“If you want my honest opinion, it's this. There's nothing new in the world. There's nothing much going on today than what has not been happening for thousands of years,” the priest shuffles his steps as he approaches. “I can imagine a lot of beautiful things and I can do the same for the horrible. But that's because I've seen them firsthand. But what I can't imagine now is the world without SCS.”

“Sure,” Shentel whips her head around. “Let me just ask them for an ID.”

Shentel's height is no taller than the priest's Collar. Her mud-stained garments look to fit someone of double stature, sinking in folds around her ankles. Her slightly orange hair is pulled back in dust-filled braids with smeared marks of dried blood under her nose. Accumulated saliva rests in the corner of her mouth. She has tattooed on the side of her neck a set of bright pink lips. Both her hands are sullied and worn, like she has worked her entire life on a nutria-farm.

She glances down at Mico's hands, which are clean and inviting. She hears in his voice a glimmer of optimism when he speaks of SCS. Shentel pictures herself alone in a dark room without a rescuer on the way. She tries to think of a possible way the people of Thicket would believe SCS is a modern savior. She tries to imagine the thousands who attend service simply to hear the word of God. She thinks of her mother and the few moments she had to save those who tried to escape the clutches of SCS.

“You have no idea how far back SCS reaches.” Mico's voice grows perplexed.

“I didn't ask for a history lesson.” Shentel turns around and crosses her arms, keeping her bandage above the pressure of her pride.

“Maybe this is something you need to know. Near the end of the twenty-second century, humanity experienced more than its share of natural disasters.”

Mico points to each of the cathedral's windows of reassembled stained glass. The postmodern murals depict earthquakes, tsunamis and tornadoes. They illustrate stories of unsurpassed wild fires, the flooding of coastal cities, and severe desertification. His worn tone comes down on Shentel's shoulders like a heavy mist.

“Most of these events stretched our population to the verge of extinction.”

Survivors of the fortunate upper class and those left scattered across the world’s five remaining continents came together. Official titles were replaced with unofficial duties. Leaders became followers of the convicted while the last of mankind fashioned their final city. Those who wore Silver Collars became engineers and those responsible for the city’s state of morality followed under the standard of the Silver Collar Society, an organization originally designed to better the last of mankind.

“When SCS took over, the plan was supposed to be about the people. They introduced the cathedral that would unify everyone's beliefs, ending the separation of spiritual order. They promised a new way of life. They promised a conclusion to religious conflict. With the help of the church, SCS was the savior who promised to protect us.” Mico softens his nature and proceeds to the front row pew.

“What do you mean, promised?” Shentel moves after him. “SCS didn't save us. They're keeping us alive. They're destroying society. SCS wants to clean us out. I used to think I was safer outside, living with the other fucking absconders-”

“Come now! We’ll have none of that language here. You need to turn yourself over to a higher order.” He takes a step to the side, inviting Shentel to sit. “God, if you remember, is the one with the plan.”

Shentel hesitates at first, watching the way his tired body succumbs to the weight of reclining. Mico’s black garment sinks in folds on the pew, barely covering the front of his toes when he sits. Shentel looks around the quiet amphitheater, finding no use in declining the offer to join him and thinking, only if no prayer is involved.

“Shentel. Do you know God has a plan for you? A revised plan?” Mico stares off to the front of the church with both hands resting open in his lap.

“How do you know my name?” Shentel frowns, thinking maybe she hesitated for a good reason.

“My child, you may not have an Imprint Drive installed in your unit, but I know you. You have many names and we have come to know the day when all our flock will return.” He sustains his gaze forward.

“You really believe God is able to help?” Shentel breaks the calm, squinting her eyes in skepticism. “You know? More than a voyeur?”

“For our sake, let’s hope not.” Mico returns his attention and chuckles briefly. “No, God has already presented himself in a new way.”

The Silver Collar priest rolls up his right sleeve to reveal a comp-uzync surgically embedded in his wrist. The clean, thin border around the consol-vert’s screen is a sign that his unit was installed in a legal, hygienic laboratory. Most illegal implants done on

the city streets end up looking like Shentel's, whose comp-uzync appears infected and previously owned.

Shentel rubs the bandage of her own comp-uzync casing, wondering if the necessary upgrade is worth the digital assurance it will give her. Sure, it has the storage capacity for every bit of digital information, but the comp-uzync device is connected to her nervous system. She feels the start-up and shutdown process like falling asleep and waking up.

The consol-vert that operates as a complex circuit board and cradle is constructed with a neuro-metal casing. This casing houses a small, touch sensitive device that can display amplitudes of visual entertainment on its projected surface. Shentel sits on the edge of her seat in the cathedral pew, thinking of her comp-uzync and the pain she endured while receiving the implant.

"The comp-uzync is a fascinating thing." Mico focuses on his arm. "They have opened the door to the lode of our existence. Thanks to SCS, we just may have found our link to God."

Shentel sits in silence, tripping over the memory of nearly fainting in the East Sector Club, unable to accept the priest's claim about God's new plan. He could have been babbling after that fully booked sermon, or he could have been sober. Shentel did not want to experience the difference.

"How old are you, fifteen now? For the past several decades, followers as young as you even," he assumes with a smile. "Have come to this place in search of God's truth. We get Mormons and Baptists, Buddhists and Pagans. We even get the occasional Hindu and Muslim, but we don't turn them away. We are all children of God."

"The people I know who came here, walked away lobotomized." Shentel keeps her expressions to a minimum, refusing to smile.

"No, my child. No one was ever lobotomized. Their hope was revised!" Mico lets his voice carry.

"What if I don't believe you?"

"Has God ever steered you wrong?"

"Your God is wrong!" Shentel stands from her seat to shout over the calm priest. "I'm better off praying to the yellow star in this solar system, rather than asking your God for advice."

"Calm yourself! Never say such things! God exists to those who choose to receive." He gestures for Shentel to return to her seat, "And SCS can show you how. If you would only let them."

"Let them?" Shentel continues to stand. "How? By giving up a part of myself? I've

seen what happens to people who fall in line with SCS. None of them believe in anything anymore!”

Shentel clenches her fists as she speaks what she believes to be the truth in a desolate world. Everywhere she travels in the city of Thicket, she assumes pedestrians crowd the streets without recognizing a higher order of creation. Everyone from her past who has come to have his or her hope renewed was flushed of all their compelling need to believe in anything but what SCS wants them to believe.

The people of Thicket, in view of Shentel's young ignorance, are easily persuaded to purchase items that do them no good. They are manipulated to think a certain way. According to Shentel's narrow view of the world, the people of Thicket have quickly forgotten about their ability to make a daily decision.

“The people still believe. They believe in God. They believe in each other. They also believe in SCS.” Mico pushes a button on his comp-uzync, which illuminates the entire device cradled in his consol-vert. “By way of connection, SCS can channel your beliefs and in turn, they will open your eyes to the truth.”

The priest's comp-uzync flickers as he speaks, almost mimicking each syllable that escapes his vocal chords. He runs his fingers along the comp-uzync's surface as if the gentle touch helps him recall the words that seem scripted to Shentel.

“You just got that implant, did you not?”

“How did you know?”

“You said you need a Cleaner. It wasn't installed properly. Illegally harvested. Locked in Coroner mode. Am I getting close?” He stands from his seat and approaches the staircase.

“This is a joke, right?” Shentel looks to be running short on time by the way she digs her dirty, chipped fingernails into the seat of the pew, looking around the cathedral for anyone who may enter in silence.

“Think of your time here like an upgrade.” He ascends to the balcony. “A connection must be made. God must be found.”

Mico turns from the balcony's edge and approaches the large, reseeded-steel altar. He presses a button on the side of the altar and a compartment slides open, revealing a small black cube.

“What are you looking for?” Shentel tracks Mico's movement as he returns to the front row pew with the cube on his lap.

“It's a secret,” he whispers.

“That's neuro-metal.” Shentel scoots forward to see its tar-like pattern of dark neuro-

metal, reaching out to make contact but being swatted away. “Isn't it?”

“Shentel, I need to be able to trust you.” Mico runs two fingers along the topside of the black cube, creating a growling sort of purr for its wake sensor.

“I swear.” Her eyes widen, hoping to convince him that she can keep a secret. “I live under the painted rock of the violet ultra.”

“Do you know what this is?”

Shentel thinks deeply on the sight of the comp-ucube, but her mind starts to wander. She ponders her existence and equates her time left, always concluding that life today is because of SCS and how a self-indulged government is controlling her decisions and making it more miserable than living needs to be. She shakes her head.

“You could call this a gift with an extra-regular ability to share with the world. With this device, the church has been able to step away from SCS.”

Shentel has a hard time swallowing the priest's definition of a gift. She knows the comp-uzync is now a part of her, like a direct connection into the human soul, but she does not like the idea of being manipulated by an outside source. She looks over the bandage covering her own comp-uzync in comparison to Mico's whose is fully responsive. She runs her finger along the neuro-metal that feels like a second skin. She thinks about her mother, her friends in need, her own security, and the chance of seeing any of them again. She also wonders what it would be like to have a religious connection to the mass population of Thicket.

Everyone in Thicket is after the same afterlife, or so everyone says they are. The Silver Collar Society, in cooperation with the city's cathedral, are after the same goal, to give the people what they want in the way of a personalized eternity. The most powerful organization on the planet offers the people of Thicket the chance to live forever for the sake of loyalty. Dying body parts are replaced with indestructible limbs, and diet is mandated, and yet the step-up with SCS's promise to give the people a step closer to heaven exists.

“I'm not cooperating with SCS.”

“Don't be ridiculous.” Mico pushes his hand through the air like he is moving the ridiculous question. “We're not SCS.”

“You're not?” Shentel covers her wrist.

“Not at all. They may have authority over what goes on here, but they don't interfere in our sermons because they don't want us diluting their science.” His comp-uzync illuminates, phases between several colors and fades. “If they knew what this cube is capable of, they'd demand access to the Arkermin Project.”

“You got me.” Shentel hooks a grin and lifts her eyebrows.

Mico closes his eyes and breathes in, “A penny for your thoughts.”

“What's a penny?” Shentel squints her eyes.

“Never mind,” Mico quickly opens his eyes and rolls them. “Think of the Arkermin Project as the collected dreams of Thicket. With this device, we can synchronize with the citizens of Thicket and harmonize our faith. You'll be joining us for mass, won't you?”

“Um,” she hesitates. “I don't think so.”

“In your condition, I don't recommend skipping another procedure.”

“You sound just like SCS.” Shentel pulls her comp-uzync arm in and protects the bandage.

“My child,” Mico pauses. “SCS will never take you in. Think of it this way. Your implant is deactivated. If you leave and wander away, you'll get picked up and detained because you're harboring a stolen device. You don't want that, right?”

Shentel is speechless.

Mico continues his story, petting the neuro-metal cube on his lap. “The Arkermin Project is more than an upgrade. We have a revision, and a relaunch. It's new for everyone, and I can promise you this.” He leans in to whisper, allowing his Silver Collar access to the sunlight that shines in through the reassembled stained glass in gradient shades of green and blue. “Your belief in a greater good is worth more than a single life that may or may not need saving. And by doing this, we're saving all of what we have left.”

Shentel hesitates to speak, but then finds the right words to say. “You want all of us on the same wave length, but I'm skeptical of this place and everything that comes from this corrupted religion.”

“You can't believe that. We are in no way responsible for the corruption in the world. We may live in a world influenced by SCS and must adhere to the rules that govern our city, but that doesn't mean this place can control you.” Mico continues to pet the neuro-metal cube that keeps a hold on Shentel's stare.

Shentel's gaze falls to the floor as if she feels ashamed of mentioning her own arrogance. “I feel like I'm being lead down the wrong path, but can't find the strength to stand up for myself.”

“Then being on the same wavelength may be the best thing for you.” Mico smiles while extending a thin, translucent nanotube from the cube's corner coating.

Mico motions for Shentel to show her comp-uzync. She begins by removing the edge of her bandage, pulling on a loose end that seems to be sticking to the rest of the dressing. With parts of her comp-uzync exposed, Shentel can feel the cool air against the device that feels more like an irritated sunburn. She moves her left arm close to the cube, and her comp-uzync starts to glow. He offers to Shentel the loose end of the carbon nanotube.

“Your DNA, if you please.” His eyes dash between Shentel and the tube derived from synthetic aerogel.

“For what?”

“For your safety, my child. This comp-ucube would recognize a decoy and scramble whatever is connected to it. Something as simple as saliva will do.” Mico sticks out his tongue and licks his forefinger, which Shentel mirrors with the nanotube and a frown of distaste.

The priest’s Silver Collar glistens with a blue-green sunlit glow. He takes the nanotube from Shentel’s hand and inserts it into the side of her consol-vert, through an access port that does not look made to receive any sort of cable. The cube purrs, and then growls. Shentel can barely tell the difference.

“I call this an implant baptism, the equivalent to a baptism by water. It will activate your device and bridge a connection to its database.” Mico sits back with the cube still on his lap, keeping both hands free.

“That’s it? No big show? Am I supposed to feel different?” Shentel lifts her arm, watching as the carbon nanotube slowly illuminates and floats upward, taking on the properties of defying gravity and turning into a kaleidoscope of bright colors. The faster the colors bleed, the darker the sunlit cathedral falls. To Shentel, the room sinks into the calming shadows of an abyss. Her eyes become heavy and the last she hears is the sound of the growling comp-ucube, purring to its creator’s clever design.

Chapter 4

Everyone Needs a Hero

..

“Let no one say when he is tempted, I am being tempted by God, for God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one.”

James 1:13

..

My name is Oscar Sunder. I reside in the year 2218, one hundred fifty-seven years after the New Beginning. As a citizen of this so-called outcast society among narcissistic thieves and anarchistic leaders who survived the end of the world numerous times over, I watch as civilization begins to evolve into a new system of cataloged hermits. Those who were once scared of the concluding Mayan calendar in 2012 took their own lives in the world’s largest, maddening suicide pact. I miss those clearly defined days, but I live in a time with no regard for its troubled past. We have been given a clean slate.

Soon after humanity was swept away in vast stretches, because of natural disasters and international wars, a single empire emerged as a treaty amid residual countries, working to better the rise of mankind’s numbers. Linking those gene trees that survived, including my ancestral best and sane cohorts, thousands felt hope renewed by the unifying of the few remaining countries that did not fall victim to corporate greed and religious corruption. They were given this city.

The streets in the city of Thicket are crammed in narrow rows and industrial avenues, making pedestrians the main attraction. Motorized vehicles are found decayed and only in the wasteland where every other artifact used in the early twenty-first century ended up. Everything in the city of Thicket is recycled, reconstructed, reseeded, reassembled, recoiled, and conceals an electromagnetic pulse.

Between each of the city’s many soaring circular buildings of reassembled-glass and reseeded-steel, alleyways house the smell of homeless vendors trying to sleep under florescent showgirl signs. Circulating link-rails, seen as horizontal chutes piercing each building, commute thousands of citizens each day. These suspended neon green tubes, passing through each floor, connecting each building in a never-ending frenzy of corporate congestion, are gift from the Silver Collar Society.

Sunlight supplies the city with a large portion of power, generating an electromagnetic pulse beneath our feet, but ultimate power does not originate from the stars. The geniuses who continue to envision Thicket as it should be feel an obligation

to showcase their authority in the form of corporate power. The prize for Thicket is to forget about our past, outlining the wasteland as a barren graveyard. Where the Silver Collar Society sees regret, I see death.

In Thicket, sex sells faster than caffeine discs. Physical entertainment of the old world survived into what has become the largest sponsored enterprise in all inhabited corners of the city. Everyone has an opinion about selling goods and services and my thoughts are no different. Because a partnership with the Silver Collar Society means dedication to its citizens, Silver Collar specialists can obtain sponsors for biotechnologies, neuro-surgeries, and chemo-nutrition farms, which supplement the basics for every living person in the city of Thicket.

During an era of ancient dreams and horrific nightmares, memories have come to be easy to download through the comp-uzync links in surgically implanted consol-verts. Once-hurtful remembrances are now capable of becoming completely obsolete, with the convenience of being recovered if needed, while boastful conjurations have become the hottest demand in underground retail. Silver Collar specialists are exceptionally trained to perform certain neuro-surgical operations on the subconscious, connecting human and machine with a split-ligament cellular-device.

As an experienced specialist with a curiosity for digital memories, my access to the research station in the North Sector of the city proves surprisingly profitable. I used to think that the future would play to my benefit unless the residents of Thicket stop believing in artificial hope.

Society's fixation for pleasure comes in many forms. In the last 57 years, the people of Thicket have successfully grown vertical farms inside several buildings in each sector. Although the basis for chemo-nutrition was perfected within a hybrid strain of the simplest plant to harvest, the people are now more than determined to reinstate a variety of vegetation into their meager diets.

Among the seeds collected from a Doomsday Vault in Canada, the cauliflower plant has proved the most beneficial to all our bio-mechanical needs. Grown on no more than a few registered floors in each sector, cauliflower had quickly become an obsession for bio-engineers and neuro-scientists who could manipulate the flowers' nervous system to supply the human body with all the nutrients it would need.

The growth of a cauliflower's intelligence is a map, and with a brain-like circuit board a Silver Collar scientist can develop the technology for neuro-metal and personalized devices such as the comp-uzync and consol-vert.

Unlike the Cauliflower press, the standard form of chemo-nutrient that the Silver

Collar Society provides to the public, the Cau-li tab is an artificial derivative of the cauliflower; an illegal substance that supplies its user with euphoric effects comparable to any prevailing stimulant and without the damaging aftereffects.

When the cauliflower's chemo-schematic mysteriously surfaced into distribution, neuro-hackers manipulated the plant's chemical compound, heightening its user's cognitive abilities and making it the most precarious and yet most rewarding chemo-nutrient available. As the people of Thicket adapted to the newest trend in biological satisfaction, my concept of authority intensified with each Cau-li tab I selfishly sold.

"I need more than a weeks worth this time." A lengthy, barely covered woman lays on a large absorbent platform, that doubles as her bed, her comp-uzync phasing between several colors in rapid, chaotic order.

"I told you before. Not until you settle up with what you owe me," I look at the empty wall as I button the top clasp on my shirt. "I'm about ready to cut you out completely."

"I know," she palms her disheveled hair to the side of her head as she stares at my back. "It's just that I have these friends-"

"No!" I turn around on the edge of the bed, holding up a finger to interrupt her. "Stop lying!"

The woman smiles and starts laughing, deflating her attempt with another fabricated story. Learning the pattern of her excuses has saved me from both volunteering information and donating my supply. Her fingernails are not cracked or dirty, but rather trustworthy and pristine.

"I promise to pay you," she sticks out her lower lip, blinking her eyes as if pouting in the aftermath of a bad joke.

"You said that last time." My eyes softly look into hers. "This stuff isn't free. You have to give me something."

"Haven't I already given you everything?"

My eyes tighten as I hold out my open palm. I accept a transaction drive with disdain and insert it into my comp-uzync. A transaction of five hundred bits is deposited into my account. I hand the drive back to her while opening a pocket in my clean desert suit, withdrawing a cylindrical container that is adorned with silver and brass. She watches as I press my thumb against a Silver plate on the side of the container and allow a single Cau-li tab to tumble into her open palm.

Although her nourishment is not my responsibility, I feel like I am being judged for selling her an illegal substance that will curb her appetite. She quickly swallows the tiny pill-shaped enzyme and thanks me before laying back.

As I return the cylindrical container under the folds of my desert suit, I notice the sound of her breathing as it quickens. Then she starts to whine. With a head full of dreams and my own severe anxiety, I shuffle my bare feet forward. In trying to remain calm and inconspicuous, I move toward the apartment's front entry-port.

For the last 16 years, I have been without a stable income. Making up for the credit lost, I sell Cau-li tabs to elite members of Thicket's upper-class as well as dealers and users on the street. As I move through the hallway in some tower in the North Alpha Sector, I am reminded of the SCS protocol that led to the discharge of my authority. Although I was given a choice to be exiled or executed, my commitment to SCS offered a third option to have my comp-uzync erased. Sixteen years ago, I was Oscar Sunder, bio-engineer, licensed neurosurgeon, applications director, an honorary A.L.L agent, and an inventor. I was the director of cauliflower research, but today I am an insignificant part of the North Alpha Sector's unlisted market. Outside the system, I am trivial, as is anyone not plugged into a social network. Without the backing of SCS, I have nothing.

Having to start my life over with no credit to my name, no medical history, and no way to prove who I used to be has been difficult. I have dealt with the impulse to jump through a panel of reassembled glass to plummet toward a more empathetic resting spot on the high-traffic street. I never wanted to deal with the truth, but as I walk alone, staring at the October skyline, I notice Thicket's bleak horizon pulling away, seeming more distant than ever before.

I massage the wrinkled folds on the back of my neck, hoping my thoughts do not turn into a migraine. Inside an elevator to take me to the highest link-rail level, I think about what my life used to entail. I remember ground-breaking theories but I can no longer provide proof to an explanation. I remember generation-changing inventions but have to accept that any experimental prototype I create is property of the Silver Collar Society.

As I enter a link-rail transport station, a pod passes through the tiny waiting room. I wait behind a guardrail for the next pod to appear. Link-rail passengers do not have to wait long for the next pod to come whizzing by, transporting no more than twenty at a time.

Link-rail tunnels stretch for miles through the city and operate every hour of every day, commuting thousands of citizens. The neon green tubes are made of a thick retro-glass, reassembled from hundreds of broken television screens and solar panel cells. The electric current that feeds each tube, similar to light running through an optic cable, controls the ever-moving pods.

Each pod is equipped with seats, ceiling handlebars, digital monitors, and windows

for viewing what is left of the outside world. I remember reading about crowded subway cars from long ago each time I enter an empty pod.

Matching the speed of the rotating platform, I walk into a moving pod and a message appears on both monitors, warning me of an approaching guardrail. I occupy the window on the opposite side, staring at the back of my hands as I feel propelled toward the West Sector.

The soothing vibration of electricity in the retro-glass around me makes me feel like I am never alone. The digital monitors signal the passing of each building. The link-rail will never stop but will allow citizens to depart at each transport station by simply walking onto the rotating platform as it approaches. I spend most of my travel time casting a stare over the horizon of the wasteland where it is considered humanity's only regret.

Not all my link-rail trips are enjoyable. Many trips are beyond crowded when I experience encountering the people of the upper-class who should really stay in their apartments. I see elderly women who are rude and unforgiving to everyone slower than them. I see young men who are selfish and unloving in their unsettling decision to ignore their significant others. I feel the constant need to mind my own business, burying my attention in my digital applications. The visual nuisances of today's generation are other people who are part traveler and part deranged wanderer. They would walk all over me if given the chance.

To the citizens who know my real name and side business, I am considered a professional troubleshooter of digital dilemmas. To the random person who rides with me on the transport, I am just another citizen of Thicket.

The people of Thicket all want the same thing, and we seem to walk over each other to obtain it. The Silver Collar Society wants to give us what we need, but fails to delivery in giving us what we want. Hoping to achieve full control of its inhabitants, SCS wants only the best for it people. Something I used to believe.

I may want a personalized eternity like everyone else, as stated by SCS's own promise, but their price is too much. People follow SCS because they believe there is no other way.

I remember my first transport ride when I was an toddler. I held onto my father's finger as we scoured over the marvelous view of the city. Identifying the different buildings that passed me below, I spoke with a simple explanation, buying time until I could start asking serious questions. I remember the way I used to smile, not having a

care in the world, soothed in the belief that a higher order in the universe had our support.

The monitor signals an upcoming destination and my eyes pop open. I shake the restless sleep from my head as the notification for an approaching guard rail comes through a speaker in my comp-uzync. I step onto a rotating platform that is parallel with the transport. With each step, I feel the momentum within my chest pushing forward while my eyes adjust to the artificial light of the West Sector.

I walk into a bare corridor that is painted in soft shades of brown with a metallic trim. Along the ceiling's edge, where the walls meet the highest point of the hallway, insulated copper pipes run parallel through each corridor, carrying fresh water and oxygen in opposite directions. My focus follows these pipes each time I return to my apartment when it comes to my attention that someone is asleep near my door.

The tiny figure looks thin and fragile, no older than able to carry their own weight, and yet old enough to have endured the bruises I see on their feet. The young girl is curled into the fetal position, fingernails chipped and dirty, with a splatter of blood that has dried under her nose.

I step to the side, first wondering if I could simply make it inside and close the door behind me. I have seen reruns of horror films that start with an unconscious body and then the revealing of an impressive weapon, quickly concluding with an unexpected murder and grave misunderstanding. The ragged body moves and coughs several times. Her dirty orange hair tousles in front of her face as she gasps for air, swinging her arms back as if she has been recently fighting off an abduction. Spotting the absence of a weapon, I kneel to help the young girl sit up.

“Are you alright?” I hold her back.

“Hey! Get off me! Where am I?” She pushes my arm away, looking everywhere but into my eyes.

“You're in Wesec.” I notice a set of pink lips tattooed on her neck as she tries to look past me.

“Wesec? This isn't the church?” She starts rubbing her head.

“It's about four and a half miles from here. You get dropped off or something?”

“It's happening more and more. But I- I can't remember.” She looks at her comp-uzync with a concerned frown.

“Not another one,” I reach out for her implant. The tiny screen displays the words, RECONFIGURING APPLICATIONS. “You messed with the settings.”

“What are you talking about?” She pulls her comp-uzync in close, rubbing the neuro-metal as if it itched. “I didn't do anything. I just got it.”

I sense the insecurities in her voice. Her unwillingness to look me in the eyes tells me that she is still recovering from some traumatic experience. Her recovery is beyond my control. Without the Silver Collar Society backing my authority, I could be held responsible for caring or making a mistake.

“I’m forgetting something really important.” She rubs her temple. “Why can’t I remember what it is?” She looks at me with a hint of a headache and suppressed anger in her eyes.

“You need an upgrade.” I try to sympathize with any of her misunderstanding. “Nothing personal, but I don’t do that anymore.”

“I need-” she pauses, reflecting on the memory of being in the cathedral. “To find someone.”

I place my open palm on a small retro-glass plate near my apartment’s entry-port. The system recognizes my fingerprints and the entry-port opens as I point to the dried blood under her nose. “What happened there?”

I could tell right away that she is an absconder. Her unwillingness to listen and always being ready to leave are clear indications. I move into the center of my apartment, leaving the door open. I glance at my comp-uzync that displays an early hour in the day, the earliest I have ever been home without someone to meet.

“I don’t remember.” She rubs her upper lip, shaking free a few shingles of blood. “I need to find someone, or avoid someone.” She rubs her face, acting as if she wants to say more, but is having a hard time waking up.

“So, you’re hiding. Okay.” I can feel a prank in the works, but I ignore any impulse to spoil the surprise. “Can you hide one floor down?”

“But I need help!” She sounds surprised by her own words.

“Not today.”

I shake my head, turning to occupy the mirror that hangs on the wall. I look over the features of my face that have been aging more and more each year. The wrinkled crow’s feet around my eyes distinguish my experience while my lack of a beard showcases my youth.

“Why can’t pretty girls just be normal? They’re either, ‘I’m not crazy. I promise,’ or, ‘Of course you can hang out with that other girl.’ Attractive people talk to me, so why can’t they be sane?” I continue ranting to myself as the girl’s attention is redirected to entering my apartment and wandering toward a shelf with an array of heirlooms.

“Weird keep.” She lingers with curious fingers, touching every piece.

“Yeah, well don’t touch anything.” I huff in opposition.

“Are you a Collar?” She smiles before returning her attention to visually cataloging

everything she sees.

“Why do you ask?”

“Some of this stuff is too high-tech for a civilian. No offense.”

In addition to many popular gadgets that are sold in the marketplace, my apartment is filled with knickknacks and furniture from the previous century. Most of my possessions are considered outdated and worthless, complimenting the dark green backdrop of my home's interior. My entire apartment is fitted as a homage to the world's past where I long to be every night I come home. I have things in my collection that reflect each of the world's most powerful countries.

Before civilization came to an abrupt decline, humans produced some of the universe's most extraordinary pieces of art. From the rubble of the wasteland, I acquired a wooden cabinet that was constructed in France, a framed landscape of a lush pasture painted in Germany, and several dish sets fired in China. I also paid tribute to the fathers of music with a refurbished cassette and compact disc player.

“I bet this stuff would bring in a cute credit.” She looks at her reflection in an old compact disc, scratching off the rest of the dried blood from under her nose.

“I told you not to touch anything.” My sudden approach causes her to drop the round disc of poly-carbonate plastic.

“Oops,” she watches the disc crash and wobble on the floor. “Is it broken?”

I pick up the compact disc and flip it, looking over my shoulder to the music player that sits on the shelf. I carry the player to a charging dock near the window. I slide the disc into the front slot. I can hear the gears inside twisting and turning the data into audible music. After several seconds of configuration, the vocals of twentieth-century legend Bono resonate out from two small speakers. The sound is not at all clear, resembling more of an amateur recording at an extremely loud outdoor concert.

“Sounds like it should, I think.” I blink in satisfaction, deciding to leave the music on.

“Is that your girlfriend?” She quickly moves across the room and picks up a drawing of a young, brown-haired woman.

“Do you ever listen?” I grab the drawing from her hand and hold it to my chest, as if an intruder scared it. “My wife, Sherianne.”

“You drew that?” She asks, looking star struck.

“Don't look so surprised.” I frown in irritation, slowly placing the drawing back on the shelf.

“I'm stunned,” she pauses, showing me a trusting expression that I feel I should know from somewhere. “It looks just like her.”

Her smiling eyes cross as she points a finger pistol to her temple, casually walking

past me.

“Are you trying to be funny?” I raise an eyebrow as I hold up my hands, following her movement across my apartment, scrutinizing her next compulsive lie.

“Brainwashed, if you ask me. Probably thinks she's someone else right now.” She lifts her chin as she inspects another area of my apartment.

“Are you schizophrenic or simply talking gibberish?” I straighten my head and take a step closer, feeling the sense of investigation boil over into pure frustration. “What are you talking about?”

“Do you-” she pauses, turning to hide her nauseous expression. “I mean, do you-”

“I'm not going to listen to this broken record,” my brow tightens over the inconsistency in her story.

“I'm not broken.” She sucks in a small amount of recycled air between each word.

Suddenly, she drops to her knees and expels her stomach, vomiting out an opaque yellow liquid. She begins crying as her body convulses and her stomach and gag reflex work against her, forcing her to vomit again. She tightens into a fetal position. Her temples quickly saturate in beads of sweat and her teeth begin to chatter as her crying tapers to a silence. As if being cradled to sleep, she faints.

“God, damn it.” I wonder out loud.

I study the face of the young, orange-haired freak sleeping peacefully on my floor. Questions begin to circulate in my head like a link-rail with too many passengers. How does she know Sherianne? Even with my fading memory of her beautiful face, I can never prove the significant impact she had on my life. I cannot show anyone a picture of what she looks like, because none exist. And yet, this girl knows my wife. Did Sherianne survive the South Chan raid?

I try to imagine the last time I hugged my wife, but no fresh memory comes to mind. I begin pacing back and forth over the open area of my living room, wandering through the endless possibilities of what could have happened. My eyes bounce between the unconscious young girl and the window overlooking several dozen floors of gravity.

A stranger's health should not be my immediate concern but I find that my mind is no longer completely scattered. I notice her breathing. The longer she sleeps, the harder it get waiting for answers. Like waiting to identify a lottery ticket, I feel compelled to speed up the process and take matters in my own hands. But I know I must wait. Patience is to be had. Conditioned to reminisce over the past, I distract myself with things in my apartment. I find a miniature bust of a Greek goddess and remember the

importance of where human thought originated.

The rest of my apartment is arranged like an antique store. Vaulted shelves are cluttered with rare books that rest spine-out among a small museum of personal effects. I hold onto all my expired identification cards and adorable gifts that Sherianne either purchased for me from the marketplace or made by hand. I reminisce over a bouquet of wires that represents her adoration for me. I reread a love letter that sounds more like a distinguished award. Worthless to most, I surround myself with irreplaceable memories. Even something as simple as paper, which is no longer in functional existence, swells in universal value, and yet I could never part with it.

While the last of my sanity works on ignoring the skip in my music player, I remember reading in one of my archives that Bono was the only artist nominated for not only a Grammy and Golden Globe, but also a Nobel Peace Prize for his support against global hunger. Bono's worldwide support and selfless need to care is an archetype that I dream to achieve. I imagine that perhaps I will be able to change the world by listening to the recordings made by my late grandfather.

Many in the city of Thicket are too young to know who Bono was as it is easy for me to forget I am playing host to someone who either does not want to be here or has nowhere else to go. Although I believe that everyone needs a hero who tries to make the world a better place, I am no hero.

I pick up my old Silver Collar and feel its weight in my hands, acknowledging its purpose. I carry the Collar to the window where my view of the wasteland will never leave me wanting.

I used to think there was no better place than the city of Thicket. I used to think that nothing needed changing. The world can refurbish the old and recycle the new, then transform it into something that can make humans live forever. I tumble the Silver Collar in my hands, hoping to remember the pride I felt when I first became an agent. Sherianne never wanted me to wear one but we have Silver Collars to thank for everything.

The city of Thicket is not just another stronghold against the desert winds, but an oasis of luxury. Within the city limits, Silver Collar pedestrians have seniority. We have the protection that some do not desire. Without a stronghold to encase our future, this world will fall apart. I must accept that today's youth is capable of re-imagining a brighter tomorrow.

Suddenly, the young girl's comp-uzync chimes out loud. Curious by nature, I approach and lift her wrist. The words AUTHORIZATION REQUIRED marquees over

the tiny screen, followed by the prompt to VERIFY her activation. By pressing my finger against the screen, the high-pitch alarm falls silent and she wakes up, throwing her arms upward and pushing me away.

She jostles her shoulders and breathes harder, coughing and fluttering her eyes. She sees the glint of the Silver Collar in my hands and holds in a deep breath, turning white as a waterlogged cadaver. In an instant, she crawls backwards for the open door, as if an invisible force that haunts her waking dreams is chasing her out.

Like the first interlocking pieces of a maddening puzzle, she remembers the surgeon who butchered her arm. She remembers being told not to trust a Collar or anyone from the Silver Collar Society.

After confiding in her friends at the East Sector Club, who mocked her for not getting her comp-uzync implant sooner, she remembers help from the priest, who must have carried her through the link-rails only to leave her. As if superstitious thoughts bombard her with the images of a potential death, she feels a power pushing her along the only path of getting out alive.

Chapter 5

Sea of Onlookers

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“Behold, I send my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me. And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple; and the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, behold, he is coming, says the Lord of hosts.”

Malachi 3:1

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Absconders, former citizens of Thicket, and wanted outcasts are feared for their unpredictable nature and unrelenting lack of morality. They have come to dwell in the wastelands outside the city, despising everything about the Silver Collar Society. Evicted from living inside the city limits, absconders will keep Silver Collars as trophies for their benign rebellious ways. Some who sneak into the city refuse to leave, living on the streets like all unlicensed children. Pedestrians who come across these scavengers either refuse to lend a helping hand or run in fear for their own lives.

Anyone capable of withstanding the desert winds and extreme fluctuation in temperature either works for SCS or, as an absconder, has learned from the very best. The rough sounds of Bono’s classical chords linger in my now-empty, now-forlorn apartment, mixing with the confusion I see through my open doorway.

What sort of demon, I wonder, would lurk inside an old Silver Collar, frightening away the youngest of freaks? Today's youth may see the Collar as a typical symbol of governmental interference, but where they see absolute control, I see lies. I may no longer support the standard of our government's luxuries, but I am still curious by nature.

I think about Sherianne's whereabouts, left in the dark and away from the people she loves. With the way I remember leaving her, nothing would have prepared me for this girl's visit. How could she know my wife? Sherianne was the only one capable of protecting our daughter's life, and I failed in protecting her. I failed in protecting them both. The few memories I have of my daughter begin to bubble to the surface of my guilty subconscious, leading me into merely guessing how they both could have survived.

When Sherianne and I met, we thought the world owed us a favor. We thought we would be together forever. I soon realized that one’s treasure will never last, and now I must relive the first-hand effects of SCS's power over discrimination.

There was a time when work was too much for the stomach to withstand. I would ingest several marbles of synthetic alcohol, not bothering to think about the consequences of destroying my liver. I hoped to drown my sorrows and forget the reason why I was still alive, only to quickly return to the guilty pleasures that I have come to justify as my normal routine of staying afloat.

I look out over the cityscape and the buildings look different now. Thoughts of Jessica and Sherianne flutter in the back of my throat. I swallow hard as I form their names on my lips, not wanting to say anything else out loud. With the right kind of heart, I could cry. Instead, I scream into the folds of my sleeve, muffling my sounds with the wailing of the music. Although I wish for this entire day to be a dream and that I am simply waiting and ready to wake, I fall back into old habits and swallow a C-tab.

Within minutes of dissolving, the wave of Cau-li gives me a rush of adrenaline, followed by a rise in caffeine, mixed with the hormones of several wild animals, fueling me into regaining an improvised conscious position. I scan my quiet apartment and the sparkle in my collection of silver accessories catches my eye.

As I inspect my cluttered shelf of gadgets and VR headgear, the denial of my family's existence grows louder. My heartbeat quickens with the thoughts of my family in danger, like a super hero on drugs. As I switch off the music player, the fast rhythm of my heartbeat resonates in my head, pounding with both the impulse of guilt thrown in like salt on a wound, and the brave role model who makes a recovery.

The air tastes different. Of all the temporary solutions Thicket should offer its citizens, the underground market still proves beneficial. One Cau-li tab is enough to submerge its user into a euphoric spell of harmony and exodus. A second tab allows a bridge to form within its host, uniting a parallel plane of self-explored fulfillment. I can describe my best Cau-li voyage as one that does not focus on the draining reality of the outside world. Those days would allow me to curl into bed and let my mind wander. Today, however, will require a thicker level of motivation, forcing me to ingest a second C-tab.

The light retraced from a nearby lamp illuminates the silver accessories on numerous cluttered shelves. I catch myself staring outside the window where the view of the morning's sunshine blends into a bleeding watercolor memory of the young girl's face. The thoughts of a beautiful world dissolve and I catch myself staring into a mirror where the hard truth about my life becomes completely clear.

Soon, I can barely separate the mental images from those of reality as the world slowly turns into a darkened, yet erotic peril of misguided trust. I can no longer tell the difference between the wall, ceiling, and floor. I can no longer assume I have a stable

future, and I can no longer behave like the selfish bachelor that I have claimed to be.

The vivid detail of each sky tearing tower comes into focus and pixels turn inside out in a vacuum of space. My cognition and peripherals pop back into existence as quickly as the hourly chimes echo throughout my apartment. An hour has passed and I have no intention of giving in to my semi-conscious laziness. Heading toward the front door, I notice the drawing of Sherianne. The crude attempt to recapture a frozen moment brings a smile to my estranged state with the feeling of never wanting to let go. I pick up the drawing, tucking the only physical memento to the love of my life into a pocket under the folds of my desert suit.

The thought of my family in physical danger stretches the muscles on the back of my neck. The feeling of unknown guilt reminds me of nights when terrors came true in my dreams, crawling up from the darkest pit of my wicked imagination and manifesting itself into a scenario that could make or break my entire existence. I feel my pain justified but I may never truly understand the fight.

In a Cau-li sync daze, I drag my feet through the corridor. The other apartments on my floor belong to SCS officials and engineers, mostly men who are married and happily involved in work-related activities. On my way to the elevator, my focus strays to the clear-paneled walls that display the city's landscape, jousting with the sky alongside other buildings that are just as tall.

I take the elevator to the floor below and walk to the nearest link-rail access point. Boarding a crowded pod, I am unable to find an empty seat. The green tint in the windows portrays the city of Thicket as the futuristic haven that many children of the 20th century dreamed to create. The electronic link-rail pod hums as it speeds on, almost as if the transport itself emits the sound of launching metal pipes out of the back exhaust.

The link-rail pod travels on as passengers board and disembark at each access point. The claustrophobia never makes me react as some do on the crest of a full moon, but certain busy days are only bearable with a steady dosage of mind-altering drugs. Should my clients on the street know of my former involvement with SCS and, in turn, decide to exclude me from the system, all my rustic business ventures would be over. I would lose the credit in my name. I would no longer be able to introduce myself as Oscar Sunder, the trusted supplier. I would forever carry a meaningless name and a tarnished reputation that could never be erased. I would return to being Oscar Sunder, widower to a secret marriage, and father to an illegitimate child. My mind returns to finding a solution to today's outcome.

As my pod travels through the Alpha Wing, I think back on the hours I spent

configuring my bank account to collect enough credit to retire. Such is the grand design for everyone in the city and the universal agreement that SCS is in control. I depart the moving pod and arrive in a long, curved corridor. I map my 15 steps, counting the heel to toe conversion of each step, and arrive at the second door on my left.

I place my open palm on a retro-glass plate while using the digital number pad on my comp-uzync to manipulate the entry-port's security system. After a few seconds of tricking the system into obeying my commands, the sound of twisting gears resonate from inside the wall and the entry-port opens.

The holding chamber to the supply room is sterile and solitary with a metal table in the center and thousands of drawers built into the walls. The drawers contain hundreds and thousands of cauliflower presses, stored for future recipes. The air smells stale with the mixture of artificial dirt and growth.

Hoping to stock up on supplies, I reach for the nearest drawer but find it locked. Suddenly, the entry-port opens and three Silver Collar agents join me in the holding room.

“Hello, Sunder.” The smallest of the Silver Collar agents speaks in a dense Mexican accent, dubbing his voice in learned English.

“Do I know you?” I quickly lower my hands, trying to hide my attempt at forcing the drawer open.

“Maybe not personally,” he looks around the room. “But you know who I represent.”

“I do?” I glare at the entry-port that is already locked in place.

“We know you received a visitor recently.” The largest Silver Collar agent addresses me with a German dialect.

“Am I supposed to say yes and invite you back to my place?” I nervously smile.

“I don't think you're funny,” the Mexican agent adds.

“And I half expected to see you carried in a basket,” I laugh as I throw up my hands in a huff before crossing my arms.

“You've been difficult to locate.”

“What's your point?” I squint.

“We went through your inventory report and we noticed that not everything is in our possession.” The Mexican agents slowly paces the room, looking at the thousands of drawers.

“Took you long enough.”

“You have something that belongs to SCS.”

“Me?” My eyebrows tighten as my eyes widen. “Now, why would I keep anything for myself?”

“And I suppose you're here for the view.”

“I am.” I flick my fore finger at the German agent. “I'm not doing anything illegal.”

“I don't know how you still have access to these rooms,” the Mexican agent slowly approaches, prompting me to rotate in the room. “Maybe it's because of who you used to be, but your name can't protect you forever.”

“I don't have any of your toys.” I shake my head, trying to smile, keeping my arms tightly crossed.

“Then you're going to tell us who does,” the Mexican agents takes a step closer, casually pulling an oval-shaped device from his pocket.

“Am I under arrest?” I watch him move two fingers along the length of the egg-shaped instrument, waking its sensor.

My pulse tightens as the oval splits, pivots on a hinge and flattens into two pieces, revealing a metallic cradle to cover one's comp-uzync. The memory of having my implant cleaned induces a migraine as the anguish of having to start my life completely over fills me with dread.

“Your designs and prototypes belongs to SCS, Sunder.” He moves closer with the opened device that sounds to be humming.

“You collected your research from me 16 years ago. You cleaned me out. That's more than enough of a punishment for what you think I did.” I slowly unfold my arms and open the entry-port.

“I wouldn't do that,” the German agent casually raises a hand.

“Am I under arrest?”

“We're just talking,” the Mexican agent smiles, slapping the device closed in front of him like its a fidget toy.

“Good talk.” I nod, and my smile drops as I quickly exit.

“We'll see you around, Sunder,” the Mexican agent calls out, trying to stall my departure. “If you want to cooperate, you let me know.”

“Can a guy be any more desperate?” I mutter.

Outside the room and on the elevator down, I remember the young girl in my apartment, touching everything that she thought was perhaps interesting enough to steal. I remember hearing the distorted lyrics from the music player and the way she rubbed her comp-uzync like a guilty vixen, running away as if she had something to do with my past.

The circular entry-port to the surface level opens with a pressurized release. The elevator becomes engulfed in an aroma of heated metal and hydro-generated moisture, perfumed in a layer of artificial flavors. I can taste the sweet and sourness of the street's air that is pumped through large vents all over the city. Although I keep an open eye on anything that could possibly track me to the streets below, I cannot help but feel as if I

am being followed.

I venture out from behind the shadow of the Alpha Wing and Medical Tower through a small portion of the population in their busy schedules, where thousands commute on foot over streets made entirely of neuro-metal. Looking up at the connected towers of reseeded-steel and glass can sometimes cause me to lose my balance. The tall retro-glass display monitors overlooking every stretch of the marketplace flicker messages of control by SCS standards. Logos of contraband items cycle through a slide show of what not to do, followed by contact information for turning in a law-breaking neighbor.

Because of regulation by the Silver Collar Society, the people of Thicket invest more in full frontal nudity than fully-automatic artillery. The people believe in debauchery over decapitation, sex over death, and lewdness over being a prude. People of all races and languages live within the city limits of Thicket. With the government's promise to fulfill every citizen's basic need, the only ones left wanting are those who deal in the contraband and those who are not willing to live without SCS. Sentences of death and banishment are held for crimes against the one company that could put everything back together when the world fell apart.

Generations of both young and old have successfully adapted to a surreal existence within an isolated environment. I always find myself walking through leagues of people originating from different backgrounds. This time I weave through a small crowd of Russian elders conversing with a group of young Asians.

“There's no point in telling them,” he whispers to his friends.

“Your other customers will know,” someone shouts in Russian.

“Not until they get home, you old fool,” another Asian speaks.

“And what about the Collars? What's to stop me from turning you in?”

“Are you accusing me of something?”

“Just selling contraband, absconder!”

“Liar!”

“Son-of-a!”

The small crowd quickly transforms from a lowly discussion into a heated argument, verbally attacking each other for committing some sort of crime. It is against the law to buy from an absconder and it is equally illegal to sell to someone who is not allowed to be inside the city limits.

Secrets of the marketplace trade are not obvious to everyone. Most purchases that are not regulated by SCS are either transacted in nearby shadows or involve an excess in fees that are sometimes foretold, but now always avoided. Ever since I lost my source of credit through SCS, I had to find another way to pay for my daily nutrition. Along my

thoughts, I think about the many heirlooms and artifacts that clutter my apartment and the illegal privileges they could return me to.

As I pass the outer edge of the West Sector, I avoid this area's marketplace and venture into the Division Zone. The streets are crammed with as many apartments as there are venues in other marketplaces, but the Division Zone is much quieter.

Several yards from a popular graffiti tag that blames SCS for all the city's problems, I catch sight of the swinging sign that hangs a few hundred feet above in a florescent glow, inviting in patrons to question their standings. The sign offers the fortune of travelers for a price, owned and operated by a married couple, Arlita and Chester Stine.

I approach the surface level apartment in the Triennial Division where I feel at home with what many call a gypsy, a fortune teller, a mystic, and an all-seeing oracle. I ignore the accusations of her being a lonely heretic against those involved in the Silver Collar Society. I must be the exception. The people of Thicket despise her but I see her in a different sort of light.

Though one reading is enough for anyone to return to their proper path, I feel compelled to malingering back to the oracle on a weekly basis. Like the thought of not having those illegal credits I acquire from my connection to SCS, I feel lost without a guide.

The entry-port to the mystic's apartment is open and looks welcoming as the atmosphere inside leads me to believe I have traveled back to an age that could never again exist. Beads hang from archways, parts of the floor are soft, metal ornaments in the shape of flowers hang upside down across the ceiling, and the air is coated by the fresh scent of artificial rosemary. On shelves that trace the walls sit tiny skulls of once-living creatures. I find an old woman in the far corner of her cluttered apartment, squatting on her chair, hunched over a lit glass orb that she reconstructed using pieces of retro-glass.

Arlita's pose makes the wrinkled woman appear younger than she really is. Her garments lay in folds of several dark colors that resemble autumn foliage, while her prestige of silver rings accents the very belief in her ability to foretell the future. Her bare feet look delicate and soft the closer I approach.

“If you stare too long, you could lose the last of your sight.” I gesture with the hint of sarcasm for my friend to look up.

“Oh, it's you.” Arlita moves her feet down and leans against the back of her chair. “Has it been a week? No.” She leans forward and glances back at the orb that is

glowing.

“No, I'm about six days too soon.” I pause, thinking of yesterday's visit. “Got a minute?”

“Sure.” She huffs, flicking her downward fingernails to the open chair across from her. “You know the steps. Have a seat.”

I approach the open seat and the retro-glass crystal orb darkens.

“Interesting. Yesterday, the orb brightened. What's been going on?” Arlita scratches at the orb, catching her fingernails in the grooves that cover the sphere like intricate lace, and rotates the viewing angle.

“Nothing really. A couple of Collars giving me a little bit more trouble than usual,” I squint at the darkened orb before me. “Should I be worried?”

“No, I see the Collars. They're wandering in another direction. Not with SCS. I see more of a S – O – S.”

I look deeper into the dark cloud of retro-glass but can barely tell the difference between the shadows Arlita conjured and the shadows that haunt my own head. Within what I presume is morning fog, an image of a young girl comes running forward. The image appears blurry, but as the unknown character approaches, her face and hair color become clear and quickly fade out by stretching over the surface of the retro-glass.

“And her!” I point, touching the glass, triggering a white noise.

“I can see. No touching, remember?” Arlita rubs the orb, removing my dirty fingerprint. “She's lost. But her aura is bright. Another one of your clients?” Arlita cracks a smile.

“She mentioned my wife.”

“Of course!” She tries to look surprised by sitting up, pulling her fingernails from the orb and severing the connection. “This time she's alive.”

“She recognized Sherianne in a drawing.” I quickly pull the folded picture out to show her. “She could have seen her.”

“Of course, she could have.” She settles back in her seat, aware of her preemptive response by nodding her head at me. “That what you want to believe.”

Arlita reaches into the folds of her extra-large tunic, pushing aside elaborate beads and metal ornaments, and uncovers a sealed container the size of a clenched fist. She pulls a latch on one side and an opening appears on the top. “After you left yesterday, a couple of teenagers stopped in my shop and traded for a palm reading.”

She tilts the container and a dozen thumb-sized pieces of Cau-li tumble into a haphazard mound on the table, causing the nearby crystal orb to flicker. Each

cauliflower tab has its own tiny circuit board of living lights that stabilizes the small botanical brain.

I pick up a Cau-li tab to examine, twisting it between my fingers. “Was it a legitimate source?”

“Doubt it.” Arlita shrugs her shoulders. “But then, I'm not on the C-list. I don't do those sort of things, Sunny. You know that.”

I would know. I can tell simply by looking at the circuitry of a single Cau-li tab whether its manufacturer is regulated by my personal distributor or by another underground grower.

“I miss the days of legal Cau-li.” I return the tab to the pile, separating the mount into two. “You could get it anywhere and you only needed one.” I pick up a second tab and examine it. “Now we get pressed pills and Cau-li run-off.” I return the tab and pick up a third. “The illegal stuff is what some people need to keep the body going these days, but maybe I'm getting too old,” I rub the top of my balding head as I return the third tab. “Maybe I discovered the side effects. How much do I owe you?”

“I won't take your credits.”

“What are you talking about? These tabs are worth your time. You have to take something for them.”

“Sunny, that's the problem with society. Money gets in the way of everything. We don't have relationships anymore. We have transactions that benefit both parties, one way or another. Think about every person you've spoken to. Wasn't there something they wanted or you wanted from them, in exchange for something of value?”

I think about my clients and the mentally challenged men who try to earn an extra tab simply for being my friend. I think about the selfish women who rub my shoulders, pretending to care when I charge extra to show any emotion. I think about the A.L.L agents who only know how to do their job, but who take pleasure in seeing me rationalize my guilty past. Then I think about the young girl who merely wanted to find a way to fix her life at the expense of getting into my apartment.

“You're better than this,” Arlita starts.

“I know.” My hand drops. “But it's not like I have a choice.”

“You always have a choice.” Arlita reaches out to touch my wrist. “Suppose your wife is back in your life. What do you think she would say if she saw the way you swallow those things?”

“I'm sure she would ask me to share.” I smile into the pile, thinking of the satisfaction I could receive if I ingest just one more tab.

“And what kind of example would you be showing her?”

“I don't know.” I mumble as I sit up. “Maybe she would okay with it.”

“You don't get it.” Arlita looks back into her crystal orb. “Sherianne would never want you to turn out this way. She would have wanted you to be the best at what you do.”

The guilt begins to weigh me down like a perpetual downpour of human regret. Why do I feel like everything I am used to is now suddenly corrupted? Why do I feel like everything that I have become is no longer acceptable? I think about the life I briefly had when Sherianne and Jessica were my motivation to fight. In my youth, I wanted to make the right decisions. I thought ahead for my family's benefit. I planned for our future. Now, I only look out for myself. I feel guilty for the selfish life that is now apparent to me. I see the reflection of my face in the crystal orb before me and I cannot help but think about the mistakes that led me here.

“Is it too late for me? I mean, you know me, Arlita,” I look up with a pathetic smirk on my face. “Is there any hope to get my life back?”

“Sunny,” she starts with a look of disappointment. “Everyone deserves a second chance. Not everyone is willing to take that first step.”

Arlita looks around her apartment and notices her husband standing in the archway of the adjacent room. Chester smiles at Arlita, nodding his head in a soft motion. He passes through the curtain of beads that quickly bounce against each other in a soothing sound of rubbing porcelain.

“Do you know why I help people?” Arlita takes both my hands into her palms.

“Paycheck,” I try to smile.

“Faith.”

“But you don't preach. You just listen and answer questions.” I blink.

“People know I believe in order. They know I believe in justice. The church wants me to believe in loyalty.”

“I don't get it.” I squint my eyes.

“Why do you think the priests in the cathedral only speak one language?”

“I just thought they were gifted individuals.”

“Ordained by SCS to give the people what they need.” She shifts in her seat, sitting up against the back of her chair. “They want us to believe there is no choice in the matter, but everyone has a choice. Do you understand?”

“Sort of, but why would SCS be against other beliefs?”

“Not just my beliefs.” Arlita moves in her seat, preparing to stand. “If I didn't remind people that SCS was still in control when they left after talking to me, I could be held responsible for anything.”

“So, camouflaging the propaganda?”

“I don't really have to,” she moves to the back of the room to a large bookshelf which contains books that look older than the city itself. She traces a finger over several spines until it rests upon a specific edition of new age prophecies. The folds of her robe hang in low loops, revealing both forearms, free of any regulated implant. “What would you say if I told you that SCS can't give us everything we need?”

“I'd wonder who could.”

“If you had to choose today who you will serve, would you prefer the Lord of the old world or SCS?”

“This is a trick question, right?” I squint, smiling at the thought of answering.

“No tricks. I'm just asking.” She pulls the large book from the shelf and holds it in both hands. “It depends on what you believe,” she gently places the book on the table in front of me. “I can leave this here and tell you that it's worth looking at.”

The old pages between the leather covers of the book are weathered in a yellowish hue of improper care. I open the middle of the book where a cloth bookmark lines the inside spine of what looks to me as a reconstructed bible.

“Does SCS know you have this?” I lift the corner of a page, aware of the emanating scent of aged paper that sets my mind at ease.

“If they did, you wouldn't be seeing it right now.” Arlita wanders into another part of her apartment where I hear the whistling of a steam vent. “I'm drinking tea, if you'd like a cup.”

I nod my head, agreeing to her offer but indulging my thoughts in the text before me.

The date of the entry reads 2161, which seems familiar to me. I remember hearing about a grand opening and thousands of absconders who appeared from the wasteland, only to be contained and driven out by the introduction of the A.L.L. Collar agent. I shake my head and read.

The crowd erupts in a thunderous cheer. Men, women, and children alike throw up their hands in celebration of another year in passing, stomping their bare feet on the neuro-metal pavement. The year is 2161, one hundred years after the completion of Thicket. The streets are crowded with onlookers, surrounding the steps of the cathedral with whispers of prophecy and revolution. A dozen priests stand in front of a massive sealed archway, encasing the cathedral's new entry-port. The priests are adorned with long black robes with the circular crest of a unified religion and Silver Collars that reflect the afternoon sun.

A large man with greasy hair and a jetted-out belly, wearing a similar Silver Collar, stands at the top of the stone steps with both hands raised to the crowd, gesturing for their silence.

“Today! We look to our own! Today! We look to the future! We look inward!” The man speaks with his arms outstretched, holding the attention of all those before him. “We have suffered so much these past hundred years. We have seen the outside world crumble by the unflinching winds.”

The speaker pauses to allow the imagery to set in. “But a new beginning this is! The Silver Collar Society was here when the world fell to pieces. We were here when you needed us the most. We will be here when the world becomes uncertain. Today! We promise you safe passage into tomorrow. Today! We fulfill a dream!”

The crowd explodes with joyous cries. The people in the upper class of society stand rich in color, watching the celebration from open windows in nearby towers, while those in the lower class share in the same dreary colors of the great depression, watching the large greasy man speak on large display monitors throughout the city. Everyone gathered here recognizes this moment in memory for all that had been sacrificed over the last hundred years.

“With one hundred years behind us, I dedicate this new entry-port to the people of Thicket.” He walks toward the center of the massive, 14-foot entry-port, blocking from view a small reseeded-steel plate embedded in the structure's keystone. He places his hand on the scanner plate, and after a series of internal chimes the system recognizes him, not simply as the Director of Religious Affairs, but as someone with enough security clearance to open the entry-port.

The large reseeded-steel blades, interlocked upon each other in a circular design start to hum. The center keystone slowly submerges into the floor, followed by each extremely sharp blade.

A teenage boy with rustic brown hair and dark circles under his eyes glares up at the speaker, refusing to join the celebration. He stands with his father who is dressed in a beige lab coat and Silver Collar.

“What wasted credit.” The teenage boy glances back at his father who has succumbed to the collective appreciation of this day. “Even with a new entry-port, the absconders will find a way back into the city and everyone's going to die.”

“Hold your tongue, Loy!” He grabs the boy's arm and pulls him close. “You say the wrong thing and there's no telling what will come of this place.”

“What if I don't? What if I tell them how I really feel?”

“Loy!” He looks around, panning the outskirts of the crowd for those figures of authority who wear the same Silver Collars. His eyes soften, “Please.”

Loy Dakya breaks his father's grip and slips into the crowd, heading toward the

cathedral steps where the Silver Collar priests stand with smiles and clasped hands. His frail body squeezes through the standing onlookers, dodging raised elbows and flailing hands that clap continuously. One of the priests acknowledges the young boy's ascent but stops his approach with a gesture to sit on the base of the steps. Loy sits with his arms wrapped around his knees, looking up at the speaker. The Director parts his greasy hair to the side and continues his speech.

“Over 60 years ago, we sent an expedition to Canada to find the Doomsday Seed Vault. Many men were lost along the way. Many died of hypothermia, many from the desert winds. Many were caught in the acidic rains of the outside world, but from their sacrifice, we will survive!”

The crowd sends out mixed responses, clapping for their futures and crying for their fallen citizens. Loy claps with those around him but looks back to find his father in the crowd wiping tears from his eyes.

“We have the raw genetic material to survive through tomorrow. There is nothing we have not imagined. There is nothing we have not foreseen. We have survived the worst of disasters, and because of the Silver Collar Society, we can prepare for the life we were all meant to withstand. The next generation will learn and appreciate the finer traits of a being a citizen.” The Director points to Loy whose content expression turns into a surprise of intrigue. “We can teach today's youth to father their own futures.” He waves at Loy with an intention of calling him up the steps.

The Silver Collar Society, or SCS as the people of Thicket have come to call them, is responsible for the world-wide survivors who live within the city limits. After numerous countries fell victim to nuclear warfare and natural disasters, a private organization rallied the dozen remaining collective inhabitants across the globe to sponsor the construction of earth's ultimate stronghold.

Built against the sheer jagged cliffs of the Hetch Hetchy Valley near Yosemite National Park of California, the glacial valley seemed ideal to house the permanent residence of more than a hundred thousand refugees to humanity.

“We can give them the tools to remake this world. They can re-compute the wasteland into a living habitat. They can redesign our system of belief so we will never again feel alone.” He gestures for Loy to quicken his pace up the steps to join him at the top. “Our children will lay down the next layer in our desert oasis.” He places an arm over Loy's shoulder and breathes heavily into his ear. “I didn't have time to read your speech, so it better be good.”

The Director throws up his arms to the crowd and breathes in. “Listen to one of the

brightest minds of our newest generation. Listen to the words of our youth!"

The priests look at Loy with smiles and nods as if allowing him to take his place with the row of clergymen. Loy returns a nervous smile but directs his stare over the crowd surrounding the steps of the cathedral, who are eager to hear his first words.

Society has taught Loy to rely on his own abilities, to support his own endeavors. Loy believes the prophecy will never be about him. He believes someone will lead the people against the Silver Collar Society. Between Loy and his father, Loy is the first in his family to see the wrong in the city's standard of hope. He sees despair and an artificial means to surviving another day.

Hesitant and nervous, Loy starts slowly. "New life will be transformed by the error of our ways. Electronic control of the ways we relate." His eyes search for the Director who is now in the crowd and still smiling in his decision to allow a teenager to speak. "A collection in a cube and a mass serving madness. A new age of regret with power and sadness. Collar rule will lead to ruin. Trust not few for new world destruction. Bar codes tailored to tainted souls. Absconder ordered with dismissal."

The crowd starts to whisper, cupping hands to ears and conversing among each other with what is being said. An old man standing near Loy's father nudges him.

"Hey, is that your son up there?"

"Not my son." He replies.

"Was that a warning?" Another person asks the old man, breaking off the interrogation with Loy's father.

The Director drops his smile and unfolds his arms, grinding his teeth as he speaks into his comp-uzync. Loy catches the sight of several Silver Collar agents moving through the crowd toward the cathedral steps. Three Collar agents wearing gas masks surround him, reaching for his arms and face. Loy breaks free, dodging one grab and slipping through another. He runs toward the 14-foot open archway of the cathedral.

"Arrest him!" The Director points to the cathedral's entry-port, demanding the priests close off the only way for Loy to escape.

A young priest places his hand on a scanner plate, activating the entry-port's mechanized pulley system. In a sudden burst of elevation, six reseeded-steel blades fan upward from the floor below. Following Loy through the narrowing archway, one Collar agent stumbles. Each reseeded-steel blade slides into its interlocking position, severing the agent's head and half of his torso from the rest of the screaming public.

The Director joins the decapitated agent at the top of the cathedral steps. The deceased agent's hips and legs continue to bleed out, draining into the entry-port's blade cavern below. The Director speaks into his comp-uzync.

“Do you have him?”

The Director hears nothing by static.

“Do you have him?”

“Yeah,” a voice replies. “What do you want me to do?”

“Get rid of him.”

“What of the boy's father?” Another Collar agent approaches the Director.

The video footage of the Collar agent's death fills every display monitor throughout the city. Citizens in their high-rise apartments continue to relax, eager to see the next installment in modern television. The people on the streets below scramble for the steps with outpourings of justice, watching the teenage boy fearing for his life, wondering what will become of him. Loy's father, frantic in the hysteric crowd, tries to make his way to the cathedral steps, but is arrested by two agents and escorted in the opposite direction.

Of the few remaining on the cathedral steps, the youngest priest watches as the crowd disperses in large segments, each with its own unrelenting outcry of questions. Who is this teenager? Why is the Silver Collar Society threatened by his beliefs? Why would he think the people of Thicket are in danger? Where is God in all of this?

To save the city from riots and an uprising of anarchy, the digital monitors that hang over every marketplace corner and residential avenue begin to display censored footage of the agent's death, branding the teenage boy a murderer, a traitor, and a terrorist to those around him. The screens flash orders to refrain from speaking to absconders and to cooperate with the duties of an agent of SCS.

To many in the city of Thicket, the Silver Collar Society is thought to be a savior of the New Beginning. It is said to be a type of government in control of everything and everyone. The hot afternoon sun continues to beat down on the city's heat shield as the cathedral's dedication ceremony and 100-year-anniversary ends with the authorized removal of another person who does not respect the order of Thicket.

“The kids has guts.” My transcription of the boy's testimony to the people of Thicket straightens the hair on my neck.

“This kid drew together a new wave in violence.” Arlita returns to her seat with a steamy cup of tea, reaching out to close the book with a heavy flip of the back cover.

“Maybe he was cut from the parade.” I try to smile at my own joke but find no amusement in my company. “Okay, so this boy knew SCS had more control than necessary and they took care of him.”

“I know you think reputation is important, Sunder.” Her old eyes gaze deeper into the crystal orb that continues to flicker. “But some things are not worth the pain.”

“I know,” my eyes shift across the room, not wanting to feel guilty.

“How are you sleeping?” She does not look up as she sips her tea.

An image of a small black cube crosses my imagination. I remember the growling sound effects and translucent nano-tube that extends from its corner casing. I remember being devoured by neuro-metal, molded into the pavement of the city streets.

“I’m seeing the cube again.”

“Are you still scared?” She looks up with a raised eyebrow as if asking a rhetorical question.

“Maybe.” I look back and start counting the number of hanging beads. “They asked for the prototype.”

“Technically, they own everything you do,” she tilts her head in sympathy.

I shrug my shoulders in agreement. I never did agree with the rules of invention, forcing citizens into creating new technology, presuming to be used in good faith, only to be altered and left with no reward of accomplishment.

“SCS claims the cube belongs to them.” My focus returns to the crystal orb.

“Why does the cathedral have it?” Arlita stares into the crystal orb, rotating it by the cracks in the retro-glass.

“They did me a favor.”

“Oh, that’s right. You needed a favor.”

“Are you implying something?” I squint.

“Not at all. Your reputation is important. I understand.”

“Nothing is more important than family. I need to find out what happened to my wife!” My tone escalates.

“You enjoy finishing my sentences, don’t you?” She looks up at me. “You think your wife isn’t interested in your cube?”

“I don’t know why she would be. It’s just a prototype.”

“A working prototype?” Arlita raises an eyebrow.

“Yeah?”

“Who else knows where it is?” Arlita stands from her seat and approaches a wall that is covered in copper pipes.

“Other than the priest I gave it to, only you. If they knew where it was, I don’t think they would have asked me. They’ll probably accuse me of harboring the schematics to

make another one.”

Unwilling to humor my stubbornness, Arlita ignores me as she loosens a copper pipe. As the pipe swivels away from its connection, a hidden cavity is revealed.

“A little over 17 years ago, I made you a promise.” She pulls a cloth pouch from the copper pipe. “You told me to hide this and only give it back to you when things were too much for you to handle. Do you remember?”

“I remember,” I accept the pouch and loosen the string that runs through its opening.

Recalling the moment I entrusted Arlita with my secrets, I empty the pouch into my hand and a small Imprint Drive tumbles out. My heart sinks and I can feel the excitement coursing through my veins, but I am unable to smile.

“I expected to at least get a smile out of you. Isn't that what you want?” Arlita returns the copper pipe to its original position and sits back down.

“I should be happy,” I look up from staring at the ID.

“Are you scared of your past?” She smiles, popping her question with the smack of her lips.

“I've been without these memories for so long. I don't know if I can handle this kind of reunion.”

“Nothing bad is going to happen to you, Sunny.” She reaches across the table, hoping to touch my elbows.

“I want to believe you, but this is what SCS is hoping to catch me with.” I hold the ID up to make my point.

“I don't think SCS is aware of what humans are capable of. We can learn from our mistakes.” She picks up her tea and slowly sips the cold liquid.

“But we're never forgiven. Not many in this city are normal.” I watch Arlita swirl her cup. “More than half the population is plugged in around the clock.”

Arlita seems too busy enjoying the flavor of her drink to hear my comment, because she does not look up to correct my ignorance. Her fingers tap repeatedly on the side of the ceramic cup before she utters a response.

“That boy had knowledge of your cube 56 years before you helped create it. SCS took the steps they thought were necessary to preserve their image of superiority. Killing him would only transform him into a martyr, so it was by order of the President that led to that boy being exiled.”

For anyone to walk outside the limits of Thicket means a slow and horrible death. I recollect episodes of SCS raids on absconder camps where agents tracked hundreds of people who lived as squatters with stolen deserts suits. Woven in neuro-metal, a desert

suit protects its user from the severe fluctuation in temperature, allowing an absconder to live hopelessly, like a cornered creature with nowhere to go. Absconders and exiled convicts carry the weight of a disposed life.

“He wouldn't have lasted long,” I mutter. “Even with one of these, the system can pinpoint the location of each suit.” After I pocket the Imprint Drive, I run my rough fingers over the zipper folds of my torso, playing with the texture behind SCS design. “Unless you know where the tracking unit is installed, this thing's pretty much useless inside the city. I like it because it reminds me of someone.”

“Does the phrase, 'Broken Willow' mean anything to you?”

“Um,” I raise an eyebrow as I reach for a Cau-li tab. “Another one of your Chinese proverbs?”

“I can't take credit for nonsense,” she smiles. “Those teenagers who traded the Cau-li tabs for a fortune reading? I heard them whispering. I haven't been able to make sense of it. I thought I'd ask you.”

“I may be talented, but I'm lost with today's slang.”

“Your confidence not only amazes me, Sunder. It frightens me,” she stands with her tea and turns to face me.

“It's not the best thing in the world, but next to it.” I laugh.

“And yet the worst remains hidden.” Arlita sets her tea on the table and moves closer, unfolding my arms and taking my hands into her own wrinkled clutches. She tightens her fingers around mine, looking deep in my eyes, displaying to me her smoky gray, pupil-less eyes. “I wouldn't ignore all that has happened. Your wife may still be alive.”

“Are you serious?” I lean away from her.

“This time, you have to trust me.” She tightens the rings around her forefingers.

“When you left yesterday, I knew you'd be back the very next day at around this time.”

“Why didn't you say anything?”

“Like you would have believed me,” she smiles.

I place my thumb on the small plate of my cylindrical container and deposit the Cau-li tabs. With the cylinder securely tucked under the folds of my desert suit, I move toward my oldest acquaintance for a friendly embrace.

“Kids these days. Same time next week?” I can feel her warmth like a grandmother who has enough love to heal the world.

“If you remember, sure.” Her arms fall to her sides as our hug concludes, returning her focus to her tea and the darkened crystal orb.

As I exit the gypsy's apartment, the crystal orb brightens, flickering through the cracks in the retro-glass. With the pressurized seal of Arlita's entry-port behind me, I wander back into the crowded streets of Thicket.

Unaware to most, unlicensed children of Thicket spread like diseases without a home. One dirty child runs by and reminds me of the young boy who started a revolution. Back then, his absconder prophecy was heard by half the population, and retold to the other half through rumors and tall-tale legends of rebellious hope.

The various marketplaces of Thicket are occupied by small vendors who try to earn an extra credit from others on the same route. The neuro-metal asphalt is dressed in layers of recycled fabrics, trinkets constructed of reseeded materials, and advertised oddities performed by dramatic actors. Even the labor-friendly prostitutes on street corners in each sector have an angle to work.

The tall retro-glass display screens above the marketplace flicker various messages and advertisements. When new patrons enter the area, tiny sensors in each screen track the visitor's movement. As I venture across the marketplace boulevard, bulletin screens recognize my comp-uzync signal and adjust their advertisements accordingly.

One advertisement catches me off guard. The audio from the screen several hundred feet above me begins to resonate from my comp-uzync, and the narration comes across clear and personalized.

“Are you ready for death? Are you prepared for the afterlife? Tomorrow could be your special time. So today, register with After Dark. With After Dark, you won't have to worry when your special time comes. No medical bills. No embarrassing scene. No need to worry about benefactors. Stage your final bow and prepare with After Dark. Call today, before a special tomorrow. Aff Ter Darr.”

As I continue walking, the After Dark melody stays settled with my memory as my internal judgments bounce around like the verbal offers I receive throughout the busy marketplace. On my left, where a man is already negotiating a deal price for a re-manufactured hydro-generator, I think of what my wife would say.

Linking people together over a social network, the city of Thicket allows people to use the same government-issued implants to stay in contact. Wearing sensors that distort reality is common for the younger generation, who prefer to see the world through digitally rendered visors. On my rights, near a woman winking her way into the purchase of either her revealing bust or a set of synthetic gloves, a teenage girl with orange hair, blinded by her vi-zync, walks past me in the opposite direction.

The news of Sherianne's existence has me trembling with the fear of the unknown. Now that I know she is alive, what am I supposed to do? While the shade of orange pulls away, overlaying the other pedestrians, I dart for what I see as an absconder with

an ulterior motive.

“Got-cha!” I reach out for the short person's shoulder.

The orange color quickly dissipates to a dull brown. The features of a female face instantly turn masculine, and I realize I am holding the shoulder of a young homeless teenage boy who has moved into my hypnotized, Cau-li driven flashback.

“I didn't do anything!” The teenager tries to squirm free. “Let me go!”

“What the brown?” I release the dirty child but look him over. “Where'd the girl run to?”

“You don't own us,” he insults, gesturing to the crowd behind him.

“What? Die off, kid. I thought you were someone else.” I push the teenager aside, walking past him.

“And what about justice?” He moves after me, pointing his finger at my back.

My annoyance turns cold as I try to ignore him, knowing that he is not wrong. The teenager signals the crowd and a young girl kicks me in the back of my knee. As I stumble to the ground, another girl pushes me and quickly grabs my arm, twisting it behind my back. With my free arm supporting my weight, I feel like she could dislocate my shoulder if I try to stand. The teenage boy approaches me from behind, grabbing my hairline and pulling my head back.

“Your rules don't apply to us. You expect people to act on your behalf, but no one cares. You think we steal because we want what you have?” He glares at me as I am held down by the other two youths. One of the girls unzips my desert suit and searches my pockets, extracting the cylindrical container. She passes it over my shoulder. “We take what we're owed.”

I try to break free but, despite their small statures, they have complete control. While he admires the cylindrical container with a sense of vengeance, I feel the last of my masculinity being ripped from my scalp.

“This belongs to me now,” he shakes the container.

“I hope you chock on them,” I try my best to insult him.

“You're not that lucky,” he whispers into my ear.

With my Cau-li container in his hand, he rushes past me. Without saying a word, the two young girls release me and run in opposite directions. Retracting my injured arm, I fall to the ground. I hold the top of my head, hoping they did not set my hairline back even further.

Citizens of Thicket are aware of the rules that govern our streets, claiming that SCS oversees the disbursement of justice. As I look behind me, I notice the other patrons in the marketplace. As citizens of Thicket must comply with SCS regulations, they are conditioned to ignore all crimes, arrests, detentions, punishments, and executions. No one feels threatened by SCS presence, nor do they protest justice as it is dispensed. Everyone simply looks the other way, leaving me feeling alone in a sea of starving entrepreneurs who know better than to cross the city's government.

“Another reason to not care,” I mutter as I try standing.

I want to believe that everything is normal but as I look up at the building that blocks the sunlight from reaching the pavement, Thicket's skyline pulls away from my vision. Clashed with the constant gray of a scorched sky, the background of Thicket's sunset reminds me of the day Sherianne gave birth to our daughter.

Halfway through my twenty-first year in Thicket, summer days were extremely humid. Absconders were part of a dying revolution and I had a secret that could cost me my freedom, health, and position in the Silver Collar Society. My love was a tale not easily spoken, nor was it an embrace I could easily exhibit. My love was to a woman who could not live freely in the city that raised her.

Sherianne's pregnancy was known to only those whom she trusted. As she lived with me in secrecy, my role was to protect her from the authority that regulated life. We could never have children, having been denied a license, nor could we announce a union we truly deserved. When the time came for Jessica to be born, we fled to the cathedral, putting our trust in the people of faith. We were assured that nothing bad would happen.

Chapter 6

Lips That Bite

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“You shall not worship the Lord your God in that way, for every abominable thing that the Lord hates they have done for their gods, for they even burn their sons and their daughters in the fire to their gods.”

Deuteronomy 12:31

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Parts of the city lay hidden by elongated buildings that protect its urban dwellers and church place goes. Powered by the scorching sun and fueled to keep the city comfortably cool for months at a time, Thicket's design was inspired by lab results conducted for space exploration and planetary colonization. During the longest, coldest days of winter, the people of Thicket no longer need to band together, or face the reality of another near-death season.

The city is powered toward the insulation for hundreds of thousands of citizens. The entire city is regulated by the same rules and regulations, and many sectors rely on the unhinged authority of the Silver Collar Society. Each sector acknowledges a universal method of perseverance, managing to maintain fear in its citizens by allowing agents to patrol everywhere with full authority.

With each step through the marketplace, remnants of my stolen memories begin to crystallize. My thoughts circle a dirty shade of orange and I look around, unable to make a connection to anyone I pass. Along the edge of the marketplace and between the dark alleys of Thicket, I hear people speaking a language I do not understand. Shadows of individuals move between side streets in my peripherals as I think about my stolen cylindrical container.

For over a decade I have accepted the reality that I am alone. Believing that Sherianne died in the Southern Channel Raid, I lived with the guilt of being responsible. Without her, I lived with a secret I could not share. Like a widower unable to be consoled, I feel nothing for the outside world.

The further into the dark alleyways I wander, my mind becomes cloudier. I drag my bare feet along the surface of the neuro-metal pavement, hoping to understand why I am not in my apartment. With the memory of a big misunderstanding, I feel blind in knowing why I am at fault.

My comp-uzync flickers and I feel a tingle. Trying to maintain my sanity, I

acknowledge the system in my wrist to be chiming with an alarm. I look down and see the words INCOMING CALL plastered on the tiny screen. When I raise my comp-uzync closer, making it easier for me to read, a person walking by glances in my direction, hoping to eavesdrop on my conversation. The caller's identification comes out as unknown but I feel compelled to answer the incoming request. I activate the console's video conference.

All I see is static. Figuring that my system is on standby, I lift a compartment few citizens know about and manually reboot my device. After a few seconds the system is online and I am again connected to the main network in the city. And again, my comp-uzync chimes with an incoming call.

When I answer the second time, the system connects, but the video is disabled. I speak into the microphone.

“Hello?”

There is no answer. Instead, I hear faint voices on the other end, male and female lingo with noise in the background. I can barely make out the conversation.

“When are you going to get your own Imprint?” The first voice sounds male and brutish, as if it resonates from inside the body of a large block of stone.

“Why? This one doesn't work?” The second voice sounds female and weak, as if it is bubbling from an innocent child with a not-so-innocent angle to work.

“I didn't say that. You know this isn't you.”

“Why should it matter? Nobody knows who I am.”

“You're pathetic.”

I hear the female voice starting to cry.

The soft murmurs of her crying quickly turn into a roaring laughter. The conversation's static starts to get louder as the sound of a pressurized seal overpowers the tiny speaker. Music fills my comp-uzync, forcing me to lower the volume. I look around and feel alone, quickly realizing that this call is coming from another part of the city. I speak into the microphone again.

“Anyone there?”

The call disconnects and my comp-uzync returns to its normal, idle state. I access the call history in my implant, but find no identification of the call's origin. The streets are quiet again, but in the distance, I hear a vibration that many associate with music.

As I look through my comp-uzync, a group of teenagers walk past me. They are dressed in today's fashion, which I personally find inappropriate. According to society's standard, guys are expected to dress for utility, wearing loose, glossy pants that require accessories. Girls are expected to dress for appearance, wearing tight-fitting leggings that accentuate their physique. When they turn down an alleyway, I decide to follow, maintaining my distance.

Soon, the smells and sounds of the marketplace are well behind me. In the approaching distance, I spot a half dozen people standing in line before a discretely looking entry-port, guarded by a single brute of a man in light attire. As I approach, everyone stares with disapproval and resentment, voicing their opinions as to why I am entitled to jump ahead of everyone else.

“Long night?” I rub the top of my face, looking up at the bouncer.

“Not long enough.” The bouncer flexes his shoulders, cracking a bone I cannot identify.

“What's going in there?” I point to the entry-port.

“Business.”

“All these kids are here for a meeting?” I pass my finger over the group.

The bouncer ignores my question and uncrosses his arms, pushing me to the side to acknowledge a familiar face approaching the entry-port. “The showcase is ready for you, Mr. Andrews. Your table should be open.”

In the East Sector Club, popular for its strobe shows and backstage implants, people take refuge from the streets of Thicket and the reality of SCS control. The bouncer escorts the high-ranking SCS engineer and his guests through the heavy entry-port that opens and quickly shuts. The darker stained habitat of raging hormones and illegal circuits dancing to the synthetic beats of an electronic jockey is revealed for a moment before my view is hindered.

Knowing the limits to interrogation, I back away. I wander toward a cluster of steam vents and watch from a distance, keeping an eye on those who exit the club. Trying to remember the faces of those who stole my stash of Cau-li, I throw my head back and look up, hoping to wake from this nightmare. I close my eyes and with a state of depression turning my stomach, I sink to the ground. Wrapping my arms around my knees, I bury my face in my elbows.

I look up at the club's entrance and see that half of the people standing outside have been granted entry. I turn my head, resting my sense of defeat, and spot a silver container. A cylindrical holster had been left in a puddle of steam exhaust. I reach for the container and discover the silver and copper design is one that belongs to me.

With a pessimistic shake, I hear the rattle of several Cau-li tabs stored inside. Turning somewhat optimistic about finding what was stolen, I ingest a C-tab. Like a rush of adrenaline, the motivation to save my family brings me to my feet.

The more I think about my wife, the clearer my intentions become. I picture Sherianne holding our daughter, determined to survive against the world of SCS. Picturing her alive, I return to the entry-port.

“I'm looking for a couple of thieves.”

“Yeah, I can see that,” the bouncer glares down on my thin hairline.

“A girl with orange hair. You let her in.”

The bouncer does not move, nor is he amused by my accusation.

“You give her the pink lips?” I squint in his direction.

The bouncer's rigid posture breaks like chiseled ice. The muscles in his arms appear to loosen at the seams.

“You're going to let me in?” I raise an eyebrow, seeming surprised I scored a direct hit.

He looks back at the heavy entry-port, almost as if hiding his flushed reaction. Turning back to me, he asks, “What's in it for me?”

“A new shirt?” I glance down at the sprinkle of blood that does not match his range of motion.

“Not my blood. Not your problem.”

“I know. Did you see her with anyone?” I do my best to hide my impatience.

“Look pal, unless you plan on paying for information,” he looks over my thinning hair and desert suit, swiping his nose with a massive thumb. “You don't get in.”

“You let Collars in? Is that right?” I smile and step past the bouncer, approaching the heavy entry-port.

“You don't get it.” The bouncer does not seem amused, pinching his thumb and forefinger on my right shoulder.

I maneuver away from his grip, holding up my hands as if to apologize.

“Are you trying to piss me off?” He steps toward me, forcing me away from the entry-port.

“I mean no offense,” I place my hands together, wedging the air under my nose. “I just really need to get in.”

“You and everyone else.” He points to the line behind me. “What makes you

special?”

“Look,” I lower my hands. “I’m Oscar. I know you’re having a tough night. I can see it your shoulders and they’re not making it any easier. I’ve been there.” I glance behind me, hoping the people in line do not hear my insults. “Teenagers think they’re entitled to everything. They’re digital hipsters. They treat the world like a never-ending supply of principle payments and ignore authority like a curfew.”

“What’s your point?” He relaxes his shoulders, seeing me no longer as another obstacle in line, but as a human being.

“Adults need to stick together. I know you’re looking out for me, and I appreciate that. When the time comes, I’ll owe you my life.”

Luck resides with my unusual habit of being entwined with other people’s lives. The more I empathize with the bouncer’s position of authority, the more I am reminded of the life I lost in taking a stand for love. Hoping to stay clear of any disarray, I apologize again.

With a sympathetic nod, the bouncer opens the heavy entry-port and allows me to enter the East Sector Club.

Occupying the center of the large room, teenagers dance behind railings that cage them in. The dance floor sinks below a couple of steps as if the entire platform is a covering for something below.

The sides of the club are occupied by numerous arcade games that emit virtual controls of colored lights and three-dimensional viewing screens. Countless credits are spent by dozens of energetic patrons vigorously trying to outperform previous high scores. Taking comfort in a far corner of the club, a young man and his girlfriend sit at a suspended table while a waitress listens.

“Three ND’s.” The young man speaks for his female friend.

“Three nicotine discs. Table nine. Eighty credits.”

“Now that’s a deal!” He snaps with a smile, accepting a transaction drive being handed to him by the tall waitress.

The young man inserts the transaction drive into his consol-vert and allows the deduction to be made from his comp-uzync. He hands the drive back to the waitress and receives three tiny discs, each as thin as aluminum foil but as dark as neuro-metal itself. He slides a soluble disc across the table and she inserts it into her own consol-vert’s disc-port. As if a wave of nicotine crashes down on her, she sinks into her chairs.

“Are you saving that one?” She asks the young man, leaning in as if begging for another jolt.

“She's on her way. Don't be greedy.” He responds while pocketing the remaining nicotine disc.

“Did you see the crazy guy on the link-rail last night?” She speaks with expressive hands.

“No, what happened?” He rearranges several computer programs in the interactive retro-glass table before him, almost ignoring her question.

“This guy went chip shit on the system as soon as we boarded.”

“Really? Where was I?” He asks as if amazed by his own question.

“You didn't see him? He kept scratching his arm and punching the window, saying something about only getting one.” She reaches up to tug on her earlobe. “The whole thing freaked me out.”

“Everything freaks you out.” His insult turns into laughter.

Several waitresses scurry around the dance floor on wheeled footwear, distributing aqua-marbles and taking orders. Most of the people who work at the East Sector Club are easy to recognize but not easy to stop. Their black uniforms with the neon blue letters ESC give rise to the club's reputation for being the only venue in the city where one can escape. The easiest way to escape the East Sector Club is to find a tall blonde waitress with blue eye-shadow.

“Excuse me,” I reach out and grab the attention of a rolling waitress on her way across the room. “I'm looking for a girl.”

“Honey, you've got to paint it on thicker than that.” She tries to move on. “Every man in here is looking for some girl to call him daddy.”

“I'm looking for a couple of thieves.”

“I've had Collars use better pickup lines and still got nowhere.” She flips her blonde hair sarcastically. “Did she steal your heart?”

My eyes lock on the waitress's smile. I feel lost in her beauty, like a child unable to recover from a bad dream. I remember Sherianne and the way she smiled at me after I told her how much I loved her. The memory of a girl with orange hair returns with the image of my daughter, holding my wife in a reunion I never thought possible. Like the ripple theory in reverse, I think about the girl in my apartment who told me that my life was a lie, and that my wife is alive.

“Are you okay?” She touches my shoulder. “You look like you're going to be sick.”

“Yeah,” I hold my forehead.

“You can't run forever.” She leans in closer to whisper.

I push myself away from the rolling waitress in sheer paranoia, but she wraps her arm around my neck like we are best friends. Her perfume is intoxicating, reminding me of soft fabrics and animal urges. Close to my face are her tattooed fingers with the letters,

T, R, U, and E, highlighted in black ink. On her other hand, she shares the feel of her hip with the letters, L, O, V, and E.

“I'm not running!” I try again to break free but feel like pudding in the arms of the blonde waitress with blue eye-shadow.

“Right, and that ring on your finger is to fend off single women.” She gestures to my left hand.

I feel a loss for words, unable to think of anything but the fact that I look like an absconder living within the city. Without a way to prove my intentions, I feel reminded of the absconder traits that match my life exactly.

“Let me hold that ring for you.” She gestures to the gold wedding ring around my pinkie.

“That's not going to happen.”

“Okay,” she releases me, sounding unconvinced. “Good luck with that.”

I hold up my hands to stop her from rolling away. I can tell by the way she bites on her lower lip that she cares more about her own luxury than the reputation of the next absconder who uses the club for personal gain.

“How much for a name?” I utter.

“How much you got?” She returns with a prettier smile, looking around as if her supervisor could catch her without an order to fill.

“Enough that you'll ask for more.” I look past her blonde hair at a table of teenagers who roar in laughter, rousing a curious stimulus for everyone in the club.

The suspended table that hovers before them projects a holographic recording of a young man and his two female friends. The reflection of light from a series of lenses built into the retro-glass surface of the table flickers in a small cloud of electronic dust, illuminating the darkest corner of the East Sector Club with the illusion of live footage.

“What's with the show-all?” I nod at the table.

“What show?” The waitress turns to guess, and sees whom I am referring to. “Oh,” leaning back to elaborate. “More absconders. Young growers. Pain in the bit if you ask me, but they've always come through.”

I know many growers in Thicket but feel lost in my stare when she speaks of them as the usual contributors of the East Sector Club. As do most people in the city, I use the term grower as being synonymous with selling or buying a botanical enzyme, but the city's youth will continue to surprise me.

The waitress sees that I cannot help myself. She smiles to break my line-of-sight and makes an offer.

“A set of lips for a set of C’s,” she whispers.

“Two?” My gaze returns to the blonde who is close enough to kiss.

“Your thief’s got friends,” tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. “But they’re sort of shy.”

I reach into the zipper folds of my desert suit, and from between layers of neuro-metal fabric I pull out the cylindrical container. I press my thumb to its side panel and a compartment opens. I remove what the waitress assumes to be two Cau-li tabs before stuffing the container back into my desert suit.

The waitress reaches for my closed hand.

I pull back, “What do you mean, shy?”

“Alright, not shy.” She reaches out again but returns empty handed. “They’re a little rude.”

“Rude is worse than being shy?” I retract my closed hand to my chest. “I never thought of it that way.”

“Okay, so they don’t mingle as normal people do. They hate authority, and don’t take kindly to other absconders, so I wouldn’t show off your trophy just yet. They grow like crazy, and they never get caught. Now what about our deal?” The waitress moves in close.

“Where do they grow?” I slowly extend my closed hand.

“Here and there.” She reaches for my hand, covering my fist. “Are we settled?”

“Not quite.” I turn my fist over. “Where are these friends of yours?”

The waitress points with her eyes to the table of wild teenagers that is no longer drawing on spectators with their holographic light recording. I make my move in their direction, but the waitress digs her fingers into my cupped hand only to find it empty.

“What gives?”

“You didn’t give me a name.” I move for the suspended table in the corner of the East Sector Club where the pair of teenagers are involved in their own conversation.

“Once we get what we need, we’ll be in control.” The young man speaks with his elbows on the table, directing his concern to the young girl beside him.

“If we let him do all the hard work, we won’t need the Father anymore,” she tries to make her point by mirroring his hunched position.

“Imagine what this place would look like.” He leans in closer to whisper. “If the

Father had everyone's memories, heaven would be closer than ever before.”

“Sounds boring,” she frowns.

The closer I approach, the less focused each teenager seems, and once I touch the suspended table, both of them enter a staring contest with the only one who could resemble authority. The young man and his female counterpart look to be the appropriate age to know either my daughter or the runaway with orange hair.

“Looking for a good time, old man?” The young man speaks, glancing sideways, expecting her to laugh.

“I'm not your type.” I reflect an expression of contentment.

The girl whispers to the young man, darting her eyes back at me.

“I'm looking for someone.” I move to take a nearby seat.

“Nobody said you could sit, old man.” The young man snaps, but it is not enough to sway me from grabbing hold of the padded chair.

She pulls the young man to the side and whispers. “He may be SCS.”

“What if I am?” I correct her assumption. “I'm looking for a thief.”

She gasps, mouths agape, and the young man leans in, intrigued. “So what does that have to do with us?”

“Word on the link tells me that absconders grow in closed circuits.” I stretch in my seat, admiring the comp-uzync implant on the young man's forearm.

“Not closed enough, apparently.” He huffs.

The synthetic music from the club bounces off each mirrored wall, aiding the strobe lasers and beams of spotlights that shoot across the dance floor and break apart in the reflective surface of the disco ball. The girl frowns at me, aware that I am not about to stand and casually walk away.

“Was it Shentel?” She asks but is immediately elbowed in her seat by the young man.

“Zip it, Laci.”

I lean forward with tensed shoulders. “Is that her name?”

“Well, not really,” Laci rolls her eyes, looking away.

Laci's young demeanor seeps out in her overuse of cosmetics. Under her bright blonde mane is a crop of pitch black hair. Through the bridge of her nose is a piece of silver that many men find attractive. Her eyebrows are plucked and painted on with a series of piercings that line her innocent brow. Her earlobes are stretched and pierced with large gauges of neuro-metal plugs. Her jugular is tattooed with the crescent phase

of our abandoned moon. She is dressed in layers of black and white fabric, with alternating straps and belts of artificial leather. She seems to have lost her train of thought but continues.

“Anneli was in here earlier. She said she had something to sell, and that someone was following her.”

“My guess is locked in.” The young man smiles as he looks up at me.

“What was she selling?” I ignore his remark, looking at the young girl.

“Something big. I assumed it was stolen.” She sits back in her seat.

The young man continues for her, “And I bet you're willing to pay more.”

“Are we negotiating?” I snap at him.

“As a matter of fact, we are.”

“Thumbs!” Laci pushes him in the shoulder. “What the hell?”

“Look, old man,” Thumbs starts. “Unless you're fixing to pay for our time, scrutinize somewhere else.”

Raising my hand, I signal the nearest waitress.

“What can I get you, sir?”

“Get me a marble of Alco. D grade.”

“I'm sorry, sir. We don't serve Alcosynths.”

Shocked, I let the waitress roll away, deciding against any type of refreshment.

“What a dumbass! This is a dance club. What did you expect to get out of this place?” Thumbs laughs with a slacked jaw, throwing his head back.

“He's probably looking for a new girlfriend.” Laci whispers into his ear.

“Yeah,” he adds, pointing me off. “Get your own, grandpa.”

I look out at the sea of dancing fools. Many of them are dressed in minimum attire, including varied patterns of neuro-metal cloth, and vest-like coverings, attached with refitted rubber straps. As I wander through the crowded dance floor, men sway and glisten with the sweat on their bare chests as do the women with their flat stomachs and hypnotic pheromones. The hotter months ahead will only shed the layers off each dancer, while the colder months mean more voltage through each able body. Mimicking fish that use to jump over riverbank crossings, everyone bounces to the steady beat of 2218's popular culture.

On my right, I pass men with long black hair trying to break their own necks to the rhythm of the hidden speakers. On my left, I try to ignore the same “True Love” waitress who is busy flirting with another unsuspecting patron. Quickly, as if on cue with the music, the colors in the room start to blend. The flailing limbs and kicked-up

shins of nearby dancers seem to transform from the tendons and tongues of wild, ferocious creatures into rigid corpses of the ill-entertained. Everything beautiful about the East Sector Club falls apart in a moment of decay. They call this dancing. Everything pure and sweet fades into a scale of sepia-toned flashes of dilated pupils and widened smiles.

Suddenly, the crowd erupts in cheers. A male dancer next to me howls. A female dancer screams.

I look back at the table in the far corner and notice the young man and his female counterpart are now accompanied by a third. Someone is reaching through the holographic image, distorting the video footage. The individual in dark attire tucks a lock of black hair behind an ear, revealing a set of bright pink lips tattooed on his or her neck.

I move toward the table, wishing I could hear what is being said.

“You can't be here right now.”

“Why should it matter? We had a deal.”

My walk back to the table of obnoxious teenagers is heavy as I dodge the thrusts of dancing body parts. I feel my short-term memory skewing as I approach the suspended table. Again, the laughter stops and everyone looks me over in modest disapproval.

“Seriously, Digis?” Thumbs speaks through the projected hologram.

I am beginning to hate the term, Digis, as this common insult for the older generation refers to the digital era as archaic. Like another piece to an abstract puzzle set in motion, the young man's accusation sparks another memory fragment that ignites my collection of thoughts.

“I've seen you before.” I point at him.

“You think so?” He pockets something that I cannot identify. “You must be missing something really important.”

I slip my hands in my desert suit, feeling the weight of the cylindrical container. As I fidget with the silver and copper inlay, my memory stirs. I remember my visit with Arlita and reading about a young boy who started a revolution. Although I cannot recall Arlita's advice, I remember being mugged by a group of children. Suddenly, the young man's face fills a memory gap.

“The marketplace!” I stare with an obvious intent to crawl over the table and through the hologram to choke the teenager.

“Care to prove it?” He laughs while arranging several software tablets in the hologram between us.

The young man's features barely set him apart from the other scoundrels on the streets. His dark brown hair is long and disheveled, covering part of his face like a tapestry against a civil introduction. His face looks clean and smooth, and by the way he rubs his jaw line, he cannot wait to start shaving off a beard. His desert suit looks sealed and new, making me wonder how well off his business really is. I look over the individual with pink lips and notice him to be a girl. She looks so familiar that my mind begins to wander. She matches the physique of the runaway from my apartment, except for the long black hair, closely shaven across her temples.

“Are those lips popular?” I struggle with my words, rethinking the innuendo.

“Take a number.” She refuses to look me in the eye.

“I mean your tattoo,” I chuckle in the confusion. “Do you share that tattoo with another girl? Like a gang sign?”

“A gang sign?” She sounds offended, trailing her sulking remarks. “I knew you were a loser.” She turns away from the hologram, leaving the table.

I reach out and grab her arm, pulling her face into the light.

“You were at my apartment!”

Segments of memory that have been unraveled slowly twist together in a mosaic flash of self-realization. Except for the black hair, everything about the girl with pink lips makes sense. I remember her waking up in a daze outside my apartment and leaving without giving me a straight answer.

“What did you say about my wife?” My frustration turns sour.

“What are you talking about?” She raises her voice in a defensive tone.

“Stop lying!”

“Leave her alone!” Laci cries out. “She said she doesn't know!”

I grab the girl's comp-uzync arm, dragging her away from the suspended table.

“What's going on?” I state a serious inquiry to the adventurous youth.

“Easy! That still hurts!” She sounds scattered by her own response.

“Do I have to break your wrist to get a straight answer?” I pull the drawing of Sherianne from my pocket and shove it in her face. “Why were you at my place? How do you know my wife?”

“I already told you!” She sounds threatened, her voice cracking.

Looking down, I can see that I am squeezing her wrist so tight her skin is turning white. I release her wrist and lower the drawing, moving for the open seat. My hands weigh me down like anchors as I set them on the suspended table. If I know my wife, I would know what kind of trouble she would be in. With today's youth running around the city like there is no tomorrow to shield them from today, I feel as if time is running out.

“It's like I'm interrogating a ghost.” Feeling like a beaten down man on the brink of a nervous breakdown, I stare at the drawing.

“Did you draw that?” Laci leans across the table.

“Yeah. I wish I had an actual picture.” I reply without looking up at the curious young girl.

“Isn't that?” She looks up at the girl in dark attire while speaking to me.

The runaway shakes her head, hoping I do not notice.

“Who?” My face stretches to full alert. “Do you know her?”

“No,” she sinks in her seat. “I just thought she looked familiar.”

Deflated, I turn toward the dancing crowd. “Sherianne hated places like this,” I start with a hint of denial in my voice. “Everything is backwards.”

“Backwards?” Thumbs fusses. “People like your wife should know. They need places like this.” He stops, looking over his shoulder at the mirrored wall and back across the table. “Everyone here knows.”

“Knows what?” I sound anxious for his story to continue. “What does everyone here know?”

The young man's focus switches from a standoff stare with my old eyes to a bored smirk that concludes with an activation code on his comp-uzync, which to him is both a remedy and destroyer of his full attention. The sound of random field entries leads me to doubt his capacity to hold a conversation. With a final key input delivered, he looks up at me, smiling through a hologram projection that quickly appears between us.

A cluster of female faces resides within the display. The dark colors in the projected image quickly dance into my tunnel vision, reverberating within me another level of synthetic music. A girl in the middle of the hologram reminds me of Sherianne and the way she moved when we were both young.

Sherianne, as I remember, was the strongest person I have ever loved. She protested alongside thousands during the registration of neuro-metal implants. She held her own against the A.L.L. Collar intervention. Although my responsibility to SCS stood against everything Sherianne believed, our love for preservation proved superior. The youthful

girl in the projection resembles Sherianne, only younger. In the moment of realizing that I am looking upon my living daughter, the table of teenagers divides in groups of scuffs and smiles.

“Is that Jessica?” I reach out, passing my hand through the holographic display which distorts in zigzag patterns across the projected image.

“You tell me,” Thumbs looks at his comp-uzync, adjusting the contrast. “That's the best I can do with the resolution. Is this who you're looking for?”

“I thought she was dead.” I squint at the near-transparent flicker.

“That's your daughter?” Laci asks with a sarcastic attitude, looking between me and the runaway who sits behind the hologram. “Looks like her bra is padded.”

“She'll never be a citizen,” he adds.

“Like you could?” Shentel interjects. “You're an orphan, just like her.” She chokes on her words and swallows. “What did you do? Plan a heist?”

“Shut-up.”

I think about baby Jessica and the ordeal she and her mother faced upon surviving the desert. I would like to think that my Jessica can live without her mother in such a city as Thicket. She would have seen the very worst of the city's authority. I feel unconvinced to any negative impression that both my daughter and wife have with these teenagers.

“I'm just going to say, your daughter-” Thumbs starts politely, but no one at the table is really listening to him.

“-is everything you're not. We know!” Shentel raises her hands to massage her temples.

“Like you care, lager.” He waves his hand in a daze in front of her face. “You keep passing out if you don't get your precious medicine. Father knows what you're capable of. Or should I say, limited to?”

“Chill out, Thumbs,” Laci frowns. “You're yesterday's news. This guy's daughter creates wakes.”

“So, she's got a creative streak?” I smile to myself. “She probably takes after her mother.”

“I think she's a little naive,” Shentel mumbles.

The footage of Jessica's dancing endeavor proves more than her sudden existence in the city. This recent footage gives me a set of present-day features that could narrow my search. I understand that Jessica is at the proper age for independence. She could be marked as an absconder, as her mother willingly chose over a controlled imprisonment within the city.

The idea of all three of us back together would be another moment suitable for

drawing. I remember that in the library of my comp-uzync, I had my life preserved until it was erased. I feel forced to reminisce over the memory of a mother holding her newborn child against the threshold of a corrupt government that wants unconditional control and loyalty from its people.

Sherianne knew about the contracts each child would be forced to sign at birth, and she wanted a better life for our daughter. Each time I think upon my separated family, I envision them escaping Thicket on that warm day in April. As I picture them running, my heart rate increases. In my own insecurity, I always picture them losing the race, falling to the demands of the Silver Collar Society.

I sit in an invisible bubble of sulk and guilt, wishing my Imprint Drive was never erased. Staring off into the distance of the dance club, I continue the conversation with the rest of the table. "What does your father have to do with my wife?"

"Everything, Digis," Thumbs drags the insult, smiling between Laci and Shentel.

"You think you have it all planned out. Don't you?" I snap from my daze and cross my arms, holding the silence for anyone in suspense. "You don't know that SCS watches your every move. I've seen the monitors. You don't know that SCS is full of corruption and greed. You don't know about collective comas. You don't know about the city's population." I pause to let the idea sink in. "And I doubt you know that a couple of Collars are in this very club, searching each sector for growers like you."

The table is left speechless, hanging on my every word. I have them thinking about the Silver Collar Society and their possible reasons for lying to the entire population of Thicket. I have Laci thinking about location of each monitor and what may have been recorded when she thought she was alone. I have Thumbs thinking about the mass population of Thicket and the range of control he could have at his command. I think about the A.L.L. Collars who could have followed me to the East Sector Club.

Sealing them with the impression that authority figures are raking through the crowd, I lean back in my seat.

"Your time's running out," I smirk. "Give me a name."

"Why? Are you going to arrest us?" He places his arm around Laci's shoulder.

"You actually believe SCS will overlook your little marketplace here?" I wave my hand over the vicinity of the suspended table, as if I am inviting the Collars to join us.

I look behind me at the dance floor and smile at the table next to us. As they whisper about me, I decide to use their awkward expressions to my advantage.

"Those guys are smart. They're waiting to see who'll run first."

“Alright, Digis. What do you want?” Thumbs gives in, pulling his arms back to the table.

“My name's Sunder. Knock off the Digis,” I snap.

“Bright and Sunny. What's it going to take to send you off?” He cups his hands as if conducting a business deal.

“Give me a name.”

“People like your wife know him as the Father.”

“You got talent, Thumbs. Shame to see it wasted.” I stand and look around for Shentel. “Where'd she go?”

“You can't tell people what to do, Sunny.” Laci's eyes start to tighten as she pushes her chair away from the table and stands.

Struggling to agree with the terms that somehow make sense, I think about my wife and daughter, and I try to imagine the danger they have already faced. Unable to force anyone or get a straight answer, I feel trapped at the beginning. A portion of my sanity includes believing my family is alive, but without knowing their whereabouts, my memory of their happiness is threatened.

Near the front of the club, I spot the blonde waitress with blue eye-shadow leaning over a table, conducting another transaction with the patrons of the club. I spot Mr. Andrews who sits at an elaborate table with a projected display in the company of several young women. As the music of the repetitive generation continues into the early hours of the morning, I think about the best way to avoid another confrontation with the Silver Collar Society while keeping an eye open for my family.

There must be more to these occurrences than simply running into the same people. I think about the set of pink lips tattooed on Shentel's neck and whatever the reason she has for concealing her identity. She could be running away from her father and is now forced to fight for her life.

I think about Thumbs and Laci and their connection to my family. They could know where my wife and daughter have been this entire time. Worrying about the Silver Collar Society and the reason they have for following me is enough to drive any citizen crazy. Knowing that my Imprint Drive is worth a life in exile, I feel glad that I am without it, but I also feel like I am being led into a dead end.

Thanks to the illegal market, there are ways for me to forget about this day, to forget about being a victim, and to forget the obligation of seeking justice. Against the Silver Collar Society, I am not special. I am average. I am no longer a specialist. I am no longer an engineer. For fear of Sherianne's safety, I was never able to address myself as her husband, but then I remember. I am still a father.

Chapter 7

Every Adverse

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“No servant can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money.”

Luke 16:13

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On the streets outside the East Sector Club, the mood is different from every other sector. All is quiet, comparably. As the sun rises and the ruckus of the marketplace stirs, I hear the selling sounds of controlled relief. The retro-glass advertisement boards flicker words in bold print over thousands of commuters. As if ordered with a type of visual aid to enjoy the start of my day, I am forced to follow SCS rules to respect my neighbor. Like every citizen in Thicket, who must earn the right to live here, I am told to behave.

Unlike the citizens of Thicket, I am aware of our government's reach within the production methods of neuro-metal. I know that the Silver Collar Society mass-produces and operates a nutria-farm to either improve or replace the recipe to a higher nutrient-rich cauliflower. Everyone not wearing a Collar, including those who swivel around my path through the city, knows nothing of the collective potential from connecting the lot of them.

The warmth of the city streets is vital to the survival of humanity and the Silver Collar Society provides the digital circuitry to power the neuro-metal pavement. The surface acts as an insulator in the winter and conditioner in the summer, using massive amounts of electricity. A newly designed power station, secretly installed by SCS engineers, generates the voltage from the dry river bed directly below the city's foundation. The decommissioned power station, built in the same structure as the nutria-farm, is separated from the city by a course of rocky terrain and across a link-rail system built on the ground.

On both sides of my path, people sleep on the heated streets. Vendors who stand in a line along the edge display their hand-made merchandise in piles and grids at their feet. Thousands of desperate people sell hand-stitched fabrics that can only be used inside the city. While I pass up their tempting offers, wondering what the fabrics are woven from, I rub my balding head and trek deeper into the marketplace where the smell of a bountiful feast lures the city's walking population.

The animals of the old world cannot survive today. The city is not designed to

support the ecological need of both human and animal. Except for the aroma of a home cooked meal that emanates from steam vents between each vendor of the marketplace, animal sustenance does not exist, yet the people of Thicket have grown accustomed to the artificial smell.

Advertised for its basic appeal, food is far from ordinary. With the earth's lack of edible sustenance, the people's daily supply of nutrition comes in the form of pressed pills and digestible marbles of liquid. We have fallen victim to the government's control over the city's food supply, where the credits earned by working for SCS could pay for a month's worth of little gray oval pills.

My entire diet is mandated, including flavored protein drinks of 200ml marbles that are expelled from Cau-li remains. Although fruits and vegetables are available to the upper class, the bulk of Thicket's population must rely on three pills a day, followed by a digestible marble before bed. Artificial colors and flavors are added to help us accept the fact that normal food is a thing of the past. I like to think that Cherry Red is my favorite.

As I knew would happen, the dinner bell rings in my head and my stomach rumbles. Now would be the proper moment for my body to demand another pill. My Cau-li supply keeps my mind in check and satisfies my hunger, but missing a pill means less energy, poor decision-making skills, and a variety of other impairments that will eventually lead to malnutrition and starvation.

“Presses!” One vendor exclaims.

“Marbles. Get third free!” Another vendor rivals.

“Collar special! Presses and marbles! Special for Collars!” A third vendor invites.

My choices continue for as far as the marketplace perfumes. When the people of Thicket reinvented the luxury of corrupted currency, they invested in rival dispensers of the same government issued nutrition package. As one vendor tries to outsell his neighbor, I remember the simple spite of stores that existed merely to compete against another catering service. Each vendor bares a greedier smile in their sale than the previous one I pass along the way.

“Fantastic presses!” One vendor tries to persuade.

“Know the difference! Buy from me!” An elder vendor tries to speak over everyone else.

“Can I get your presses in orange?” I mock the old man's confidence.

“Maybe, but these presses won't smell like the shoveled carcasses of a thousand processed vermin.” He speaks with expressive hands.

This is not the first time I have heard this vendor's opening line to closing a sale. But for the first time I consider his service on the streets of Thicket to be valuable. As many would try to cheat their way out of more credit through some planned glitch in their transaction drive, I settle on a sure sale to keep me alive.

“Tell me, Uni. How does SCS cook the vermin?” I squat down to admire the other artifacts for sale at his kiosk.

“They send children.” Uni speaks to me as well as those wandering by his venue. “With desert suits and shovels. Big shovels. Bigger than most shoulders.” He begins licking the air as if an invisible salt block sits on his collarbone.

Uni is short for acting unique, and the children of Thicket gave this old vendor such a nickname for his fictitious rants of underground furnaces accompanied by the occasional habit of unrolling his tongue during a conversation. Uni's behavior never brought him trouble, nor did it bestow upon him any luck. I see Uni as a restructured child, lost in the body of a crumbing adult, and on the last leg for being a threat.

Selfish shoppers ignore Uni on their way through the North Beta Sector and arrogant hypocrites avoid him on their way to the city's cathedral. To these patrons of Thicket, Uni sells nothing but useless stories that could possibly be used to scare young children into obeying their parents.

“Black skin. Black vermin.” Uni gazes up into the dawning sky while spitting. “Pink lips. Black box. Gray farm. Silver Collar.” He rambles on, unaware to what he is saying. “What box?” I turn up, intrigued by his one-sided dialogue.

Thinking Uni overheard part of some important conversation, I want to believe his regurgitated words are the recipe of some master plan. What may have been whispering rambles inside of Uni's thought chamber could be translated into the string of details that match the occurrences to my weekday of trouble.

“Pink lips after SCS.” Uni's gaze returns to the streets in a blush.

“Whose pink lips?” I squint as my eyes connect with Uni.

“Farm lips.” Uni starts to lick the air, turning to face the invisible salt block that now sits on his other shoulder.

“Can you can show me this farm?” I stand.

“Desert vermin run the farm. Absconders fear the farm. Prophecy says SCS will destroy. The Father knows about the prophecy.” Uni quickly turns away from me as if he has said too much.

“Whose father?” I ask as if I am clueless. “Yours?”

Uni starts vigorously rubbing his face and the top of his head as if he is being attacked by a swarm of accusations. A squeak emanates from within, rearranging Uni's entire vocabulary, processing his voice like the screams of either a scared rodent or a ill-oiled hinge.

“I'll trade you for a press.” I reach into my desert suit and pull out the cylindrical container.

Uni turns on the ball of his foot, grinning with both hands over his crooked smile that surfaces for the first sale in a long time. Having the reputation of scaring his customers, Uni contributes his lack of funds to the sight of his artificial body. Selling his body parts for more than enough credit to live forever, Uni carries on making a living.

His makeshift venue is no more than a few handmade desk ornaments and pieces of reconstructed metal that double as a preconditioned art project. His available merchandise sits on the city's streets as does the hundreds of others in this sector of the marketplace that try to keep capitalism alive. Uni picks up a large box off the pavement, opening it as quickly as he can, and seems to dive face first into its open lid.

Uni is beyond excited, grabbing more than a handful of little gray oval presses. He closes the box and sets it down with the other hand while trying to balance the excessive number of pills he withdrew. With both hands as a dedicated serving tray, he offers the mound of synthetic nutrition to me.

“Well,” I ponder. “I guess I'll take this one.” I reach for a random pill near the edge of the pile.

“Not that one.” Uni jerks his neck, swatting with his eyes.

“Right,” I start, a little confused. “I meant this one.” My hand changes direction.

“No, not that one.” Uni swats with his eyes again.

“Then which one, Uni? They're all the same.” I retract my hand.

“Hard to say.” Uni looks down at the presses in both hands. “But they've been cleaned.” He leans closer and breathes in. “They don't smell.”

“Alright.” I feel like I have had enough of Uni's games. “Do you want to trade a press or not?”

Uni's playful expressions and story references have darkened as he has grown older along Thicket's streets. He hears my tone drop in sudden disapproval and, in a more serious turn-of-events, starts to distant himself, unable to look anywhere but into my eyes.

His expression changes as he drops the lot, except for two. More than three dozen

presses bounce off folds in his attire and disperse across the tiny corner of the marketplace. Uni holds both identical presses up to my eye-level where they serve as an operator between offended customer and disgruntled clerk.

“Take this one now.” Uni looks seriously at one pressed pill and then gently at the other. “This one for passage.”

“I only want one, Uni.” I reach for his left hand.

“It's not up to you.” Uni shoves both pills into my empty palm. “Just remember,” he encroaches with brightly dilated pupils. “A nutria-farm is no place for a child. There's a plague on humanity. Like the painted rock under the violet ultra, the creature will appear unique.” He breaks his stare, taking a step back and rubbing his eyes.

“Like I need more desert rocks,” I remark quietly.

With the awkward rubbing over, I watch Uni hunch down onto his knees to pick up the scattered presses. Nearby shoppers pay extra attention to his surrounding misfortune. Children who wander the marketplace unsupervised stop only to swipe a press or two while Uni is busy with our sale. He tries to stop one child who grabs a handful but falls backwards onto the neuro-metal pavement, grumbling over the fairness of the day.

I do not consider it my responsibility to curb an adolescent law-breaker. I could grab one by the elbow and force out an apology, but I do not feel any obligation to uphold the law. If the Silver Collar Society does not look out for my safety and well-being, why should I enforce any ordinance of civil obedience?

“I despise children,” Uni mumbles as he reaches for the last of his stray presses.

I cannot settle on agreeing with Uni, but I feel compelled to respect his verbal assertion. Maybe he is wasting his time as a bitter man. The words I want to say are clashed together, rolling around like thousands of marbles in my mind. Before I can speak, I hear a voice that I may never be able to trust.

“I wouldn't do that,” Shentel points to my mouth as I ingest one of the two presses.

“How's that?” I swallow and glance down at Uni who is preoccupied with moving his collection of presses back into his box.

“Collars questioned us in the club.” She glances at the second press in my hand. “You could have warned us.”

“Right.” I look off into the distance. “Now, you're following me? I thought you said you could take care of yourself.”

“Still.” She sounds convinced that I set the entire interrogation scene in motion but then continues as if she has quickly forgotten about being mad. “Are you really going to

take those things?”

“Yup,” I smile, depositing the second press into my cylindrical container. “Vermin-free.”

The thought of shoveling vermin starts to turn her stomach as she recollects her time on the nutria-farm. She remembers her shovel being twice the size of her hips as she slept beneath one. She squats down to help Uni gather the few remaining presses, handing him all that she collects. She begins to cringe as she recalls the taste of actual vermin, comparing it to the final product Uni holds in his box.

“Am I supposed to feel sorry, or guilty for being hungry?” I look down on her sulking with a dusting of both my hands.

“You never worked on a farm.” She looks up with a frown. “How would you know?”

I would know. I remember the absconder camps outside the city that housed the hundreds of outcast families, and those people who were as important to me as they are to her.

“Have you ever lived on a farm?” She holds back her tears with a harsh tone in her voice to prove a point. “Have you ever worked in a place that proves how revolting human life can be? Have you, Sunny?”

I find myself unable to answer, thinking over my wife and the life she chose to live. Sherianne, like the other absconders in her camp, survived the desert by scavenging the land of anything valuable. Because of her neuro-metal suit, Sherianne was able to exist in the extreme.

Like many absconders, Shentel has own desert suit that looks like my own. Knowing about the harsh reality of the desert, I contemplate the simple act of walking a tour against the wasteland winds and wild weather. As truth comes to understanding the trial and mortal error of life on such forsaken land, I chew on my tongue over sounding foolish.

Her tears seem held back, and if given the appropriate shoulder, she could cry forever. She looks up at me as she slowly stands.

“Have you ever had to make a choice that could either make or break your world, and still affect everyone else?” She moves in closer. “You should have been prepared.”

My memories grow curious. I remember sitting in the home of Arlita and the transcription of the teenage boy's speech. The prophecy foretold was ignored as he warned the people of Thicket. The Silver Collar Society may be responsible for the

death of those who oppose them, but then I remember the chilling words of another absconder who happened to mention the uncertain outlook of my wife.

“Why are you here?” My eyes trace the roots of her black hair until I see Orange.
“Your name's Oscar, right?” She looks at me after admiring Uni's merchandise.
“Yeah? How did you know that?”

Shentel's face softens as she touches Uni's shoulder. She moves around him and quietly slips on a pair of desert boots that he has for sale. Dropping her smile, she picks up a second pair and starts walking away, being careful to not be seen. With Uni distracted, I march after her.

“Who are you?”

“I was sent to find you.”

“What for?” I sound unsure as to why I am following her.

“I need your help.”

“And I want my life back.”

“What?”

“We can't always get what we want.” I glance behind me to see if Uni is following us.
“Why me?”

“He thinks you can save him. He said you're the only one in Thicket who knows how it works.” She turns down a street, directing me away from the bustling commotion.

Through the marketplace I follow Shentel but fall into confusion over what she means. Being able to save another human being is not a philosophy I acquire easily in life. I watch her swing the pair of desert boots in her hands, wondering why she needs a second pair.

“Who? Thumbs?” I feel compelled to stop our venture until I get a direct answer.

“Not really,” she starts, unsure of herself. “I'm taking you to the Father.” She keeps moving in the same direction, hoping that I will follow her.

As we continue walking, now in silence, I think of my daughter and the way she would have referred to me as Father. I remember the ways Jessica's tiny hands held onto my forefinger as I carried her. Although I never got to hear her first words, I always believed Jessica would have developed into a strong and confident woman, just as Shentel seems while escorting a man two and a half times her age.

“But what does your father have to do with me?”

“He said you have important business to discuss.” She holds one of the boots in the air as if she has no idea.

She stops, looking up at the Alpha and Beta Wings of Thicket's Medical Sector. As her mind starts to wander, I think on the underground market that helped to decorate my elaborate apartment. With the Silver Collar Society following my every move, there may be no more business for me to conduct. Over the years I have become aware of my competition and I will quickly lose my turn in making a profit.

“He said if you can't save him, there's no point in fixing me,” she glances back at me with a sense of uneasiness.

“Fix you? What's wrong with you?”

She looks away, gazing up at the Medical Tower where thousands of reinforced windows exhibit medical experiments and recovering adjustments. Each room in the Medical Tower is equipped to reduce a patient's healing time by half. Her eyes fall but she cannot look at me, trying her best to hide her emotions.

“Is that why you settled with a harvested?” I point to her wrist.

“I didn't have a choice.” She glances down an alleyway, sounding depressed.

“Nobody knows who I am.”

“And I do?” My words come out surprisingly calm.

“I kind of thought you would. I mean, you're a doctor, right? You're one of those guys who can fix people.”

I think about all the people who have come to me for help. Then I think about all the people who I must turn away because of the reputation I need to protect. I understand her need for medical attention, but I have a gut feeling that there is something she is not telling me.

If there is an ailment she suffers from, I am unaware of her symptoms. If her health is important, she is failing to seek the proper help. I have always wondered what absconders in the city do when faced with a matter of life or death. I have always figured a scavenger of the desert to know where to go and what to do, but now, I guess I am wrong.

“Not anymore. I can't fix everyone,” I begin sympathetically. “I just know how to point people in the other direction.”

She looks around, wondering if we are being watched. The large medical buildings will not protect us from old debts or classified stress.

“Look,” she sounds impatient, as if my ignorance is wasting her time. “It's no big deal. I can manage. I've kept myself alive this far.”

“Then, if you really don't need me, I'm going this way.” My sarcasm allows my steps to take me in another direction.

“Brought on by selfish acts,” she murmurs.

As the young absconder starts walking again, leaving the birthing shadow of the Medical Tower, my mind starts to flicker. I remember Sherianne getting mad at me for not wanting to stay with her as she settled in her new home outside Thicket. She told me my decision was brought on by selfish acts. Unable to ignore the coincidence, I turn and walk after her as she approaches the edge of the Medical Sector and the entry-port to the rocky wasteland.

“What did you just say?” I reach out and grab her arm.

“You're selfish.” She pulls her arm free.

“How would you know that? You stick up for my wife in the club, but can't give me a straight answer.” I point at her face. “Why should I believe you? What if I just ignore you like everyone else?”

“Because-”

“Because what? You know something I don't? You know where she is? You know why she's been gone all this time and refused to drop me a line?” My hands go up like I refuse to remain calm. “What is it? Is she spelunking and unable to find her way home? What! Tell me something!”

“Because if you don't,” she pulls on a large lever to the circular port. “Jessica will die.”

The citizens of the North Alpha and Beta Sectors live in the cleanest portion of Thicket. Most would believe the residential apartments surrounding the Medical Sector to be owned by the upper class, and citizens involved in the Silver Collar Society.

The Northern edge of the marketplace is considered by most to be the end of the road, but I feel I am being led in a direction that requires a checkpoint. Twisting gears and harmonious chirps of electricity resonate from within the walls of reseeded-steel. The entry-port's pressurized release sends a gust of white steam in our direction.

The outside air smells burnt. What looks to be a cave-in of rubble and rot is a ladder to an endless desert of unbelievable sand storms, crashing into one another like tornadoes of dirt and grime. Beyond the walls of the Hetch Hetchy Valley, absconders are home.

“You don't have to follow me.” She drops the pair of boots in front of me and pulls up the hood that lays zippered under the folds in her desert suit.

“Why is Jessica going to die?”

Refusing to look at me, she holds her breath and takes a step outside. Before wandering off she glances back.

If I have a choice, I would remain within the city limits and let her wander back to her father, but I must think of my daughter. I need to make sure she will be fine. I need to be fine. Instead of turning around and disappearing back into the marketplace, I pick up the pair of boots and slip them on. I unfold the hood to my own desert suit and tighten the neuro-metal fabric around my face. Taking a deep breath, I step through the entry-port where the heavy, circular puzzle pieces close behind me with a loud, pressurized seal.

Chapter 8

Layers in Dirt

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“And no wonder, for even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light.”

2 Corinthians 11:14

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The desert wind smothers my face. As I follow Shentel up the rugged landscape, I battle against the heat that surrounds us. The rocks and sand under my feet carries with it the scent of tepid decay. There are no trees to shelter us from the morning sun. No rivers to cross or swim in to cool off. Not even wild desert snakes or rugged cacti occupy the wasteland. The land outside of Thicket is dead.

The darker stained sky, although thicker against harmful solar radiation, does not aid us in the extreme fluctuation in temperature. I look to the West and ignorantly smile at an even spread of clouds. I like to think that the world is not in complete peril when every few days, the weather breaks its threshold.

Rain clouds appear in the West. Not a mark of celebration, for these clouds do not bring life. The rain clouds of the wasteland carry evaporated moisture from the heated coastline, displacing a dense layer of acidic fog. The desert suit I wear can protect me from most of nature's updated elements, but not all of them.

When I am home within the city, the mass population is safe behind ionized vents that seem to shield us from the corrosive storm. Now that I am far from the comfort of Thicket's safety, I must deal with the deadly fog in my own way. Raised by refugees and protesters still living outside the city, Shentel takes charge on which way to go.

“Don't fall behind!” Her voice crashes in the wind. She turns to the East with a hand shading her eyes. “We're heading East.”

“East?” I shade my eyes, wondering if the absconder camp in the same direction is still occupied.

“Don't look surprised,” she walks past me but looks back. “You're not welcome.”

With a spread of condensed clouds encroaching, we hike for several hours to the nearest absconder camp. We march up hills and around large boulders. We cross old highways that are no longer in service and illegible road signs that can barely stand on their own. The sight of camp appears on the horizon.

“Don't talk to anyone.” She looks back at me as she keeps walking, making sure I am

still with her. “These people don’t want your help.”

I scan the perimeter of the camp, identifying shelters made of a steel, copper and zinc. Their irregular shapes outline the poverty that should no longer exist in the world but as I search for anyone who may be able to help, I am quick to assume that this camp is dead. While the locals call this part of the mountain ridge, Piute, the flagpole at the center of camp identifies it as Crutchtown. I feel reminded of Sherianne’s decision to raise our daughter in a community without the help of the Silver Collar Society.

The camp is clustered closely together, leaving no room for additional structures. I approach one home nearest the flagpole and slowly open the door cut from a single piece of metal. Standing in the entryway, I place my hand on the door frame, rubbing the shackled pieces of steel and large eroded stones. As I inspect a few metal canisters and various pieces of fabric from a nearby shelf, I notice Shentel outside walking by impatiently.

“Where is everyone?” She sticks her head into the open doorways of several homes. “All their stuff’s still here.”

“I know this camp.” As I walk outside I feel as though my voice cannot be heard over the wind battering on the shingled roof. “You can’t find this place with an old-fashioned compass.”

“I’m sure.” She does not sound impressed, seeming distracted by the camp’s desertion.

“It’s the reverse in polarity. If you headed north on a compass, it would send you in the opposite direction. My wife brought our daughter here. It wasn’t safe in the city.”

She reaches for a broken hydro-generator that rests upside down. As I join her, I help her turn the generator on its side.

“Safe for you, but not for them.” She ignores my attempt to help.

“It’s not that simple.” I look up at her scorned face. “I risked everything to be with her. It wasn’t easy for me.” I remove a side panel of the generator to reveal a circuit board of wires and small tubes. The gears in my head start to turn.

“You abandoned them.” She stands, stepping away from the broken machine.

“I didn’t have a choice.” I bury my shame in the generator’s open compartment.

She brushes off a layer of sand that has accumulated on her sweaty cheeks, tightening her hood in frustration.

“Someone told SCS about this place.”

“Are you accusing me?” I look up.

“Look at this place!” She stretches her arms out and looks around. “There’s nothing

left!”

“How is this my fault? I loved my family. I did everything I could to make sure they had a life.” I push my finger into my open palm.

“Not everything.” She crosses her arms in disappointment, returning her stare to the horizon.

The wind starts to pick up speed. Shentel reaches into one of her large pockets and retrieves a handful of Cau-li presses. She offers her closed hand to me.

“Put these in your bottle.”

“Did you take these from Uni?” I feel torn accepting her gift.

“Does it matter?”

“I think it should,” I open the container and deposit the presses. “Everyone should be held accountable.”

“Hypocrite.”

“Why are you so angry with me?”

With her back to me, Shentel stands at the edge of a low-lying cliff. Watching the horizon, she spots the approaching storm. I return my focus to the hydro-generator on its side. I plug and unplug wires and rearrange several tubes until the device begins to hum. I replace the side panel and turn the generator upright.

“I don’t know why you’re mad at me. I protected my family the only way I knew how.”

Shielding her face from the advancing fog, Shentel keeps silent.

“I’m not going to let Jessica die.” I pick up the hydro-generator that is now fully functional and get to my feet. “Are we clear?”

She steps down from the edge of the cliff and turns toward a mountain ridge on the opposite side of the camp, “We need to hurry.”

We trek up the mountainside to the entrance of a cave. Although the mouth of the cave is no bigger than an entry-port in the city, the belly of the cave is ideal for sheltering refugees from the storm. Leading the way, Shentel instructs me to watch my step around stalagmites that sharpen near my waist.

“We’ll stay here till morning.” She takes a seat near a rounded boulder.

“Morning? Why so long?” I stand close to the light of the entrance.

“It’s only a few hours.” She loosens her desert suit hood. “You want my advice?” She flicks her wrist downward with her extended forefinger. “Stay put.”

The average absconder has seen their share of acidic storms and has survived the worst by learning from those who failed to heed proper advice. Once the acidic clouds leave the area, the ground will still be covered in puddles, cavities in stone. Walking at night with a randomized field of acidic ponds is not the easiest obstacle to maneuver, even for the very best. Shentel would do as she always did when faced with these circumstances. Even if I am willing to leave on my own, she will make me wait until the sun evaporates all evidence of the storm.

I look out of the cave and watch as the beads of rain bounce off the shelters' roofs. Lightning strikes in the distance, illuminating the evening sky with a sudden burst of electricity. The absconders who used to live here could protect themselves from the acidic storms, but they failed in fleeing the authority of the Silver Collar Society. The storm gathers in heavier patches over the camp, raining in larger segments. Lightning flashes again, hitting the edge of the cave. I stare off into the storm and flinch at the spark that seems too close for me to easily fall asleep.

“Try to get some sleep.” She tries to sound invincible.

“What about you?”

“Don't worry about me. Nobody does.”

“What about your name?”

She ignores me and rolls onto her side. I lean back against the cave wall and close my eyes, listening to the rain and hoping my dilemma will soon wash away. Against the echo of the cave I hear her speak.

After several hours, the heavy beads of the storm slow to a trickle and eventually cease to fall. I fall asleep in the confidence of the mountain's solid structure while Shentel lays near the entrance, unable to find sleep.

In the blanket of my dreams, I find myself at the base of a large solitary tree that looks to have been torched by the wild fires of earth's devastation. As I start to climb its thick branches, a voice calls from the ground. Shentel is there, calling for me to climb back down before it is too late. Instead of following her friendly request, I climb higher. The storm picks up speed and the tree begins to disintegrate, withering away like grains of sand in the wind. Suddenly, I find myself on the ground and Shentel is the one climbing the tree. The trunk cracks and quickly disappears, leaving her suspended in the sky with nothing to grasp. She screams and calls for her father. As she falls, I lunge forward in panic, hoping to catch her. The quicker I run, the faster she plummets to the hard ground below.

The next morning, the sun begins its day by evaporating the many large puddles of

acidic moisture from the ground. I am the first to wake in a violent shake, recalling a dream that includes Shentel, a heavy storm, and a burnt tree. I feel as though I am living out the shadow of someone's dream, looking for a hand to hold. A dream where every touch feels like gold to me. As I get to my feet, I look around the entrance of the cave and out over the campsite that survived another fierce storm. I move to Shentel who lays motionless from her night's sleep.

“Shentel? Wake-up. The storm's over.” I shake her arm.

Shentel's eyes flicker as she begins to wake. Instead of greeting me with a reasonable welcome, or an anticipated shove of my heavy form away from her personal space, she breaks out in coughs that quickly lead to the expelling of her stomach's contents. I stand back, giving her enough room to breathe.

“Are you alright?” I reach for the hydro-generator, filling a portable container that I carry in my desert suit. “Here, drink this.” I reach for Shentel's shoulder and hand her the cup of water.

“I- I don't know.” Shentel takes a sip of the water, but is unable to swallow. She coughs and vomits again. “It's happening again.”

“You really are sick.”

“You think?” she wipes the saliva that has accumulated in the corner of her mouth.

“Well, I can't be sure.” I help her stand, noticing a dark red mark on her shoulder that looks swollen. “When did you get that?” I point to the part of her skin that looks like a recent bite mark.

“That?” She looks at her shoulder, quickly looking away as if she does not care. “I don't know. I've had that for a while.” She rubs her shoulder, worsening the expression of pain on her face.

“We need to get that covered.” I touch the surrounding area of the wound which is just as sensitive. “There's no telling what that's doing to you. We should probably get going.”

Shentel takes a piece of fabric and dowses it with water from the hydro-generator, tying it to the hood of her desert suit. She offers me a second rag soaked in water, and as soon as I hold it to my face, my breathing seems to improve. I no longer smell the heat in the air, or the wild fires that seem out of control. Once we leave the cave and the absconder camp in the distance, Shentel begins to feel better. She holds her head up as she tightens the hood around her face. Soon she can walk on her own.

“There must have been something in that cave.” I look back at the camp as Shentel leads me over another hill.

Particles of heavy dirt, along with both the rotten and rusted bits of the old world, ride the storm throughout the day. I can smell blood and metal in the air among the swept-up clouds of sand, and I can barely distinguish Shentel's silhouette in the leading distance. I move cautiously through the desert sands, covering the narrow opening in my hood from any intrusion. Shentel moves through the clouds like she carries a can of repellent, not phasing from anything.

As I struggle to keep my pace up, I watch Shentel march with confidence, wondering how my daughter could have survived the desert. If Shentel can figure a way, so could Jessica. I want to assume Jessica is as strong as her mother, or if not, she is stronger. I want to believe everything was fine when I left their camp all those years ago.

Shentel easily maneuvers around large obstacles in the ground by following a path that is familiar to her. She leads me through a graveyard of toppled automobiles, an asphalt sea of mangle shopping carts, and a mountain of rubble that looks to contain the pieces of an entire neighborhood.

“There! You see that?” Shentel stops and points to a tornado in the dirt.

“See what?” I join her in looking. “The desert tornado?”

“No,” she turns in a sarcastic tone. “The tower antenna!”

I squint my eyes but see only a twisting symphony of dirt. “I don't see a tower. Are you sure you're okay?”

“I thought- I thought I saw the lookout point.” Shentel shakes her head, tightening her desert suit hood. “We must have passed it.”

A majority of the wasteland surrounding the city seems cleaner than the outlining mountain ranges. Without trees, shrubs, or any kind of foliage, the unending horizon blends with the uneasy smell of the dead. My vision narrows the longer I walk, as if I am trying to squint at something on the ground level from my apartment window. I can barely see Shentel, who continues her march only a few feet ahead.

From Thicket, we walk for nearly 16 hours beyond the mountains of crumbled bricks and folded steel, to the Western shore of the former Lake Mono. Built extremely wide, a building no taller than the trailer of a twentieth-century shipment crate protrudes from the center of Paoha Island. Camouflaged by the same color palette as the barren landscape, a surface level link-rail that is constructed from thick, reseeded-steel extends from the small building, traveling through the mountains of debris and connecting back to the city.

The burning smell of a scorched earth lingers over every stone and every low-lying mound of hardened clay. Even the sand that I pass seems to retain the essence of a traveler who has lost the way home. A sort of poetic atmosphere triggers my memory over a time that belongs to me and my family.

I remember hearing about the revolution on Piute Mountain. Sherianne had developed a reputation for voicing her opinions against neuro-metal implants. I remember Jessica, wrapped in a neuro-metal garment to shield her from the desert winds. The forsaken ambiance of the wastelands brings tears to my troubled past, as does the unrelenting heat that makes my eyes burn. Without a proper face mask, I may soon go blind.

Before the thought of collapsing crosses my mind, Shentel gestures for me to catch up.

“We're almost there!” Shentel must shout to be heard over the wind. “But I should warn you!”

“Yeah?” I try my best to listen.

“Don't run,” she pauses, looking forward at the building in the distance. “He's not going to kill you! Got it?”

“What!” The only words I hear are KILL and You.

“Got it?”

“Yeah!” I roll my eyes, holding back my impatience to get inside and out of this torturing sand storm.

The only spot in this corner of the desert that resembles a sanctuary looks to be carved from a same environment I hope to escape. Identical to the surface of Thicket's narrow streets, only covered in desert decor, the neuro-metal shelter contains its own electromagnetic pulse. With each step Shentel and I take toward the building's exterior, the electronic buzz in the wind grows louder.

The entry-port, somewhat hidden by the desert's erosion, looks like the tens of thousands installed all over Thicket. The circular frame seems badly worn, as if someone once tried to break in. I walk up to the structure and rub its surface that crumbles like chalk. This entry-port may have been the very first, developed as a substantial portal, and used as a barrier between the Silver Collar Society and the untrustworthy absconders of the wasteland.

Assuming the same about all entry-ports, I feel confident that I can unlock the interconnecting panels with ease. Standing close to an access plate, I watch as Shentel approaches the building and brushes dirt off the metal plate.

“This looks easy to open.” I offer my cynicism.

“It will,” Shentel starts removing her glove. “Just not for you.”

Shentel places her open palm on a hand print scanner and the entry-port creaks as internal mechanics rotate the door open. The inside of the neuro-metal building houses several large collection chambers, with each metallic bin connected to a processing machine for the city's nutrition supply. The equipment operates at a decibel lower than the desert winds making our entrance more welcoming.

The floor of the entire building is slanted, leading the conveyor belts of each collection chamber deep underground. From first impressions, the mechanics room is littered with odd angles and shapes of scrap metal, alongside tools that look recently handled. On one side of the room, a dark hooded figure drops an unlit welding torch when he notices us emerge from behind one of the working machines.

“You must be,” the hooded absconder approaches, almost as if floating over his scattered belongings. “Sunder.” His electronic voice seems to sneer as he pronounces my name. He sounds like he does not belong here.

“Perhaps,” I grow hesitant, shifting my eyes between Shentel and the absconder cloaked in his own shadow.

“I've heard so much already,” The absconder expresses his words with long sleeves covering his hands. “Do you know the tale of the man who tried to live forever?”

“Rings a bell,” I answer with a quick glance around the workshop.

The absconder squats over a small mound of neuro-metal fragments where hidden from my view he selects a piece of a hardened circuit board. Standing, at best as a hunchback, he turns to me and flicks the chunk of neuro-metal.

“Try to swallow that,” he points to the piece I catch.

I tumble the circuit board between my fingers and notice how it tickles the implant in my arm. I look up at the absconder who hides his face well in the barely lit room. Deep in the hood of his robe, which is made primarily from compressed human hair, his features are cased in shadow. When I search for the eyes to match the voice, I get the feeling I am looking at more fragments of neuro-metal.

“Alright,” I feel like I have had enough. “What's going on?” I toss the piece of neuro-metal to the ground and hold my arms out.

“You're the father, aren't you?” The absconder points with his sleeve, revealing a finger that looks to be dipped in neuro-metal. “She's here, you know. Your daughter.

Shentel, here, has been trying to keep her alive.” He gestures for Shentel to access the entry-port on the other side of the room.

“She's what?” My arms drop to their sides as I confusingly watch Shentel leave, wanting to hear a good reason.

The absconder waits until Shentel is in the other room, away from anything she could hear us discuss. He approaches the sealed entry-port, flipping back his long sleeves. He drags his fingertips against the surface, eroding another layer of reseeded-steel.

“Have you ever injected neuro-metal directly into bone marrow?” He moves his hand in a circle, leaving deep grooves in the entry-port.

“What?” I squint. “Why in the world would you do something that stupid? You wouldn't be able to survive.”

“I wouldn't?” He turns and rushes toward me, grabbing me by the throat.

The hardened black sludge that coats his fingers and wrists extends up both arms, across his chest, and between his shoulder blades. His hood falls to reveal a bald head, coated in neuro-metal and covered in cracks as would be a human skull. His ears look to be molded to the side of his face while his nose sinks in flush with his brow. I look down and see that in between his toes and movable joints, the neuro-metal cracks, leaving an almost rubber like callus over his normal epidermis.

“Of all the people in Thicket, I'd expect you to know.” He looks at me with eyes that seem to be burning off electricity from an overloading source.

I cannot help but feel scared, lost in my own mind like a child without a guardian. I feel my airways closing, being crushed by hands that can break my neck with no effort. I can sense the fear of humanity's mistake overpowering my senses as if this absconder is the product of the city's evil. I see a manifestation of man in the mask of technology. I may very well be looking at the man who tried to live forever.

At first, I am at a loss of words, juggling my emotions like a partially digested meal on its way up. I blink several times trying to breathe and understand what is happening. Something bubbles out from my mouth, and to my amazement, they are words that I believe to be true.

“Expect?” I inhale. “Nobody expects things anymore.”

Suddenly, he releases me and lets me fall to the ground.

I back away from the absconder and crawl toward a working machine.

“It used to be that people expected the world to end.” He watches me holding my neck and approaches the machine from another side.

I look up and see a series of visible pistons crank out a continual supply of pressed Cau-li onto a conveyor belt that disappears into the next room.

“People expected their government to save them from every possible disaster. Now,” he picks up a finished press to examine. “We're trying to live forever on our own.”

Not able to speak, I watch him move toward the scattered equipment as if disregarding my presence or the pain I feel. Ignoring any empathy, he reaches down to move a socket wrench. He lifts a plank of metal, pushing it to the side. He examines the unlit welding torch.

“Youth has its advantages. Don't you agree?” The absconder looks up, pulling his hood back over his face. “Before I was exiled, the people of Thicket loved me.” He drops the welding torch for a screwdriver. “The people looked up to me. I was the son of an important man.” He stands, gripping the screwdriver in my direction. “Now, they call me, Khristoff.”

The absconder offers his name, which in turn makes me remember. The talk with Arlita seems more important now. A written page of history is mere text to someone like me, while to Arlita and Khristoff, the past is still alive. Arlita never forgot the look on the boy's face when SCS agents escorted him from the cathedral steps to a region far outside the city. Khristoff never forgot how those who he thought were on his side left him to the wastelands without a means of surviving.

“You're that Dakya kid.” I sit up.

Khristoff stares, scaring me with the size of his glowing eyes. “There was a time when people called me, Loy. Even my own father, at one point, had respect for me.”

There is a part of me that sympathizes with Khristoff. In his former life, Loy would have enthusiastically introduced himself to every person in the room. Before injecting neuro-metal in the bone marrow of both arms and spinal cord, Loy would have hoarded his own supply of Cau-li to feed his neighbor. The young boy who grew up as Loy Dakya, only son to a famous neurological surgeon, abandoned the identity of his past. To survive the extremity of the wastelands and preserve the future of his destiny, Loy created a creature that the people of Thicket have now come to fear.

“Why stay here?” I look around the room again, correcting my first impression about the smell. “What could you possibly get out of this place?” I glance at the scattered

tools over sheets of metal.

“My children.” Khristoff lays his elongated neuro-metal fingers on a compression engine, jolting the machine into a rumble with a tiny spark. “I send them out to reap the land.”

“With what, large shovels?” I rub my neck, trying to hide my sarcasm.

Khristoff seems to remember sending Shentel to search numerous caverns where millions of dead bats accumulate in a putrid smelling mulch. These nearly empty caves became safe havens for these creatures and because of their ravenous appetites and the basic assertion to survive, billions of bats occupy these caves that surround the city of Thicket.

“Have you ever seen a bat savagely devour another bat?” Khristoff calmly twists the screwdriver into the side of the engine.

“I never figured bats for cannibals.” Not wanting to stand, I feel like I am learning something new.

“A sight like you wouldn't believe.” He digs the screwdriver into a crevice on the engine, lifting a large panel. “Imagine a creature that has in its hereditary traits the ability to live forever.”

“You collect their skulls too?” Wanting to disagree, I look away.

“Imagine taking in that trait.” Khristoff reaches into the engine's opening and removes a clump of mulched bats that emits a foul odor.

Disgusted, I cover my nose and mouth. The smell of churning fat and fur fills the tiny space with an odd memory. I remember visiting the caves with Sherianne. We had the time of our lives watching the bats fly from their rocky perch to their jousting partners. I never figured the bats were attacking each other for survival. Khristoff flicks the mass of mulch onto the ground, slapping the panel closed.

The lights from the ceiling bounce off Khristoff's Silver Collar. While I am reminded of an agent's duty to report this interaction, my lack of responsibility is ingrained in the situation as I unconsciously stare at the Collar around his blackened neuro-metal neck.

“Have you ever bartered for your innocence?” Khristoff approaches, holding the screwdriver in his bloody hand.

“What are you talking about?” I wake from the thoughts in my head, trying not to think of the smell.

“Imagine a world without the need to purchase everything.” He focuses on my body language. “Imagine life without the urge to follow.” He looks up at the ceiling, staring at an obscured point in the sky. “Imagine connecting everyone in a realm most comfortable, where the impression of heaven is closer than we all think.”

I picture in my mind a great pyramid. Believed to be the first man-made structure, the pyramids of Egypt were staples in humanity's interpretation of the very beginning. Even as wonders that glorified the afterlife, the pyramids were not built to survive the storms of the apocalypse. I imagine the city of Thicket as one of the great pyramids and as a wonder that shaped the making of the modern world. I feel I may contrast my fellow citizens' beliefs with those of ancient Egypt, having to hear the electronic voice of the new world's self-proclaimed savior.

"You can't read people's minds," I feel lost. "Or access their faith."

"I'm curious," Khristoff tilts his head, stabbing the top of my thigh with the screwdriver.

A feeling of hopelessness fills my lungs and I scream in agony. I fall to the ground, holding onto my leg, as he digs the screwdriver deeper into my leg muscle.

"Imagine," Kristoff slowly twists the screwdriver, creating a tearing sensation. "Knowing if God exists." He twists in the opposite direction, "In the heart of every person in Thicket."

"Stop," I speak softly, staring at the blood that is pooling under me.

"I can't hear you. It's more than you can imagine." He pulls the screwdriver out of my thigh.

"What do you want?" I try to apply enough pressure to stop the bleeding.

"You'll bring me the cube." He moves my hands away, letting the blood flow faster.

"The what?" I feel confused, hoping for a miracle.

"You're smart, Sunder," he stretches his hand over the open wound and a warmth envelopes my leg. "But I own you."

In an instant, the light protruding Khristoff's palm cauterizes my wound. Although the pain remains, I can see that the bleeding has stopped.

"If you want to see your daughter again, you'll bring me the comp-ucube."

"What?" I glance back at the entry-port as it emits the sounds of turning gears. "How do you know about the cube?"

The entry-port opens in a loud transition and Shentel appears in a small cloud of dust that quickly settles. The corners of her mouth have an accumulation of saliva that resembles ivory foam and dark rings have now appeared around her eyes. I watch her move from the entry-port as I try to massage the pain from my leg.

"You have 4 hours." Khristoff motions for Shentel to sit.

“What?” I want to know more. “I can barely walk.”

Khristoff speaks to me but watches Shentel walk across the room to the compression engine. He smiles as Shentel tries to operate her comp-uzync while using the engine as a bench.

Khristoff's gaze seems to shatter. “Your daughter will suffer. She may not be as lucky.” His eyes brighten as if more electricity is passing through a nuclear outlet.

I do my best to stand without falling to my knees. Looking toward the large panels of the wasteland entry-port, I feel powerless in believing I would be able to make the journey back to the city.

Khristoff hovers over Shentel as she fails to properly operate her comp-uzync. He lowers a forefinger to her device and a tiny jolt of electricity jumps across an inch of recycled air, restarting her comp-uzync into working order again. “Jessica is just another creature in my possession. She wanted a home. She wanted to be something more.”

“And now? Why should I believe you?” I grab my leg, unable to deny his strength.

Ignoring my question, Khristoff uses his comp-uzync to access the nutria-farm's link-rail. The entry-port opens into another room where an electrified link-rail pod awaits its single passenger.

“Sunder,” Khristoff starts, petting Shentel's dirty hair. “You think you have a choice. Fake your courage.” The electricity in his eyes flickers to the sounds in his voice, illuminating the hood covering his face.

I mumble as I step through the entry-port and board the tiny transport. Looking around the retro-glass dome gives me the same thrill as if this trip is part of another ordinary day, yet I continue my pessimistic mumbling as the pod's door slides into place, and starts moving forward.

Today is turning into the worst of ordinary days. I always find that the worst in any situation is to be expected, but I assume situations like this would never happen to me. I see the speeding landscape of dirt clouds and deathly tornadoes, wishing I could wash my hands of the entire matter, curl into my bed, and go back to the way things were yesterday.

The thought of searching Thicket makes me feel like an innocent child lost in a maze of grown up ideas. A small part of me still accepts the power of belief but an alarming portion of my career has lead me further from the right path.

Sometimes I think that SCS is to blame for everything that is wrong in the world. I feel as if I have given up on my faith when I must weigh out the involvement in SCS and their decision to spark the raids on absconder camps. For me and those who have lost a personal connection to the desert, Khristoff sounds as if he wants to make things right.

Khristoff wants me to believe that the absconder's mentality and way of life is complete for humanity's sake. He makes a convincing case that there may be no other way to truly live. Like another loyal pet ordered by a simple command, I see no use in struggling. He has my daughter's life at his disposal and there is nothing I can do short of listening to what he wants. I simply count each passing mountain on my solitary journey back to the city, thinking of Jessica, remembering Sherianne, and thanking God for this opportunity to regain a part of me that could have been lost forever.

Chapter 9

Heartbeat of God

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“And there you shall remember your ways and all your deeds with which you have defiled yourselves, and you shall loathe yourselves for all the evils that you have committed.”

Ezekiel 20:43

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The most I can remember about Jessica comes through what I can recall about Sherianne. As an infant remains hidden in the warm folds of its parent's arms, my opaque memories of Jessica and her mother come back to me in scattered details of their absconder encampment. The sun shines over the barren landscape, highlighting areas of dead earth where I once traveled.

As my solo trip on the link-rail pod takes in the view of the approaching landscape, I am reminded of the way Sherianne used to move in the morning. She would dress for the marketplace in her best attire, and I would watch as I always enjoyed. She would eat her daily pieces of cauliflower with a smile while I did the same. I envisioned a perfect life together, free from worry and doubt that anything dramatic would change our future.

With the passing of each low-lying hill and jagged mountain range, I think back to my younger years when daily life involved less stress. I wish I still had access to the prints on my comp-uzync. I could reminisce on the time I spent with my family. I wish I could cycle through pictures of Sherianne and the candid snapshots of her to remind me of a more carefree chapter in my life. As the horizon zooms closer with each link-rail second, I remember the love that was my wife.

I met Sherianne when I was a teenager, at an age when a few big decisions were soon to change my life. Around that time, I hoped for someone to take me away from this mundane world. On a SCS guided tour around the outskirts of the city, I saw an exciting employment opportunity as well as the future love of my life in the guise of a young, reddish-blond female. The color scheme in Sherianne's hair seemed unnaturally beautiful even as it appeared the brightest in direct sunlight. I would never forget the wave in her long curls or the way she tucked a single strand behind her ears when she had something important to say. To me, she seemed more perfect than any citizen in Thicket, which did not sit well with my parents.

As I witness the mountain ranges of Hetch Hetchy Valley clustering together, I

remember my parents and the stern look of disappointment on my mother's face. From the time of my licensed birth, I was raised by a couple who followed every rule enforced by the Silver Collar Society. The city's population limit had been regulated from the first years of breaking ground, anticipating a heavy fluctuation in elders who wish to preserve their family bloodline.

I never had a brother or sister because of the policy against siblings. The people of Thicket were forced to curb their breeding urges while those who chose to rebel against the system multiplied based on sexual occurrences. I never experienced the joys and sorrows of sharing my genes with another person until the day I met my daughter, Jessica.

Like all legitimate children in Thicket, I attended a school operated by SCS officials. In addition to people from the community, I learned from specialists who helped me develop the skills necessary to better serve my city.

It took me years to understand that the educational system was organized to flush out the early signs of a natural born genius, and those children who were deemed this highest honor became the property and responsibility of the Silver Collar Society.

I was one who SCS considered a gifted child, which meant extensive education and research in the development of neuro-applications, adding to a tiny fragment of arrogance that remained with me throughout my teenage years. As I think on the woman who I believe Jessica could have grown up to be, I feel sorry that she did not receive the same thorough education. As a product of an illegal union, Jessica would have had to endure the skills of an absconder.

As the link-rail pod starts to slow on its path to the city, my vessel approaches the outer entry-port, which opens and then closes behind me. Inside a segment of the city's infrastructure, I am reminded of the way Sherianne held baby Jessica in her arms, how she would stop crying the instant she saw her mother's beautiful face.

My motionless stare is interrupted by the loud opening of the inner entry-port, knocking back my posture with the momentum of a breaking vehicle. Somewhat dazed, as if returning from a trip back in time, the pod door opens and I succumb to the returning smells of the South West corner of the marketplace. Before taking my first step back onto the neuro-metal pavement, my stomach turns. I feel nervous.

The sounds of the busy cityscape quickly fill the link-rail pod while my hands guide me out using the transport's guard rail. Pedestrians in the vicinity rarely see this link-rail used, so it is a surprise to the hundreds nearby when I step out. People focus on me with stares of confusion and gawks of jealousy. If the old world was in better condition than

it currently is, these link-rail transports would have made mass transportation a simplistic adventure. How sad that no one thought of this until it was too late.

I move away from the sealing link-rail pod as nearby pedestrians close to me surround the transport, not wanting to board but shamelessly displaying their curiosity. Among the chattering bystanders eager to get a hands-on-look, I hear the mention of Uni's name and the chances of his crazy stories being true. Not surprised, I venture out, away from the crowd, thinking about Uni's odd habits and the presses he sold, wondering if they really are vermin-free.

A large portion of the marketplace has grown weary of Uni's slanderous rumors, but rarely do they act with authoritative discipline. The more Uni speaks of the Silver Collar Society and the vermin used to feed the population of Thicket, the less the people listen. Most people ignore Uni as they pass him on the streets. When he speaks of Khristoff and the legend of the immortal man, people gather to ponder his accurate findings. Their questions lead to Uni's rants about SCS. It runs a vicious cycle.

Thinking of the comp-ucube, I recall a younger man who helped distract SCS when Sherianne and Jessica escaped the city. A debt worth the lives of my family is forever tied to a device I consider too important to be used against the public's will.

Walking through the city takes longer now that I am in pain, maneuvering through crowds that seem to be venturing in the opposite direction. I roll up the sleeves of my desert suit, which slip down with the brushing of more people. I then raise my elbows to push a way through the men and women who glance back with concerns of their personal space.

Rather than get involved with a random person over an elbow raised or a shoulder scrapped, I mind my own business. As the streets divide me from the crowds, I notice people seem to be gathering on the other end of the marketplace, while only a handful linger near the steps of the cathedral.

What I remember best about entering a place of worship was during my courtship with Sherianne, before I had any permanent deal with SCS. She had been eager to speak with a priest, who at the time was a spontaneous young man named Mico. The cathedral was built to be a booming capital where people of various faiths could come to congregate under a single roof. When Sherianne entered the elaborate building with me at her side, the cathedral was filled with hundreds of people silently praying to their own gods.

Dozens of priests in black robes roamed the outer walkways of the cathedral. They

each wore a Silver Collar as if it represented a symbol of authority over penance. A priest of Thicket could absolve the sins of several religions without the need of a translator. Today, less than half a dozen priests roam the church halls.

The tall staircase to the cathedral invites every citizen to count the steps on their way into the great hall. Each step is engraved in ascending roman numerals. Those who choose to loiter in front of the building daily occupy specific steps that remind them of the number of their sins in hopes of being forgiven. An old woman at the top step hugs her knees, mumbling about a little boy who she was not able to save.

The archway to the cathedral is 14 feet high, adapted to host more than a single deity. The six reseeded-steel blades, safely hidden below me, are still capable of slicing me in half. As I walk between two 14-foot-tall humanoid statues, I feel my sense of self-confidence dwindle, slowing my pace across the quiet aisles of the main hall.

Sitting on opposite sides of the vast building, two priests with Silver Collars focus on the same mural of retro-glass that decorates the back of the hall. My eyes dart between the two Silver Collars that sparkle in the sun's filtered light.

The emptiness of the main hall keeps me in silence as I take a seat in the pew directly behind one of the priests. Unwilling to hesitate on Jessica's behalf, I lean forward as if I am kneeling in prayer. I lose myself in my leg's pain with my hands pressed together, wondering what is so incredibly important about having control over the cube. Does Khristoff want a revolution against the only system large enough to prove a successful method of perseverance? Does he want the same thing?

I start to wonder if the city's entire population is really at stake. The advanced nature of the neuro-metal technology has continued to spark my interest from the first schematic I designed to the creature living as Khristoff. Absconders are vengeful and extremely territorial. If not for the public displacement of a young boy who knew the end was near, a wasteland rebellion would never have been formed.

I close my eyes in disappointment, feeling horrible for the child torn from his family and friends over a piece of scribbled poetry. I feel sorry for the teenager who had to survive the desert by joining those who wanted nothing to do with the city's way of life. I cast my attention on the mural in front of me and I feel sympathetic for the young adult who could no longer live a normal life, bonding his internal self with neuro-metal. More than an injection into the bone marrow, Khristoff smeared his wounds in neuro-metal. I would rather not test his strength in negotiation, but I cannot sit back and let my daughter be harmed.

When I think back to the hunched creature holding a handful of mulched vermin, I

realize he has complete control over the city's nutrition supply. If something were to prevent his satisfaction, he could contaminate the city. The frustration and disgust leaves me feeling obligated to respect the work of art that Loy has created.

The longer I choose to dwell on Khristoff's state of madness, the more I feel like acting out irrationally, hoping all the disharmonious events I have recently experienced will snap back into a proper reality. Even as my leg aches and my hips twitch in this position of penance, I sense a greater power that keeps me kneeling in place. The sight of two motionless Silver Collars, sparkling in the green reflection of the retro-glass, assures me that nothing has changed. Are these feelings about lost hope and regretful opportunities all in my head?

The silence in the cathedral quickly dissolves across the rippling sounds of heavy footsteps approaching from behind. As a last resort I feel I could jump over the pew in front of me and use the priest as a disorientated obstacle. The Collars who feel compelled to have me run would find me soon enough and eventually there would be no place left in the city to hide. With each slow step that I hear shuffle in the large hall, I shift part of my weight in anticipation of running.

I look back and see the reflection of a Silver Collar who seems to be wandering in my direction. The black robe that cloaks the figure reminds me of Khristoff, except for a circular insignia that highlights his chest. The religious logo is a combination of every belief, collaborating into a hybrid design, illustrating the fact that all religions eventually come together as one. As the robed figure sits in the pew behind me, he speaks in a raspy tone that seems to drag through my memory like a lead anchor.

“Less and less show each day.” The priest folds his hands into his lap, retaining his focus on the mural. “I remember when this hall filled every morning and sunset. I remember a time when there wasn't room for everyone to sit.”

I lean back, standing from my position of penance and sitting in the pew. The priest's ideals seem strangely familiar, as if I have heard them somewhere before. A sure assumption shakes me into a widened stare at the old friend sitting behind me.

“All this time?” I look back, surprised.

“Taken seriously.” Mico sounds sincere in his gentle voice.

“Do you still protect the young?” I break the tension in bridging our pasts. “I remember when you carried the tiniest of living dreams with the biggest of smiles.” I smile as I recall the image of Mico holding baby Jessica moments after Sherianne gave birth.

Mico's distant stare springs into my field of vision as if he has heard a bogus rumor. Although my smile is less pronounced and the first feature Mico recognizes, the priest sounds confused.

“Sunder?” He points to the top of my head. “What happened to the mane?”

“Well, I would call it stress.” I rub the baldness of my scalp, combing over the front of my receding hairline.

I believe in the manifestation of my past, controlling my current state, and feel strong in my hair loss being associated with the raids on Sherianne's camp. I know that working against the Silver Collar Society is responsible for my lack of charismatic appeal.

“What happened here?” I turn in my seat, placing my arm on the back of the pew. “Has SCS finally taken over as your true savior?”

“Sunder, much has happened since the beginning of the new age.” Mico looks on to the stained retro-glass that depicts the four catastrophic events leading to the city's creation and the power and authority of the Silver Collar Society.

After 2012, floods conjoined into continental tsunamis, earthquakes grounded more than violent aftershocks, volcanoes generously advertised toxic wildfires, and worldwide famine influenced the illusive disease that continues to eat away the outer wastelands and its remaining inhabitants. By the end of the late 2050's, the worst of the natural disasters had passed, and by witness to the earth's steady demise, the Silver Collar Society stepped in to propose a solution that would save the last of humanity.

The city of Thicket was constructed to be mankind's last wish for peace. By the beginning of the 2100's, mankind had advanced its neuron-technology while it rapidly retracted any need for ecological support. The surrounding land outside the strongest city on earth had become barren, a wasteland where humans once decided to let the forests burn, the animals die, and the lakes dry up.

Those of the privately funded scientific fields, such as electrical and biological engineering, found an alternative way to sustain a city of tomorrow's only hope. For the price of their own neurosis to live, humans sacrificed all that did not maintain their postmodern cause.

Mico clears his throat. “We lost our ozone layer but gained a new level of protection.”

The city of Thicket was erected in a nine-year time span, battling against six months of extreme heat and six months of extreme cold each year. Spanning the surface of the

Hetch Hetchy Valley, the city of reseeded-steel created a new home for the last of the human population in the summer of 2061. Construction workers from several neighboring states worked around the clock to lay the foundation for the largest project in earth's history.

“Neuro-metal was introduced as a life-preserving material.” Mico scratches the tar like surface that covers a large portion of his left forearm. “It can carry an electrical current and be manipulated with a control chip, adhering to any surface to form the strongest conduction in existence.”

“Don't forget about the consol-vert unit,” I hold up a finger. “It houses the comp-uzync system.” Reciting the schematics I helped create, I unroll my knowledge in developing the comp-uzync.

“Millions of gallons of neuro-metal, Sunder. The production of neuro-metal was needed to create this city, but it led to the out-cry of a rebellion.” Mico looks back at the stained-glass murals of catastrophic events. The third mural depicts the rise of the human right's movement, boycotting the use of neuro-metal research alongside the publicly supported desert suit. “Those who opposed its use and anything that had to do with SCS were forced to wander. Those who remained in the desert, transformed their way of life.”

A majority of the population in Thicket knows of the absconder race and the intimidating lives they lead. Most absconders simply smell bad, but in large numbers, every single one is to be feared. Throughout the 2080's, the rise of absconders led to control of city streets and the revolt of half the population. Turning the city into a giant pornographic waterfall of showcases, absconders quickly gained the support of everyone not comfortable with the debt claimed by elites of the Silver Collar Society.

“Fortunately for our children, SCS felt like they had enough of the revolt and introduced the first A.L.L. agent to patrol the streets, taking the law into their own hands.” Mico pushes a dozen buttons on his comp-uzync, illuminating a holographic display of a news article from a day in history that blocks the stained-glass murals from view. “Imagine life without the urge to follow. Four years after the A.L.L. Collars were introduced, the last of the absconders were driven out of the city.”

The holographic news article reads, ALL ABSCONDERS REMOVED FROM THICKET. I remember my parents showing me this same article soon after my seventh birthday, conditioning me to be grateful for a world free of absconder domination. Until my daughter's birth in 2203, I had to keep my life separate from those who tried to live outside the city. I look up at the news article that slowly flickers out of existence, leaving my glare fixed upon the retro-glass mural.

“It's all because of SCS that I couldn't raise my own child. Sherianne couldn't stay with me. No one could know about Jessica. Her birth had to be kept a secret. I wish I could have taken them back with me, but I had to leave them behind.” My words break on the verge of crying.

“You did the right thing, Sunder.” Mico leans forward and places a hand on my shoulder. “If SCS knew about your involvement with either one of them, things could have been worse.”

I cannot help but think that the hypothetical situation Mico ponders is already happening. Perhaps the Silver Collar Society knew about my involvement with Sherianne's camp and that was why Crutchtown was raided. Perhaps they know about Jessica and think that she is responsible for everything.

I try to picture my family smiling, hoping that their pain was swift. I am reminded of the way Sherianne looked up at the stars, the way she smiled while waiting for the upcoming meteor shower to occur. We would sit in silence and stare into the heavens, counting the stationary lights as precursors to the ultimate show. Sherianne would curl her head into my shoulder when the meteors started to fall, whispering small promises for the next year of our lives together.

“Mico, I need to get her back.” I look up with tears on my cheeks. “I have no idea what happened to Sherianne. I have to at least make sure Jessica is safe.”

“Sunder, do you remember the day you left the wastelands, and returned to the city without your family?”

“I think about it all the time.” It hurts to admit such a flaw in my past.

“Have you asked God to watch over them? Have you prayed for God to protect them?”

“I thought I didn't have to. I figured Sherianne was strong enough for both of them.”

“You can't place your faith in man, Sunder. Even if it's your own wife.” He lays a hand on the back of the pew. “You have to put some of your faith in the Lord. Only he can make sure that they will be fine.”

“Can he guarantee they get enough to eat? Can he insure they have a shelter to protect their heads? What can he promise? Safe passage into Heaven? Be like SCS and promise an eternity of peace for the price of loyalty? I can't think of the end of the road for them. Not yet, anyway.” I shake my head, failing to admit the arrogance in my voice.

“You can't do this to yourself.”

“Do what?” I keep my face hidden.

“You can't keep blaming yourself for the life they needed to live. God chose a way for them to survive. And he did the same for you.”

“He doesn't have a plan for everyone.” I hold my arms out. “I mean, look at this

place. Is it by coincidence that these people are the last strands of human DNA?"

"God has a story of purpose for you, Oscar. If your gift is to fix the system, do so, and do it with a hopeful heart. Do it enthusiastically. Your purpose is clear."

"My path may be clear, but Jessica doesn't have that luxury."

"Where is she now?"

"I don't know." I wipe the tears from my eyes and straighten my back, hoping to bring back the masculine tone in my voice. "Haven't seen her yet."

"Do you think she's hurt?"

"I don't know. That thing's holding her." I curl my lip, thinking of Khristoff's bent form.

"The immortal man." As if he agrees, Mico sits back in his seat and looks forward. "Do you know the tale of the man who tried to live forever? There are a million excuses for immortality, but Khristoff seems to be the one who could produce the only reason."

"There's no reason for what he wants."

"And what is that?"

"Why don't you tell me?" I glare at him, hoping he knows that I am talking about a secret that should have remained silent. I stand from my seat and look away.

Mico looks surprised, "Why would an absconder want such a device?"

"He said the future of Thicket was at stake." I move away from the pew and linger in the main aisle. "He shouldn't even know it exists."

"Sunder, I understand that your daughter means the world to you, but do you realize what you are saying?" His focus remains fixed on my stressful pace.

"I know you believe in this whole thing," I look around the cathedral. "But how can you make spiritual claims with such a primitive tool?"

"Imagine a creature that has in its hereditary traits the ability to live forever. Sunder, people like Khristoff don't give back their prized possessions. They fight their entire lives to obtain the unreachable and will kill to retain it."

"I realize that, but now he thinks I can provide a direct link to God."

"Is he wrong?" Mico lifts an eyebrow, creating an awkward moment of silence.

"Why does he want it?" I start.

"I don't know. I've had several teenagers try to steal it, and each time they got a little bit closer."

Mico looks at the back of the cathedral as he stands from the pew and moves toward the center wall. His robe drags along the floor as he climbs the staircase to the upper balcony and reseeded-steel altar. Hidden from my view, his fingers caress the sides of the altar, feeling for a compartment switch that opens the top portion of the altar. Slowly, a submerged level appears with the comp-ucube.

Coined in my scientific discovery, the comp-ucube's design originated through the hard connection of two comp-uzyns, linking the similar systems into a single processor

capable of expanding its own storage components. Later redesigned as a single unit without the need of a display screen, input dial pad, or power host, the comp-ucube became the shell casing for a new type of neuro-metal appendage.

Mico lifts the cube from the altar and holds it out for me to see. “Sunder, tell me what you see.”

Wondering if the priest's question has some significant value, I answer with a slanted expression. “A cube?”

“What else?” he descends the staircase but holds his distance between us.

“Alright. I see, a single outcome.” My gaze with the cube remains unbroken as I sit in the front pew. “It gives off the illusion of control.”

“But we have the control.” Mico leans forward, holding the cube close to his stomach.

“You call this control?” I raise my comp-uzync, shaking it between us. “This is just another form of luxury.”

“Yes,” he lifts the cube to his eye level. “To better mankind may be the only luxury we can afford. Imagine a world without the need to purchase everything. When I look at the cube, do you know what I see?”

“An interlude to your sermon?”

“The heartbeat of God.”

“Heartbeat?” My eyebrows lift in amazement. “I guess I'm limited in my social constructs.” I look around the empty cathedral. “I guess it's capable of population control, but not religious control.”

“A sight like you wouldn't believe.”

Any assumption about the comp-ucube comes from direct experience, having conducted experiments with the prototype that would ultimately help me design the final device. Such a cube was originally engineered to diagnose its owner's overall health and update any electrical glitches in their comp-uzync. The neuro-metal casing is no different than the city's walking pavement, reminding me of ribbons of hardened sludge. The electrical current that runs through the streets of Thicket is the same source of energy that emanates from the comp-ucube.

“I'd believe a plan for total corruption.” I cross my arms, leaning back in the pew.

“Nothing of the sort,” Mico scoffs. “The church would never assist with an element of destruction.”

“Obviously, you're not familiar with SCS,” I roll my eyes.

“Then, why not destroy it?”

“I don't know.” I rub the pain in my leg. “I thought I had a plan.”

“And how far have you strayed?”

I think about the memories of Sherianne, the schematics of the comp-ucube, and the

rest of my life contained on the Imprint Drive in my pocket. Remembering my intention to build a better world, I try to justify the option of returning to bad habits. I designed the comp-ucube to link together every living person with an implanted comp-uzync, but never followed through with my promise to give SCS a working unit.

“I wanted to help bring people together.”

“Is that why you dumped it here?” Mico lowers the prototype comp-ucube.

“I wanted to be safe.”

“And?”

“And now, I'm no longer sure.”

Mico turns and looks up at the retro-glass, slowly lowering his eyelids.

“What do you know of this prophecy?” I think on the dedication ceremony.

“Only what the people tell me.” Mico continues to stare with his eyes closed.

“And how much of it do you believe?”

“Before we lose the individual, a boy will rise and take control.”

“Is that it?” I squint, raising my eyebrows and shaking my head.

“Like I said, only what the people tell me.” He moves toward the front pew. “And you? What do you believe?”

“I believe I can get my daughter back.” My words come across as if desperate in needing to prove a point. “I believe I can save a life.”

“Sunder, don't confuse bloated belief with faith.” He glances down at the comp-ucube. “You ask what you cannot answer. You want what you cannot afford.”

“What does that mean?”

“You can't barter with this device.”

“I can't?” I cross my arms. “I'm the one who brought it to you in the first place.”

“Well, when you first left it here, you said that it shouldn't leave the cathedral under any circumstances.”

“Well, that's a double portion of crap delight.” I sigh in disappointment, turning away in my seat.

“Excuse me?”

“The only time anyone listens to me.” I squint my eyes at the ceiling, “Is when I'm trying to save my own skin.”

“This cube is everything.” Mico turns in his seat next to me. “It contains the people's belief and your belief is my business.”

The idea of belief as a business does not sit well in my stomach. The words twist and turn in my intestines like a virus that cannot be destroyed. If Mico is so inclined for the people of Thicket to believe, why be difficult? I scratch my chin in thought.

“Then what's my belief going to cost me?”

“Have you ever bartered for your innocence?” Mico looks down at the cube and then out to me, clutching his chest as if his heart is ready to explode. “Some people are born with a certain gift. Others are born with a single purpose. Whether that purpose is to be a leader or follower, a taker or a giver, everyone has something to contribute. For the cube, I need the girl.”

“What girl?”

“Shentel.” He stands and turns, holding out his hand to offer a shake. “You promise to bring her back with the cube, and we have a deal.”

“You're serious? What could she possibly mean to you?”

“Youth has its advantages. The answer is in her DNA. Imagine connecting everyone in a realm most comfortable, where the impression of heaven is closer than we all think.” Again, he offers his free hand. “Do we have an agreement?”

I think back on the years I wasted not fighting for my family. I think back on the moments lost to the requirements of my job. The life I could have enjoyed is so far in the past that it may be impossible to recognize, even with digital memories. I pull out the drawing of Sherianne and I start to feel happy again, as if the life I had is close enough to touch.

Hesitant to shake hands for such a deal, I measure the thought of saving my daughter's life, wondering if it outweighs the life of a teenage scavenger who could have died on the streets of Thicket. Slowly, I stand from my seat, tucking the drawing back into my suit and step towards the Silver Collar priest who holds the comp-ucube close to his stomach.

I stretch out my hand and Mico pulls me close. Our shaking hands send ripples through the priest's robe, and I can feel our deal closing as if I am forced to watch from an outside perspective. He speaks into my ear.

“Imagine knowing if God exists in the heart of every person in Thicket. We may even find out in our lifetime.” He lowers his voice to a whisper. “Our savior is among us.”

I feel a chill running up my spine, caressing my skin like the pins and needles of a nervous habit that I know to be wrong. The smile in Mico's expression reminds me of Arlita and the spiritual belief she guards so well. She trusts her faith with such fortitude that she would probably not approve of this transaction. I can hear her voice of reason in my head, where my conscious should be guiding me.

With her words of scripture returning to my memory, I now understand what Arlita meant. I can now see how the priests of the Silver Collar Society impose a simple form of control. It seems as if I have no say in the matter when making this deal. I feel stuck

against a wall of an imperialist cathedral, a gathering place for people who have nowhere to go, and nothing else to believe.

When our hands separate, I am holding the comp-ucube and Mico is already half way across the empty hall, acting as if our conversation had not taken place at all. With each step toward the cathedral's open entryway, I can feel the bubbles of guilt floating to the surface of my soul. The cold stare of the humanoid statues seems more appropriate the second time around.

Outside the cathedral, I quickly feel like I made a mistake. I realize that I have conducted a compromise with a man of God to deliver an unknowing person for the chance to save another. Is this deal fair? Is it my decision to bargain the life of one young girl for the other? As I descend the large stone steps of the cathedral, the heavy blades of the 14-foot entry-port spring upward, closing behind me in a loud rumble.

The old woman sitting at the top step is still hugging her knees. She mumbles to herself, quietly blaming her own soul for the loss of another. Will this be my future? With the comp-ucube in my hand, I approach the old woman, kneeling close to her shoulder. She pulls back in fear.

“Easy.” I place a hand on her shoulder which seems to calm her hectic rocking. “You'll only make things worse.”

The old woman reaches up and holds onto my hand, locking eyes with someone who has taken the time to notice her. “You know my son- You know him- Follow the willow- Follow- He isn't bad- He's all thumbs- All thumbs-”

The old woman repeats the same line as if she needs to convince the demons of her past. I stand and take a step back, which does not seem to halter her rants. I tuck the comp-ucube into the folds of my desert suit and continue down the stone steps of the cathedral.

The few people who sit on various steps look up as I pass them, addressing my attempt at comforting the deranged woman with nonverbal cues of sympathy. Near the bottom of the steps, a young girl approaches from a sprinting distance away. I instantly recognize her from the East Sector Club.

“Sunny!” Laci pauses, hoping to catch her breath. “You've got to help!”

“Hold up. What's going on?” I reach out to calm the girl.

“It's Thumbs! Uni is going to kill Thumbs!”

Chapter 10

Burnt Offerings

..

“And your offspring shall possess the gate of his enemies, and in your offspring, shall all the nations of the earth be blessed, because you have obeyed my voice.”

Genesis 22:18

..

The harsh winds battling against the nutria-farm bring hail stones with the thunderous vibration of a tin roof. The changing hue of the horizon awakens Khristoff's imagination as he pets Shentel's dirty hair. Alone with his daughter, he orders her to stand.

“Get up, the sun is falling.”

“So?”

“So, we're like the Mesoamericans and the Persians. We're like the Greeks and the Egyptians. I'm like Abraham and you're my unfortunate son. We have a schedule.”

Tired and unconvinced, Shentel slouches in her movement. Khristoff approaches the heavy entry-port to the wastelands, pulling on a large lever. The circular entry-port rotates open and a wave of hot desert air crashes into the open work station of the nutria-farm.

The wasteland sunsets are an encouraging sight. Playing off the jagged terrain of South Tahoe's dry lake bed, venomous Hyltots awaken and begin to scurry. Khristoff pushes Shentel through the entry-port to feel the difference a sunset makes.

The evening air smells just as putrid as the afternoon swelter, but the severe heat is no longer a problem. Shentel looks out at the dispersing clouds in the distance, feeling happy about her decision to sleep through the recent storm. She walks a few feet into the distance and spots a solitary Hyltot. She points with a cheerful expression.

“There's another one!” She points again.

A baby Hyltot flickers between Shentel's legs and she runs after it. Determined to prove herself, she takes several long steps to follow the brave lizard, cornering it against desert debris, and picking it up. She returns to Khristoff with a pitiful smile.

“Can I name it?”

Khristoff watches Shentel's smile melt over the Hyltot's leathery beak, sharp claws,

and scaly tail. He glares at her infatuation over a creature that, if threatened, can kill her. In a moment of rage, Khristoff grabs the lizard from her cradled arms and marches back into the nutria-farm.

“Wait! What are you doing?” Shentel tries to stop him from walking away with her new pet.

Khristoff tightens his grip around the Hyltot's neck. Its eyes close and blood begins to seep from its lids. The small lizard's head separates from its body and falls to the floor, bouncing off Khristoff's knee and rolling away. He raises the headless Hyltot over a Cau-li collection bin and squeezes, draining its body of all its venom and blood.

Between bursts of hysterical tears, Shentel woefully inspects the collection bin and a splash of Hyltot blood catches her in the face. She steps back, covering her eyes.

“It got in my mouth!”

Khristoff throws the bloody Hyltot into the bin and slaps Shentel in the face. “Your time's up.”

Shentel drops to her knees, buckling by the immense pain in her throat. Crippled by the Hyltot's poison, paralysis sedates her as her vision floods with darkness and despair. Shentel grabs hold of the collection bin, clutching her stomach while falling to the ground.

Chapter 11

Case of Paralysis

..

“The one who conquers and who keeps my works until the end, to him I will give authority over the nations.”

Revelation 2:26

..

As the people of the West Sector in Thicket bustle along with their everyday routines, others in opposite sectors throughout the city are doing the same. Electricity runs across the neuro-metal pavement like a circuit board, powering generators, oxidizing vent capacitors, and keeping the population active.

Those standing still are immersed in personal conversations with others through the links in their comp-uzyns. Equivalent to a mobile telephone, their conversations are improved with the use of their vi-zync visors, aiding in their not-so-obvious disguise as those completely occupied by the virtual world.

While many can walk and talk at the same time, I find it easier to find a comfortable, quiet place to give my full attention. Near the stone steps of the cathedral, people converse with their implants while an old woman rocks in silence. A hysterical young girl comes running up for my help.

“It's Thumbs! Uni is going to kill him!”

“You're joking, right?” I curl an eyebrow, reflecting on the soft nature of the babbling salesman I passed earlier.

“I'm serious!” Laci pushes me, disheveling my desert suit. “You have to hurry,” she grabs me by the wrist and leads me away from the cathedral. The more she pulls my arm, the faster I must walk.

As if I am being dragged against my will, I follow with a frown, thinking if not for my inherent disfavor of running, I would not have been involved. I could have dodged Shentel's presence at my apartment entryway, making the quick step around her sedated body to a quiet room inside and I would not have to return to Khristoff without having to save another disrespectful youth.

Laci pulls on my arm, leading me through crowds of bystanders who are oblivious to the commotion she vaguely described. She leads me through occupied alleyways and under link-rail tubes that continue to commute people who know nothing of our endeavor. Soon, she is leading me through herds of people who speak of a spectacle in

the marketplace. I overhear people speaking in various languages as we pass them.

“The girl's dead!” A woman rants in French.

“They'll take him away after this, I'm sure of it,” her husband confesses.

I want to interject, but perhaps they know more about the situation than I have witnessed. I want to say that Uni would never be a threat to anyone. I want to say that it is all a big misunderstanding. I want to defend an old friend, but I finally arrive at the scene in the marketplace and see Uni with his bloody hands around a young boy's neck. People have gathered in a circle around him.

“Back off! This is for his own good!” Uni yells at an encroaching man.

“Let the boy go!” An elderly woman exclaims.

“No one can let it go!” Uni begins licking the air over his right shoulder as if the invisible salt block has been there this entire time. “I won't let him destroy our way of life!”

“Uni!” I try to flag his attention. “It's Oscar, remember?” I take a step closer to the struggle. “Tell me what happened.”

“She stole my presses!” Uni gestures to the unconscious body of Laci's older sister, Anneli, with a small puddle of blood around her head and Cau-li scattered at her feet. He flexes his grip around the boy's neck. “I won't let this one take control!”

“Okay, Uni. How's he going to take control?” I raise a hand, pointing to the boy's throat. “He can barely breathe.”

“One by one, he's going to turn us against each other!”

Laci stands next to me, gazing at her sister's rag doll body who is sprawled on the neuro-metal pavement. The open wound on Anneli's forehead triggers the maternal instinct in her sibling. Laci rushes to Anneli's side, holding her head, wiping the blood from her face, and trying to rock her awake.

“After this, Uni, a lot of people will be against you.” I draw close to the two siblings, wondering if they need any help.

“After this, I won't be afraid!” Uni changes his grip, allowing Thumbs to breathe, but quickly tightens his mechanical fingers around the young boy's throat again.

“These people are going to hurt you more than what you're doing to that boy.” I point to the surrounding crowd. “I don't know what's going on, but these people look like they care less about you than that kid. I don't think they're going to let you go. Look at their faces. Look at the girl. They're saying you killed her.”

“I didn't kill anybody!” Uni starts with tears forming.

“Murderer! You killed my sister!” Laci stands up from the lifeless body of her only family at her feet. “She was only trying to survive!”

The crowd around Uni grows tighter in an oppressive stance. Their whispers of justification are quickly silenced and replaced by suggestions of vengeance. Women with canes lift their walking aids above their heads. Men with crates ready them for an impact. Even those who are not willing to fight find an object nearby that can be used as a weapon. The rational ambiance of the marketplace is soon drowned out by the grinding and growling of teeth.

Uni's eyes are shaking as he sees the majority of those around him taking up weapons from ordinary items. What Uni once saw as a hydro-generator for sale is now a large block of metal with its cross-hair on his own forehead. Fan blades that are for sale on the other side of the marketplace are now being distributed here at a double price for the sake of seeing Uni bleed. Trinkets of nearby vendors that Uni thought would never sell are now being sold quicker than they can be fabricated. Uni watches as those vendors around him sell through an entire day's inventory at the expense of seeing it used in his punishment.

“But he's the one to blame.” Uni sounds as if he has finally caught his scapegoat. “He started the revolution. I can't let him kill us all.”

“No one wants to die, Uni.” I reach out to persuade him. “Let the boy go. We can talk.” I want to smile, but find my fake grin to be disappointing.

“Tell them to back away. Tell them to put their clubs down. No blades.”

“I don't think they'll listen to me, Uni.” I look over my shoulder at the approaching crowd that has turned into a mob, refusing to lower their weapons. “They're not going to let this go. You have to release the boy.”

“You have to get me out of here,” he whispers to me.

“I don't think I can do that.” I feel that I should whisper back.

Uni looks at the horizon of the mob and notices the reflection of someone wearing a Silver Collar. With tears gathered in the corner of his eyes, Uni licks the invisible salt block on his shoulder and releases his grip around Thumb's neck. As the boy falls to his knees, Laci runs up to catch him, pulling him away from Uni.

“We can't have you roaming our streets,” a young man wielding a reseeded-steel bar is the first to speak.

“The marketplace isn't safe anymore!” An elder woman exclaims in Italian.

I watch as Thumbs coughs to regain his breath. He looks at the angry mob and feels convinced in their rage against this sinister wrongdoing.

“This isn't over!” Thumbs rubs his throat as he addresses Uni, glaring at the crazy old man with an intent to return with a weapon of his own.

“Are you people really going to take matters into your own hands?” I exchange glances of oppression with several citizens in the marketplace. “What about SCS? What's going to happen if they find out what you're about to do?” I extend my forefinger in a wide radius, catching the faces of those with the closest reach.

“They'll commend us,” a familiar voice surfaces from the mob.

“For what? Being murderers?” My stare darts from scalp to scalp, trying to match the voice.

“For being savors.” A shorter man wearing a Silver Collar emerges from the front of the mob. “And having full authority to do so.”

“You know that's not procedure.” I take a step in between, separating Uni from the agent.

“Oh, I know.” He smiles at the entire angry mob behind him. “That's a word that I don't like to use. Now, AUTHORIZED TO GET THE JOB DONE. I like those words.”

The short agent snaps his fingers and two agents appear from nearby, pulling me to the side. “You see, Oscar. Just because you no longer have the authority to justify the cleansing of evil, doesn't mean that others shouldn't be allowed.” He raises a hand to the mob who continues to hold various weapons above their heads, asking for their silence. “I say what can be done, and it's by my word that it gets done.”

“You don't have that right, or that authority either. You're not God.” I try to wiggle free but I can move no further than a single step.

“That's true, Sunder.” He casually points to the sky, relating to my statement. “I'm not God.”

For a second, I feel relieved. I start to feel like things may start to go my way. I imagine the two Silver Collar agents letting me go, along with Uni to calibrate our priorities. I see this entire situation being dissolved and the crowd dispersed, but my reality is quickly shattered by the words of the short Mexican agent who finds amusement in another man's failure.

“But I enjoy passing for a portion of him.” He smiles with something sinister glistening in his eye. “A large part that I find therapeutic. Would you care to guess?”

“You vowed to be lenient,” I recall the oath of a Silver Collar agent.

“Not really.” He looks disappointed in my answer. “I vowed to fulfill justice. I vowed to follow the rules and to break what everyone thinks is already broken.”

Standing alone, Uni backs up against the wall, surrounded by his array of unsold merchandise and scattered Cau-li presses. He looks at the injured boy who stares back with eyes that are as much on fire as those in the crowd. He looks at Laci who expresses the same look of hatred. He looks at the Silver Collar agent who stands with his willing gesture to cause a civil war, and then he looks at me who is being held by both arms,

unable to move closer, being forced to watch.

“Go home!” Uni starts with a crack in his voice. “Leave me alone!” He pauses, wiping his bloody hands on his abdomen. “I’m no murderer! They’re the ones!” He points to Thumbs and Laci, huddled over Anneli’s body.

“Enough of this ridiculous blather!” A voice in the crowd barks.

“I’m not the evil one here!” Uni rebuttals.

“Liar!” Another voice exclaims.

“Please!” Uni defends.

The short Mexican agent has heard enough and lets his arm drop, signaling to the near hundred in the vicinity to launch whatever they are carrying at the heretic standing near the wall. A heavy object of reseeded-steel and solid neuro-metal slams into Uni’s neuro-metal chest, causing him to fall to the pavement.

A heavy rain of debris pummels his artificial body, denting his legs and twisting his arms, severing many of his original fingers and breaking his untreated collarbone. A large retro-glass orb collides with Uni’s forehead, fracturing his skull. His comp-uzync emits a loud buzz, an indication that his heart has stopped.

I am then released by the two Silver Collar agents who follow their superior officer into the dispersing crowd. Unable to watch the launching, Thumbs and Laci leave in a hurry with Anneli’s body, not wanting to become involved in the outspoken cruelty of Thicket’s populace. I hesitate, staring at Uni’s tangled body at the edge of the marketplace, not wanting to advance. From where I am standing I simply fall to the ground and watch as blood escapes Uni’s body, soaking the fabric that was his vending platform.

The emptiness in Uni’s face brings me back to the absconder encampment. I remember seeing the bodies of so many innocent people strewn across the wasteland. The women and children who had fallen in their escape from the A.L.L. Collars of SCS had burn scars littering their bodies. The same cruelty used in the containment of the absconder revolution is again fresh in my memory.

In my vacant gaze over Uni’s cold body, I try to forget the image of finding Sherianne’s closest friends among the casualties, their hands pointing to a path that others used to escape.

As I sit with Uni, holding his limp hand, the satisfied crowd thins to a light traffic. Those who did not condemn Uni to death, as well as those who were not close enough to take part in his execution, left their projectiles on the street. Soon all that surrounds us are the scattered items of various marketplace vendors and the Cau-li presses that fell

from Uni's stash box.

The last memory I have of Uni is his infectious rant about our own government's control. Such a hysterical man could disclose to the public secrets that few understand. The city's supply of Cau-li is created with the remnants of vermin. A set of pink lips did lead me to the source of benign control. Whatever Uni mumbled seemed to be true, so why did he lie and blame Thumbs for Anneli's death? Was Uni truly crazy?

As I slowly stand, leaving Uni's lifeless hand at his side, I notice the streets at the end of the marketplace are quieter. There is no longer a blathering salesman to entice the last of the wandering crowd. There is no longer an interesting storyteller to scare children in their dreams. The friend I need is no longer able to cover my back during a time needed most. A part of me dies and tears form. I think about the strength Uni gave me and the fact that he would not want to see me cry, so I whisper a soft good-bye and walk away.

I make my way back to the entry-port that carried me to the city. The nutria-farm is less than an hour away when I travel by link-rail, but the distance on foot can take close to two days. I pass people on the street who acknowledge my bravery. I also pass people who frown down on my attempt to befriend a blasphemer of the Silver Collar Society. Whoever I pass makes no difference in bringing back an old friend. When I reach the entry-port, I habitually lift my comp-uzync arm to engage the link-rail system.

Nothing happens.

I press several buttons, hoping to stumble over the correct sequence of coding, but again my access of entry is denied. When I pound my fist on the metal entry-port, the people in the area turn their heads. They may not know how to leave the city, but it is obvious to them that to operate this specific link-rail, I would need to possess the key.

Then I hear something. A vibration emanates from inside my desert suit. Thinking something must have been activated during the ordeal in the marketplace, I remove the comp-ucube from my inner pocket and notice it is purring on its own.

The closer I hold the comp-ucube to the entry-port, the louder the purrs become, and I start to wonder if such a device is capable of unlocking the system. I place the comp-ucube against the surface of the entry-port's control panel, and the purring turns into a growl. The comp-ucube overrides the controls and the entry-port opens with the link-rail pod ready for boarding.

“Sunny!” Laci sprints forward from a crowd of marketplace patrons, pushing her way through.

I turn, lingering in the entry-port. “What happened to you?”

“I couldn't let SCS have my sister's body.” Laci sounds out of breath, dropping off Anneli's body and running back to find me. “She's the only family I have.”

“Something we have in common,” I mumble. “Is Thumbs alright?”

“Small bruises. No biggie, but I needed to catch you before you disappeared again.”

“Now what?” I tilt my head back in acceptance, pocketing the comp-ucube.

“It's about Uni.” She leans in close and starts to whisper, discreetly passing an object into my palm. “He wasn't lying. He didn't kill my sister.”

“What?” My head straightens.

“I've known Thumbs a long time and he'll lie straight to your face. He'll tell you that he's innocent, that he has a rare, irreversible disease.”

“That takes a special kind of sick.”

“He wants you to think he has Willow Amnesia.”

I look at the Imprint Drive in my hand and recognize it as my own. “Where did you get this?”

“I just hope that she's worth saving after all this.” She silently gestures to the Imprint Drive in my hand, acting as if someone is listening. “Memories are important.” She points to the ID and then makes a fist over her heart, rotating it in a clockwise circle.

“I'm sorry about your sister.” I lower my head in solidarity as I stuff the Imprint Drive into my pocket. “If only I had gotten to you sooner.”

“Don't be sorry. If it wasn't for you, Thumbs would be another body on the street.” Laci approaches me and looks up. “And so would I.”

I exchange a smile with Laci, gently touching her cheek with the back of my finger which makes me think of how Jessica would have grown up. I board the link-rail pod and the sliding door clicks into place. In a matter of seconds, the transport is propelled in the direction of the nutria-farm, leaving the city in the distance.

The shuttle ride is quiet. My mind starts to wander, but I can still feel the weight of the comp-ucube in the folds of my desert suit. As I stare out the window at the passing landscape of nearly impassible mountain terrains, the words of what I will say once reunited with my daughter bounce around my head. I think I will tell her that I love her. I will tell her that there is nothing left to fear. I will reassure her that there is room in the city for another citizen, and that it does not matter where she grew up. I will hold her in my arms and never let her go. All my life, she slept silently. All my life, I felt confined in a world so unfair. Trapped in her memory of a father who was never there for his family, I want to correct the faults I left in pieces.

I pray that I find her in peace. I pray that I find her well. I pray to God that she will be able to return with me and help reassemble the family I once protected.

As the link-rail pod slows in its approach to the nutria-farm, the outer entry-port opens and allows the transport to enter. The secondary entry-port opens as the first port

seals, transferring me and the pod into the storage center of the nutria-farm. The retro-glass door slides open and I step out. Except for the sounds that come from the working machinery, the room seems silent and empty.

“Khristoff!” I shout across the room.

A reply comes back in the form of a young girl's violent cough.

“I have the cube!” I walk through the open entry-port of the nutria-farm, looking around corners. “Show yourself!”

The mechanics room is in the same condition as when I left. A compression engine still occupies the center of the room, surrounded by fragments of recycled steel. The Cauliflower machines are still producing presses for every citizen in Thicket and still uses the vermin mulch from the collected bat carcasses.

“You're too late.” Khristoff appears from behind one of the large dispensers that produces a steady supply of neuro-metal, being pumped to the city through one of the many tubes that run along the distance of the link-rail track. “Your daughter is gone.”

“Where is she?” I take a step forward, feeling the pain in my leg, darting my eyes around the room.

Khristoff gestures to the pair of visible legs that stick out from behind a loud, working dispenser. “Suffering.”

I move for the corner of the room but am halted by Khristoff's outreached hand. He slams me against the collection bin, grabbing my leg and squeezing. The pain coursing through my thigh stiffens my hips and I jerk my lower back. I feel close to buckling at the knee and sinking to the ground.

“First, give me the cube.” He glares at me with electricity in his eyes.

I can barely tear my eyes away from the visible legs that twitch with every cough. I quickly reach into my desert suit, unzipping a pocket, and retrieve the comp-ucube. I push it into Khristoff's abdomen.

“Here! Now, let her go.”

He squints as he looks down, seeming unwilling to believe my offer.

“Done.” Khristoff releases his grip on my thigh, taking the comp-ucube from my hand.

As he holds the comp-ucube up to the light, forming a smile, the visible legs fold at the knees and the hidden figure emerges from behind the dispenser.

“Shentel?” I look surprised but sound concerned. “Where's Jessica?”

Shentel's hair is mated to her head as beads of sweat trickle down her cheeks. The accumulation of saliva has thickened at the corners of her mouth. She looks exhausted, barely able to support her own weight.

“You're really bad with faces, Sunder.” Khristoff approaches Shentel and wipes the foam from her mouth.

The image of Sherianne flashes in my head as I stand before the likeness of my beloved wife. I realize that I am staring at my own flesh and blood who deceived me from the very beginning. This is the same girl who came to me for help. She recognized her mother in the drawing of Sherianne. She defended her mother in the club like she was from the same last name. Shentel came to me, looking for a way to ruin my life, when in fact she came looking for a way to save herself.

“You're supposed to recognize your daughter,” Shentel coughs and hangs her weight on Khristoff. “I don't have her memories.”

“You can't be my-” I look worried, refusing to accept the truth.

“Jessica? I used to be.” Shentel detaches herself from the cloaked creature and takes a step forward. “You left her in that absconder camp! You left her to die like the others!”

“I didn't know the camp would be raided. I wanted to come back for you.” My words sound as if I am speaking from the other corner of the room.

“But you couldn't? Seems like you can't do a lot of things!” Shentel turns to the bin of mulched vermin. “You couldn't save your wife when she needed you the most. You couldn't save your own job when you got a slap on the wrist.” She digs her hands into the carcasses of bats, squeezing a collection until a slime oozes out. “You couldn't even save Uni. You're useless!”

My eyes blink in rapid accordance with every traumatic event Shentel has mentioned. I remember that Sherianne was a free spirit and could barely be told how to live her life. She would have no connection to the city of control if she had it her way. I feel like I wasted the last sixteen years of my life.

“What more do you want from me?”

Khristoff presses a button on his comp-uzync and a three-dimensional image of my family appears in the room.

I take a step back to compensate for the image resolution. “You knew about me this entire time?”

“I told Shentel everything she needed to know,” Khristoff interrupts. “She came to me after she lost her mother. She looked up to me as a father figure.” The holographic image disappears and Khristoff’s eyes brighten with an excess amount of electricity. “Ironic, isn’t it?”

“Hardly.” I glare at Khristoff and return my focus to Shentel. “How did you know about Uni?”

“I have eyes everywhere, Sunder.” Khristoff holds the comp-ucube close to his face, admiring the neuro-metal casing. “Uni was in too deep for his own good. You’d be surprised at how much hate can be sparked from a simple rumor.” A small jolt of electricity jumps from his forehead to the cube, waking the device into a low purr.

“All this for the cube?” I sound agitated. “What could you possibly accomplish from way out here?”

“I thought he’d be smarter.” Shentel smiles at Khristoff.

“Do you see these press generators? Do you see these neuro-metal dispensers?” Khristoff places his hand on a working machine. “What do you think the city would do if we cut off its supply of nutrition and technology?”

“Resort to recycling?”

“Still trying to hover with denial, I see.” Khristoff looks at the comp-ucube. “It’s probably hard for you to see from your tiny window of reality, but I’m in control. I have the power to let you and the rest of Thicket starve to death. Suppose I turn off the ionized vents during the next down pour.”

Shentel laughs, which turns into a cough. She moves to sit on the compression engine and Khristoff aides her with a hand on her shoulder.

Khristoff smiles over Shentel. “Once I get all the information I need, I won’t need them anymore.”

“Why? To fulfill some vague prophecy?” I squint my eyes.

“Let me tell you a story.” Khristoff holds the comp-ucube to himself as if he is telling a story to the inanimate object, pacing the area of the nutria-farm. “My father once told me about God. He said, man couldn’t create such a powerful being. He told me, God created himself. Like God, no one says I was born. Like a circle, never will I die. I have grown alone in a place only I can call home. Until I can control eternity, I have no reason to exist.”

Khristoff continues his slow pace, holding the comp-ucube as a trophy for his ultimate plan. He stares off into the distance, periodically connecting his focus on the purring device while ignoring both my and Shentel’s existence.

“People will live on for generations. I will have favorites and they will grow with the

rise and setting of an orange sun. I will watch them advance in their electric technology. They will be capable of destruction and I will witness the dispute over my existence. The people who grow to love me will become distant and will begin building walls of their own, twisting and replacing my existence with a fictitious story they deem truer than myth. Thousands of versions will originate from my thoughts about what they see as empty space when heaven does exist.”

Khristoff's story reminds me of Mico and his attempt to convince my faith. The collection of Thicket's personality inside the comp-ucube frightens me. If Khristoff believes that he now has the power to play God, the entire city is most certainly in danger. I picture all those innocent people who, at one point, were reassured by a promise that nothing bad would come from their loyalty.

“If you're so powerful, why didn't you get the cube yourself?”

Khristoff laughs in offense. “I enjoy watching you struggle. Who better to betray a man of the cloth than someone who placed his faith in him to keep his family a secret?”

My puzzlement keeps me rigid. My feeling of assurance in Mico's promise to look out for my family is quickly replaced by a feeling of betrayal. I picture the Silver Collar priest taking part in this conversation, completely aware of the innocent risks involved. I feel Mico was able to bridge everyone in a realm that may no longer seem comfortable.

“Everyone has a secret.” The longer Khristoff holds the comp-ucube, the louder its purr becomes. “I will know them all and no one will remember a thing.”

“You won't get away with this.” I clench my fists, standing ready to be tackled.

“He already has.” Shentel gestures from the center of the room, pointing to the device in Khristoff's hand. “The nano-tube is the access point. It goes into your comp-uzync.”

Khristoff pulls the translucent tube from the corner of the comp-ucube's casing. Shentel begins to cough again, now more violent than before. Her eyes roll into the back of her head and she falls off the compression engine, hemorrhaging into convulsions of her arms and legs. Even more saliva has accumulated in the corners of her mouth. I run to her side to hold her still.

“Poor child.” Khristoff speaks, ignoring her spasms. “They always suffer the same fate. They shouldn't play in those infected caves.” He inserts the translucent tube into his comp-uzync and, with a spark of electricity from his finger, he jump-starts the comp-ucube into a series of growls.

I hold Shentel close to my chest, rubbing the sweat from her unconscious forehead. I can hear the growls from the comp-ucube getting louder as a kaleidoscope of colors

illuminate the floating nano-tube. The colors quickly blend together in a dark array, creating a visual example of hate.

“I can feel its power.” Khristoff looks to the ceiling, absorbing the comp-ucube's power of information. “The warmth of the city flows through me. Millions of images flicker before my eyes!” He lifts the comp-ucube as he speaks. “I- Know- God!”

A small stream of smoke escapes the side of the comp-ucube where the nano-tube extends from its casing. Suddenly, a stream of smoke vents from the opposite side, clouding the local vicinity in an aroma of rancid decay.

“I can see every person in Thicket!” His voice starts to carry an echo. “I can read everyone's thoughts! I have access to all their memories and dreams! I can control who lives and who dies!” Khristoff smiles sinfully, looking directly at me with eyes overloaded with electricity.

Khristoff points directly at me, stepping in my direction and dragging his dark robe that seems to be disintegrating, falling apart in small segments.

The smoke from the comp-ucube begins to expand. Springing from the cracks of Khristoff's neuro-metal skin, the same rancid smoke douses his figure. The blackened color of his body begins to change in color, turning gray before transitioning to a red glow.

The temperature of Khristoff's body rises drastically, burning the tissue of his internal organs. He screams in agony as the comp-ucube, adhering to its defensive protocol, destroys him from the inside out.

The comp-ucube lets out a deafening roar before flashing a white light that fills the entire room, blinding me and knocking me to the ground next to Shentel's unconscious body. The shell of Khristoff's body falls to the floor in a loud clang along with the comp-ucube, which silences its growls into a lull of a purr.

Chapter 12

Tinkerverse

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“But let each one test his own work, and then his reason to boast will be in himself alone and not his neighbor.”

Galatians 6:4

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The blinding light from the comp-ucube has the same effect as the ricocheted lights of the East Sector Club, magnified by a thousand percent. The sounds of the comp-ucube's short circuiting mechanical defense is like the music played by a disc jockey who is difficult to find in the dark and popular establishment. But the body odor of the dancing teenagers who have spent the last several hours gyrating in their own sweat cannot be compared to the smell of Khristoff's charred remains.

In the corner of the East Sector Club, Thumbs sits with Laci at his side. He stares out at the ever so moving crowd, rubbing his throat from the stress of Uni's deadly grip. Laci sits with a look of grave disappointment, swiping through images on a portable tablet of her sister when they both were at a healthy weight.

“Let it go, Laci.” Thumbs looks over his shoulder at the tablet.

“It's easy for you.” Laci lowers the device, raising her voice over the music. “You didn't lose your only family!”

“Don't give me that!” He stares into her eyes with a hint of evil. “Oscar shouldn't have interfered! If it wasn't for him, we'd have Uni's stash!”

“If it wasn't for him? Anneli died because of you! I hate you!”

“Hate yourself!” He knocks the tablet from her hands and onto the table before them. “I did what was necessary! It took SCS too long!”

“Whatever.” Laci turns in her seat, ignoring Thumbs.

“That's right, whatever.” He looks out at the crowd with a growing smile. “If I oversaw SCS, I would have had Uni taken care of long ago. I would have removed his sales platform before he started that day. He would have shown up, and be like, where the hell did all my stuff go?” He throws his hands up, mocking Uni's confusion, and starts to chuckle.

“Grow up.” Laci's attention returns to the tablet, keeping her eyes buried in her collection of memories.

“Like you care!” He glances at her fingers as they navigate the system's file manager. “You wouldn't know what to do with complete power.”

“Neither would you!” She looks up to prove a point.

“Yeah, I would! Who do you think taught me?” Thumbs keeps his glare solid.

“Well, it's not like he'll stick around to hold your hand.”

“You're just jealous!” He snaps.

“Shut up!”

The comp-uzync screen on his wrist flickers. Thumbs looks down with an annoyed reaction to the violent blinking. His frown curls into a smile.

“Speak of the devil. You said, 'Don't waste your time with After Dark.' Guess who's life insurance just paid off? I just inherited access to the entire SCS mainframe.”

From the other side of the East Sector Club, dancers in the middle of the room step across a dance floor of light and artificial smoke. Lasers of multicolored beams shoot out from the corners of the platform, flickering to the beat of the music. Shentel appears near the front entrance, holding a small square object in one hand and clutching her stomach with the other. She stumbles through the crowd to the floating table where Thumbs and Laci are still arguing over who is right.

“Shentel?” Laci looks her up and down. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah, babe. What happened to you?” Thumbs tries to act considerate, moving to the front side of the table to help Shentel to the nearest seat.

“It was horrible!” Shentel leans against a chair, balancing her weight while clutching the comp-ucube. “Sunder killed Khristoff.”

“Are you serious?” Thumbs stands up straight, almost doubting Shentel's news.

“What the hell happened?”

Shentel adjusts her posture, holding the comp-ucube closer to her stomach. “Sunder did something to the cube.”

“Are you okay?” Laci moves to Shentel's side, rubbing the sides of her face.

“She's fine.” Thumbs answers for her, following Shentel's arm to the comp-ucube.

“Did you bring it?”

“Damn it, Thumbs!” Laci snaps at him. “Can't you see that she's hurt?”

“Give it up,” Thumbs orders.

“Why?” Shentel coughs, clutching the comp-ucube closer.

“Because you don't know how to use it,” he tries to sound sympathetic. “Let me show you.”

Shentel looks around the club and sees no reason to cause a scene by resisting him. She thinks over her weak condition in comparison to Thumbs who could most likely tear the comp-ucube from her clutches if he really wants to.

She slowly offers the device which is quickly snatched up by the greedy young man. He spins it around in his hands, looking over the neuro-metal surface with enthusiasm. He smiles as he picks at the corner casing, discovering the transparent nano-tube that

extends several feet. He sticks out his tongue and is about to lick the end of the cable when Shentel speaks up.

“Why should you get the cube?”

“Like you could do better.” Thumbs looks Shentel up and down, mocking her weak, semiconscious state.

“I bet you I could.”

“Yeah, right, and I'm a gifted child with a registration form.” He laughs to himself and continues to move the end of the tube toward his open mouth.

Laci steps up to Thumbs and pulls the tube from his hand. “She could.”

“Are you serious?” He stares at Laci, gesturing to Shentel as she awkwardly slumps down into the chair with both hands around her stomach. “She can't even sit up straight.”

“She's better than you at everything.”

“Oh, yeah?” He places the comp-cube on the table and the nano-tube retracts with the sound of a winding zipper. “Prove it.”

Laci looks at Shentel with a sprouting smile. “She'll prove it. Give her ten minutes. Then she'll show you what's up.”

“Five,” he holds up an open palm to haggle her terms. “I'll give her five minutes to prove me wrong.”

“Deal!” Laci jumps from in front of Thumbs to Shentel's chair. “Shentel? What do you need? What can I get you?”

“I- Need- My medicine.” Shentel speaks with a shortness in her breath.

“What kind of medicine? I can get you whatever you need.” Laci tries to keep Shentel's posture, wiping the sweat from her forehead.

“H- D- C- V-” Shentel's eyes slowly blink with each letter.

“What you need is a miracle.” Thumbs overhears, mocking her with a smile.

“She needs a human diploid cell vaccine, genius.” Laci glances back at Thumbs. “Get a degree.”

“What is that supposed to mean?” He finds his seat on the other side of the table.

“It means, you have no ideas worth my time.” Laci stretches her neck and looks out at the crowd, trying to spot the nearest waitress. “I need to flag her down.”

“She's not going to help you.” Thumbs crosses his arms, pessimistic about Laci asking for help from the blonde with blue eye-shadow.

“That's your problem.” Laci stands from Shentel's chair and rushes across the dance floor to the blonde carrying a tray of aqua-marbles.

Laci uses her expressive hands to illustrate the urgency of her request to the waitress, pointing back at the table where Shentel slips in and out of awareness. The blonde waitress drops her jaw, nodding her head in an obvious reaction to a customer's medical need. She rushes away, almost dropping a half dozen marbles of water. Laci returns to

Shentel's side.

“What's going on?” Thumbs sounds interested in Laci's plight, but does nothing to comfort Shentel.

“I asked her for an Imovax.”

“What? I'm O?”

“Seriously?” Laci sounds surprised, looking back at Thumbs. “It's a series of rabies vaccines created from samples of human cells.”

“You better give her more than she needs. She'll need all the help she can get.”

“It's amazing you can lead yourself to water,” Laci mumbles as she helps Shentel sit up in her seat. “Shentel needs an injection every four days for two weeks in the affected area.”

“You got all that from HDCV?”

“How did you ever get through school?”

“That's simple. I never went.” Thumbs smiles to himself, thinking he is something special.

The blonde waitress returns on swift wheels, carrying a silver platter with one hand and balancing her weight with the other. She lowers the tray to Laci who reaches out and takes the syringe and bottle of HDCV. Laci fills the syringe and tosses the bottle across the table, shocking Thumbs out of his self-appreciating daydream.

“Hey! Careful!” Thumbs sits back, looking over the side of the table.

“Get a clue.” Laci pulls out Shentel's arm and violently stabs her in the shoulder, pushing the rabies vaccine into her bloodstream.

“Damn,” Thumbs twitches in his seat as he watches. “Leave her an arm at least.”

In a matter of minutes, the movement in Shentel's eyes returns. As the disco lights revolve around the dance club, the strength in her legs brings her to an upright position. The dancers amid a hovering fog pay little attention to Shentel as she slowly stands on her own. She pulls back her hair, looking around the club.

“I knew this was a bad idea,” Shentel secures her hair in a single bunch.

“Which part?” Thumbs crosses his arms. “Letting Sunny live, or letting the Father die?”

“Coming here.” Shentel looks at Thumbs with a bit of resentment in her voice. “He's not the same guy you painted him to be.”

“Sunny's a fool, and you're a fool for believing him.” He slams his open hand on the table. “Whoever you are, Shentel,” he pauses, mocking her name. “He doesn't care about you.” He slams his hand repeatedly, trying to illustrate his point. “He doesn't care about his daughter. He doesn't care about his wife and he doesn't deserve this power!”

“Right. Like you do?”

“Hey!” Thumbs points at her. “I've seen enough to warrant this power! I've suffered enough to know what it feels like. You have no room to talk about loss. You're just a broken Willow.”

“Don't call her that!” Laci speaks up. “She deserves respect! If it wasn't for her, that cube would still be outside.”

“I don't have to take this from either of you.” Thumbs reaches for the comp-ucube on the table. “I have the cube now, and it's all I need.”

“That's what you always think about,” Laci reaches out and grabs the comp-ucube before Thumbs has the chance. “Always yourself. Never anyone else.”

“That cube belongs to me!” Thumbs holds out his open palm. “Give it to me!”

“You can't tell me what to do.” Laci smirks, mocking Thumbs and his tantrum.

“I can, and I will.” He presses a few buttons on his comp-uzync and a hologram display appears over the table between them. “I'll just upload this footage and make it available to everyone. I'll let them judge you for themselves.”

“You wouldn't dare!”

“Oh,” Thumbs tilts his head upward to watch the hologram. “But I would.”

Thumbs presses a button to tighten the viewing angle. The hologram shows Laci and Anneli talking to an older man in a quiet alleyway. His Silver Collar reflects the light from a nearby retro-glass advertisement board. He smiles as Anneli hands him what only Laci and Thumbs would know is a transaction drive.

“I know what he's paying your sister for, but I'm sure it looks like just another backstage deal. I'll just attach a little disclaimer explaining what's going on.”

“Why are you doing this?” Laci seems to be on the verge of breaking down in tears.

“I've suffered enough. Now, it's your turn.” He refuses to look up from his rudimentary typing.

“It's not like I did this to you!” She shouts, unable to hold back her emotions.

“She's right!” Shentel steps between Laci and Thumbs, taking the comp-ucube into her own hands. “I did this to you, and there's nothing you have against me.”

“You got me there,” Thumbs smiles, redirecting his stare to Shentel. “I'll just tell SCS about your adventure inside the mainframe.”

“Not to sound repetitive, but I don't have to give you anything.” She tosses the comp-ucube in the air, catching it with the other hand. “Besides, you'd probably end up like your dad and smoke yourself to death.”

“That won't happen.”

“What makes you so sure about that?”

“Because,” he crosses his arms. “The tale of the immortal man was never about Kristoff.”

“Yeah?” Laci interrupts. “Well, Shentel's still smarter than you!”

Thumbs juggles his stares between Laci, Shentel, and the comp-ucube. He licks his lips and scratches his chin, thinking of a way to get his hands involved. With a smile, he slaps his hands together.

“Fine!” He points to Shentel. “Time to prove it.”

“Prove it?” Shentel raises an eyebrow, looking back at Laci. “What's he talking about?”

“A challenge,” Laci frowns, grabbing Shentel's shoulder. “You can beat him.”

“At what? Arm wrestling?” Shentel suggests with a sarcastic tone. “It's not like I have an advantage.”

“She's right. I don't play fair.” Thumbs smiles at Laci. “But I'll let you choose the game.”

“You're joking, right?” Laci lowers her head, keeping her gaze on Thumbs.

“Not at all.” Thumbs crosses his arms. “You can set the rules, and I'll still win.”

“What if we win?” Laci speaks up.

“If Shentel wins? You can be in control. You can tell SCS what to do. I'll never bother you again.” He smiles, crossing his arms.

“And what happens if we lose?”

“I'll get the cube, and both of you have to do everything I say.”

The music in the club continues through its playlist of popular songs, muffling out the conversation between the three absconders in the corner. Shentel hands Laci the comp-ucube, which she tucks in the folds of her desert suit. Thumbs stands from his seat and makes his way onto the dance floor, waiting for Shentel to join him. Shentel takes her time, looking over the arcade games that line the perimeter of the East Sector Club.

She passes several arcade games that all seem too easy for Thumbs to win. She thinks about choosing a racing game but wonders how much of a lead Thumbs will have over her when the starting light turns green. She thinks about a first-person shooter but wonders if Thumbs will turn out to have better aim. She thinks about dancing with two left feet, and fighting to keep her own neck from breaking. Then Laci points to a recipe game on the opposite side of the club.

“There's your game!” Laci shouts over the music, nudging Shentel in the same direction.

“Tinkerverse?” Thumbs throws his head back in a chuckle. “Yeah, sure. I'll take you on. It's all skill that you don't have.”

Shentel thinks back to the absconder camp where trinkets and mechanics riddled the ground like incomplete robotic projects. She remembers the floor of the nutria-farm and

the tools she used to fix the compression engine. She looks at the arcade game and studies the decals of gears and wires that cover the outside of the large machine, smiling at her odds of winning.

Thumbs enters his name into the Tinkerverse system log and Shentel does the same. A splash message appears on the tiny screen, offering two versions of the same game. Rather than play a local two-dimensional simulation, Thumbs insists he and Shentel take a step back. As the game's internal music starts, a group of nearby dancers focuses on the two young absconders who just locked their names into a serious battle. The music of the club slowly fades out and the hidden disc jockey makes an announcement.

“Well,” he starts with a slow, deep tone. “It looks like we've got a face off happening tonight!” His voice instantly changes to a very charismatic announcer. He pauses to let the message sink in. “Let's clear the dance floor, and let's bring up the sub-floor arena. This is a real treat. We don't normally get to see the sub-floor for face-offs. This is a special night. Let's turn up the fog and give these guys some room!”

Teenagers cheer, taking their places surrounding the perimeter of the sub-floor arena where Shentel and Thumbs stand amid a holographic projection of a mechanical assembly line. Designed within the floor to use holographic cameras and projection lenses, Tinkerverse allows its players to create a fully manipulative universe.

The disc jockey continues.

“The players have set their stakes. Let's go over the rules. For each round, players are given the same ingredients, the same materials, and the same components. The player who configures the best device wins the point. The bigger the output, the higher the grade. Best three out of four wins. Alright, people! Cheer them on!”

The crowd erupts in cheers. Men and women alike throw up their hands, stomping their bare feet on the illuminated dance floor. The word TINKERVERSE appears in the fog that spills from a machine above Shentel and Thumbs, and then disappears. The words ROUND 1 appears, followed by the words MOBILE SURVEILLANCE. As the fog continues to pour over the players, a plethora of digitally rendered components appears around each of them.

Shentel recognizes several items that are displayed around her. She holds out a hand and selects an antenna, dragging the image across the fog to a connection block. She adds a motion sensor and a power cell from another group of components. While she selects a sound transmitter, a visual scanner, and a circuit board for the data relay, Thumbs is doing the same on his own assembly line.

A buzzer chimes over the cheering crowd, and the time has come for the players to reveal their devices. Shentel finishes the last few connections of her surveillance unit, displaying to the crowd a versatile, multi-legged creature that can travel over rough terrain to monitor any subject. The crowd around her erupts in a heckle and a cheer. Thumbs displays his device as a maneuverable winged creature in the shape of a bat that can cover large distances with a broader viewing spectrum. The crowd shouts in mixed reviews. The disc jockey returns to the microphone.

“Both players look confident in their devices but from the sound of the crowd,” he pauses. “Looks like the point goes to the bat!”

Dancers stomp their feet and clap their hands, patting Thumbs on the back for a well-earned point. With a smile, he waves his hand across the holographic display, erasing the round and adding his point to the scoreboard. The words ROUND 2 appears in the fog, which to Shentel is a depressing sight. She looks up with heavy shoulders, remembering the Hyltots outside the nutria-farm, believing she should have won. The fog fills with the words, SURVIVAL GEAR, the theme of the second challenge.

The assembly line around Shentel disappears and quickly reappears with a new arrangement of digitally rendered components. She reaches for an air compressing chamber and exhale valve, thinking with a smile on how she will win the next point. She adds a heating and cooling unit to her connection block, configuring the circuit board with a filter coil and control switch. While Thumbs configures the schematics for a hydro-generator, Shentel finishes with the detailed plans of her gas mask. The disc jockey calls out as the buzzer chimes.

“Alright! Let's see what's going on!”

Thumbs powers the hydro-generator that produces an impressive amount of water for its size. The crowd around him screams for his winning design. Shentel funnels her gas mask with a huge cloud of smoke and it releases copious amounts of fresh oxygen. The crowd around her screams louder than those who want Thumbs to win.

“Whoa!” The disc jockey cries out through the speakers. “We've got a tied game! Point goes to the gas mask! Am I the only one who breathes?”

The crowd erupts in laughter, clapping for Shentel's winning point. With a look of betrayal across his face, Thumbs violently waves both hands through the fog, erasing the assembly line display and adding Shentel's point to the scoreboard.

“Let's keep things going!” The disc jockey starts his music that overpowers the roaring voice of the crowd. “We've got the third round coming up! Don't go away!”

Thumbs approaches Shentel and Laci from across the dance floor, glaring at them through the fog that keeps them hidden from those outside the illuminated sub-floor arena. He ignores the people around them who smile and share handshakes over the game that has taken the entire club by popular force.

“It's just a point.” Thumbs takes a step closer to Laci. “But the game's not over.”
“Then why the fear?” Laci smiles, seeing through his trials to cover his shame.
“What fear?” He holds up his hands and looks around. “I run all this!”
“Not anymore.” Shentel speaks with a stern look.

The strobe lights flicker to the music and the rotating beams of color that dance against the mirrored surface of the walls bleed faster. The music slowly fades out and the disc jockey's voice returns over the crowd of mixed reviews.

“Contestants ready!”

“I'm ready to kick you out of Thicket!” Thumbs addresses Shentel from across the dance floor, letting his voice carry through the illuminated fog.

Shentel refuses to show any emotion to Thumbs or the crowd. She simply nods her head at the disc jockey who proceeds to continue their game. The fog thickens around the players and the words ROUND 3 appears and quickly fades out, followed by the word NAVIGATION. An assembly line appears around Shentel and Thumbs, showcasing dozens of digitally rendered compass parts.

Shentel looks around her assembly table, thinking back to what her mother taught her. As she connects the pieces of the compass to the connection block, she remembers a lesson on the magnetic poles of the planet. She adds the needle to point its navigator to magnetic north but then remembers the heavy ice storm that covered most of the planet, reversing its polarity. Because Thumbs never went to school, he would never know such a minor detail in the planet's history.

The music continues at a lower decibel as the disc jockey speaks. “Well, it looks like they're starting to think alike.” He highlights both players and their compass designs. “But let's see which one works better!” The crowd erupts in a series of claps. “On the count of three, players, turn on your instruments! Uno! Zwei! Threeeee!”

At the sound of the number three, both Shentel and Thumbs flip a holographic switch on their navigation devices. Their needles spin in circles several times, wiggling until

they stop moving, pointing in opposite directions.

“See!” Thumbs smiles, pointing to Shentel's compass. “You can't even make a basic compass work! What good are you?”

“More than you can ever be.” Shentel returns her answer with an even deeper frown.

The disc jockey shines a spotlight on the needle of both devices. “It looks like one of these devices is not up-to-date.” He addresses the crowd, pointing out that only one compass can be correct. “Do you all want a boring history lesson?”

The crowd shouts back. “No!”

“Fair enough.” He quickly changes the tone in his voice. “Round 3 goes to the girl!”

“What?” Thumbs shouts over the cheering crowd. “Impossible!”

“That's what a lack of education will do to you,” Laci speaks up.

The crowd cheers Shentel from all sides of the club. Numerous waitresses circle the dance floor taking drink orders as Shentel takes the lead. Thumbs watches a waitress roll toward him to an encouraging table on the other side of the club. He purposely trips her, letting her service tray skip across the illuminated dance floor, spilling aqua-marbles of various colors.

“Double or nothing!” Thumbs shouts over the profane taunts of the nearby club goers who disagree with his behavior.

“No way,” Shentel points. “You can lose fair and square like a normal person.”

“Double or nothing, or I destroy her forever.” Thumbs presses a button on his comp-uzync, illustrating the air above his implant with a three-dimensional memory of Shentel and her mother.

“You wouldn't.” She stares at Thumbs through the likeness of her mother in the electronic haze of evaporated water.

“I would,” he corrects her. “And if I were you, I'd give up.”

“You're never going to win.” She clenches a fist and waves her other hand over the fog, resetting the assembly line and adding her second point to the scoreboard.

The words ROUND 4 appears in the holographic fog and quickly fades out, followed by the word VI-ZYNC. The disc jockey lowers the volume of the music, speaking out over the crowd.

“Round four, people! Tiny Tim homeless is still in the game.” He pushes a button and the strobe lights and rotating colors freeze. “Let's see if he can regain control of the scoreboard.” In the sudden rush of moving lights, the teenagers around the dance floor begin moving hysterically in circles around the contestants. Thumbs smiles over the

category of the round, having constructed a vi-zync a hundred times in the past. Shentel smiles, but feels nervous, never having used a pair in her life.

Thumbs gets busy assembling his pair of vi-zync visors, stitching a set of polarized lenses with a fiber optic cable. He finishes in record time, taking an extra minute to customize his device with a vibration setting. He smiles at Shentel who is still deciding on the first component to add to her connecting block.

Thumbs throws up his hands. The crowd cheers, clapping for a countdown to his victory. He gestures to the disc jockey to start the music.

Shentel tries her best by using the components that look convincing for a pair of visors. Without the necessary electrical current, powered by the fiber optic cable, Shentel's vi-zync will be a simple pair of wired frames. As beads of sweat begin to form on her forehead, the music in the club intensifies, coinciding with the countdown from the crowd around her.

“Time's up, babe!” Thumbs shouts over the music as he offers his vi-zync to the crowd. “These are all my points. I'm only lending you the ones I don't need now.”

“Players!” The disc jockey speaks. “Let's see who will be on top!”

With a press of a button, both players' vi-zyncs float higher in the holographic display, wirelessly connecting to a communications port of the same incoming call. The visors that hover above Thumbs illuminates in a bright orange cloud of static, showcasing a recorded video of Thumbs in the East Sector Club. The visors that hover above Shentel illuminates in a bright pink cloud of static but does not pick up the incoming footage.

“Yes!” Thumbs throws his arms outward and his head back in laughter.

“That's not fair!” She points to Thumbs. “He's connected into the system! He's feeding his footage into his visors!”

“Don't be ridiculous!” Thumbs moves close to Shentel so his words do not carry. “Just admit it. You're jealous of my skills. I can construct more with my eyes closed than you'll ever understand. If you don't believe me, have a look for yourself.”

Thumbs gestures to the pair of visors above him, lowering them to Shentel's eye level. He pushes them toward her, covering her eyes and peripherals.

“See what I mean!” Thumbs shouts over the music and crowd that shouts his name. “You can never beat me.”

Shentel's face becomes digitally rendered for a few moments, illuminating the dance floor with a flash of bright orange. In a moment of panic, she pushes the visors off, which disappear with the rest of the game's assembly line of components. Her legs buckle and she falls to the floor, holding her head with both hands and crying out in pain.

“All drinks are on me!” Thumbs holds his hands up to the crowd, walking back to his corner of the dance floor.

Laci tries to hold back her anger. She approaches Thumbs, swinging her fist into his shoulder, as if struggling to accept his immature behavior. “You're a monster.”

Thumbs turns around, catching Laci's fist, and backhands her to the floor. He reaches down and takes the comp-ucube from the folds of her desert suit, leaving her curled in the fetal position.

An older boy from the crowd rushes to Shentel's side, helping her to stand. He supports her weight as she slowly walks to a nearby seat. He tucks the strands of hair covering her face behind her ears, asking if there is anything he can do to ease the pain.

“What happened?” She keeps her eyes lowered.

“A bright light came out of his visors. Are you okay?” He tries his best to make her comfortable.

“I don't know.” Shentel looks around, unable to recall any flash of light.

The scoreboard above the crowd appears in the hovering fog with the tally of points. Shentel looks up at her name appearing in a smaller font, resonating as a player in sudden death.

“Who's playing Tinkerverse? I want to go watch.”

The older boy's eyes widen.

Thumbs moves to the floating table in the corner with the comp-ucube in his hands. He holds up the device to the crowd that continues to shout his name. With a boastful smile he extends the transparent nano-tube from the corner of the comp-ucube and quickly coats the end with a mouthful of saliva. He glances back at Shentel before he inserts the tube into the side of his consol-vert.

Within seconds, the transparent nano-tube turns into a kaleidoscope of colors, floating upward, while the air surrounding Thumbs and the comp-ucube thickens with

the smell of heated metal. The casing of the comp-ucube begins to glow red and resonate with a loud purr. Thumbs closes his eyes and smiles, relaxing his shoulders with the energy that flows out from the tiny device.

“What's he doing?” Shentel asks the older boy, staring intently across the dance floor at Thumbs with sincere confusion.

“I don't know,” he stands from her side. “But he's not going to get away with it.”

The older boy rushes in, raising his clenched fists, pulling back his weight. He lunges forward to tackle Thumbs, hoping to knock the comp-ucube from his grip. He hopes to catch Thumbs in the booth of the suspended table and beat him with the vindication Shentel deserves. He swings with his left fist. Thumbs opens his eyes which appear electrically brighter than they normally do, and with a solid shift in weight, he avoids the punch. His shoulders flex, and he punches the older boy in the face, breaking his nose.

“Who the hell do you think you are?” The older boy holds his nose, trying to catch the blood that drips onto the dance floor.

“I'm the Father now!” His voice is electric and deep, echoing like thunder in a metallic drum.

Chapter 13

Heal with Time

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“The iniquities of the wicked ensnare him, and he is held fast in the cords of his sin. He dies for lack of discipline, and because of his great folly he is led astray.”

Proverbs 5:22-23

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The nutria-farm is more than the manufacturing sight of neuro-metal and cauliflower presses. It is the only building in the wasteland with a direct link to the city of Thicket. The room that houses the machinery and dispensers for the city's supply of nutrition and electricity is now the same room that contains the burnt remains of Khristoff Dakya.

I wake in a daze to the pungent smell of Khristoff's carcass. A thin layer of smoke still lingers in the air, invading my nasal cavity more as I stand. I look around the room, collecting my scattered memories of Khristoff's demise. The first thing I can recall is the impression of Jessica's face, masked in the compulsive persona of Shentel's alter ego. She gambled with my own freedom for a chance to help the Father control the people of Thicket.

I do not want to believe that my daughter could be a habitual liar, but then I suddenly start to follow the symptoms of Willow Amnesia and what Laci was trying to tell me. Willow Amnesia is an irreversible disease that Shentel will never escape. She wakes up every morning living the memories of other people. Some people call this hereditary disease by the ghost that resides within the machine. Other people call it karma for having a natural birth while tampering with the subconscious on a technological high.

I do not want to believe that Shentel is junkie, runaway version of my daughter. I do not want to believe that my daughter only exists now as a random surprise to a girl who is not in the slightest bit interested in her father's existence.

A whole slew of images appears in my head, each caricature a crazy realization to my feelings for the past two decades. I see an abnormal tempest, a woman in black transparent attire, and an irrational teenager, thought more like a farmer's pet. The farmer's hair rotates in colors, as well as her eyes. For a moment I think I see Jessica and I call out her name. Am I merely looking for Shentel?

I search behind each machine and dispenser, calling out her name, but find no trace of Shentel or Jessica, or the comp-ucube. The entry-port to the link-rail pod is open and the transport is missing from its cradle. Still trying to adjust to the smell, I realize that

Shentel has fled to the city on the link-rail with the comp-ucube in her possession.

Among the tools and mechanics of Khristoff's workshop, the remains of a desert suit wardrobe litter the floor. To my benefit, a pair of sturdy goggles have been left near some neuro-metal boots and synthetic skin gloves. In addition to the portable hydro-generator we found at the absconder camp, I will need these accessories if I am to get back to the city alive.

My thoughts parade in my head as I change my boots and slip on the pair of gloves. I think about Sherianne and the day we discovered we were going to be parents as I stretch the goggles over my forehead. When I approach the entry-port to the wasteland, I think about my daughter and the creature she turned out to be.

There is more to Shentel's personality than I may want to understand. She traded in her own life, changed her hair color, and buried the past that eventually led her back to her family. The entry-port opens with the pull of a lever and the hot desert winds of the midday sun enter the nutria-farm, nudging me into taking a step back.

The essence of the wasteland is not as strong as the smell emitting from Khristoff's body. With my desert suit hood wrapped tightly around my head and my goggles secured in place, I take a step toward the Western horizon.

For more than 10 hours I hike in a single direction, hoping to reclaim the path I previously followed. The storms of the wasteland have covered the footprints that Shentel and I carved along the way but I am able to recognize a mountain of rubble that looks to contain the pieces of an entire neighborhood. I think I am going the right way.

I venture through an asphalt sea of mangled shopping carts and a graveyard of toppled automobiles. Staring at the potential of transportation laying in ruin, I consider the chances of fixing this outdated technology, shaking my head at the reality that I know nothing about it.

From opposite angles, I observe the hills and mountain peaks that could have surrounded the absconder camp. I then notice the structures that have been worn down by lightning strikes and acidic rain.

The absconder camp on Piute Mountain is empty, and the last of the refugee's equipment was either dismantled or confiscated by SCS, leaving nothing behind that could benefit a survivor. Hoping to quench my thirst, I operate the hydro-generator, but find it malfunctioning. I now feel like I am running low on luck. There are no transports in the area, nor are there any modes of communication with the city. I sense that I am

walking abandoned.

I feel the need to rest, but with clear skies on the horizon, I search the structures for any piece of useful equipment. In several make-shift homes, I find the family portraits of those who fled the area. Painted in oil and clay, the portraits render each facial expression in murky colors of the barren earth.

Standing in the middle of Crutchtown, I feel the same pain as I did all those years ago. This is where Sherianne lived. Shentel was trying to tell me something and now I feel as though I am deserting them once again.

As the sun starts to crest the top of the horizon, I feel I can no longer waste my time in this forsaken wasteland if I am to find out what happened to Shentel and the comp-ucube. I must take the direct trail to the city without stopping for sleep.

After several hours of walking through hills of cracked desert and sun-dried debris in the twilight, I can feel the effects of hunger and malnutrition. I reach into my desert suit and retrieve the cylindrical container, tripping over the chrome bumper of a buried automobile and launching my Cau-li supply into the air. The container crashes into the side of a sunken boulder and my presses spill through the cracks in the ground. The rattle of my Cau-li presses echo on their way to the bottom of the buried pickup truck.

My heart falls to the dry earth. The last of my food supply drops like marbles on a tall staircase. I feel the last of my strength escaping my grip as I claw at the cold sand below me.

As the sun sinks below the horizon, painting the desert around me in darkness, my heart prays for the silhouette of the city's perimeter. Like a mirage on the desert's skyline, I want to be convinced by such an illusion. I cannot accept that all hope is lost, nor can I give into the setting of betrayal. I need to march on. With each step, the pain in my leg worsens and the weight of my body tumbles forward.

I tell myself, I must keep going. I cannot give up all that I have accomplished. Having a hard time accepting my fate, I feel as though I cannot let Shentel go without releasing my daughter, her hostage, nor can I let the comp-ucube fall into the hands of SCS. I tell myself, if I can just make it back to the city. I tell myself, the pain in my leg and burning in my throat will pass. I tell myself, it will all be over soon.

I hear from my comp-uzync an ever-increasing warning bell, alerting me to the fact that my vitals are failing. The end is coming too quickly.

The horizon pulls away from me in sparkles of a dark hue. Before my entire view is swallowed up by fatigue and pain, I make out the face of my wife. Standing as beautiful as the day I met her, I watch as Sherianne takes me by the hand.

My consciousness falls deeper than sleep. I feel lost in a maze of uncertain results, constantly correcting my actions with assumptions of guilt and disease. In the distance I see my daughter, running away from her past. Recognize the mirage for what the desert wants to show me, I sense a glimpse into my own reality. Shentel is holding onto the hand of a boy near her age. I can only presume they have fallen in love.

The love that I feel for Jessica quickly dissolves. She is no longer the little girl I considered as family. I see her now as a wanderer, an absconder, a shell of a memory that was designed to remain. In my distortion, I watch as she runs in my direction, but further and further away, always out of my reach. Headed into the sunrise of another day, the vision of Shentel blinds me in my fatigue. Hoping for my vision to return, I no longer see Shentel, but rather the face of a young man with a bloody nose, holding onto my feet as he drags me over rock and sand.

Suddenly, the decay of the wasteland is no longer a concern. I wake to the sight of someone hovering over me. Cradled on the neuro-metal pavement where a crowd whispers and gawks, a dreamlike face meets my own to help me sit up.

From behind me, a hand holds the back of my head. I feel a cold metal injection in the side of my neck and my eyes flicker open. Another hand feeds a cauliflower press to my open mouth.

“What do you think you're doing?” Someone squeezes my shoulder to get a reflex. “How long have you been out there?”

I swallow the press that I so desperately need and cough, looking around at the people who stand in groups of murmuring conversations.

“I thought I still was.” I look around, squinting.

“Are you delirious? Where have you been?”

I blink a few more times, trying to get my focus to return. I rub my forehead and look again, contempt with seeing Arlita at my aid.

“Khristoff's dead.” I roll onto my side. “Jessica has the cube and she's somewhere in the city.” I try to stand. “I have to get it back.”

“Jessica?” She watches me get up slowly. “She's alive?”

“You tell me, Lita.” I respond sarcastically, walking away from her. “You saw her and didn't tell me.”

“I told you what you needed to hear. I saw a bright aura around a young girl and I assumed that she was a forgotten child.” Arlita walks after me in her argument. “It was up to you to decide how important she was. You knew that she would lead you to your daughter. Where are you going?”

“I don’t know,” I huff as I turn around. “SCS thinks I stole the cube and without proof, they’ll start questioning the people I know. I need to talk to Mico.”

“Mico?”

“The priest?” I do not sound reassured. “He only gave me the cube if I traded that absconder’s life in return. Tells you what kind of fool I turned out to be.”

“Then you haven't heard.”

“Heard what?” I stop, looking back.

“There was an emergency. He's been taken to Medic Tower. They found him barely alive with his comp-uzync cracked.”

“Cracked?” My words sound stunned. “That doesn't sound right.”

At the Northern edge of the marketplace, the Medical Sector is where the people of Thicket come to repair their physical demands. Whether someone is injured by blunt trauma, mistreated by malnutrition, or appears ugly on the outside and prefers the look of plastic surgery, the Medic Tower is here in the form of government aid.

The curved buildings to either side of the Tower are the Alpha and Beta Medical Wings, designated for outpatient housing and extensive private research. The Silver Collar Society takes care of its citizens, treating every registered body the same. They can also accommodate the highest bidder and monopolize research funding. I hold my breath when we walk in.

The entry-port to the Tower is inviting, but the lack of a human presence does not seem right to me. I feel as though the first step in helping a person through a painful ordeal should be another human to empathize the experience. Instead, a large digital directory board is displayed to direct us to the appropriate floor.

Treatments for malnutrition are assigned to the first five floors. Appointments for various types of cosmetic surgery are assigned to the next ten floors. As we walk toward the elevators, I can feel the pain in my leg returning. I try to regain my composure. I breathe in and out and hope that the day will not continue in a downward pattern.

I look at the reflected mirror's edge and see the aging face of regret. I see a painfully notable receding hairline and the large earlobes that match my square chin. I feel as if my age is catching up to me, wanting to find a bed to lay in and sleep for the next few hundred years.

Arlita presses a button on the elevator, turning to me as if I deserve an explanation.

“I'm sorry.”

“For what?” I glance at her as I watch the elevator's numbers go up.

“I should have told you about Jessica.”

The elevator door opens and I notice a couple of A.L.L. Collar agents standing outside one of the medical rooms. I place a hand on Arlita's shoulder, walking past her.

The two agents cross their arms when I approach.

“Excuse me.” I clear my throat. “Is this Mico's room?”

“No authorization.” One agent speaks in a German accent.

“No visitors.” The other agent translates in Russian.

My confused gaze bounces between the two of them.

“Well,” I move for Arlita, positioning her between me and the two men. “I brought his mother. They haven't seen each other in quite a while.”

“Yes,” Arlita adds, deciding to play along. “You'll make an exception for his mother, won't you? I would like to know what happened to my son.”

“I'm sorry, ma'am, but we've been given direct orders.”

“I beg your pardon.” Arlita blinks her eyes with a deep, raspy tone in her voice.

“Nothing personal, ma'am.” The German agent tries to sympathize with her. “We can't let anyone in. Authorized personnel only.”

“Can I speak to you for a second?” I gesture for the German agent to step to the side. “Do you know what'll happen to Mico if he dies without his mother at his side?”

“Not my concern.” He pulls his shoulders back, widening his chest.

“Well, it should be.” I steal a glance at Arlita and the other agent still standing in front of the room. “He's the only one who knows what happened and the person responsible for this is still out there. It'll look bad on your part if this happens again, and they order you with the same detail. I've been here. It's not the best assignment, now is it?”

“Is that a threat by a civilian?”

I look down, feeling as if I must confront this misunderstanding with my own intelligence and wit.

“I'm saying, before I take my final vows for the church,” I thoughtfully invent. “I need to experience the true grit.” I playfully hold up my fists.

His arms seem to shake loose as I start to gain his interest.

“You know how much pent-up anger is left between these two?” I approach Arlita and hold her next to me, gesturing for her to sell my story with the innocent smile of a victim. “She's got so much lecturing left to do.” I smile and nod at the other agent to agree with the laughter I create.

The German agent agrees with a humble chuckle. I guess he finds the thought of a priest being scolded by his mother as the magic word. He turns and signals the other agent to step to the side and let us enter the post-operation room. The Russian guard opens the small metallic door into the medical room, where Mico rests in a bed with several active machines around him. One machine monitors his heart rate while another administers an intravenous dosage of pain relief.

The Silver Collar priest's bed is raised off the floor, extending from the wall like a medical tongue. Mico rests under a plastic blanket that regulates his body temperature. His face is bruised and wrapped in white cloth. Only his eyes and mouth are visible, with a tube inserted in his nose.

“Priest,” the German agent speaks into the room. “You have a visitor.”

“Thank you.” I walk back to follow the agent out. “We won't be long.”

The agent nods and closes the door behind him.

I approach Mico's bed in a rush, rustling the plastic blanket. Arlita moves to the foot of the bed, holding on to the structure as if her touch is a mild comfort to the bed's pain.

“Alright, Mico.” I grab the priest's shoulders. “Mico, wake up!”

Slowly, the priest opens his eyes and blinks as if he is afraid.

“What happened? Who did this to you?” I pull the blanket off and see that most of his body is covered in bandages.

“People- Danger-” With a machine to regulate his breathing between each other word, Mico is barely able to speak above a whisper.

“You knew what Khristoff was planning all along, didn't you?”

Mico's eyes freeze at the sound of the question. His hands, which are also bandaged, quickly come up to shield his Collar. His comp-uzync is heavily destroyed, showcasing a crack in the consol-vert's screen that reminds me of the stalagmites of Piute Mountain.

“Khristoff-” He takes a long, deep breath. “Wants- The cube-”

“Shentel took the cube.” I look at Arlita for help but find nothing of value in her blank stare. “Where did Shentel take the cube?”

“Children- Try- Save-” He points to his heart.

“Save who? My daughter?” My eyes trace the white bandages around his face as my questions go unanswered.

“Tried- No choice-”

“What choice? She came to you for help!” I lean closer, almost able to smell the blood and bruises through the soaked bandages. “What did you do to her?”

The priest shakes his head in tears, mumbling into his bandaged hands. The words he speaks are inaudible to Arlita, but as a father figure, I am barely able to understand the violent betrayal in Mico's voice. All I hear are the words INJECT and WILLOW and I picture Shentel wandering back to the cathedral where she thought she would be safe. She would never have known the bargain placed against her return. She would never have anticipated the priest's intentions.

“What were you thinking, old man?” I grind my teeth together as I speak. “How could you do that to my daughter? What were you expecting to get from her? You should be glad that Khristoff didn't kill you when he had the chance!”

“Sunder. Look here.” Arlita calls me to Mico's chart at the foot of his bed. “It shows that he's in need of a heart transplant.”

“He needs a donor?” My stare bounces between the illuminated display of the digital chart and Mico's bandaged figure.

I move away from the medical bed, joining the view of the window and remembering the way Mico clutched his chest as we spoke in the cathedral. I hold my silence with my arms crossed and an intent of hate gleaming behind my eyes. I try hard to understand the need of a young heart, and the benefits weighed between saving the old versus the young.

“Sunder, listen to me.” Arlita tries with reason. “You can't get your daughter back. She's not the same person you left in that camp. Whatever you do can't bring back the past. All we can do is accept the fate and move along for the sake of others. Besides,” she looks back at Mico who is crying behind his bandages. “What ever happened to Khristoff is probably what he deserved.”

“As a child, he didn't deserve to be sacrificed.” I stare at Mico.

“As your child?” Arlita adds. “How much would you allow? Does a parent sympathize for their child who doesn't want to remember home?”

I take in a deep breath, first looking at the neuro-metal boots that support my weight

and then up to Arlita who tries to break my concentration with a friendly smile.

Arlita moves to Mico's bed, kneels, and takes his closest hand into her own. She pulls his bandaged wrist to her lips and kisses the white cloth, whispering into the fabric.

“My dearest Lord. Please watch over your lost sheep. Protect your flock from the temptations of evil. Look after your followers with the same love you deserve. Although a lost soul may not be worthy of your grace, I pray for this beaten man. Let his soul be welcome into your house of love. May his sins be forgiven and his conscious be cleansed. I ask this through our Lord, and Savior.”

Arlita stands from Mico's bed and returns to me. With a smile, she walks past and opens the door to find the two agents still at their post. I take one last look at Mico before departing his room and leaving the priest to his own conscious understanding. I think about his heart surgery and the donor needed to have a successful operation.

Mico's condition seems like a devious scheme that will forever plague his face, if only visible in his watering eyes and quivering lips. I want to know more about whatever happened in the cathedral, but I figure that something this traumatic has no room for descriptive words. I close the door behind me, letting the old man whimper alone.

“He should be fine.” Arlita addresses one of the agents with a gentle touch as she walks me to the elevator. “He'll heal with time.”

The two A.L.L. Collars nod in agreement, crossing their arms as they listen in on the tail-end mummer of Mico's whimpering.

As Arlita and I ride the elevator to the bottom floor, I wonder about the brief dialogue that Mico was not able to finish. I wonder about the words Arlita whispered over the priest's bed, and I wonder about the revenge that sent such violence to the city cathedral.

“Who do you think he was talking about?” I turn to face Arlita in the elevator.

“The donor? Or the children” Arlita shrugs her shoulders. “Could have been any number or them. I see signs everywhere.”

“Signs,” I look away in thought. “But who would seek revenge like that?”

“Don't worry about it.” She reaches out to touch my shoulder as the elevator door opens to the bottom floor. “What else can you do? Slap their wrist for protecting their friend?”

I agree with a look of sympathy and walk away from the Medic Tower with Arlita at my side. The crowded streets are not as packed, now that the sun is going down. The

night brings out a different set of pedestrians who stay in the shadows and alleyways, giving us more room to walk freely down the street.

The air at night smells cleaner and the lights from nearby billboards look brighter. It seems that the city of Thicket is more perfect without its people plaguing the streets. The walk back to Arlita's apartment is quick and comforting. Neither one of us must push or shove our way through or tell a single vendor that we are not interested in their merchandise. When Arlita approaches the entry-port to her apartment, I stop short.

“There's one thing that still bothers me.” I look at the control panel on the entry-port. “If Khristoff's dead, who's after the cube?”

“Sunder.” Arlita speaks with a sigh. “Do you remember the cathedral dedication ceremony?”

“What about it?”

“The prophecy was never about Loy. The signs are happening again and I've seen them in the streets.” She strolls around her stoop.

“What do you mean? Another uprising?”

“Haven't you seen the abundance of children these days? They all seem to be running in the same mindset. They're stealing and dealing, occupying and ordering. I think they're preparing for another shift in power.”

“Well, like you said.” I tilt my head while rubbing my hairline. “We shouldn't worry about it unless there's something we can do about it.” I back away from Arlita as if I am requesting my leave. “I just need a good night's sleep.”

Arlita smiles and waves me on my way. She opens the entry-port to her apartment and lets it close behind her. I zip up the folds of my desert suit out of habit, looking around the city streets for anyone else still awake. I walk past dimly lit corners, wondering where all the children sleep. I pass exhaust vents and think about the families torn apart from the raid on the wasteland camps, having the city be the only logical hope for the survival of their children.

The neon green light from the link-rails above is bright enough to illuminate my path. Accustomed to the same footsteps, visiting Arlita's apartment for guidance and walking home, I feel reacquainted with the assurance in what she had to say. The link-rails in the Triennial Division travel in two directions, transporting dozens of insomniacs and those who function better at night, and rather than return to the privileged apartments of the West Sector, I decide to expand my curiosity and venture further into the night.

I walk to the nearest link-rail station and board the next available pod, taking an empty seat next to a young blonde girl with streaks of pale green in her hair. The transport is crowded with other children who have no accompanying adults. The sight of their youth brings a smile to my face but also sparks my intuition of concern. These

children are most likely involved in this new revolution that Arlita mentioned, and any one of them could be responsible for Mico's broken form.

“Can I ask you a question?” I address the blonde girl sitting next to me.

“Sure.” She turns to the side.

“Where do you all sleep at night?” I look around the transport in acknowledgment of the young girl's friends.

“We stay with Khristoff.” She flips her hair with a definitive answer, revealing a set of pink lips tattooed on the side of her neck.

“Shentel?” I panic, grabbing her sleeve.

“Let go of me, you freak!” She shouts and scurries to the back of the link-rail pod, positioning the other children between us.

“Shentel, it's me, Oscar. What the hell happened?”

The other children on the transport glare at me in my attempt at moving closer to the girl who is trying to get away.

“What? What do you want?” She sounds as if she is questioning a stranger.

“I want to know what happened at the nutria-farm. I want to know what happened to Mico.” I hurry with my words.

“I don't know what you're talking about!”

“Don't you remember anything? What happened to the comp-ucube?” I look around at the other children, as if I am addressing the entire group.

I stand in an awkward position, waiting in silence as the transport speeds on its way across the city. The other children who sit around me know nothing of my endeavor or the circumstances that revolve around the immortal man on the nutria-farm. They whisper to each other while exchanging glances of an applied rumor. One of the children in the corner of the transport raises his hand. The little boy speaks.

“You mean, Khristoff's cube?”

Chapter 14

Main Investment

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“Because you did not serve the Lord your God with joyfulness and gladness of heart, because of the abundance of all things, therefore you shall serve your enemies whom the Lord will send against you, in hunger and thirst, in nakedness, and lacking everything. And he will put a yoke of iron on your neck until he has destroyed you.”

Deuteronomy 28:47-48

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The transport travels through miles of link-rail tubes, commuting me and the children of Thicket across the city. To anyone walking on the streets, the pod looks to contain a regular group of travelers, but to myself who sits in awe, surrounded by the newest generation of absconder youth, the pod is an unexpected reunion. A girl who looks exactly like my daughter, but claims she is someone else stands in defense, juggling her attention between the view outside and the little boy's question.

“Khristoff's cube?” The little boy's face is dirty and his clothes are torn in several places.

“Where did you see it?” I gesture for him to move closer.

“I don't know,” he shrugs his shoulders with animation, watching the reaction of the other children who signal him to stop talking.

“It's okay. You can tell me. I won't get you in trouble.”

He becomes silent, seeming too shy to answer me.

“Where did you see Khristoff's cube?” I ask, hoping to hear a definitive answer.

The little boy turns his face away, hiding his fear in the folds of another child's jacket.

“He doesn't know, okay.” An older boy stands up, easing his friend into a nearby seat. His face seems familiar, like a vision from a dream. His attitude makes me assume he is older than the other children on the transport, yet the severity of his broken nose says otherwise. “We saw it on some project stage.” He crosses his arms, looking around the transport at the other children who would probably agree with him if they felt brave enough to answer me.

“Where was this stage?” I adjust my tone to match his demeanor.

“Why should I tell you?” He squints his eyes.

“You don't have to tell me anything.” I step closer as I raise my voice, directing my gaze at every child. “And I don't have to drag you back to the wasteland.”

“A lady let us in,” a little girl speaks.

“A lady with blue eye-shadow,” another child continues. “Please don't turn us in, mister.”

I remember the blonde waitress who tried to collect my Cau-li tabs for a sliver of information. I picture the crowded dance club and laser strobes that ricochet off the reassembled disco ball, hindering the dark atmosphere of colored lights and loud music. I remember the large brute bouncer who would never allow children to wander through the front door without the right credentials.

Yet such an underground location is perfect for hiding something that everyone wants. I look back at the girl who reminds me of Shentel and extend my hand as if inviting her to join me.

“You have to remember.”

“I don't think so,” she says sarcastically.

“I may never truly know what is happening in your life, so I won't ask you to follow me this time. I wish you would. I just—” I feel the tears forming but I hold them back. “I just wish you would remember who you are.” I almost choke on my words.

“I'm pretty adamant about who I am.” She barks in a stern voice, holding on to the shoulders of a boy half her size and showing no signs of emotion in my departure.

“Wait,” the older boy steps up. “How do you know Shentel?”

“It's a long story.” I try to smile, looking over the boy's shoulder at the girl who reminds me of my daughter. “We've been through a lot.”

“I'm not sure what you mean, but she's been through more than you can imagine. She hasn't been the same.”

“Are you talking about her hair? I think it looks good.” I try my best to smile.

“No, I'm talking about her memory. Something bad happened to her a long time ago, and she keeps going back to that same club.”

“What happened at the club?” I frown, sounding more concerned.

“Khristoff. She doesn't remember who she really is.” He looks back at Shentel who is involved in a conversation with the other children. “Anyone who may know her from a previous life are the ones who have the most difficult time accepting her disease. They think she's just playing an innocent game.”

“And they're the ones following the willow.” I acknowledge his moment of sympathy. “Can you do me a favor?” I look down, unzipping a fold in my desert suit. “Make sure she gets this.” I hand him my Imprint Drive. “Tell Shentel that her mother only wanted the best for her. Tell her to follow her heart, wherever that may lead her. Can you do that for me?”

“I guess,” he accepts the drawing with a look of confusion.

“And clean yourself up.” I gesture to the dirt on his face and the blood from his broken nose. “Set an example.”

I start to think that he will refuse to take me seriously by the way he smiles and throws his head back in a chuckle. With an accepted nod in agreement on my part and an informal acceptance of sarcasm on his, I step onto the rotating platform of a passing

link-rail station and let the transport continue its path through the city.

The streets between the North Alpha and North Beta Sectors are quiet and the marketplace is empty. Anyone awake at this hour is either hiding in the shadows, dealing in dark market sales or assisting with unauthorized surgeries. The oxygen vents that bellow steam from its grates and gutters are the only mechanical sounds I hear as I follow my memory through the alleyways of Thicket. I expect to find a Silver Collar patrolling the streets but feel alone in my travels.

I turn one corner and follow another alleyway, losing sight of the main street and having to look up to pinpoint my bearings. While I search for fluorescent showgirl signs and illuminated advertisements, I cannot help but think of my daughter. Jessica had become a whole other person in Khristoff's household. She had given up her life in virtue for a chance at disgraceful power, and now she is clueless and unrelenting to the man who saved her life.

The show lights of an adult venue illuminate the walkway. As I pass, I notice a female dancer who tries to lure me in. She uses gyrating hips and provocative thrusts of her upper torso, caressing her barely covered body with promiscuous ideas of pleasure. Stopping for a smiling stare and an exchange of winks, I sense the impulse to indulge.

Her single labret piercing against her petite face glistens against the light of her stage, symbolizing the slightest hardened edge in her personality. Her long brown hair is tied in twin braids with strands of fiber optics rotating in colors. Beads of sweat appear on her flat stomach, illustrating the workout she is willing to endure. She twists her hips and waives her wrists, swinging her hair from side to side. If I could be on the other side of the glass, I would hear the music and rhythm she uses in her nightly routine.

The saliva in my mouth begins to saturate my tongue but I must remember my path. I must remember the result of my journey. I must remember the strength I received from all those who believe in me. A voice speaks from the depths of my heart and it recites a verse from a religion that starts to make sense.

I have come to understand that no temptation has overtaken me except what is common to mankind. And God is faithful. He will not let me be tempted beyond what I can bear. But when I am tempted, he will also provide a way out so that I can endure it.

“You don't worry about anything, do you?” I shake my head as I watch her dance.

“I wouldn't say that.” A voice startles me into seeing my staring reflection in the glass that separates me from the dancer.

“She has everything she needs.” I glance at the man next to me, but return my focus forward.

“Probably not.” The short man steps closer into the light of the projected venue and smiles, which excites the girl. “She looks old enough to be in there, though.”

I cannot help but think that I am in a dream, being tested against the morals of the right path. The dancer who stares down at me looks old enough to know what she is doing. From a distance, I should realize that she is a woman. She looks old enough to know what she wants, yet up close, she is probably younger than I expect. She could easily satisfy a man's lust for youth, but she makes me think of only the disappointment her parents must have felt when they discovered what their daughter had become.

“Did you come here for me? Or somebody's daughter?” I assume with a simple grin, looking up at the young woman.

“We've been looking for you.”

“We?” I look around but see no other person standing on the street. “What do we want now?”

“Just information.” He turns away from me and looks up at the dancing woman behind a thick layer of clear retro-glass. She peels back the thin fabric of her bikini top that separates us from her birthday suit. “Where have you been these past couple days?”

“Should it matter?” I cross my arms, turning to lean against the retro-glass display, not willing to say more.

“It should.” He moves closer and taps on the retro-glass, catching the woman's attention. “You're taking things that don't belong to you.”

“Why would I do that?”

“Sunder,” he turns back to me. “I don't like being driven for no reason.” He gestures to the shadows behind him, waving to the presence of someone I cannot see. “My orders are to bring you in.”

The seriousness in his Mexican accent plays with my memory. I remember standing in the marketplace when Thumbs and his gang of absconder youths ran off with my Imprint Drive and collection of Cau-li tabs. I remember being connected to the Cleaner against my will and losing consciousness while other patrons simply stood by, unwilling to help. I also remember the order given to end Uni's life. I find myself again in the presence of the SCS agent who took it upon himself as a personal responsibility to reclaim my whereabouts.

From the alleyway across the street, a couple of large men emerge from the shadows. They step into the show lights of the woman's advertisement window. I can see that they are wearing desert suits, heavy boots, neuro-metal gloves, and illuminated gas masks.

“What do you want from me?” I look over the other two A.L.L. Collars who have their arms crossed. “Why can't you just leave me alone?”

The Mexican agent approaches me as I back up into the other two men. “I'd stop

talking if I were you.”

“Why? So Mr. Big Arms and Tiny Head here can rough me up more than your fat tongue?”

“You'll address me as Sergeant Valdez.” He starts walking, forcing me to join his direction with a push of my shoulder.

The further away from the show lights we travel, the darker the streets of Thicket become. The streets are empty but the alleyways are starting to swell with pedestrians looking for another late-night business to occupy. We four men merge with a group of people who look to be headed to the same destination.

I watch as boys and girls laugh in procession, sliding glances at us as we all walk together. I turn to Valdez who keeps a straight face through the entire march.

“If I can get you what you think I stole, would you let me go?”

Valdez stops walking and turns back to me.

“What makes you think I'll believe you?” He picks at my desert suit. “You've been outside too long.”

“What if I can get you the comp-ucube?” I want to follow up with a riddle such as what one gets when crossing an agent and a bulb of cauliflower, but feel silenced in their forward stares.

“Where?”

“The East Sector Club.”

Valdez starts to laugh.

“What?” I frown, unwilling to understand the joke.

“If that's your last request, I'll give that to you.”

“I'm serious!”

“Sure, you are.” He gestures for the other two agents to push me forward, forcing me to lead the way.

We walk through alleyways of steam vent exhaust pipes. When I notice the illuminated sign and line of waiting party goers, I recognize the entry-port to the East Sector Club.

“I don't think we'll be able to get in.” I sound like a pessimist, slowing my footsteps on our way to the entry-port.

“We won't have any trouble.” Valdez keeps his focus forward, moving me along.

The large man standing outside the club's entry-port seems larger than before. Valdez

walks up to the bouncer and shakes his hand, exchanging words that I am not able to understand. The bouncer looks me over, and with a smile in remembering the other night, lets us enter without a second guess.

Inside the East Sector Club, I gaze over the league of dancing heads. The disco lights and laser shows are still set in motion. Stars and circles reflect off mirrored surfaces and the Silver Collars around the three men who escort me across the illuminated dance floor.

One of the masked agents escorting me points to the back of the club. Valdez acknowledges with an upward nod. My imagination wanders through the crowd, searching for the hunched stature of Khristoff, who I believe would have disguised himself as one of the dancers. I feel the need to see him now, more than ever.

“You have ten minutes.” Valdez speaks into my ear.

Valdez snaps his fingers which can barely be heard with the loud music overhead. The other two agents push me forward, leaving me to wander the club without supervision.

I blink in succession, remembering the events of Khristoff's demise. I picture the powerful aura that surrounded his neuro-metal body only seconds before the comp-ucube began to smoke. I remember the way the surface of the comp-ucube acted out against Khristoff's connected invasion.

I want to stop and think, but I feel rushed by the three men who stand between me and the entry-port. I imagine Khristoff in the marketplace and the resulting screams of fear that would result in his mere presence. I remember meeting Khristoff inside the nutria-farm and my memories return me to the wasteland entry-port with Shentel.

My steps refuse to halt as my mind confronts the marketplace. I see Khristoff's face alongside Uni and his crazy charades of super salesmanship. I remember Valdez approaching me after Thumbs ran off with my belongings.

The further I walk away from Valdez, the more strenuous my internal questions become. I wonder how a hunchback absconder would be able to move through the crowds of the marketplace without rousing suspicion. I ponder the origins of Khristoff's desert suit and the way he possibly entered the city undetected.

A large crowd of dancers occupies the center of the club, hindering a direct path to the other side. Slowly, as individuals drift past their partners in a chorus line of kicked

up shins, I spot a couple of familiar faces. With no obstruction, I recognize Thumbs and Laci at their usual floating table surrounded by a group of eager faces.

The hovering table is illuminated with another holographic show of Thumbs and his exploits. Hands that pass through the floating image join in a Cau-li tab exchange, which is obvious to me, but perhaps not to everyone in the club.

I always believed that false accusations will lead to expressions of shock, so protocol tends to focus on the public entourage of all gritty dispositions. I remember what Thumbs did to me in the marketplace and find the humor in leading authorities back to him.

“Digis?” Thumbs looks up from his conversation. “What are you doing here?”

“Thumbs,” I feel the urge to sit. “Where's Khristoff?”

“You still don't know who I am?” He sounds insulted.

I picture Uni in the struggle of the marketplace with Laci's older sister in a pool of her own blood. I remember Laci screaming for help and Thumbs being in the clutches of a maddening adult. Uni mentioned that he was trying to prevent another uprising and that Thumbs was responsible for starting the revolution. Uni wanted to prevent Thumbs from killing everyone.

“Why did Uni want you dead?” I stare at Thumbs through the holographic image on the table.

“Uni? You mean the crazy rat? He was asking too many questions.” Thumbs smiles at a girl who accepts a dosage of Cau-li from him. “I've got a reputation to adhere to.”

“So, you let Anneli die?” I look at Laci who keeps her face hidden from the light.

“Collateral.” Thumbs presses a few buttons on his comp-uzync, erasing the holographic image from view. “Just like the priest. We can't hold on to everyone.”

I think about Uni, who died because of the city's need for justice and vengeance. I think about Khristoff, who died because of his arrogance and greed. I picture Mico in the medic tower, recovering from the wounds that now make sense.

“Let me ask you something, Sunny.” Thumbs leans forward on the table. “Did you believe me when I first told you who I was?”

I think back to when I asked for the young absconder's name. Thumbs answered with what I assumed was a false identity, believing Khristoff Dakya should have died in the wastelands at an early age.

“No.” I want to lie, but find no use in denying what I originally thought.

“Because I was telling you the truth.” Thumbs leans in closer to whisper so only I can hear. “And I have to thank you. I wouldn't have been able to get my hands on the cube without your gullible sense of family values.”

The hate and confusion begins to mix in the pit of my stomach. I did not know that Shentel would mislead me from the start, nor did I want to believe that she was being manipulated by so many of her friends. I remember the way she clung to her oblivious nature on the link-rail, recalling nothing of our journey together.

“If I knew how easy it was to get the cube, I wouldn't have excluded Shentel. She would have been safe with us from the Collars. No Willow.” Thumbs smiles to himself as he leans back and tucks a lock of Laci's hair behind her ear.

I feel as if I have heard enough. Thumbs has threatened my life and the life of my daughter for the sake of the comp-ucube. An innocent man has been judged based on the lies fabricated in this youth's name. A priest is in the hospital for reaching out to today's youth, and everything now rests on the shoulders of a boy who the people of Thicket know as Thumbs. He may identify himself as the real Khristoff Dakya, but I still see him as the arrogant child who stole from me.

I lunge forward and crawl over the floating table. I reach my hands to Thumbs' neck, imagining the power that Uni once felt. My fingers touch the fabric of his desert suit but before I can strangle the young absconder, the two masked agents grab me by the arms and drag me back.

“Hey!” Valdez moves to help hold me still, standing between me and Thumbs. “What are you doing?”

“He's been lying to us from the very beginning!” I try to break free. “He has the cube and he plans to kill everyone!”

“That's right, Digis.” Thumbs sits back in his chair once he is sure that the agents have me contained. “I'm the main investment and I plan on killing everyone. Even the people who pay me.” He points to his own forehead. “Think about it.”

“Val!” I look to the short agent. “This kid is evil! He's a grower! You got to believe me! He knows too much about what SCS is doing! If you let him go, he'll take over the city!”

“This guy's harassing us!” Thumbs points at me as if ordering the two masked agents to haul me out of the club.

I reach out for Thumbs and grab a lock of his hair, tearing the few strands from his scalp. He screams in agony as his dramatic performance is well received by the group surrounding us. The two agents pull me back.

“Orders, sir?” One agent turns to the Sergeant.

Valdez looks back at me, believing that I am ready for a fight. “Take Sunder to the holding tower.”

“No!” Thumbs interrupts.

“Excuse me?” Valdez raises an eyebrow.

“Take him to the city's entry-port.” He speaks with a sinister smile that seems too mature for his age. “Let the desert have him. He doesn't deserve to be here.”

The order to dispose of me in the desert appeases Thumbs as if he is settling some debt with authority. He rises from his seat and runs around the table, acting out his excitement about my banishment. Feeling compelled to venture along, he follows us toward the club's entry-port. Laci reaches out to Thumbs before he gets too far from the suspended table.

“You shouldn't allow this to happen.” She looks in his eyes with a glimmer of sympathy.

“I'm not allowing anything. I'm watching it all happen. This is better than UD vision.” Thumbs rips his arm free of her clutches.

“Don't you remember what Sunny did for you in the marketplace?” Laci looks down at her comp-uzync and the digital prints of herself and her sister. “He saved your life and this is how you're going to repay him?”

“Well, he deserves it!” He seems to be running short on excuses by the way he rips the Imprint Drive from her comp-uzync. “We have to clean up his mess. Shentel should have just taken the cube when she had the chance. If it wasn't for that damn priest, she'd still remember what to do. It's all her fault!”

Sergeant Valdez and I, escorted by the grips of the other two agents, reach the other side of the loud dance club.

“If this works, dad wouldn't have died in vain.” Thumbs touches Laci's shoulder and smiles. Laci deflects his smile with a frown, rejecting his attempt to overrun her with guilt. She turns in her seat, brushing Thumbs off with her cold shoulder.

Near the front of the club, Sergeant Valdez pushes me through the crowd. He does not look to be in the best mood, even while following orders to lead me toward my punishment.

“Val! You know you can't do this to me!” I try again to break free but succumb to the tight hold of the two large agents. “I can get you the cube.”

“Your ten minutes are up, Sunder.” Valdez tries to offer a little compassion.

“You're too slow, Sunny.” Thumbs interrupts, joining the group as we pass the

bouncer outside. “You need to learn how to lead.”

The outside of the club is busier as the night draws in more people. The lights that play in the steam vent puddles reflect me in a prisoner's hold. Thumbs has to walk twice as fast to keep pace with our long strides. The two masked agents remain quiet while they walk, and Valdez glances at Thumbs as we pass an intersecting alleyway.

“This doesn't concern you.” He tries to persuade Thumbs to leave.

“Yes, it does!”

“I should have just let Uni strangle you. At least then the world would have been safer,” I mumble.

“What's that, Sunny?” Thumbs catches up with a cupped hand around his ear. “Are you threatening me? You need to learn to not let your emotions get involved.” He drops his hand in a hysterical laugh, hitting the short Mexican in the shoulder for comical support. “Am I right?”

“If you touch me again, I'll place you under arrest.”

The further along we all walk, the deeper in thought I sink. As we pass through the Northern edge of the marketplace, I think about Arlita and her weekly forecasts on my mundane life. Passing between the Medical Wings, I think about Mico and the strength religion used to give me when I struggled in doubt. These days I feel as though I am drowning, and I remember that a lifeguard is meant to walk on water. I think about my wife and the way she lived without a proper husband to hold her at night. I also reminisce on Jessica and the day that I had to leave them both. It is this memory that gives me an idea.

“Sergeant!” I try again to reason with the Silver Collar agent. “I have proof this kid was planning to steal the comp-ucube from the cathedral. He's planning on taking over SCS!”

“I didn't steal anything!” Thumbs sounds defensive. “Don't blame me for what you did!”

“Sergeant! That kid has the cube!” I try my luck at assuming. “Check his pockets.”

“You're a liar!” Thumbs points his finger.

Sergeant Valdez glares me over with a pessimistic expression. He glances at Thumbs and quickly makes a decision. He approaches the young absconder.

“Empty your pockets.”

“I don't consent!”

Valdez gestures to the two masked agents. Less than a hundred yards from the wasteland entry-port, they grab Thumbs by the arms and hold him still. He tries to kick

and scream but his mouth is muffled, restrained by one of the agent's large hands.

After patting the boy's desert suit, Sergeant Valdez exhales in disappointment. He pulls a Silver Collar and the comp-ucube from a zippered pocket and holds it up to Thumbs.

“Does these belong to you?”

“It's my right!” Thumbs tries to shout over the short agent.

“What about your suit? You steal that too?” Valdez nods at the two agents.

“That cube is too powerful for any one person to possess.” I watch Valdez turn the device over.

“It should never have left SCS in the first place,” Valdez glances at me. “I guess I have to trust you again. Now I have to decide on what we do with the kid.” He rubs his face with desperation. “There goes my weekend.”

“Let me talk to him.” I take a step toward the two masked agents holding Thumbs.

“What?” Valdez looks up confused.

“Let me use the Cleaner.”

Valdez smiles as he hands me the pyramid-shaped device, seeing the irony in the situation. The two A.L.L. Collars release the young absconder's arms and push him near the wall, close to the wasteland entry-port where he could be watched as I speak.

“You know, Thumbs,” I approach with a cheerful tone, keeping the volume of my voice to a minimum. “There are many reasons for failure in this world, but not a single excuse.”

“I didn't fail! Your family failed!” Thumbs moves away from the wall, trying to intimidate me.

“Nobody here wants to see this world fall into another great catastrophe. Someone close told me once to follow the willow. At the time, I didn't know what she meant. That is, until I heard the hysterical rants of a mother at the top of the cathedral steps. Her sins had gotten the best of her. I simply won't allow your sins to infect the rest of this peaceful city.” I put my hands in my pockets and turn back to Sergeant Valdez with a smile. “I have to admit, I thought it would be me hearing this speech.”

“I'm not falling for that.” Thumbs looks me over.

“Do I lie?” I breathe in deep, glancing down at the dirt on my boots. “Tell me, Thumbs. Do you know the tale of the man who tried to live forever?”

“Yeah, what about him?”

“Have you ever seen a bat savagely devour another bat?”

“I know where this is going, and I've heard it all before.”

I walk up to the entry-port and pull on a large lever near the circular entryway. Twisting gears and harmonious chirps of electricity resonate from within the walls of reseeded-steel. The outside air that seeps into the city smells burnt. What I remember as an endless desert of unbelievable sand storms, crashing into one another like tornadoes of dirt and grime, is now a way for me to transition my days.

“I'll give you a chance.” I reveal the Cleaner. “You give up everything and I'll let you leave.”

“Are you stupid?” Thumbs drops his jaw.

“You can never return.”

“How? Are you going to lock me out?” He tries to smile his way into rejecting the agreement.

“Something like that.”

He looks around at the people who have gathered near the wasteland entry-port.

“People will know my sacrifice is just another way for SCS to control them.”

“Then we're even.”

“You think that thing is going to work on me?” He tries to laugh. “I can't be put to sleep.”

“If you want my opinion, I'd disappear,” I quickly glance at the horizon. “Just go.”

“This is all you can do? You never were a real Collar. You can't even perform a simple execution. You will never control me.” His voice deepens as if the point he is trying to make is to be recorded for future generations.

“Of course not.”

“Don't think you can intimidate me.” He stares at me with widened eyes that seem to get brighter.

“Then don't get stepped on.” I attach the Cleaner to his comp-uzync.

The gears inside the pyramid-shaped device loudly crank against the software of his comp-uzync. His sight will darken, leaving him with a sinking feeling in his body, as if he is slowly submerged into an abyss of soothing shadows. I imagine Thumbs to be on the verge of losing consciousness, but in a moment of benign brilliance, he grabs his wrist. Disregarding the Cleaner, Thumbs removes his consol-vert, leaving an empty cavity for his comp-uzync implant. His eyes roll forward as he catches his breath.

“You don't get everything.”

The entry-port's gears twist in loud cranks as the entryway slowly closes, leaving me and the other three A.L.L. Collar agents in the comforting arms of the city of Thicket. The inner and outer shell of Thicket's wall prevents anyone from simply gaining access. As Thumbs stands on the other side of the sealed entry-port, I try not to calculate his chances of survival. I try to imagine that as an example of his humility, he sprints away crying.

“Sunder, we can't have this kind of thing happen again.” Valdez pulls me away from the other agents. “Remember for future reference.”

“Don't trust absconders, got it.” I make my point with a nod.

“Don't get cute, Sunder.” His face turns serious. “I'm doing you a favor. Just remember that.”

Sergeant Valdez glares me over as I return the Cleaner and the uprooted consol-vert unit with a dumbstruck look. He gestures for the other agents to follow him.

“You know, he can't get back in.” I try to assure him.

As quickly as they turn their backs on me they disappear into the darkness. Soon I am standing near the shadows with the light of a nearby retro-glass advertisement board reflecting off my mimicking comp-uzync.

“I have to ask you.” Shentel slowly appears from the darkness. “Did you love my mother?”

I try my best to hold back a smile, forcing my focus to answer in a serious tone. “More than the space between the stars.”

“Do you know what happened to her?” She walks closer to me, showing signs that she expecting to be hugged.

“I don't,” I sigh.

I wish I could say more. I wish I could say that I helped Sherianne escape the confines of the city. I wish I could say that I returned to the absconder camp to check on my wife and failed to see the signs that lead to her entire community's extinction.

“Did you draw this?” Shentel pulls the drawing from my front pocket as holds it near her waist. “She looks so happy.”

I start to wonder if Shentel's memory has returned or if she is trying to regain my trust by making me answer her questions correctly. I wish I knew what happened to Sherianne. I wish the relationship between my daughter and me could be normal, but as I glance around, reality snaps me back into place and I must remember that things are this way for a reason beyond our control. Not even God knows our path. God only knows the trials we face and the decisions we make.

“A part of me wants to believe that you could be my father.” She looks up at me with tears in her eyes. “I cycle through so many identities, the family I had is forever gone. I would give anything to feel that security again.”

“Shentel, I-”

“Just tell me something,” she interrupts. “You may or may not be my father, but I do know that you are a father to some kid out there. If they did something horrible to you, could you ever forgive them?”

“I can't tell you that I will forget what you did.”

Shentel lowers her head in shame, letting a tear fall to the neuro-metal pavement below. I feel the guilt she puts out like a radiator of heat that is responsible for the mess we are both in. She knows the consequences of her actions and the ramifications with the Silver Collar Society.

“But I can tell you this.” I slowly approach her. “I will always forgive you.” I open my arms, inviting her in for a friendly embrace.

Her warmth cradles me like I have always wanted. For one solid moment, I feel united with both Sherianne and the daughter I never got to raise. As I stare at the top of her head, an idea crosses my mind that could settle most of our problems.

“Tomorrow,” I hold her by her shoulders to look in her eyes. “We'll talk with citizen registration. We'll let the city office know that I'm adopting you.”

Shentel's eyes light up with an outcry of emotions.

“Then we can be a family again, and we won't have to worry about anyone taking you away from me.”

I smile at Shentel who returns a smile that looks exactly like Sherianne's. As we embrace for a hug, I stare at the sealed entry-port and think about Thumbs.

Gaining distance from Thicket, Thumbs refuses to stop as he runs toward the nearest absconder camp. The arrogance coursing through his veins intensifies with the anticipation of what he will find. He remembers the story of the man who tried to live forever, relating to the pain of being abandoned.

He remembers the caves that he explored as a child and the shovels he used to carry the bat carcasses back to the processing bins. He remembers scavenging the land with Anneli and Laci outside the absconder camp, avoiding the adults in preparation of the Collar's arrival.

The defectors of the absconder camp were subjected to experimental effects. Although their symptoms mimicked those of basic memory loss, Shentel and Sherianne

were among those contained and exposed to the lingering disease of Willow Amnesia.

Thumbs thinks on Shentel's state of mind and her chances of having a normal life. Irritated by the thought of her happiness, he picks up a rock and launches it at a scurrying Hyltot. He pictures his father's neuro-metal skin that protected his body from the elements of the wasteland.

Thumbs smiles at the crushed body of the bleeding Hyltot, imagining his revenge on my treachery and wrongdoing. He stares at a series of clouds that begin to form on the horizon, adamant on surviving longer than the reign of the immortal man.

Chapter 15

Recycled Wire

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“Now the Spirit expressly says that in later times some will depart from the faith by devoting themselves to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons.”

1 Timothy 4:1

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The mornings in Thicket are always a sight to behold. Mixing in with the atmosphere of the dead landscape, the brilliant lives of the dawn create a breathtaking view from any tall building in the city. From the street level, the colors of the morning sunrise reflect off the link-rail tubes and the towers of reseeded-steel. The crackling sounds beyond the city's borders are the easiest to hear during the early hours of silence, before most of the population take to the streets.

A rumor in Thicket spreads quicker than wildfire so I am not surprised to hear what has happened to Thumbs from the people in the marketplace. People on the streets share in the gossip while vendors embellish the same stories with their sales. A rumor that began near the boundary's entry-port made its way through the alleyways of the homeless, between the dancers of the East Sector Club who shared the information with friends, across the link-rail system by interactive strangers, and over the neuro-metal pavement to Arlita's apartment.

“No doubt you've heard the same news.” Arlita unclasps her hands, placing them on the table before her.

I sit back in my chair with my elbows stretched out and fingers interlocked behind my neck. My eyes survey the apartment that has come to be my second home. At the sight of a manufactured mobile that hangs with adorned gadgets of the old world, I feel reminded of a time not yet under full control of its electronic appendages. Marveling over Arlita's collection of aluminum cans, each dressed in unique fonts and colors of companies that no longer exist, I wonder how people ever survived on such malnourished liquids.

“I have,” my voice cracks. “But I don't believe a word of it.”

“The people are talking.” Arlita rises from her seat and approaches a hydro-generator that works as a heated purifier, emitting steam from its top opening. “They're saying you're a hero.”

“For what?” I lift my right foot and cross my leg, resting my heavy ankle on my knee. “Sending a kid to the wasteland? Doing an agent's duty? I feel right at home with

those leaders in that old book of yours.” I hold on to my shin, stretching my back and breathing in the smell of Arlita's old books.

“You can't blame yourself for the boy's fate. It was the path of corruption he chose.” She takes a sip from a mug that she molded from the wet earth. “Besides, what do you think would've happened if you just went home?”

I look at the ceiling, thinking on the people whose comp-uzyns are connect to the mainframe indefinitely, on behalf of the religious connection they all hoped to make. I try to imagine the daunting effect on the entire population. I ponder the scenario of thousands of absconders roaming the streets at the command of a teenage boy. I visualize the destruction of upper-class buildings at the expense of proving a point. I massage the back of my neck, cracking a smile.

“I guess we'd all be drinking gasoline.” My rubbing turns into scratching. “But if it happens again, I won't have to run.”

“It's been a few days now. How's the new leg?” Arlita lifts her cup to me.

I slap my shin, creating a hollow bang that seems to echo.

“The best they could offer me was a free upgrade.” I lift the fabric covering my shin, exposing a Silver nuero-metal leg. Connected to my femur, I show Arlita the newest norm in artificial limbs.

“Since I did so much for them-” I want to say more but I stop, thinking on the memory of Uni and the order given to end his life. I drop my foot in a heavy fall and approach a cluttered shelf. I pick up a shiny object as if I am shopping for another trinket. “But things won't be the same.”

“I can agree with you there.” Arlita takes another sip of hot water. “What became of the cube? Was it given back to the church?”

“The cube?” My focus breaks as I turn to answer. “SCS took it back to headquarters and had it dismantled.” I turn back to the shelf and pick up a spherical object that contains a clear liquid and a storm of white flakes over a city scene. “That's what they told me.” I shake the globe and the flakes swirl around the miniature buildings. “Aren't these buildings already underwater?”

Arlita spits up a little water as she tries to drink, smiling at my ignorance and trying not to laugh. I place the snow globe the shelf, along with the display of twentieth century artifacts that remind me of my daughter's curiosity. I remember when she was young and had a new set of eyes in the world, holding on to my forefinger before she could start speaking and could ask about everything.

“I don't think she'll ever be the same.” I watch the snowflakes settle.

“Who do you mean?” Arlita sets her cup down.

“My daughter. When I saw her on the link-rail, she didn't recognize me. She wanted nothing to do with me.” I place a hand on the shelf, hanging my face in embarrassment.

“Well, some things are hard to process.” She taps the outside of her cup. “Some things you just have to let go.”

“But then soon after, she found me and wanted to come home.”

“Sounds like she found a little courage to listen to her heart.” She raises her eyebrows, staring into the distance.

“As always, Lita, you know just what to say. But I can't help but think that Thumbs had something to do with it.” I slump back to the empty seat across from Arlita.

“With your daughter?”

“Yeah.” I lean forward in the chair, laying my arms on the table. “When I was at the East Sector Club, the atmosphere was,” I pause, thinking of the way people responded to the Silver Collar agents in the club. “Different.”

“How do you mean?” She tilts her head back, slurping the last of her water.

“The air. The people. The dancing. Even the music and light shows seemed out of sync. It was almost as if everything was reprogrammed to fit that kid's impulse. I mean I have no basis for reference, but it felt like Thumbs was able to use the cube before SCS took it back.”

“But if that was true, he would have done a lot more. He would have had people there to protect him.”

“It's weird. Those agents didn't care about him at first. It was like he was invisible and overlooked for what he was.”

“Why would they ignore him?”

“Exactly.” I raise my eyebrows. “They had to have seen what he was doing.”

“He wasn't hiding, was he?” She waves her hand in the air, as if helping to move along her train of thoughts. “I mean, any suspicion would lead an agent to at least question him.”

“Right!” I stare off in the distance. “I heard Valdez talking about following orders from Headquarters. I think Thumbs was considered an exception.”

I think about the communications system backing the city of Thicket. The entire relay of wireless information is vital to the success of the Silver Collar Society. When a creature like Khristoff is capable of interfering with the direct orders of a Silver Collar agent, the simplest of situations can be jeopardized. Thumbs may have been given the same access, the same power to fake complete control, if only to dispose of his own adversary.

“It was like he was granted a free pass with access to our database.”

“The cube gave him access? How?” Arlita squints, unsure of how I will answer.

“Code words- Secret channels- Legal immunity- I don't really know.” I raise my

elbows on the table to rub the top of my head. “You don't think Willow Amnesia has anything to do with it, do you?”

“Should it?” Arlita looks confused, carrying her cup to the hydro-generator.

“I don't know,” my head falls back. “I guess it doesn't matter now. His body is probably somewhere between Thicket and Crutchtown.”

“I need to tell you something,” Arlita turns. “And I hope you're not mad.”

“What is it?” My smirk drops to a serious look of puzzlement.

“I tapped into SCS security.”

“Why?” I chuckle. “Aren't you paranoid enough?”

“Well, I heard about a break-in at the nutria-farm.” She returns to the table and places her fingernails into the cracks of the orb that sits between us. “Let me,” she pauses, squinting at the foggy complexion. “Show you what I found.”

The retro-glass orb flickers in shades of blue and green, focusing its resolution on a clear image of the nutria-farm. A clearly defined person, dressed in a long dark robe with a deep hood, paces the room that is still littered with mechanical parts. The security feed captures the individual throwing tools and punching the nutrient press machines, overturning the collection bins. With each punch that lands against the metallic surface, sparks fly into the air like a shower of electricity.

The figure's long robe sways in the motion of each aggressive footstep. The gaps in the fabric reveal a darkened skin tone that resembles the tar-like surface of neuro-metal. Cracks separate wrists from arms and ankles from legs in the same pattern as Khristoff's body.

“That can't be Khristoff. When is this footage from?” I point to the retro-glass orb that is now zoomed in on the dark figure. “That body was a melted shell of neuro-metal when I left.”

“I don't think it is.” Arlita twists the orb by the cracks she manipulates with her fingernails. “His aura reads too young. I think that's his son.”

“His son?” I almost choke on my disbelief.

“I think Thumbs broke into the nutria-farm.”

“You've got to be joking.” My concerned voice barely breaks open.

The short figure in the video footage raises a hand to his hood and pulls back on the fabric. His bald head is coated in a thick layer of neuro-metal with cracks along the major segments of his skull. The back part of his head is missing, with only pieces of recycled wire used to fill in the shape. His eyes are a glowing yellow and orange, and his mouth is sealed shut. He reaches into his pocket and reveals an Imprint Drive that I can barely see without squinting into the viewing orb.

With the ID inserted into his newly reconstructed comp-uzync, the tiny room becomes illuminated by the holographic image of the comp-ucube's digital schematics. He turns to the security camera with eyes full of electricity, overloading the camera feed and melting the lens.

A sneak peek at the sequel to City of Thicket

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Born in Silver

A City of Thicket Novel

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“For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened.”

Matthew 7:8

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The large space of Arlita Stine's apartment seems to darken and shrink in size with the growing static field of the hologram projector. I sit back in my chair, rubbing the top of my head, fixing my gaze deeper into the retro-glass display. The idea of Khristoff in a younger, more agile form would prove worse for anyone to imagine. To exacerbate matters for the population of Thicket, the schematics of the comp-ucube are in his possession.

“I have to warn SCS.” I jump to my feet, knocking the table into a wobble. “There can't be a repeat of this ordeal.”

“Sunder.” Arlita reaches out to catch my arm before I can run out of the room. “You're going to get yourself killed.”

“That never crossed my mind.” I turn, gesturing for Arlita to let me go. “But if I consider him less than intelligent, I'll end up underestimating him.”

Arlita closes the small gap between us and embraces me in a friendly hug. The thickness of my Silver Collar juts out from my neck like a shelf over Arlita's forehead. The smell of reseeded-steal and masculine pheromones mixes with the spices that are resident in her colorful robe.

“Don't forget these.” She pulls away from our embrace, grabbing the cylindrical container on the table.

“Of course.” I smile, accepting the container of Cau-li and stuffing it into my desert suit.

“Sunder!” Arlita calls out to me. “Welcome back.”

Although the wound in my leg has been replaced by an entire artificial limb, walking too fast remains a problem for my other human leg. I leave Arlita's apartment and head

toward SCS headquarters in the West Support Sector. Anchored to the ravine wall of the Hetch Hetchy Valley, the towering buildings of the WSS are home to those who operate the city of Thicket. I pass several retro-glass display boards that hang in various heights over the city streets. Some advertisements remind citizens to always be courteous to their neighbors, while others suggest they purchase more from SCS manufacturing.

“Why be satisfied with a single hydro-generator when you and your spouse can get the added benefit of a second, in case one gets left behind. Don't buy local. Buy from SCS. The Silver Collar Society will deliver the very best in neuro-metal fabrics. Need work? Apply for a position in waste management and get the opportunity to travel outside the city limits. Need a boost in your step? Try SCS Booster Shots. All the daily nutrition plus the added benefit of extra energy to get you where you need to go. Don't get caught in the wastelands without one.”

Wherever I walk, subliminal offers bombard my senses with ideas that seem to fit with the missing parts of my life.

“Feeling lonely? Try SCS dating and connect with another romantic single. Thinking about children? Don't adopt. Register with the SCS Family Plan and grow one of your very own in our clean, hypoallergenic facilities.”

The ideas of consumerism and love, mixed with the possibilities of earned credits and artificial procreation are common across the city of Thicket. Myself and the millions who roam the streets are used to the idea that the Silver Collar Society owns the rights to humanity. With each step I take over the neuro-metal pavement, I can feel the electric warmth that seems to desensitize my ability to live a free life.

Guarding the entrance to the SCS Headquarters are two A.L.L. Collar agents who stand with their arms crossed. I approach and acknowledge them with a simple head nod. The entrance opens with the trigger in my comp-uzync keypad, confirming the promise made by agent Valdez to reinstate me as an honorary A.L.L. Collar Agent.

The inside of the WSS building contains more A.L.L. Collars who move through corridors parallel to giant tubes carrying an unknown amount of neuro-metal to another part of the city. I wade through the brutish agents to the elevator at the back of the hallway. As I press the button to call the next available transport, I look around, taking in the sight of several dozen agents who stand with nothing to do. As I board the transport, I wonder why so much security needed in such a small building. Has something happened to the organization that calls for strict protocol, or am I thinking too much?

Near the top, my transport stops on a floor that has a reputation of dealing with hostile situations when called on assignment. Agents with Silver Collars roam the floor, dressed in a more professional manner with cloth suits and other silver accessories. Men and women alike are relaxed in their attire, being kept from the harsh treatment of subordinate agents who are ordered to always wear desert suits and head gear. I feel a little jealous.

From one of the rooms, I hear a familiar voice that emanates from an open doorway. A male voice is mid-sentence in concluding a series of reports to a female agent who sits across from his desk. His stern voice speaks about the other agents who accompanied the woman on a recent venture to the wastelands.

“I understand that they were under your command, but that doesn't mean they can wander off and pillage the last of the settlement. Whatever you collect out there must be brought back to headquarters. Are we clear?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Good. Now, this won't reflect on your file, but you just need to remember from now on.” The male agent taps on his desk which is constructed from reseeded-steel, entering a few key strokes into a number pad that illuminates the air between them. “Can you tell me what this is?”

“Well,” the female agent squints at the grainy projection of a solitary figure who seems to be wandering away from the rest of the team. “It's off mission.”

“Alright.” He enters a few more keys and the projection tightens around the lone figure. “What is it that he's doing?”

The figure in the projected display seems to be climbing the side of a short hill to the entrance of a large cave that looks familiar to me. The display flickers as it zooms in on the character who kneels to examine a square object that was left in the cave.

“Looks like he's collecting data.” She shakes her head in confusion.

“He's doing more than collecting.” He points with a rigid finger. “He's pocketing something that was never reported. Are you concealing evidence?”

“No, sir.”

“We're not going to allow this kind of insubordination. I want you to recover whatever it was that he took.”

“Yes, sir.” She stands abruptly, bringing her hand to her forehead in a salute.

“Dismissed.”

On her way out, she catches my sight as I enter the room. We exchange smiles that quicken my pulse. There is something about her that makes my heart tingle. It could be the flow in her golden blonde hair, or the lashes in her eyes that send my mind running

for her embrace. Her Silver Collar is just like every other agent in the building, but I cannot help but think that there is something special about her. I could have asked for her name but flashbacks of my youth quickly bombard all my motor skills, hindering my ability to speak. I simply smile as she passes me by and vacates the small office.

“Uncanny.” I watch as she rounds the corner of the hallway. As soon as she is no longer in sight, I turn back to the open room and recognize the face that sits behind the desk. “Greg!” I hold up my hands to get his attention.

“Sunder?” Lieutenant Gregory Desmun does not look happy to accept me into his office. “It’s Lieutenant Desmun.”

“Oh,” I look to the side, admiring the wall while trying to retract my arrogance. “I forgot.”

“You can say that.” Desmun continues to close the report files that illuminate the air in front of him. “Is there something I can do for you?”

“Do you remember the kid that we exiled to the wasteland?” My eyes catch the shelves that contain neuro-metal gadgets and data drives.

“I do.” His eyes do not leave the number pad or the configuration of binary code that passes across the floating screen.

“Well,” I start, moving to the desk and taking the seat where the female agent once sat. “There’s been a mistake.”

“We don’t make mistakes.” The screen disperses and we sit with eyes locked.

“We shouldn’t have let him go. He broke into the nutria-farm.”

“How do you know that?” Desmun pulls his arms into his lap.

“It doesn’t matter.” I stretch my arms on the table in front of me, falling back into my habit of taking up more space than I need. “There’s something going on in the nutria-farm and I know for a fact that it’s the kid we exiled.”

“Why not create a reason to impose a death sentence?” Desmun sits back and crosses his arms.

“You think I’m making this up?” My frown deepens as I stare, tapping on my comp-uzync, reactivating the projector and displaying the same security footage that Arlita brought to my attention.

“And?” The Lieutenant shrugs his shoulders.

“You think this is normal?”

The thought crosses Lieutenant Desmun’s mind. He remembers the report given by Sargent Valdez and the fact that Thumbs lied about his involvement with the comp-ucube. He would rather not think of a young absconder with the power of SCS authority. The rumors that circulate of the power-hungry youth remains a mockery of the Silver Collar Society, giving strength to today’s adolescent growers.

“It says in the report that the comp-ucube was taken from the cathedral,” Desmun

starts. "Is that right?"

"Well," I cock my head, looking elsewhere.

"What was it doing there in the first place?"

The thought of having to explain myself sends me into a spin. As he stares me down, hoping to crack an answer from my lips, I try to recall each time I spoke with Mico, wondering if a bystander was around to bear witness. The conversations I had over transporting illegal citizens were presumed to be private, but I cannot be sure if perhaps a recording device had been triggered.

"Whatever your reason for hiding the device from us is not important. The cube belongs to SCS and it's already been destroyed."

"That's not going to stop him. He broke into the nutria-farm." I hold my hand out to prove my point.

"How do I know this footage of yours isn't fabricated?" Desmun leans forward in his seat in a deep huff of resentment, looking up at the static field of the video projector. "For all I know, this young man of yours died once he reached the nearest absconder camp. He could have been torn apart by the desert winds or melted down by the rain, and all you can show me is a short clip of some cloaked figure in a maintenance vault."

The shine in Desmun's Silver Collar flickers as he animates his words with a wide range of hand gestures. His solid stare is intimidating, even to someone like me who can tell if a fellow agent is amid a prank.

"Well, I'm not going to stand around with the possibility of me being right. If I am, I'll be the first one to tell you so." I stand as the projected image of the nutria-farm fades and turn for the room's exit, quickening my steps on the way out.

"Where are you going?"

"To prove you wrong."

"Wait." Desmun holds out his hand. "If you're going out there, I can't have you go alone."

"I missed the part of you caring." I crack a sarcastic frown as I head toward the open door.

"Me? Not at all. Policy does." He returns the smirk that quickly fades. "I'm assigning you a partner."

"What? No!" My shoulders drop.

"He's going to be our youngest agent," Desmun starts while turning on the projected hologram of another security report. "If he survives you."

"You're funny." I point with an accompanied, sarcastic smile.

"He's waiting for you on street level." Desmun does not look at me. "His name's Aym."

“You’re serious?” My smile drops.

“You’re dismissed.”

There is nothing more that I want to hear from a ranking officer. I have been given the worst kind of news that any agent of SCS would want to receive on assignment. I was assigned a partner, and a fresh recruit to say the least.

The ride back down to street level seems shorter than the ride up. Maybe gravity is against me. I feel as though the universe is telling me to hurry and finish our meeting so I can get back to what is important. Babysitting.

Back on the street, pedestrians crowd the pavement of the West Support Sector, ignoring my presence as if I do not exist. One man stands out like a sore thumb in the crowd. His gray suit looks too new for someone who commutes on the surface. His hair is slicked back as if it's coated in a dark oil and his Collar looks brand new. A fresh scar on the bridge of his nose tells me that perhaps he can stand up for what he believes in.

As I approach him, I feel as though I have seen him before and that I need to be the one to speak.

“You’re going to tell me how to do my job, and that’s going to get you killed.”

“I’m sorry?”

“I’ll do you a favor and clear the air. I’ve been walking these streets longer than you have been walking.”

“I get that, but-” He tries to sound sympathetic but gets cut off.

“And I know you’ve probably been hand selected by our educators to excel in all areas of the corporation.”

“Well, that’s not entirely true.”

“Nobody likes a suck up, so just keep your head down and do your job.”

“Yes sir!” He straightens his head and throws his shoulders back.

“I’m not addressing you as officer, or agent, so forget your title. Whatever your name is.” I wave my hand in the air.

“Bynin Aym.” He states.

“Bynin?”

“Yes, sir.” Aym stiffens his back.

I close my eyes and shake my head in surprise. “It doesn’t matter.”

The look of disappointment coats Aym’s young face. As he looks everywhere except into my eyes, I notice the tremble in his eyebrows. I feel that he must have been looking forward to the recognition of his training and his first assignment. Aym looks to be holding back the tears, secretly reciting to himself the strength he needs to survive as a Silver Collar agent of Thicket.

“And change your outfit.” I look him up and down.

As I walk start to walk North through the streets of Thicket, Aym follows at a distance. The people around me do not notice the limp in my step, but see Aym as if he is lost with no sense of direction. I gesture for him to hurry his pace and as he walks next to me, I detect a curious nature in his step.

The billboard advertisements pick up on his presence and adjust to his wants and desires. Even before Aym says a word, I can tell that he prefers long phone calls on the weekend, sugary flavors, and women with blonde hair. He ignores the city's attempt to sell him into his own lifestyle by sparking a conversation.

“So, where are we going?”

“To check on a hunch.” I start shortening my sentences.

“Sure.” Aym looks forward but returns to my profile. “Where?”

“Outside.”

“Why?” He swallows.

“You're not scared, are you?” I look Aym over, judging him by the way he swings his arms.

“No way!” He clenches his fists to steady his nervousness.

“You'll need a desert suit. It's a full day's walk to the nutria-farm.”

Aym swallows, looking excited and nauseous at the same time. He gives off the impression of never having left the confines of SCS headquarters. He may never have experienced the outer regions of the wastelands, which makes me a little nervous myself.

“Look.” I stop in the middle of my step and turn to face him. “If we run into any danger, you can always call for backup. You remember how to use your comp-uzync, right?”

“Of course!” He rubs the consol-vert in his wrist and looks down as if wanting to show a demonstration of his skills.

I roll my eyes, ignoring his attempt at teaching me something that I could not possibly know.

“Can't we just use the link-rail?” Aym points behind us to the link-rail's entry-port with his question directed at me.

“It's a long story.” I look at the sealed entry-port and then turn away.

“What wrong with it?” He approaches the entry-port’s control panel, squinting his eyes deep in thought.

“Like I said.” I unroll the hood of my desert suit. “It’s a long story.”

“I can fix this,” he pushes up his sleeves.

I curl my brow, looking over Aym who has his attention buried in the control panel. He has the front panel pulled from the wall with the circuit board exposed. He rearranges several sets of colored wires, stripping certain thin cables and twisting together others. In a matter of minutes, an electric hum resonates from within the entry-port of the link-rail. The system opens with a loud vibration.

“How did you do that?” I look confused, and a little impressed.

“I’ve had practice.” Aym smiles, replacing the front panel and dusting his hands.

We step into the awaiting transport. Aym takes a seat on the farthest end of the pod, suctioning himself to the window in hopes of traveling to a place he has never been. I acknowledge the splash screen and sit in the middle seat, facing Aym with a look of intrigue.

“Is this your first trip?” I cross my arms.

“Me? No. Well,” he looks in my direction and back to the window. “I’ve never been outside the city in a link-rail.”

“And how old are you?”

“I turned 19 last week.”

“Wow.” I look out the window as the pod begins its rapid launch through the inner and outer entry-ports of the city's infrastructure.

To people like me who see the wasteland daily from the view of my protected office, the outside region of death reminds me of my forgotten family. To people like Aym who rarely get the opportunity to venture beyond the city's heat shield, the wastelands of Thicket look like a playground of untapped resources that may bring about a new age in reinvention.

The link-rail pod hums through the surface level tube at an incredible speed, passing mountains covered in charred forests, valleys filled with rusting airplanes, and stretches of old neighborhood littered with the remains of a great civilization. I try not to think about the millions of people killed in the last century, while Aym can barely keep his excitement under control.

The pod slows in its approach to the nutria-farm, entering the outer chamber of the building and docking in its cradle. Aym jumps from his seat, anticipating a grand

display.

“Don't worry Mr. Sunder. I won't let you down. I'll search every square inch of this place.” He smiles with a hand on the exit railing, patiently waiting for the door to slide open.

“Okay, but be careful. This place isn't safe.”

Aym exits the pod and enters the pitch-black docking room. The only visible light, which emanates from the pod's splash screens, creates a spotlight on the entry-port in the machine room.

“Looks like someone didn't close the door all the way.” Aym moves to the entry-port, examining a heavy piece of metal used in propping open the port.

“That doesn't make any sense.” I touch the metal that seems to be secured in place. “Why would anyone want this door to stay open?” I look behind me. “Anything could have gotten in.”

“Or out.” Aym stands to position his chest across the opening. “But look, I can fit.”

Before I can stand, Aym squeezes through the opening and into the loud manufacturing room. I hear his curious gasps of enthusiasm at the equipment that continues to produce pressed pills of Cau-li from the mulched remains of bat carcasses. As he mentions his excitement over the scattered tools that look recently handled, I notice the destroyed control panel to the manufacturing room.

“Aym!” I move for the opening, scanning the room for any signs of movement. “I can't fit through. Did you find anything?”

“Yeah! I found tons!” He returns to the opening, holding pieces of an old engine and the tools used to dismantle it.

“That's not what we're here for.” I gesture for him to return the tools and for him to keep walking around the room. “Does it look like anyone's been here recently?”

“I'm not sure. This place is a mess.” Aym rummages through scrap pieces of metal, kicking around scattered pills that seem to have been pulled from the collection bin in a hurry.

“Anything?” I sound impatient.

“Nothing.”

His words sound like a weight of disappointment. In a perfect wave of results, I am expecting to find a body. I need to know if the character in the video feed is still around. I need to see for my own eyes that the creature who almost took control of the entire city's supply of nutrition is gone for good.

“Wait. I found something.” Aym breaks the silence.

“What did you find?”

“It's a body. Black, hardened shell of skin. No hair, or impression of ears or a nose. Smells really bad.”

“Shit.” My eyelids slam shut and my forehead hits the thick metal of the entry-port.

“What was that?” Aym looks back at the entry-port.

“Let's get back to the city. I need to figure something out.”

As Aym dances his footsteps around the burned remains of Khristoff's body, he stops and looks down.

“Wait. There's something else.”

“What is it?” I try my best to see through the opening.

“There are large drip marks leading back to you.”

I glance across the floor and notice the large puddles of neuro-metal that lead from the entry-port to the link-rail pod. I kneel and place my finger on the hardened splotches of electronic residue. The black sludge reminds me of Khristoff's skin and the eerie way he met his demise.

The neuro-metal that dripped from a manufacturing machine had been carried, rather than pumped through miles of pipeline. The thought of this liquid material in the hands of an individual is not as bad as the comp-ucube's vast range of control, but it does make me wonder why it would be carried out instead of properly transported.

The dribble path of neuro-metal leads me back to the link-rail pod where I now realize the entire floor is covered in a large puddle.

“Aym! We need to go!” I reach through the opening of the entry-port and help him squeeze through.

“Where are we going?”

“We need to get back to SCS. Head office needs to know about this.” I make sure Aym is on board before I motion for the sliding door to lock into place.

As the pod starts its speedy trip back to the city, Aym finds the same seat but instead of focusing on the view outside, his eyes are planted on his feet and the large amount of hardened neuro-metal that looks to have been spilled from an open container.

The return trip to the city is quicker than the initial expedition to the nutria-farm. The destroyed forests and remains of neighborhood buildings blend into the background for

our ride back. My mind wanders through the possibilities of the hardened neuro-metal. The thought of Khristoff dousing his skin and injecting his femur still sends chills down my spine.

When I think about the video feed and the possibility of another Khristoff wandering the streets of Thicket, I cannot help but think of the same plot against the city's sense of personal belief. When I think about the destruction of the comp-ucube, I cannot help but think of the protocol that went into effect and the steps taken to make sure that nothing was recycled. I also think about the square object that was found by a wandering agent in that cave, hoping it was a portable hydro-generator that was collected.

When the pod of our link-rail passes through the outer and inner entry-ports of the city's infrastructure, the transport slows into its docking cradle. As the sliding door opens and the splash screen informs us of our destination, Aym is the first to step out, tracing a drip line of neuro-metal that I did not notice before we left.

“It leads off in that direction.” Aym points to the horizon on the north side of the city.

As my eyes follow the trail, I catch the impression of more than a dozen motionless figures lying on the pavement. Men and women of various sizes lay sprawled across the street. With a closer examination of each body, I check for a pulse.

I feel nothing. I notice the condition of their comp-uzyns and the fact that they are ripped out from their wrists. Around the wrists of more than a dozen dead bodies lies a puddle of blood next to a hardened puddle of neuro-metal.

The thought of a dozen functional comp-uzyns brings about flashbacks to the days of the comp-ucube's origin. I remember creating the cube when I connected several comp-uzyns during an attempt to fashion a network. When I think about the capability of a dozen comp-uzyns, my thoughts instantly return to the video feed and hologram that illuminated the nutria-farm. I remember that Khristoff still has the schematics to the comp-ucube and the means to construct a new device that could control the entire population of Thicket.



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