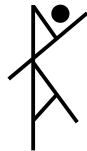


E.T. GUNNARSSON

Abandon Us



BRAGI PRESS

Prologue

Men will never weep for a dying world.

Grief is the child of consciousness when the self comes to terms with the truth. It is born from the moment when it's too late. When grief dies, its corpse becomes a memory, and regret manifests as maggots to feed on it. These children of decay stand as reminders that something could've been done.

Even now, men do nothing, allowing their machines and greed to defile their only Eden. Nothing is done as the skies darken, and the air strangles all life. Could they be forgiven? Men kill when hungry, and if the parasite called "greed" is never full, how could they be judged?

I

Part One

*“By the rivers of Babylon,
there we sat down,
yea, we wept,
when we remembered Zion.” -Psalm 137:1*

Old World

12:07 PM, September 8, 2070

Robert swung the trash bag through the store owner's gas mask, spilling garbage everywhere as it tore. With a kick, the man fell and allowed Robert to sprint after his friend William. He caught up to him by a dumpster in an alley two blocks away. From there, they bolted over piles of trash into a street and another alleyway.

Heart throbbing, Robert's limbs felt like spaghetti, and his chest tightened as he hyperventilated. He hadn't meant to hit the man. Casting glances behind them, Robert tried to calm his breathing and maintained a casual gait while they increased distance from the store.

"Shit," Robert growled.

William looked behind them, leading them onto a sidewalk. Robert gripped the hexagonal filters on both sides of his gas mask and readjusted it.

"Shut up. We got away," William said.

"I shouldn't have hit the guy," Robert replied.

William raised a brow, "You hit him?"

"Yeah, with a trash bag. And I kicked him."

William stopped and shook both hands at Robert in disbelief.

Robert raised his hands.

"I-I... okay, I panicked. He was chasing us!"

William shook his head, "Robert, oh my god, you're such an idiot," he scratched his head and groaned, "Well, now they'll be looking for two people who assaulted someone instead of two candy thieves. Too late now. Let's just

keep walking. At least we have something to eat for once.”

Robert tensely sighed and rubbed the back of his neck. The pair snuck along the streets and alleys. They stepped over piling trash, passed homeless people lying on the ground in herds, and crossed roads peppered with self-driving cars.

Above in the heavy smog, hundreds of drones flew back and forth among buildings covered with neon signs. Some were for businesses or private engagements, though some were personal drones for entertainment, photography, or other hobbies. Drone sizes depended on usage, ranging from small package carriers to large cargo carriers. A few people were riding Aeroboards along the air routes, a sort of drone-like flying skateboard capable of supporting the weight of a human. They were easy to fly thanks to intelligent stabilizers and crash detection.

Robert glanced up. Typically, those with Aeroboards were wealthier people. They flew above the commoners, avoiding the worsening problems of modern life as if they were above the issues everyday people faced. Rich pricks.

“Where are we going?” Robert asked.

“To a homie’s hood. We need to get away from all the cameras around here. His gang has destroyed most of the cameras in his area, so we’ll be safer there. Plus, I have business over there today.”

Robert tilted his head, “Business?”

“Yeah, one of the big players in the local scene wants to set up a deal. We always meet with new customers to ensure they aren’t police before setting up drone deliveries.”

“Oh, we’re doing one of those deals,” Robert grunted.

“Get over it. You’re eighteen. I’m twenty-two. We need money, and we need to eat. It’s not like there are any jobs around here. Have you found anything in the past six months?”

Robert shrugged and rolled his eyes, “Nothing.”

“Exactly. Damn corporations are replacing everyone with robots.”

Robert shook his head as his jaw tensed, “Screw the rich.”

“Screw the rich,” William repeated.

He spoke again after a few minutes, “Can’t believe that the store owner

caught you on the way out. Of course, it had to be on the day we have to do a drug deal.”

“Ain’t the first time we got caught or the first time we steal to eat. It’ll be fine; that’s how we screw the rich. We steal from them—greedy bastards.”

They walked a few more blocks before William hastily pushed them into an alley. He gazed at the origin of a deep, droning sound mixed with sirens. Three police drones flew through the smog. They carried squads of officers above the city skyline, lights and sirens on. The pair watched them disappear before going back out onto the soot-stained sidewalk.

“Where do you think they’re going?” Robert asked.

William shrugged and spoke in a high-pitched voice, “Probably responding to a call about an assault in the same direction we’re leaving from.”

Robert shook his head, “Right. Stupid question.”

The visage of the tall buildings around them changed as they approached gang territory. The pollution-stained buildings were tarnished by graffiti and had bars on their windows. Drug-dazed homeless people stood outside in their shadows. Trash piled everywhere.

William removed his gas mask and began eating the candy they had stolen. He threw each wrapper on the ground, chewing noisily as he downed chocolates and gummies.

He waved a piece of chocolate at Robert, “Want some?”

Robert waved the chocolate away, “No thanks. I’ll eat later when we’re inside.”

“Suit yourself.”

“Put your mask on, man. It’s not good to have it off out here.”

William scoffed, “It’s a few minutes with it off. I’ll be fine.”

“Whatever you say, bro.”

They crossed an intersection where sensors registered their presence and stopped cars to let them cross. During the last few decades, manually driven vehicles had been replaced by AI-driven cars, resulting in almost zero traffic fatalities.

As the pair crossed, William glanced at them with a scowl, “Look at those rich pricks.”

“Assholes. They think that they’re so much better than us,” Robert said.

“You said it. They’ll eventually join us out here as shit continues falling apart.”

Robert adjusted his gas mask again to stop the straps from rubbing his skin, “This new tattoo hurts.”

“Ah, get over it. You’ve been whining about it all day.”

“My mask is rubbing on it. Let me see yours. How’s it not hurting?”

William turned slightly. Tattooed on his neck was a black serpent coiled in a complex, knotted fashion. The skin around it flushed red from irritation. Robert had the same tattoo, though his skin burned.

“It’s hurting. I just don’t whine about it. The more you whine, the more you think about it, the more it hurts.”

William let out a prolonged, hacking cough while Robert examined the black snake. His whole body quaked as he threw his head forward and spat on the ground.

Robert put a hand on William’s back, “You okay?”

William grunted and cleared his throat before spitting again, “I’m fine.”

“Put your mask back on. Air’s burning your throat.”

William waved his hand, dismissing Robert’s concern.

“I don’t need a mask. I’m fine. I’m not done with my candy.”

“Can’t walk around so much without it on, bro. At least you don’t have to wear it all the time as people in prison do.”

“I wear my mask. I just don’t like sleeping with it on. I’m breathing fine. I just choked on a bit of chocolate.”

Robert shook his head.

William threw the last of his candy wrappers onto the ground.

They arrived at an alley among the never-ending maze of skyscrapers and crowded infrastructure. It separated a laundromat and a general drug store. Unlike most, this alley stopped halfway between two high-rises. A building rose at the far end, facing the opposite street and presenting a brick wall to the pair.

Parked next to the sidewalk was a luxury car. Robert glanced at it as they passed, unsure of the car’s brand.

A woman and two large men waited inside the alley. The woman was dressed in an expensive white dress with golden accents. A white mask with a golden logo covered her face. Wearing black suits and masks, the two men stood with their hands crossed. The dark tint of their visors made it impossible for Robert to read their faces. In stark contrast, Robert and William wore tattered pants and multi-colored, long-sleeved shirts that covered their upper bodies. Sewn into the clothes were small ribs with heating and cooling components. Their dirty and worn gas masks had been bought used. Their shoes barely held together with duct tape and string.

The woman looked at them and wrinkled her nose in contempt. Robert frowned as he saw the wealthy woman's reaction but kept quiet since William waved to her and put on a customer-friendly tone.

"Hey there, are you Mrs. Adamson?" William asked.

Robert glanced at William as he heard the phony tone.

"That is me. Are you two with Mr. Scarpello?" Mrs. Adamson asked.

"Yes, I'm one of his associates. My name is William, and this is my friend Robert. He's here as a witness for Mr. Scarpello."

Robert kept silent.

"Well, I trust Mr. Scarpello. Let's get this underway so I can leave this stinking rat hole."

William smiled and bowed, "As you wish, Mrs. Adamson."

William approached the woman, pulling out a small tablet from his pocket. The woman stretched out her forearm and rolled her sleeve back to reveal a blue, glowing line in her arm. It was an implant, one of the newer technologies replacing portable devices. The tablet read the implant and made a ping sound. It vibrated frantically for a moment before falling silent with a snap. William dropped the tablet and crushed it under his foot so that it couldn't be used as evidence by the police.

"Well. A pleasure doing business with you, Mrs. Adamson."

She followed her bodyguards to the luxury car parked on the street, "A pleasure. Have a wonderful day."

"You too!" William said.

He waited for the trio to drive off before walking out onto the sidewalk, "Rich

bitch. Did you hear her tone?” William asked.

“Yeah. What did you do with that tablet thing?” Robert responded.

“It just connected her information to an underground bank account so she can transfer money to it.”

Robert gestured behind them as they walked, “Was that really a drug deal? That’s it?”

“Well, it’s not just drugs. I connected her info to the guy I work for, and now she can buy anything from him. Guns, drugs, stuff like that. She pays, and my boss sends a drone to deliver the goods. Just had to meet her face to face to see if she was real and all that.”

Robert tilted his head, “Won’t the police catch on?”

“They try. Most drones that people use are unregistered. Each drone is monitored when delivering goods. If the police shoot it down, the pilot just presses a button and destroys all the information the drone has, including its destination and origin.”

They walked down another block. William grabbed Robert and ripped him back toward the way they had come.

Robert grunted as he flew around, “What th—?”

“Shut up, shut up, just walk,” William hissed quietly.

Robert regained his footing and followed William walking in the opposite direction.

“What’s wrong?” Robert whispered.

“Some cops down that way. Just act normal.”

Robert glanced behind them. A trio of police officers followed the pair. All three wore gray armored uniforms with blue lights and gas mask helmets whose black visors obscured their features. Each cop wore a belt lined with tools such as tesla batons and guns. They trailed Robert and William at a stark, determined pace, heads locked in the pair’s direction.

“They’re right on us, bro,” Robert whispered.

William walked faster and turned down another street. Robert followed. A pair of officers met them at an intersection.

One raised his hand to stop them, “Hey! You two!”

Robert and William stopped. The other three police officers met up with

them and surrounded the pair together with the other two officers. Robert's stomach dropped. His heart beat hard as his breathing halted.

"Is there a problem, officers?" William asked.

"IDs?" one demanded.

"Why are we being stopped, sir?" William insisted.

"We're looking for two suspects whose descriptions match you two. Show us your IDs."

"Oh, one second. It's in my pocket," William said.

William reached into his pocket and gently pushed Robert with his other hand. The push confused Robert as he watched William pull out his ID. One of the officers took the ID and scanned it while the other cops seemed to relax a bit.

The cop read it, "Will—"

William threw a fist through the mask of the officer checking his ID. The man fell to the ground, glass raining from his visor while blood dropped from William's hand. William kicked another officer's leg and turned to run.

"Robert! Run!"

Two of the officers tackled William before he could run. Robert took off. His legs felt weak, and his heart thundered painfully. He went down streets and alleys to escape, jumped over trash piles, and weaved through crowds of pedestrians.

He felt safe after a few blocks and slowed to catch his breath. Homeless people stared at him as he regained his wind.

"There he is!" a police officer shouted in the distance.

Robert gasped. A squad of four officers came out from an alley behind him, pointed at Robert, and chased after him. Robert threw himself over a garbage pile and ran across the road, narrowly missing a self-driving car.

He cut into an alley and disappeared into a maze-like network among the buildings. Robert's fingers clawed off his multi-colored shirt, which he threw into a dumpster before sprinting topless into another alley.

Robert glanced behind him again. The cops were finally out of sight.

"Oh my god. I'm screwed," he whispered.

There was nowhere he could go. If he kept running, the police officers would

eventually find him, or a camera would pick him up.

“He went this way!” an officer shouted in the distance.

Robert hyperventilated and ran around the alley as he heard the cops approach. He glanced out into the street before locking onto a dumpster, nearing it like a terrified raccoon, and opening it. Climbing in, he fell into a deep, stinking pile of filth. Raw, rotten food mixed with putrid trash bags grazed his already-irritated skin. The stench of decaying fish enveloped him like a blanket.

Robert let out a shuddering breath as he immersed his body in the filth, covering himself as much as possible. Dozens of boots stomping on concrete passed, each fading. Every sound halted his breath as he tried to hide deeper in the trash. The polluted debris burned his skin, though he dared not move.

Time slowed. Robert lay in the filth for what he thought was an hour and waited until there were no sounds outside. Like a zombie, he rose from the dumpster and ran.

He flicked off the muck and sprinted to another alley full of homeless people.

“Hey! Can I sit with you guys?” he asked.

A woman scowled at him, “Why you bothering us about it? Just sit and shut up.”

Robert joined them and faced away from the street.

He had gotten away, though he was alone. Robert had no family or friends to run to, no place to get shelter, and no place to truly hide. But for now, he was free.

Sitting quietly among the dirt-covered derelicts, he contemplated what now?

Starving Faithless

3:27 PM, June 16, 2078

Eight years had passed since William's arrest.

Much had changed for Robert since the day he had assaulted that store owner, an event that haunted him. To avoid more run-ins with the law, he had become honest. Instead of running with gangs and thugs, he scraped together money doing odd legal jobs, got an education, and became a service technician. Still, life grew worse even with a reliable job. The economy had tanked in the late 2070s. Robert was one of the few with a job, working for one of the last companies that still hired people.

It was an average day at work. Robert exited the elevator and strolled into the company lobby, mulling over the meeting he had just left. He took in the fresh inside air before putting on his gas mask tightly.

In recent years, the pollution had grown worse. Robert's body was damaged by pollution irritation. Scar tissue covered his chest, neck, and forearms. Luckily, he didn't have a chronic cough as many others had. Gas masks were now a must outside.

A TV played across the lobby. Unlike the TVs of the past, modern ones were thumb-sized projectors. The one in the vestibule was hidden in the ceiling and cast out a display on the wall, presenting picture-perfect renderings. As always, the company TV played the news channel.

"Breaking news from Texas today. The first American Ark ships left Earth this morning, breaking records as the largest passenger ships ever sent to space. These ships are part of the international Raptured Plan proposed by the United Nations,

each ship sending colonists to search for planets with the potential to sustain human life. Other Ark ships from across the world are scheduled to leave Earth within the next twenty-four hours, with Ark stations planned to launch next week. The Ark stations will orbit Earth and monitor atmospheric conditions for space agencies across the planet. We spoke to one of the volunteers scheduled to leave on one of the Ark ships.”

The broadcast switched from a newscaster to a woman with an Ark ship in the distant background.

“It’s amazing. Billions of people have volunteered to leave Earth to do this, and I was among the few selected. I won’t live to see my destination, but it’s amazing how far technology has come. My ship, the Terminus, will take almost 300 lifetimes to reach its destination. Only a decade ago, it would’ve taken 900. It’s insane. How do I feel about the whole thing? Nervous. I’m leaving everything behind and sacrificing myself to help humanity find a new home. I can’t think of a greater honor.”

The broadcast switched back to the newscaster.

“In related news, protests are happening across the globe against the flight of the Ark ships. Many say that the selection systems were rigged to select wealthier volunteers rather than randomly selecting from the general population. UN officials have denied these claims and are cooperating in investigations examining the selection systems used across the globe.”

Robert didn’t care much for the Ark ships. Escaping Earth seemed pointless. To him, the ships were flying coffins with no real destination since there were no known planets like Earth. Only an insignificant portion of the population could go into space, leaving the other fifteen billion behind on Earth.

* * *

Robert entered an airlock room that acted as the entrance to the building. With the press of a button, an alarm sounded as the door behind him sealed shut, and the door ahead opened. A gust of wind blew a flood of polluted air into the airlock, the force causing Robert to shift.

The visual difference between contaminated and clean air was barely noticeable. Robert could only describe it as a blurry film that distorted the

invisible. He stepped outside, looking up past the towering high-rise buildings. It was as if a cosmic artist had painted the sky in charcoal. A black layer covered it with streaks of gray cutting across where shards of sunlight broke through.

It was cold. Very cold. The absence of sunlight left the world dreary. Robert couldn't see far before a permanent layer of smog obscured anything distant. Even the buildings seemed dismal. Many were titans of steel, concrete, and glass stained with dark soot. The wind weaved throughout the blackened giants. Gusts cut harshly against Robert's body and picked up dirt, sand, and litter in their chilling path. Dressed from head to toe, Robert was prepared for the cold and polluted air. He had gloves, a long-sleeved shirt, a worn jacket, and pants all sealed around their edges. Circuits and wires filled his clothes, heating or cooling his body as needed. He had his clothes set to warm to keep the cold at bay.

Robert crossed to the employees' parking section and walked toward one of the few vehicles the company could still afford. He had number four, a gray van with company logos decorating both sides. The logo looked like a utility man riding a lightning bolt. Like most people, Robert couldn't afford a car or self-driving taxis. Most vehicles on the road belonged to corporations or the few wealthy that were left. People like Robert had to walk. He was lucky that his job provided him with a van for work. Even so, Robert hated this. They treated him like expendable trash.

Robert opened the van door using an implant on his finger. He sat and put on the seat belt. Like all road-legal vehicles, the van was self-driving with no steering wheel and reliant on an AI to drive. The front was like a couch with space for Robert and a passenger. His tools and supplies were stored behind a wall in the rear.

The van came to life when Robert touched the console with his finger.

"Hello, Robert Ashton," a female voice said.

"Hello, Hypatia," he replied.

"How may I help you today?"

"Drive me to my first appointment."

"Directing to Aunty Shauny's Pancake Stop on 4732 East Oak Road."

Hypatia's engine, powered by the new-age energy known as Ignium, awoke

with a quiet warble. The AI reversed and directed the van onto the roadway. It connected with the road network and seamlessly joined the traffic. Only a faint warbling from the Ignium engine was heard through the car's frame and pounds of sound-dampening material. The warbling increased and decreased as the motor spun, making just enough sound outside to alert pedestrians of the vehicle's presence. Though the van could be entirely silent, it was illegal for Ignium and electric vehicles to be completely noiseless since pedestrians couldn't hear them. By this time, electric cars were typically over thirty years old. They were considered classic and rare—generally, only older people who grew up with electric vehicles owned and cared for them. Akin to the classic-car owners of the twentieth century, communities existed online and in the real world where people gathered and talked about old cars.

At twenty-six, Robert had only seen four or five gas-powered cars in his whole life. Since gas went out of use decades ago, it had to be specially ordered. Only the wealthy and car collectors kept and took care of combustion cars. Gasoline and diesel were rare and made by only a few specialists worldwide. It was still legal to drive combustion cars even though only a limited few were self-driving, and many lacked the technology to sync with the driving network.

Robert reviewed his messages while the van seamlessly navigated through traffic. He had neural-link implants instead of a watch or phone. A phone implant composed of a thin wire lined his forearm, while a smaller implant in his left index finger allowed him to interact with the larger implant. Both were tiny and barely visible, hiding under obscure bumps in his skin. His finger implant provided secure access to everything. It allowed him to open the company car, access his bank account, or enter his apartment. The phone implant gave Robert a neural connection to the Cloud. His mind responded to messages that conveyed information and images rather than text and audio. Most messages were work-related. His implant translated neural signals, discerned what was essential or unwanted, and then built responses. He sent out replies, telling customers he was on the way, responding to his boss, and agreeing to a meeting later in the day.

Hypatia merged onto the highway cutting across the city, accelerating to 120 miles per hour. Up here, thousands of cars traveled in perfect harmony. Robert

gazed at the city through the van's smog-stained windows. The highway stood high above the ground, yet it was dwarfed by the hundreds of skyscrapers lining its flanks. Drones flew among the concrete titans, hundreds going around the city in programmed flight paths. They were the birds of this polluted world. Occasionally, a person on an Aeroboard would fly among the drones, hovering above the trash-ridden streets below.

Robert's arm vibrated while a ringtone played in his head. He accepted the call with a thought after the implant told him who and where the call was from.

"Hi, Zilv!" he answered with a smile.

"Hey, baby!"

Robert crossed his arms.

"What's up?"

"I just wanted to check in on you! What's going on?"

"I'm at work right now. I have to repair a delivery drone on the other side of town. Then I have a few more jobs. I'll be home later tonight... what do you want for dinner?"

"Mmm! I don't know, darling. Whatever you want. Weren't you talking about sushi last night?"

"Can't afford it, you know that. I can pick something up at the store. We still have room on our ration cards for this week."

"That works. Do you want to watch a movie tonight?"

Robert hummed, "Maybe we can watch something. Do you want me to get snacks?"

"We got popcorn at home, darling. Don't waste our rations. Just get dinner."

"All right, love you."

"Love you too, darling! Be safe!"

"Will do. Bye, cutey."

"Bye, love you!"

Flecks of soot hit the windshield as the van approached its destination. This side of the city was the poorest, with the decrepit buildings standing lower. Pollution had stained the structures, and bars covered each window. The streets here were crammed. The unwanted and destitute homeless sat outside,

begging for food and gas mask filters to stay alive. Rows of people lay between buildings and along the sidewalk, alone and shivering from sickness and cold. Waste piles rose high everywhere, like snow piles, while the wind blew around trash. A soot-like residue blanketed everything. It stained skyscrapers and could be rubbed off the ground with a finger, blackening the skin.

As Hypatia exited the highway and slowed, nervous butterflies fluttered in Robert's stomach. People on the roadside shot hostile looks at the car. Robert understood. He used to be one of them. With the population at a record fifteen billion, resource consumption was at its highest, and the world economy was struggling. In the United States, massive chunks of the population were unemployed and hungry. Like Robert, the employed struggled to maintain their jobs while barely scraping by. Employment had a high value, and those who had it were hated by those who didn't.

Hypatia entered an empty shopping mall. It was a large, cubic complex that stood as a lonely colossus separated by a parking lot. A closed-down grocery store made up most of the giant structure with lines of smaller buildings flanking it. A greenhouse factory once used to grow and refine food sat at the top, but it had been abandoned due to the store below going bankrupt. Only four active businesses were left: a laundromat, a restaurant, a clothing store, and a fast-food restaurant. Each was located at the base of the massive structure, while all the lots above were empty.

The van parked itself in the vacant lot in front of a restaurant called "Aunty Shauny's Pancake Stop." Graffiti and dark stains covered the rest of the complex, and the concrete walls were chipped from debris carried by harsh wind.

"We have arrived," Hypatia stated.

"Thank you, Hypatia," Robert replied.

The warbling hum of the engine ceased as Robert put his hand on the console. He grabbed his toolbox from the van's rear and walked into the restaurant. The door sensed his implant and opened automatically, closing behind him once he was inside the airlock chamber. A second later, all the polluted air in the airlock chamber was sucked out and replaced with filtered air. Robert kept his mask on, too lazy to take it off. The restaurant's interior was plain, with a

black and white tiled floor and drab, beige walls. Every table inside was bare except for condiment racks. A wall with a door and an opening separated the kitchen from the rest of the dining area.

Robert assumed that the business was family-owned. Pictures of the staff, the owners, and one or two awards lined the walls.

The restaurant guests glared at Robert.

This demonstrated an odd divide. On one side, people hated those who worked for large companies and chains. On the other side, family-owned restaurants like this one were respected and loved as providers for the community.

Robert ignored the customers and approached a waitress, "Hello, ma'am, may I speak to the owner? I'm from Nelson's Repairs."

The waitress looked at the logo on his work clothing and nodded, "Yes, sir. Come with me."

She led him through the kitchen. A chef ran back and forth inside, hastily prepping food as he worked with robotic kitchen assistants. Robert followed the waitress into a back storage room and a small office where a woman sat.

"Hey, Shauny? The repairman is here."

"Thank you, Sarah. I'll handle it from here," Shauny said.

Sarah turned and left.

"Hello, Miss Wilson. I'm Robert from Nelson's Repairs. You called about a broken delivery drone?"

"Oh! Just call me Shauny. You're early!"

"Yes, ma'am. We want your drone to be working again as soon as possible."

"Oh? You're sure you didn't stop by early so you could have time to eat some pancakes?" Shauny chuckled and smiled, "I'm just kidding. If you do want some pancakes, feel free to order."

Robert grinned.

She opened a drawer in her desk, pulled out a gas mask, and put it on, "Come with me. The drone's out back."

Robert stood aside as she led him through a small airlock and into a back alley. On the opposite side, a towering skyscraper with a windowless concrete wall made up the first two stories facing the passage. Each business had a

dumpster in the back. Even so, trash piled everywhere. Behind the restaurant were five delivery-drone tubes surrounded by metal bars. Shauny unlocked one of the tubes with a finger implant.

“This one is about fifteen years old. It’s been holding together pretty well, but one of its rotors isn’t working.”

Robert crossed his arms, “Any reason why?”

Shauny shrugged, “I think it’s just wear-and-tear. We did call your company before because a customer damaged the drone, but that’s been fixed.”

“I’ll see what I can do and see if there’s any additional damage.”

“All right, I’ll be inside. Just come back in when you’re done.”

Robert nodded and watched her leave. He opened the tube and lifted out the drone, placing it on the ground to examine it. A patch from the previous repair job and a damaged rotor were the two problems he noticed. The rotor could still move but was loose and didn’t do anything. He flipped the drone over and opened the bottom to access the inner circuitry. Robert knew the mess of small tubes, wires, and circuits like the back of his hand.

Like most things, Ignium powered the drone. Robert knew much about Ignium since it was a significant part of his job. It was invented around the late 40s and became widely used in the early 50s. Ignium was like an electrical plasma, based on research in electrical and nuclear power. Better than both, easier to manipulate, more efficient, and dirt cheap to create, Ignium opened up a new field of science dedicated to understanding this new energy and its physics.

Like electricity in old technology, Ignium flowed through the circuitry in the drone, powering everything. Robert noticed two issues. The first was the repair patch itself. Small holes covered the mended area, which caused liquid-like blue Ignium to seep through the insulation and shoot out blue sparks. The second issue came from poorly connected wires. Circuits and Ignium wires were always insulated since Ignium got hot and could cause a jolt of energy similar to a strong electrical shock.

Robert grabbed his gloves. Gloves for handling Ignium were clumsy, combining the design of rubber gloves and oven mitts to protect the user from the transfer of energy and heat. He removed the shoddy repair and replaced

it with higher-quality metal. He ensured the metal was sealed correctly and hugged the damage so that nothing leaked. Next, he replaced the bad wiring. This involved cutting the wires, putting new ones back in, and soldering them with an Ignium-specific soldering tool. Once the circuits were fixed, he put the bottom panel back on. Finally, he took out the broken rotor and replaced it. After everything was back together, he turned the drone on and tested it. As expected, it rose up in the air perfectly before carefully returning to its storage pod.

Robert smiled. Tools clattered as he packed the toolbox, metal ringing filling the alley. Just as he closed the lid, footsteps replaced the metallic sounds.

Two men ran at him from across the alley. Robert grabbed a wrench and tried to run while the pair sprinted after him and kicked him. He absorbed both kicks and screamed, clumsily swinging the wrench at one of the attacker's masks. The heavy tool went through the man's visor. The other man punched Robert's jaw, knocking him to the ground.

"Fuck! My mask! Take his damn implant!" the first man shouted.

The second man drew a knife and hopped onto Robert. Robert grabbed the knife arm, pushed it away, and hammer-fisted the man in the face with his other hand. Both fell clumsily and kicked each other away. Robert quickly mustered himself onto his feet and engaged with the first man again. The other man came from behind with the knife. Robert threw the first man around, knocking him into the second man and deflecting the blade into his leg. He felt nothing as he blocked and absorbed hits until falling.

"Screw you! Employed bastard!" one man shouted.

"Beat his ass!" the second screamed.

They took turns kicking Robert, hitting his ribs, arms, and legs until they stopped abruptly. He looked up and saw a shape smack both men with a long instrument.

"Are you okay?"

It was the restaurant owner, Shauny.

"What happened?" Robert mumbled.

She put an arm under his armpit and helped him up.

"Those assholes attacked you."

“I think... I think I got stabbed,” Robert said.

Blood soaked Robert’s leg. It felt like warm water slowly running down his leg. Prickly pain appeared when the adrenaline from the fight dissipated. Robert felt like he was getting stabbed a thousand times by a needle.

Shauny gasped at the sight, “We need to get you to a hospital!”

Robert limped as Shauny led him inside.

“Just take me to my car. I can get to the hospital from there.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah.”

To the customers’ horror, Shauny led Robert through the kitchen and the dining area. She took him out to his car and helped him in.

“Thank you, Shauny.”

“No problem. Do you need someone with you?”

“No, just take in the toolbox from the back. Call my company to have someone retrieve it later.”

“All right,” she said, “be safe! Hold your leg and keep pressure on it!”

Robert fell against the van’s side, opened the door with a pained grunt, and stumbled onto the seat. As he closed the door, Hypatia greeted him.

“Hello, Robert Ashton.”

Robert didn’t reply and hit the red triangle on the dashboard console. A few options popped up on the screen, each narrated by Hypatia.

“The emergency mode button has been pressed. If this was unintentional, please press cancel—”

Robert pressed the hospital button.

“Directing there now. Police have been notified of this vehicle’s location.”

Hypatia sped out of the parking lot and merged into traffic seamlessly. In emergency mode, the van had priority in the traffic network. Cars parted as if responding to an ambulance, allowing the van to speed across the city.

Robert tried to control his breathing as each breath became shorter and felt more like a chore. Meanwhile, he clenched his leg. It was warm and sticky, blood drenching his pants and the car seat. He activated his implant to call Zilv. It vibrated with a gentle hum, a ringtone singing in his head.

“Hey, darling! What’s up?”

“Zilv, I got stabbed. I’m on my way to the hospital,” Robert said calmly.

“Oh, my God! Are you okay? What happened!”

“I’ll be fine. Two guys attacked me while I was on the job. I’m beaten up pretty good, but it’s nothing too bad.”

“Nothing too bad? You got stabbed! Which hospital are you going to?”

“I don’t know. I’ll send you the location from the car.”

“All right! I’ll be there immediately.”

“You don’t have to drop every—”

“Ah! I do! Just send me the location, and I’ll be on my way.”

“All right. I love you, Zilv.”

“I love you too!”

Robert hung up and swiped the digital screen on his forearm to send the location of the hospital to Zilv.

The van went into the emergency lane and pulled up to the entrance. The doors opened automatically to allow Robert out. Drenched in sweat and shaking, he stumbled out and fell. Robert willed himself onto his feet and forward. A doctor, two androids, and two police officers ran out to help him. He fell again and sprawled flat onto the ground. Robert heard the androids assess his condition, the doctor speaking to both while examining him. His vision blurred while the conversation around him faded into mumbles before everything became black.

* * *

Zilv helped Robert outside as they left the hospital. A robotic surgeon had sewn up the wound. Cellular accelerant cream layered the injury, speeding up the healing process so it would heal by the morning.

“How do you feel, baby?” Zilv asked.

Robert leaned on Zilv, “I feel okay. Happy you’re here, though.”

They hugged one another. Zilv was petite and skinny compared to Robert’s tall stature. Unlike Robert, who had a tattoo inked into his neck, Zilv had LED implants in his left forearm that could take any shape or color he wanted. Today, he had purple butterflies wrapped around his forearm, each pulsing to the rhythm of his heartbeat. Robert’s gaze met Zilv’s. Zilv’s eyes were purple,

glowing from implants that brightened in reaction to his fiery affection.

“I love you, Robert.”

“I love you too. Do you want to go get sushi?”

“I thought we couldn’t afford it?”

“I’m willing to spend the money. I think we deserve it today. Plus, I might be getting a bonus soon. Hopefully, today didn’t ruin that.”

Hungry Flock

10:48 AM, June 23, 2078

It was a quiet morning in the apartment. Robert was still in his pajamas. He enjoyed the sealed space's filtered air while watching the news projected onto the wall.

“Washington DC is now the third city to be placed under martial law after riots outside the White House continue for the second consecutive month. These riots are in response to the latest ration laws put into place by President Hudson.”

“Meanwhile, the death toll from the latest Austin bombings has risen to 300 as first responders continue their search for survivors. The terrorist organization called the People's Militia has claimed responsibility for all three attacks. Their leader, Hans Renning, has stated that these attacks are in response to Governor Kelly ignoring their demands for the condemnation of automated labor.

“In other news, hospitals across the country have received an influx of patients with symptoms from a new, undiagnosed pathogen spreading throughout the east and west coasts. The Centers for Disease Control has begun working with these local hospitals to diagnose this pathogen and urges anyone with the following symptoms to seek immediate medical assistance.”

Robert shut off the projector with a swipe of his implant and looked back toward the kitchen.

“Hey Zilv, do we need to go shopping today?”

Zilv turned his head from the dishes and shrugged at Robert, “Yeah, I think so. I was thinking of going after lunch when the lines are shorter.”

Robert frowned at the TV, “We can go now if you want. I've had enough of

the news.”

Zilv crossed his arms, “Are you sure? Is your leg good enough for that kind of walk?”

Robert patted his leg and wiggled it, “Yeah, it’s been a week. It’s pretty much closed now; the accelerant helped it a lot.”

“All right, if you’re sure. I’ll go get ready.”

Robert went to the apartment’s front door as Zilv disappeared into the bedroom. Though theirs wasn’t a large apartment, it was enough for them with one bedroom, one bath, a kitchen, and a living room. It also had filtered air. The pair stored their shoes, jackets, and masks by the door. Robert put his mask on before grabbing Zilv’s mask and purse. Zilv came out after a few minutes, dressed in an old pair of pants and a shirt. Both pieces were older models of smart clothes, each equipped with technology to heat, cool, and dry. Like Robert’s and everyone else’s, Zilv’s clothes protected his skin from irritating pollutants.

He took his purse and mask with a smile, kissing the side of Robert’s mask as Robert ran his hand through Zilv’s brown, curly hair.

Zilv put on his mask and grabbed some gloves, “Thank you, baby. Put on your gloves. You don’t want your skin to get irritated.”

Robert half smiled and shook his head, “I’ll be fine. My hands are tough.”

Zilv poked him sharply in the ribs and made Robert jump.

“Gah! Okay, okay!” he said as he put the gloves on.

“That’s what I thought, cutey,” Zilv said smugly.

“Meany,” Robert remarked in a silly tone.

“Oh, I’m mean? I’m making sure you don’t burn your hands!”

Robert opened the door. Zilv went out first. Robert closed the door behind them as they entered the apartment hall and proceeded to the elevator.

“You’re still a meany.”

Zilv made a baby frown beneath his mask, “Oh, big baby, do you need a band-aid for your feelings?”

“Yes.”

Both cracked up while riding the elevator to the ground level. The pair went out into a small parking lot and onto a sidewalk, holding hands. Robert kept

Zilv close as he surveyed their surroundings.

Their home sat in an urban hell. Among the claustrophobia of titanic structures, their apartment building was hulking and wide, fitting hundreds of people within its brutalist walls. Air filters were installed in every apartment window. On the street, industrial capitalism bombarded their senses. Neon and video signs tried to push unnecessary materialism onto viewers everywhere. Like everywhere else in the city, all the buildings crowded the roads they surrounded, hills of garbage piling up against them along the sidewalks.

The bitter, shearing wind kicked up trash everywhere. The wind caused the heavy blanket of pollution and dust looming over the city to form a moving wall of toxins that stung unprotected skin. Waves of smog clung to the streets and buildings, leaving black stains over graffiti-marked walls.

“I miss flowers,” Robert said.

“That’s random. Why are you thinking about that, baby?”

“I just think of it sometimes. Kinda saw the last flowers die when I was a kid, and now we live in this hell. I think my parents planned to take me to a flower zoo before they kicked me out.”

“I’m still baffled that they kicked you out for some drugs and failing grades.”

Robert frowned, “Well, they had me by mistake and treated me like shit for it. Probably thought I was a drain on them that they couldn’t get rid of until I fucked up. At least William helped me.”

“William got you into that stuff.”

Robert shrugged, “He was there for me. Doesn’t matter now, though.”

“Yeah. I wish we had known each other when we were younger. I bet you were a cutey back then too. My mom had a flower shop when I was born.”

Robert smiled thinly, “I remember you telling me that. I would’ve loved to see it.”

Zilv looked at the ground and mumbled, “I miss her.”

Robert pulled Zilv into a hug, “It’s okay. Let’s not talk about it, darling.”

Zilv calmly exhaled and nodded. Robert had talked to Zilv about his parents occasionally, though they avoided talking about their families. Lung cancer had taken Zilv’s mother, and depression had taken his father.

They passed unemployed and homeless people while following street after

street. Many shivered in corners and alleys, trying to shelter themselves from the toxic air. Some thrashed, their blood full of drugs. Others were sick. They coughed and withered away in dysentery, languishing hopelessly with no options but to keep living. Since Robert and Zilv lived paycheck to paycheck, homelessness crept uncomfortably close.

Recently, the number of sick people on the streets had skyrocketed. Finding a dead body was so common that a government-funded company now used drones to remove bodies. Robert didn't know what they did with the bodies and didn't want to know.

They walked past a homeless man with a cracked gas mask holding up a cardboard sign that read, "The End Is Nigh!" He stared them down. Robert and Zilv avoided the man and turned around another corner, stepping aside as a horde of people rushed past them.

"Whoa, where are they going?" Zilv asked quietly.

"No idea," Robert said.

Sirens filled the streets as police drones raced overhead and disappeared into the distance.

Zilv and Robert walked down another street before arriving at a grocery store. What had been a parking lot full of vehicles a few decades ago was only occupied by the unemployed, trash piles, and a very long line of customers going into the store.

Robert looked at the line and groaned, "Ugh, this is gonna take forever."

Zilv gestured behind them, "Do you want to go back?"

"No, no. Let's just join the line and get our rations. Did you check your card?"

"Of course. I still have some ration slots."

"All right, good."

They stopped a few feet away from the next person in line. Everyone in the queue impatiently crossed their arms, tapped their feet, or leaned against a wall if they were near the store. People were everywhere around the store. Some were going about their daily lives on the street; some sat and waited hopelessly or dug through trash piles looking for a way to survive. The line crept forward. Another group of police drones soared overhead. After an hour,

Robert and Zilv reached the front door, where a man in a company uniform greeted them.

“IDs, please,” he said.

They both pulled back their sleeves and presented their forearms. The man met both of their forearms with his own to scan their implants. Each time it beeped, verifying their IDs. The man gestured them inside.

“Go on in.”

They passed through an airlock before entering the building.

“What’s on our cards today? Five items?” Robert asked.

“Yeah, five crates.”

The store was massive, filled with rows and rows of shelves that reached all the way to the back of the store. During Robert’s childhood, food was displayed for anyone to grab. The meat had once come from animals, vegetables from fields, fish from oceans, and fruits from trees. Now, everything was grown in indoor greenhouses and meat factories. Vegetables were processed into their core nutrients and vitamins before being shipped out in crates. Meat, such as beef and fish, was grown like fruit before undergoing the same processing and shipping.

Robert looked from shelf to shelf, his mouth slightly agape. The store was mostly empty.

“Holy shit,” Zilv said.

“Goddammit, there’s almost nothing here,” Robert responded.

“Come on, baby. Let’s grab what we can before anyone else takes the rest.”

They approached a wall full of screens, hundreds of pneumatic pipes rising from spaces in between the screens and up into the rest of the warehouse-like grocery store. The last stores with cashiers and walk-through aisles had died out in his youth, succumbing to fully automated stores. Security guards flanked each side of the wall and watched the pair. Zilv and Robert went to one of the screens. Robert inserted his arm into a scanner registering his ID and ration-card information. He was allowed to select five crates. Each of his selections was sent into the store’s system. Drones grabbed the items and placed them into a pipe system that delivered the crates next to the screen he was using.

“Your total is \$140.34. Your monthly rations are now expired. Thank you for shopping with us today. Don’t forget to take your receipt,” announced an automated voice.

They grabbed a stack of crates.

“Hey, we have a situation outside!” one of the security guards shouted.

Robert and Zilv watched as a squad of eight security guards ran to the store’s entrance.

“What’s that all about?” Zilv asked.

“No idea. Let’s just grab this stuff and go,” Robert replied.

They took their goods and went out through another airlock. Outside, sirens and screaming met them like a storming sea. The line had fallen apart. In its place was a raging mob. Robert grabbed Zilv and sprinted across the parking lot. The crowd split in two. One side clashed with the security guards at the entrance. Using their bodies as shields, the guards tried to form a wall while the mob threw objects at them and tried to push their way in. A mass of hungry people blocked an automated delivery truck at the far end of the lot. The desperate horde bombarded it with rocks and garbage while four people tore at the rear doors.

A squad of police drones came screaming over a skyscraper. Robert pulled Zilv along the store’s edge, moving away from the crowd and the store.

“Come on, Zilv!”

“Where are we going?”

“I don’t know! We just need to get away from this!”

The police drones landed. Twenty-four policemen rushed out with shields and tesla batons, forming a wall while an announcement echoed over the crowd.

“Attention! This is an unlawful gathering! Please disperse and return to your homes!”

The crowd turned their attention away from the truck to the police, spitting curses and slinging objects.

“Screw you!”

“Kill the pigs!”

“Fuck the fascist pigs!”

“Our right to work! Our right to eat!”

The crowd chanted as they gathered in front of the wall of police officers. Those at the front paced back and forth. Neither side charged. Each side kept shouting as they prepared to battle.

“Our right to work! Our right to eat! Our right to work! Our right to eat!”

Robert and Zilv slinked to the other side of the street.

“Come on! Come on, Zilv!” Robert urged.

A brick flew from the crowd and hit a shield. The mob rushed the shield wall, throwing objects and tearing at the small army. The police swung taser batons and stepped back, holding off the crowd while more police drones flew down from above.

Tear gas, rubber bullets, and tesla bullets rained down on the new arrivals and scattered the crowd. The police spread out, beating and arresting those they caught. The retreating horde threw objects in their flight, tossing whatever they had to keep the police at bay.

Robert and Zilv ran to flee the brutality. Robert crashed into someone and fell to the ground along with his boxes.

“Robert!” Zilv cried.

The man he had crashed into grabbed some of the dropped boxes and kicked Robert before sprinting into the stampeding horde. Robert groaned and held his side. Zilv ran to his aid and helped him pick up their leftover boxes before running away.

Robert retook the lead, shoving another person off their feet while running.

“Keep going, Zilv!”

The chaos faded behind them as they sprinted home.