

Chapter 6

I sat in Steve's office for a while, my brain stuck in a loop. Eventually, I stood up and left, robotically walking out of his office and out the back entrance, my mind still dazed. I needed this work, now more than ever before, and it was all gone. Years of working hard to establish a good reputation, working to build relationships with customers and businesses, both legitimate and shady, establishing myself as a neutral courier, making friends in places to keep me out of trouble...

When I finally stopped spiraling I stood up from the ground, not really knowing when I had sat in the first place. I didn't have time to waste or wallow in self-pity and frustration. My family depended on me. I needed to work this out.

I pulled out my chip and started scrolling through my contacts, mentally going over who I could call. While Steve was pretty well connected in terms of gossip and rumors, there was a chance he had misheard, or someone had lied to him. I paced around the back of the shop for three hours making calls and going through my business contacts one by one. I lowered my prices, explained how desperate I was, and even tried to negotiate with people who had been asking about hiring me on a permanent basis. No one was interested anymore.

That wasn't to say no one listened. I had a few people I knew well enough that they didn't believe the rumors, people like Steve who were smart enough to think for themselves and knew what kind of stakes I was dealing with at home. I was also able to convince a few people that the rumors weren't true, and that I hadn't sold Alex and his community gang out to the cops.

Unfortunately, in the end, it didn't mean anything. While a few people might have believed the truth, their clients might not, and none of them could risk sending me out on deliveries, only to panic their less-than-legal clientele. Even the businesses that were above board and legitimate still didn't want someone with a bad reputation working for them.

When my chip contacts went dry, I hopped onto my cycle and peeled out of the back alley, heading straight for the *Spotted Glass*, a bar where the local couriers liked to hang out. I never really spent much time there, I was too busy trying to keep the family afloat, but if I wanted to rebuild my reputation, that was the place to start.

I pulled into the parking lot, planning on going in and just taking a look, but I didn't even make it inside. I was stopped by the door by a bouncer, who I didn't know by name but still recognized.

"What the fuck do you think you're doing here?" He asked, his arm coming up and blocking the door. "After what you did to that community, you're not welcome here."

“Wait, seriously?” I asked, taking a step back. “I didn’t do anything, Alex just wanted someone to blame, I would-”

“Fuck off Leon. Your not welcome.”

For a long moment, I considered pushing the issue, maybe even trying to push past him. I was pretty sure I could handle him, but the bulge under his jacket was an issue I wasn’t ready to tackle.

“Fine. But Alex pinned this on me, I didn’t do anything!”

I left, hopping back on my cycle and pulling out of the small parking lot. I visited a half dozen other places, and while none of them stopped me at the door, all of them asked me to leave after they realized who I was. With my obvious options dried up, I headed home, my mind a wash of worry and anxiety

The same questions replayed in my head over and over, on a constant loop. What was I going to do? How would I pay for Olivia and still afford to keep the family fed? Why did Alex react like this? Was it because I didn’t want to join his community? I knew he was more than a little full of himself, and thought his community was the next big thing, but this... this was on a whole other level.

When I finally got home I put parked my cycle in the vertical garage and headed up, stepping into the apartment. It was a bit earlier than when I would usually get home, but my courier schedule fluctuated a lot, so nobody questioned it. Mom was making dinner and greeted me with a kiss on my cheek.

“How was your day dear?” She asked.

“It was fine,” I answered reflexively, wincing the second I said it.

I could immediately see that she saw through my attempt at covering up what was bothering me. She stopped what she was doing and looked at me, opening her mouth to ask what was wrong, but stopping when I shook my head. I nodded and looked over her shoulder to where Tyler was sitting at the table. She followed my look and eventually nodded, letting me off the hook for now.

I spent some time with Tyler, helping him with homework while Mom finished making dinner. He managed to finish his math homework in record time, something that still astounded me. As I watched him crush his homework, I asked him why he needed help if it was so easy.

“I... It’s hard to pay attention,” He admitted after finishing a math problem.

“Because it’s too hard?”

“No! It's just so boring!” He corrected, looking up at me. “We've been doing the same stuff for a week, and we won't be moving on until after the unit test on Monday. I asked the teacher for something different but she just looked at me with that empty VI stare.”

As he explained himself he demonstrated by crossing his eyes a bit and opening his mouth, as if he had been stunned stupid for a moment. He stopped and looked down at the next problem, finishing it quickly.

“It's hard to pay attention when it's so easy,” he said much quieter, mumbling to himself.

I kept “helping” him until dinner was ready, leaving to help Olivia to the table. It took a while to get her and her breathing mask set up, though she was always a good sport about it. Once again I cursed that we couldn't afford a proper powerchair, not when she never left the house in the first place.

Dinner was quiet, with Tyler picking up on the fact that both Mom and I were not exactly in the chatty mood. Once dinner was done and Olivia and Tyler were back in their rooms, Mom pulled me aside.

“What's wrong?” She asked, looking concerned.

“I... The guy who I was delivering to, he didn't get caught during the raid,” I explained, looking down at my hands. “He blamed me for it though. Claimed I led the cops to him or ratted him out or something, it doesn't really matter. Bottom line is, I've been blacklisted.”

“Wait... does that mean...?”

“It means that no one is looking to hire me,” I explained. “I spent the whole day calling contacts, riding to customers, no one would hire me.”

Mom looked at me, her eyes wide. My courier jobs provided a significant portion of our income. If that wasn't available anymore there were only so many options, and quite a few of them were not pretty.

“I... do have an option though,” I said, Mom immediately looking at me, hope in her eyes.

While watching my brother struggle to stay focused on his slow, boring classwork, and my sister, attached to a breathing mask, hanging onto life by a thread, my mind had been going a mile a minute. This was no way for either of them to live. Tyler was clearly too smart to be stuck with basic VI classes, and Olivia was barely functioning, stuck inside all day. When we had no other options, it felt like it was just the best we could do, but when I had another choice... It just seemed insufficient.

I described the previous day to my mom and explained to her the offer Ilbryen had made, about how he had found me, and what it could mean for the family. With every additional word she seemed more and more horrified at what I was suggesting, as I got more and more certain it was the right choice.

“You could get a job, something that actually pays well. We both know you would make a better manager than anyone you work for now,” I explained. “You would have options, options that actually matter, that aren’t just dead ends!”

“I will not let you put yourself in that kind of danger for a bigger paycheck!” She said. “What kind of mother would I be if I let you do that?”

“But think about it, it's not just about us Mom, not just about our problems right now,” I pointed out. “Think about it, our whole family would be lifted up, given opportunities that they would never have access to otherwise. Not just us, but Tyler's kids! Hell, with any luck Olivia's kids too!”

At the mention of Olivia having kids, my mom's eyes went watery, tears falling down her face. She looked away from me, starting to stand.

“Mom, when he made the offer I rejected it pretty easily. I really don't feel like being an interdimensional gladiator,” I said with a shrug. “But I can't see any more options... and the opportunity it provides us? We can't pass them up! I wouldn't be doing it for you, I would be doing it for Tyler and Olivia.”

“Leon... What if this noble... had something to do with you being blacklisted?” She asked. “Isn't this all a little suspicious?”

“I thought of that. Trust me I thought of that,” I admitted, studying the glass I was drinking from. “I don't think he is responsible, and no, not because I trust him or anything stupid like that. I don't trust nobles as far as I could throw one. But I'm just an option on a board for him. Maybe he saw me and had some sort of noble breakdown, decided I was the one while cackling maniacally.”

Mom snorted, through her tears, my teasing breaking through for a moment.

“But I can't imagine he did, not when he could entice pretty much anyone with this idea,” I pointed out. “And even if he is responsible, he still made the offer. He may not give two shits about me, or he may have orchestrated a situation where I couldn't refuse. Either way... the family still gets what they need, even more than they need.”

Mom looked torn, her heart breaking as her conscience clearly struggled with the concept.

“I can’t, it... it would be like trading you for-”

“Don’t think about it like that Mom. You aren’t sacrificing me. I have a fighting chance to make it through this.” I said with a smile, though I didn’t know how much I actually believed it. “Will it be fun? Of course not. But you know I can handle myself when it comes down to it. It’s like I’m signing up for the military or something.”

Mom was quiet for a long time, her eyes closed as she held my hand. After a long time, she gave me a big hug, holding me close.

“Give me a day. Let me see if I can find something, anything,” She asked, begged really. “It’s... it’s barbaric, I...”

“I know it is Mom. But it’s also a good solution.”

“What if he goes back on his word? What if he tries to screw us? Force you to work for less?” She asked, growing more and more desperate. “What if he uses us and throws us away.”

“I don’t know. I would probably be signing a contract of some sort,” I pointed out. “You know a noble would never go against a contract.”

The room was silent again, save the sounds of her crying as she tried to come up with a solution that didn’t involve me going on some ridiculous and dangerous “adventure” for the sake of entertainment.

“I know it’s dangerous Mom. But I’m willing to give it a shot to elevate this family to something better. Tyler is a genius Mom, I swear, and he is stuck learning from a VI. Olivia deserves better than to waste away, just... waiting for when her body finally gives out. I’m not doing this for you, I’m doing it for them, and their children, and their children’s children.”

My mother once again tried to stand. This time, having said my piece, I didn’t stop her. She made her way to the hall when I called out to her.

“Mom,” I said, waiting for her to stop, continuing when she did. “I’m calling him tomorrow.”

Silently, without turning back to look at me, she nodded, before leaving down the hall to her room. I sat at the table for another ten minutes before getting up and heading to my own room.

Chapter 7

The next morning I stuck around the apartment for longer than I usually did, my mind going over the choice I was making. I was distracted, but I managed to get Tyler out the door in time, and Olivia out into her chair in the living room. I sat and talked with her for a while until Mrs. Lee came to watch over her. Even after that, I hung around some more, watching my sister watch media on the wall projector, tabbing through a few different forms of it, before settling on a live stream. The streamer was walking through the streets of a large city, pausing at street vendors to buy food, and talk to random people.

The streamer was obviously a lowie, so there wasn't anything really special about where they were going. It was just another lowie city, run down and broken. The only difference between the city the streamer was in and the one outside our apartment was the language on all the signs.

But Oliva was enthralled. She watched with wide eyes, leaning forward in her chair, soaking in every detail and nuance as the streamer walked down a street I could have confused for any alley in our neighborhood.

Mrs. Lee caught me watching, catching my eye. She frowned in empathy, shrugging silently as if to say she knew how heart-wrenching it was to see my little sister clearly entranced by the outside world. Eventually, I turned away, leaving the apartment and heading to the building's elevator, pressing the worn metal button to the top floor. The elevator rose higher and higher, taking a while to reach the top, the door opening with a ding. I took a left, heading up a flight of stairs to a locked door that led to the roof.

With a long sigh, I sat on the last step, my back against the door. Technically I wasn't supposed to be here, as the seventieth floor was a maintenance floor, but it was worth the risk at the moment. This was the quietest place in the entire seventy-story apartment complex, and if I was lucky no one would decide to head to the roof.

I pulled out my chip and the smaller, ridiculous chip that held Ilbryen's contact info, typing it into my chip's screen in a slow, precise manner. When it was fully entered I stared for a long moment before clicking send. The chips buzzed twice before Ilbryen's voice came through the speaker.

"Hello? Who is this?"

"... It's Leon," I responded after a moment's pause. "Leon Draver."

"Ah! Leon, it's good to hear from you," He responded. I could hear his smug smile through the chip. "What can I do for you?"

Part of me wanted to accuse him of fucking with me, of messing with my life. I had no idea if he was actually involved, but I wanted to anyway. But I choked it down.

"I'm in," I answered simply.

"That's good to hear Leon, we were just about to start investigating alternatives," He admitted, my body tensing at the news. "But that's fine, I still think you're a good fit. Alright! I'll send a hovercar to pick you up, we can discuss the specifics and start putting together a contract. Have you told your mother?"

"Yes, she knows," I assured him. "She isn't happy about it, but that doesn't matter. My... circumstances have changed."

"Well... that sounds unfortunate, but I won't deny it works out for us," Ilbryen responded, coughing once before continuing. "I'm sending a car to your apartment block now, we need to discuss the contract before we can start moving your family into better accommodations."

"...Alright."

"You're making the right choice Leon, you're going to be famous! And make so much money your family isn't going to know what to do worth it. See you soon! Ciao!"

My chip went silent as Ilbryen hung up. For a long moment, I sat on the top step, silently contemplating what I had just done. Eventually, I took a deep breath and stood up. I needed to change into something a bit more presentable, and let Mom know where I was going.

It only took a few minutes for my ride to arrive after I got outside, coming down from the air and landing in front of the building entrance. It was a longer hovercar than the one Ilbryen had been driving before, but it had the same white color and angular design as his, with slowly pulsing lights along the edges.

I had just enough time to call Mom and explain that I was going for the day before the hovercar landed.

A moment after it stopped in front of me there was a soft hiss, a door opening up along the back half of the vehicle. It was empty but well-lit, with comfortable-looking seats and thick carpeting. I slowly climbed in, bending over to fit before sitting back in the furthest seat from the front. The door sealed itself behind me as I examined the interior. It took me a moment to realize that there wasn't a driver or even a driver's seat. The passenger seats continued all the way to the front.

The hovercar lifted away and into the air, the view clear from the interior, despite the windows having been pitch black from the exterior. I watched as we flew higher and higher, traveling quickly across the city. It would have taken me hours to travel this far on my cycle, but it only took the hovercar a handful of minutes. We soon crossed out of Outer York City and into Inner York City, the view changing dramatically as we did, starting right when we passed over the massive wall buildings that lined the Inner York City exterior.

The buildings themselves were immaculate, polished, and shiny in a way that I had never seen before, all of them absolutely massive. Not a single building that I saw looked to be smaller than fifty stories. Many of the buildings were decorated with murals that stretched dozens of floors, all done with vibrant colors. I assumed at first that they were advertisements, but soon realized that they were all just decorations. The art was clean and vivid, and as we passed one building the woman detailed on the side waved, seemingly at my car in particular. I couldn't help but stare in wonder. Even the roads were different, the grey-black ferrophalt I was used to from Outer City roads was completely replaced with trees, flowers, and grass.

The roads weren't the only place that was green either. Many of the buildings had rooftop gardens, and even more had bridges that connected to nearby buildings that were laden with greenery. I could just barely make out the people walking around on them.

I could see hundreds, maybe thousands of hovercraft moving around, which explained why the vehicle I was in had slowed down considerably. It seemed like chaos, with no lanes or organization to it, but considering there weren't any fireballs or crashes that I could see, there must have been something directing them all. There were also plenty of hoverbikes, boards, and even a handful of people flying around unaided, soaring through the air with their arms extended.

The city itself was perfectly organized, with the tallest skyscrapers congregating in the center, with buildings getting lower and lower until they reached the last row of space in Inner York City. The buildings that formed the wall separated the outer and inner sections were all half as tall as the highest skyscraper in the center, and only had windows facing in.

Every inch of the inner city was pristine, maintained, and decorated. It made me even more certain I was making the right choice. If my family could live here for the rest of their lives, and their kids' lives, then putting myself in danger was worth it.

Eventually, the hovercar reached its destination, a large building only a few roads away from the center megatowers. It was tall, and shaped like a pentagon, with every tenth or so floor open to the air, with vines and other plants hanging down from the building supports.

As the hovercar slowed near the building it swung sideways, sliding up to a specific floor about two-thirds of the way up the tower. A platform, complete with railings, almost seemed to pour from the walls, seemingly flowing into shape. The hover car rested against it perfectly, the door popping open with another hiss.

As the door opened the exterior glass panel seemed to shudder for a moment before slowly rolling up like a garage door. I could have sworn it was normal glass too, as it was way too clear to be the much tougher glass substitute most outer city buildings used. As the glass finished rolling up I climbed out of the hovercar, taking one tentative step on the outcropping balcony, before stepping across it into the building. I could hear the hovercar door hissing shut before the glass door started closing behind me.

Everything about the room I stepped into screamed expensive. It was covered with wood paneling that formed sleek walls. There was even a water feature along the opposite wall. There were two large doors on the nearest wall, which only went up about two-thirds the height of the total room. The railing running along the top made me think there was more space up there. Before I could move around and get a closer look at the room, one of the large doors opened and a black-haired woman around my age stepped out.

She was dressed in a simple black pencil skirt and black blazer, a white blouse underneath. She was perfectly unremarkable, which confused the hell out of me. Was she a lowie that Ilbryen hired?

“Leon Draver?” She asked with a smile.

“That's me...” I responded, with a nod.

“If you would please come with me then, Mr. Middison is waiting for you in his office.”

The woman turned and started walking away without another word, and I quickly moved to follow her. As we walked, her heels clicked on the floor, and couldn't help but notice how off her movement was. It wasn't overtly noticeable, but I was already focused on her because of how normal she looked. It was... almost like someone tried to make her movement as fluid as possible but ended up making her just a bit too fluid. Like every step was calculated.

She led me through a hallway to another set of doors, pausing for a moment before stepping in, holding the door open for me.

“Mr. Middison, Mr. Draver is here for you.”

Ilbryen was sitting at a huge, dark red wooden desk, with a massive array of text, screens, and video feeds projected into the air above it, which moved and changed quicker than I could really register any of it. The noble was silent for a few seconds, staring ahead blankly before he blinked a few times and seemed to come to.

“Ah! Welcome! Please, take a seat!” He said, gesturing to the seat in front of his wooden desk.

I don't think I had ever seen so much real wood around in one place before. It must have cost him a fortune. Regardless, I nodded and sat down in the chair, Ilbryen focused on his assistant.

"Grab us some drinks, some Hydro-Europa maybe?" Ilbryen asked, looking back at me.

"I... I don't know what that is," I said, shrugging. "But sure, as long as it's not going to put me at a disadvantage."

"Oh I wouldn't do that," Ilbryen assured me. "And not just because any agreements reached under the influence of mind-altering substances would be voided."

I opened my mouth to comment, but after a moment I decided to remain silent. Ilbryen seemed to appreciate this as he started going through some stuff on his desk before finally seeming ready to talk. When his assistant returned carrying bottles of water he caught me watching her movement.

"Do you like her?" He asked, smirking as I looked confused. "I paid a small stipend for her, didn't I?"

"I would argue I was well worth the credits sir," She responded, already turning to leave. "And I am obligated to remind you that you are not allowed to divulge the details of my purchase."

"I know, I know," He responded, waving her out of the room before focusing on me. "It's a VI assistant, one of the more advanced models too. She is almost completely independent."

"She... She wasn't real?!" I asked, turning in my chair to try and catch another glimpse of her.

"Nope! Completely artificial robotics! I joke but her company makes great assistants, I wouldn't know how to get through the day without her."

"How... Why...?" I take a deep breath and shake my head softly before letting it out. "You know what, cool, great. It's fine, great. Maybe I'll get one for Mom to help her keep the house clean."

Ilbryen chuckled and nodded, though he kept quiet for a long moment, taking a sip of his water. I followed suit and took a small sip of mine. It tasted like mineral water, but beyond that, it was completely normal. After another moment he smiled and leaned forward in his chair.

"Alright, I would imagine you would have some questions?" He asked.

I snorted and nodded, pulling out my chip and flicking it active, pulling up a note-taking app and scrolling through. I opened my mouth to ask a question, but before I could start Ilbryen raised his hand.

“Before you start, keep in mind that we will be going through the specific legal mambo jumbo that will end up on the final contract soon, so questions like ‘how much money’ and stuff like that should be saved until then,” He explained. “I can give you general estimates, but this is a much more informal meeting.”

I mulled around what he said for a long moment before nodding and picking a different question.

“What kind of... upgrades would be... on the other side?” I asked, looking up at the noble businessman.

“Well, I’m afraid I can’t tell you exactly, as that would spoil the fun, but I can give you some general ideas,” He responded, gesturing over his desk for a moment.

The desk lit up and projected an image of a familiar off-white crate, the images shifting through green, blue and purple. They also shifted in size and shape, always marked by the same colors.

“As I mentioned, the containers will scale with the challenges you face, with white boxes being the most common and easy, and purple being the rarest and difficult,” the noble explained. “You can expect things like body enhancing serums and augments, weapons, clothes, equipment, food, transportation. Everything will work together, we are only sending things that are compatible, though you may find serums or augments that overlap. In that case, using them will override or replace the previous improvement. Or you could hold on to it for later.”

“And you said I would get a map?”

“That’s right! Unfortunately, a colleague of mine was afraid that having a full map would make it too easy. So instead your map will show the location of all purple containers, most blue, some green, while all white boxes will be hidden unless you are within fifty meters of one. The rest of the hidden crates will show up if you’re within a hundred meters.” He explained, an annoyingly chipper look on his face. “That way you can’t just grab all of the white crates easy-peasy!”

“Great, was definitely worried about it being too easy,” I said sarcastically, though Ilbryen didn’t seem to even catch it. “What about my family’s living conditions, Oliva-”

“The company is already working on setting up the procedures she will most likely need,” he explained, waving it away like it was simple. “I was not kidding when I said by this time next week Oliva would be walking around, smelling the flowers.”

I let out a deep breath, a heavy weight lifted off my shoulders. This would all be worth it to get her the help she desperately needed.

Over the next hour or so I asked as many questions as I could think of, confirming and resolving everything I had written down on my phone. He explained that yes, I could die over there and that there would be an agreement in place to take care of my family as if I was a normal noble who had died at work. He confirmed that the other dimension was an early Earth, one that destabilized around 2040. He admitted the specifics were lost on him, but according to the geeks, the destabilization was caused by a comet strike releasing some sort of mutagenic material into the air. They already had serum that would prevent its effects, designed off of samples taken previously. I would be completely immune to its effect.

He was more than a bit hesitant to reveal any specifics about what kind of dangers I would be facing, but he did admit that the mutagenic material had affected a huge portion of wildlife, both fauna, and flora.

Eventually, I ran out of questions, or at least questions he was willing to answer. The premise was simple enough that there wasn't much room for details that I could use to my advantage. I would go over to this mutated Earth, spend six months surviving and then return. While I was over there I would be completely on my own, with no support from this Earth, even if it meant me dying.

The biggest thing I managed to tease out of him was that I would have some sort of entertainment stipulation in my contract. I couldn't just bunker down in a hole and wait six months. I would need to do things, actually go out on “adventures.” I had assumed there would be some sort of stipulation like that, but it was still worrying to hear about.

When I eventually left, it was late in the afternoon and Ilbryen walked me out, the same hovercar waiting for me on the strange walkway. He assured me that he would have a rough contract written up by afternoon the next day and that another car would be sent to pick me up.

Chapter 8

The next few days went by in a blur.

Eventually, I did manage to get through to Mom. She still hated that I was going to be putting myself in so much danger, but she respected the fact that it was my choice and I wanted

to provide a better life for her and my siblings. She was still clearly upset, but she had accepted it.

Tyler stayed home from school the next few days and we spent as much time together as a family as possible, hanging out and talking for most of it. Tyler, despite being a young kid, recognized something was up pretty quickly. I explained to him that I was going to be going away to work, doing a job that would be pretty dangerous but would let him and Olivia live a much better life. He understood most of it I think, but the real danger I would be in didn't really click for him, which I was thankful for.

Olivia, however, understood it completely. Her brush with death left her a bit more mature and understanding of just how scary life could be. She cried herself to sleep a few times, scaring my mother in the process.

The next day I left the house to sign the contract, arriving at the same office in the inner city, some time in the early afternoon. This time Ilbryen met me at the entrance and guided me into a board room, already occupied with two other people, lawyers apparently, one for me and one representing Ilbryen's company.

We discussed the contract at length, which was written in surprisingly simple language. Everything that we had discussed was in there, a company apartment in the inner city, a multi-million dollar contract signing bonus, a monthly salary that tripled our combined current income, a company car, complete coverage insurance, and a huge payout if I died while in another dimension. We would all be given noble citizenship and every time I traveled to another dimension I would receive another bonus of five million credits. There was no fine print, no secret deals, or underhanded clauses. When I commented on it Ilbryen chuckled.

"I won't lie, plenty of nobles would consider it a point of pride to use contracts as a way to sneak some underhanded deals in. But this venture depends a lot on you being satisfied enough with the deal to do your part, completely unprompted by us. We figured the best way to do that was to make sure you were happy and aren't worried about what we managed to sneak past you."

We discussed the contract for a while longer. Eventually, I voiced a concern that even if my family would be living off more money than they ever had access to before, they would still be lowies in the eyes of everyone around them and they would still be poor by noble standards.

"Oh, it doesn't quite work like that for nobles," Ilbryen, waving away my concerns.

I looked at him expectantly, prompting him to sigh and continue to explain what he meant.

"Most of us are given access stipends from our family fund, not the entire fortune. We are expected to contribute to the family, even if it's just climbing the social ladder. The more we

contribute, the more we get,” He explained, with just a hint of a patronizing tone. “Your family will have plenty, and with your bonuses, you could save and create a small fortune for your siblings to build with. Assuming they can make it in the noble business world. Besides, most of the basics in golden cities are free.”

Trying to keep my mind from exploding over the fact that daily living expenses are usually much *lower* for a noble than a lowie, I focused on the contract again. After a few more questions I was finally confident enough that I wasn't getting absolutely scammed. I signed the contract and slid it to Ibryen's lawyer, who took a quick look at it, scanned it with his chip, and slid it into a protective sleeve. Within an hour I was home again, explaining that we would be moving the next day.

It took less than two hours to move everything we owned that was worth keeping into our new apartment. The apartment was massive and open, with huge windows that let plenty of sunlight inside. The kitchen and dining room alone were just over half the size of our old apartment. The walls facing the city were open and showed off the massive, greenery-laden bridge connecting us to our neighbors across the street. There were five bedrooms in total, meaning that none of us had to share, and we even had a spare. The living room was huge as well, with a wall that clicked on into a media screen taller than I was.

Tyler was a hyperactive laser, running from room to room, gasping at each new and shiny thing he found. When he realized that the houses VI could respond to him calling out, he spent twenty minutes shouting out commands, the windows blacking out and clearing a dozen times before Mom got him to stop.

I could tell that Mom was more than a little overwhelmed, her head spinning from everything changing so fast, not to mention still emotionally confused about what I would be enduring to let the family enjoy this new life. When a hover drone dropped off our new citizenship records, gold embossed and denoting our new status, she finally broke down, hugging me tight and thanking me, simultaneously cursing the necessity.

The changes kept on coming. A private tutor, a noble dressed in a shocking red suit with glowing blue eyes and some sort of jaw augment, stopped by to evaluate Tyler, to see how he compared to normal noble schooling. He was behind, but the tutor was certain he would catch up and excel based on how quickly he was bridging gaps between some of the questions she asked. She admitted she had been hesitant to work with a family so recently elevated but had been impressed by Tyler's intelligence. She left her card behind and asked that we considered her when we were looking for long-term tutors.

Not long after that, a doctor came by to take a look at Olivia. She was clearly nervous, and she admitted she was scared that they wouldn't be able to help her. The doctor only chuckled and promised her that there was always something that they could do, and in the absolute worst-case scenario, they could clone her an entirely new body and transplant her brain into it.

I suspected that the doctor meant this as a way to reassure her, but he underestimated how unfamiliar we were with noble medicine. Olivia's eyes went wide and she began to panic, almost fainting in the process. We managed to calm her down and the doctor apologized. He took some scans with a device he carried in his doctor's bag, the device beeping and whistling, a red light glowing on its screen which he tapped.

"So it appears the contamination is mostly in her lungs," He explained, focusing mostly on the scanner he was still holding. "We will have to clone-grow her new ones since it would be impossible to extract all of the particles with surgery, especially with her current state."

As he explained this the scanner projected a detailed image of her lungs, showing off the contaminated sections.

"She has damage in most of her other organs, though that appears to be mostly healed. We can repair the remaining damage with a full immersion Vita-Gel soak. She will have to stay in it overnight, but as a bonus, if we wait until after the replacement surgery it will all but erase her healing time. After that, she would need a full array of the usual recovery treatments to get her back to full health. If I take some samples back to the clinic with me we can get started on her lung and be ready for the replacement and the Vita-Gel in a few days."

All three of us listened to the doctor talk in his casual, matter-of-fact tone, our eyes getting wider with each statement. I could see my mom's eyes start to water as she realized that Olivia was finally getting proper treatment.

The doctor took a blood and tissue sample with a small tool, painlessly holding it against Olivia's arm. After that he quickly packed up his equipment and left, promising to call within the next two days.

To celebrate the good news and new home we decided to order out from a nearby restaurant. Of course, we didn't realize until after we started eating that because we were now in the inner city, the food would be unbelievable good.

The frantic schedule only picked up from there. I had dozens of tests, samples, and scans run throughout the next few days, so they could prepare and calibrate all of the serums and equipment they would be sending over for me to find. Luckily the company car, a self-driving hovercar, showed up early enough in the morning that Mom could stay home. I found myself missing my cycle, which I had been forced to leave behind. I decided that if... when I got home I would buy a better one to ride around the city. I wouldn't need it but making it through the entire six months was reason enough to splurge.

The whirlwind of activity continued, before seeming to freeze and stick when we brought Olivia in for her treatment. She went into the surgery suite after giving us each a hug and kiss and didn't emerge for three hours. By then she was already immersed in a see-through tube of

pale green gel, floating like she was neutrally buoyant. She had a scar along her chest, where they had clearly cracked her open to remove her old lungs and replace them.

I would have been embarrassed with her being on display like that if I hadn't been helping her dress and stay clean for the past three years.

She stayed immersed for two days, much longer than the doctor had initially thought, but in the end, she came out with a smile. She took a deep breath as she opened her eyes for the first time and tensed, clearly expecting her racking cough. Instead, her eyes went wide.

"I... I can breathe!" She said, her voice faint but full of emotion. "It's so easy!"

Mom held her as she cried tears of joy, reveling in her new ability to just breathe.

She wasn't the only one under the doctors care. I spent one of those nights dunked in a tank as well, the doctors using the green, breathable gel to administer the preventative mutagen protection, as well as give me a general tune-up. When I woke up from my ten-hour dunk I felt considerably better than when I had gone in. The doctor laughed and nodded without any surprise.

"With how much smog hangs around in Outer York City? You may as well have been dragging cigos by the pack," He said.

I immediately asked them to make an appointment for my mom and Tyler, though by the time they were going to be dunked I would have been gone for around a week.

For now, there was just too much to get done. New clothes to buy, a house to fill and decorate, a city to explore, and a new lifestyle to settle into. I knew I wasn't going to be here for very long, at least not until I made it back, but Mom needed all the help she could get, especially since all of this was as new to her as it was to us. I helped where I could, ending up on the phone with Ilbryen a few times with questions, which he gladly answered. There was a lot to get used to.

Throughout all of this, I made sure to spend as much time as possible with everyone, doing my best to make the most of the last few days before I had to leave. I also did my best to make it feel like I was going on a trip, rather than being sent off to die, even if a part of me understood it was a very real possibility. Internally I was getting more and more nervous, but I managed to mostly keep it to myself.

I took Tyler on hovercar rides, sitting in the back seat of the vehicle as we flew around the inner city, his face pressed against the window, watching other cars and people fly around. I had to very clearly explain that the people who were flying around, seemingly unaided, were in fact using some sort of expensive tech that he did not have. I then had to explain that he wouldn't be able to get it until he was older, and only if he did well in classes

Olivia was much more sedate, as was expected. There was some sort of delay in getting her recovery treatment, but since her lungs were perfect after her surgery she was chomping at the bit to go outside. So we spent most of our time walking through the city along the garden roads, Olivia in a wheelchair that I would push. Her eagerness and excitement about a simple walk was contagious.

With everything happening so fast, it was no wonder that time went by too quickly. Before I knew it, Ilbryen called and told me it was time, that the geeks in the lab were ready, and that final preparations were complete. The house was quiet when I told Mom, my two siblings easily picking up on the anxiety I was feeling, and the tears welling up in Mom's eyes.

Chapter 9

"Alright, you're going to feel a slight pinch..." The doctor said, a nameless member of the science team working to get everything ready.

I watched as he pushed a thick needle, the fifth in a long series of mostly painless injections, each one pushing a small piece of hardware into my body. According to nameless doctor, they were painlessly attaching themselves to my bones. They would function as the foundation for a lot of the physical modifications that would be waiting to help me in the collapsed Earth. They itched like a bastard after each insertion.

"I get it, you don't have to tell me every time that it's going to sting," I said, the scientist looking up at me and nodding.

My mom was sitting beside me, holding my hand and chewing her lip, her eyes red and puffy, but finally dry. It seemed like she was all out of tears.

"I want you to play it safe, you here?" She asked, repeating what she had said a hundred times by now. "I know... I know you have to be entertaining but..."

"I'll try my best Mom," I assured her, the doctor giving me a look as he injected the next piece.

I looked around, watching as engineers, scientists and plenty of other people all went about their business, preparing for my departure. In the center of the room was a familiar pair of arches, with a small person-sized box in the center. I could see the door into the box was open, but I couldn't see into it from my angle. On the far side of the room, I could see a large viewing platform, protected by what I was assuming was special glass. I could just make out Ilbryen through the reflection, having a conversation with someone in a lab coat. He spotted me looking

and waved, before turning back and finishing his conversation. When he was done he quickly left the observation platform and made his way to me, walking down a set of stairs to get to us.

He had a sturdy-looking briefcase in one hand.

“Leon, Mrs. Draver,” He said politely, giving my mom a small smile. “Mrs. Draver, would you like to join us in mission control? It is the only place to watch the transmission safely.”

Mom looked at me and I nodded. She gave me a big hug, one I returned despite the doctor trying to stick my bicep with another thick needle. I held her for a long rubbing her back before holding her back slightly.

“I’m going to kick ass, I promise. I’ll be back before you know it,” I promised her, giving her a confident smile.

She nodded and gave me another hug. I watched Ilbryen gesture to his robotic assistant, who step forward with a smile.

“Get Mrs. Draver situated up in mission control,” He told her, the lifelike robot nodding in response. “Get her something to drink as well, make sure she has company.”

Mom gave my hand one last squeeze before letting the robot assistant, who she probably didn’t realize was a robot, lead her through and out of the busy working space. We were quiet for a minute before the scientists stuck me with another needle and I cursed in surprise.

“Right, well I think now is as good a time as any to pick your starting bonus,” He said, giving me a smug smile before cracking open the briefcase and showing its contents off.

The interior was cushioned by some sort of soft-looking material, smooth and cut out to perfectly hold four vials, each one a different color, yellow, green, blue, and red. Each of the vials was sealed, with a metal cap on the bottom that ended in an open flat circle.

“Alright! So as you probably guessed, these are what the serums I’ve mentioned a few times are most likely going to look like,” He explained, setting the briefcase down on the empty space beside me. “These are just four of the many types that are already waiting for you on Alt Earth. My boss okayed me to tell you that these are just the first tier of strength, healing, metabolism, and durability. You’ll be able to find more of these as well as a slew of other serums. It’s important you understand that some of them, like these, will stack up to around seven or eight doses. Others are more unique and will only work once.”

I nod and look down at the briefcase, putting my hand on the edge.

“Now I’m sure you can figure out what the strength and durability serums do, they aren’t very complicated, at least not at this tier. Metabolism lessens how much sleep and food you need by making your stomach and insides more efficient, while healing gives you a touch of regeneration. It isn’t going to let you regrow limbs or your brain, but it will keep you from bleeding out if an artery gets cut and regenerate your nerves if you get spinal damage.”

My eyes go wide and I open my mouth to pick the healing serum, but he raises his hand to stop me.

“Just a little warning, these aren’t magic. The materials they use have to come from somewhere, meaning you need to be eating, and that goes double for the healing serum,” He explained. “It will use any fat reserves you have first but after that, it’s gonna slow down big time. Basically, if you’re starving you’re stuck with normal healing. Also, don’t forget we are boosting your immune system already so you don’t have to worry about infections or disease.”

I stopped and thought it through again, keeping in mind Ilbryen’s warning before finally shaking my head.

“Doesn’t matter, being able to heal better is too important to pass up,” I said, looking at him confidently. “Give me the healing.”

“Alright!” He said, picking out the green serum and jamming it against my leg.

The pain was searing and deep, like a hot liquid pouring into my leg, spreading down and up my body until my whole leg felt warm. It kept spreading, each moment the pain and heat getting less and less severe until my whole body felt just the slightest warmth. After a few minutes, even that faded.

“Mr. Middison, I would have preferred if you waited for that until after I was done with these,” The doctor working on my injections said, though he only got a shrug in response.

“It’s fine, you just need to be a bit quicker and double-check the connections when your done,” He responded, the doctor frowning but staying silent. “Okay, now for a little secret Leon. I kept all hush hush about this because I’m pretty sure my colleagues would have shot me down if I asked permission to tell you this.”

He leaned in, prompting me to lean in as well. The doctor watched us for a moment, a weird look on his face before he returned to his work, seemingly determined to ignore us.

“The tech comes in two forms on the other side. Stuff that will bind with you, and stuff that doesn’t. Anything that requires what the good doctor here is putting into you will not function for anyone but you,” He explained, a conspiratory smile on his face. “But everything else will work for anyone. The serums are by default safe for everyone. If they have some sort of reaction or otherwise aren’t compatible, the serum just shuts down and gets absorbed by the

body. Now, this is very important, because while the human population is down to a fraction of a percentage point... they are still around. Keep that little nugget to yourself, alright?"

Ilbryen patted my back and turned, heading away as the doctor finally finished up his injections. Before I could get up though he shook his head and held me down gently.

"Not quite yet Mr. Draver. You need a tracker and your map installed, then I need to test to make sure that everything is stable," He explained, starting to put away the injection needles.

He mumbled to himself under his breath, something about idiots not understanding how precise something needed to be before he finished cleaning up. He lined up a few more things before sitting back down beside me and getting back to work.

I watched with wide eyes as he numbed my arm and sliced it open, creating a two-inch long cut in my forearm. He pushed something into the cut, a small metal contraption that I could feel grip my body, sealing itself and connecting to my flesh. While I couldn't feel the cutting I could absolutely feel the difference when the device fused itself to me, leaving a triangle of metal visible on my skin. The doctor, whose name I still didn't know, rubbed a blue slime around the device, the semi-liquid goop absorbing into my arm in seconds.

"...Alright, that should be all healed up," He said, wiping off my suddenly not numb arm before looking up at me. "Do me a favor and give it a tap for me?"

I looked at him for a second before reaching with my other hand and tapping the triangle, surprised to find that it wasn't solid metal like I had expected, but some sort of flexible metallic material that felt like cold, smooth skin. The doctor guided my hand away again and suddenly the triangle beeped and suddenly projected a map into the air. It looked incredibly similar to the one Ilbryen had shown me the other day, though there weren't any colored marks yet.

The doctor spent five minutes running me through the features of the projector, including how I could manipulate the map with my fingers and how I could use the projector as a small light. The most important use though, besides its actual map function, was that it would interface with any of the rewards I could find and give me a short description, along with an instruction manual if it needed one. When the doctor was confident the device worked, he started working on my back, inserting a small tracking device that fuses itself to one of the bones in my shoulder.

"This is so our drones can find you," He explained. "Wouldn't want them to lose you, then we wouldn't record all of the footage!"

He chuckled and I could feel him rubbing the same healing gel on my back before the sensation returned to it. It finally seemed as if he was done, cleaning up the empty containers and his workstation before giving me a nod.

“Good luck!” He said, and promptly walked away.

For a moment I was alone, looking around the large room, watching everyone get everything set. Before long Ilbryen joined me again, sitting beside me where the doctor had been just a few minutes ago.

“Alright! Everything is more or less ready to go, so let's go over everything one last time,” He said seriously, prompting me to stand up as he walked further into the room. “You're going to get all nice and cozy inside this thing. It's got some sort of fancy name and cost millions of credits in rare materials but I've just been calling it a box. You climb into the box, and all my highly trained engineers and scientists send you over to Alt Earth. You're going to have five invisible drones following you twenty-four-seven, transmitting their footage back to the box, which has an inter-reality transceiver in it.”

The noble businessman led me around the platform, all of the clearly busy personnel giving us a wide berth as we moved. Eventually, we had a full circle around the platform, stopping by the side closest to mission control.

“Now you don't have to worry about any of that,” He assured me, smiling wide as he looked back at me. “All *you* have to worry about is kicking ass and being entertaining. When your six months are up, you come back to where the box landed, climb back in and we will zap you back.”

I nodded along as he talked, my mind spinning with anxiety. I was doing my best to keep up and keep from throwing up. Once he was done with his little speech Ilbryen led me up platform stairs and under the transference arches, stopping in the center of the platform, his hand on the box.

“So... You ready?” He asked, prompting me to swivel my head and stare at him.

“Right now?” I asked.

“When else? Did you think we were getting everything ready for a dry run?” He said, with a shrug. “Time is money Leon, and this project has been spending it left, right, and center. Time to make some money back by starting to broadcast!”

For a moment I could feel my panic rising, but I took a deep breath, closed my eyes, and slowly let it out.

I was ready.

“Let's do it then,” I said with forced confidence.

“Great! Alright, get on in! I'll be watching from mission control.”

I climbed the last step, and a worker of some kind started going over the safety procedures. Basically, once the transmission started, I had to stay inside the box or the energy would more or less evaporate me into dust. I also needed to stay inside the box until I got the green light, which would take a few minutes even after I arrived.

I nodded and listened closely, committing the rather simple warnings to memory before the worker helped me climb into the box, sealing me inside the thick-walled protective shell. The door locked closed with a heavy thunk and hiss. After that, all I could hear was my own breathing.

I watched through a small viewscreen attached to the inside of the door as the room quickly cleared out, scientists and engineers running around as they prepared. A screen across the room lit up and showed a frozen countdown from ten. I closed my eyes and took another long deep breath, letting it out slowly.

After a few more minutes the countdown started, ticking down from ten. It felt like the slowest countdown I had ever experienced, each second taking an eternity. At seven, the arches began to spark and red energy began to flare and grow from them. At five the energy was swirling around the platform, cutting off my view of the room save for the occasional peek.

I could feel the box vibrating as the energy swirled around faster and faster. Red lightning arced from the roiling spinning cloud of energy, striking the ground and the box.

I just managed to catch the countdown as it went from two to one before all gaps in the spinning energy storm were filled. A pause, a single breath, and suddenly everything shuddered, once, then again before I could feel my stomach drop out from under me.

The box was in free fall.

A little timer at the bottom of the view screen, the only color on the screen, showed that I was falling for one second... two.... five... ten, before the shuddering stopped and suddenly the falling sensation was gone, despite not having landed on anything. The screen blinked and suddenly I was blinded as the once-dark view was replaced with the open, blue sky. There were a few clouds making their way across the open expanse, but beyond that, it was a clear, clean blue.

I had arrived at Alt Earth.

Chapter 10

It took a few minutes for the box's door to unlatch, a green blinking light marking it safe for me to push open. For a moment I sat there, still in the box, blinking away the light. The

interior of the box had clearly been even darker than I had realized. I stepped out when my eyes had acclimatized, taking a few steps into a new, entirely different world.

The sky was still blue, but what the viewscreen hadn't shown was that I was stood on top of a tall building, surrounded by other tall buildings. In the direction the the box was facing, most of the buildings were smaller than the one I was on. In the other direction, however, most of them were much taller.

The city itself was in rough shape, with dozens of buildings partially or completely collapsed, with at least one skyscraper among the latter group. A whole line of buildings was smashed underneath the massive broken structure. It wasn't hard to pick out what the cause of all that destruction was either.

Hanging from, through, and around the city was a massive system of purple and red vines. They were choking the city, smashed through walls, growing out of broken windows, and in a few cases that I could see, completely covering the collapsed wreckage of a destroyed building. The vines varied in size and thickness, from as thick as my thumb to a monstrously massive stalk that curved around the tallest skyscraper that I could see.

"Fuck me..."

The vines were even grown around the roof of the building I was standing on, curling around the railing, vents, and whatever else was up there. The box was resting on a bed of vines that led back to a trunk almost as thick as my torso. I stepped closer to the trunk, peering closer but being careful not to directly touch anything.

The vine was mostly purple, with a dark red underlayer below the bark-like layer around it. I could smell a sickly sweet, saccharine scent coming from it as well. I stood back quickly, suddenly wary of the purple plant. The fact that the smell made me want to lick it was probably a pretty good sign to never actually do that.

The fact that the dark red layer underneath the bark looks horrifyingly similar to bloody meat didn't help either.

I looked around the roof and spotted a door leading to a staircase downwards, partially busted open by vines. I took one step toward it before cursing softly to myself.

"C'mon Leon, let's keep the dumb, impulsive shit to a minimum," I said, before looking down at my arm and tapping the metallic triangle.

The holographic map popped up, showing the city around me, going as far as to display totally collapsed buildings and particualarly large vines. It also displayed four colored dots. I could see one purple in the far corner, two blue, and one green that was only a few buildings

away. There was also a single white dot, marked as being somewhere below me. I zoomed in on the map to confirm it was in the same building as me.

“Well...no time like the present!” I mumbled to myself, looking around one more time before heading to the doorway down.

I now had my first two goals in mind. The first was to make my way down to the white crate and secure my first reward. It was probably not going to be much, but every advantage would help.

My second goal was to get the fuck out of the city. While it was tempting to stay here as it would probably be full of things to salvage, like food and equipment, it was also most likely a death trap. I would have no way of knowing if a building was safe until I had cleared it completely, a simple task for a small house or business, but for the massive, dozen-floor-tall buildings around me, it would be a nightmare. Plus I had no way to know if a building was structurally safe or not beyond a barely informed guess.

I stepped into the dark stairwell of the building, paying close attention and making sure to avoid the vines that had crawled up the stairs. There was just enough room to carefully make my way down, taking it slow and steady. Eventually, I made it down three floors before the path down was blocked by a massive vine bursting through the wall.

“Fuck... This building might be less stable than I thought.”

I spent a minute trying to see if there was an easy way to get around the vine, eventually turning around and climbing back to the third floor down. The door onto that floor was stuck, but I managed to shove it open with a quick shoulder check.

I stepped into the new space, my head on a swivel. While Ilbryen had been really vague in what was waiting for me, I knew it was going to be dangerous. Luckily the windows and walls around the exterior of the building had been cracked open enough by the vines that plenty of light was coming in. I started looking around for another stairwell, pretty sure that a building this size would have at least two.

I still activated my projector, checking to see that the white crate was a few floors down before adjusting it into a flashlight.

After a minute or so of looking, scanning the offices and cubicles that filled the building, I found another stairwell marked by an emergency exit sign. I grabbed the handle and pulled, tugging on it for a moment before it suddenly came unstuck and swung open. I took one step into the stairwell and swung my arm around to scan with the light before jumping back.

“Holy fuck!” I yelled, my voice carrying down the stairwell, echoing back to me after a moment.

I was too focused on what I had stumbled on to care though. Laying back on the stairs going up was the dried, leathery remains of a humanoid. Lodged firmly in its skull was a fire axe, a red-painted axehead with a second pick-like point on the back. For a long moment, I stared at the corpse, slowly recovering from the shock. It was obviously not human, as its lips were pulled back enough that I could see it only had a few solid blocky teeth. Its head was the wrong shape as well, the top of its skull almost completely flat, though it was split by the axe. Its arms were too long and the hands, one of which was wrapped around the axe head only had three fingers and a thumb.

And its skin was almost the exact same shade of purple as the vines.

I scanned the room, looking down the stairs and seeing that it was almost completely clear. I paused and turned back to the corpse, stepping closer and putting my foot on its face before trying to pull the axe out. It took a few tries before I managed to yank it free. I examined the weapon closely, noticing that there was some sort of duct tape wrapped around the handle, some sort of extra grip. I checked to see if there were any cracks in the composite handle, or chips in the metal head, before giving the corpse one last look and setting down the stairs.

Feeling a bit more confident with something to defend myself with, even if it was pretty basic, I climbed down two more floors, constantly checking my map. Eventually, I reached the floor I was pretty sure the white crate was on, this time having to use the axe to get the door open, smashing the latching mechanism with the pointed pick end.

“Already glad I grabbed you,” I said, mumbling as I hefted the worn tool and pushed the door open.

I stepped into the new floor and was once again partially blinded. While the last floor had been lit up just enough through cracks and broken windows, this one was almost completely open to the elements. The entire far corner was torn open, as well as a significant portion of the floor... and the floor below. I crept closer to the ragged edge and saw that a massive chunk of the building had collapsed to the street below, the concrete, steel, and rebar structure exposed. I looked around, orienting myself in the right direction with the map before finally spotting it.

Out on a steel support beam, hanging over the edge by ten feet or so, was a small white briefcase.

Cursing to myself I slowly made my way around the destroyed office, making sure not to get too close to the destroyed edge and keeping an eye out for any sagging or worrying sounds. Eventually, I got relatively close to the outcropping beam.

Slowly but surely I made my way to the box, the floor holding my weight pretty well. Small chunks of concrete and debris fell from the edges of the floor that had collapsed away, tumbling down to the rubble below. I stopped and waited, my foot just touching the exposed part

of the metal beam. When nothing else shifted I kept shuffling forward, trying my best not to jostle anything.

The beam seemed to be stable as I slowly made my way to the briefcase, doing my best to ignore the absolutely lethal fall below me. I slowly slid further, taking my time before bending down slightly, and reaching for the briefcase handle, not wanting to get too off-center in the process.

My fingers brushed the handle before reaching a bit further and snagging it. I resisted the urge to shout in triumph before starting to slide back along the beam. As I was about halfway back the beam shifted suddenly bending down with a crumbling creak. I cursed, my eyes going wide as I just barely managed to stay upright. It shuddered again and I turned to look, my eyes locking on to the now slightly visible underside of the beam.

It was caked with rust, the beam itself heavily corroded and thinning.

I turned on the spot and took a singular step before leaping off of the beam and back onto the solid floor, the beam letting a screech of failing metal as it gave out and bent downwards at a steep angle, one that would have been impossible to stand on. I scrambled further away from the broken edge, only stopping when I reached the wall twenty feet away.

I sat there for a while, letting my heartbeat slow down to its normal level. I felt sick and clammy, but I was familiar enough with the after-effects of adrenaline at this point that I simply waited it out, taking deep slow breaths.

Eventually, when I was fully recovered I looked down at the white briefcase-like box, setting it down in my lap. I started looking around for a latch or something but as I did my projector beeped and plinked green, a similarly colored light turning on under the handle of the briefcase. I could hear a series of subtle, barely audible clicks before the briefcase opened with the hiss of a broken seal.

“Congratulations on-” The familiar voice of Ilbryen called out as I opened the box.

I cursed and slammed the box shut, looking around with wide eyes before standing and rushing to a nearby room. I quickly shut the door to the boring-looking office room behind me before putting the box on a desk and opening it again.

“Congratulations on finding your first reward!” The recording of Ilbryen said, starting again. “Most of them will be harder, you might find some that are easier! Either way, good luck and happy hunting!”

I shook my head and pulled out the folded contents of the briefcase, flicking it open. It was some sort of jacket, made of some kind of artificial leather. The material was a dark black, and as I pulled it on, it settled comfortably, fitting me perfectly. It covered my entire torso and

even seemed to roll and fold in a comfortable and precise way when I pulled up my sleeve to access my projector. I tapped it and saw it had a short description of the jacket.

Apparently, it was artificial leather and was mildly damage-proof. It wouldn't stop any bullets but would probably stop a knife, and blunt the impact of anything more brutal. It was waterproof and reacted to heat and cold to keep me cool and warm when it needed to. It wasn't heavy armor, but it was a start.

It was also extremely comfortable and didn't restrict my movement at all.

I let out a long sigh, the fact that I had risked my life for a decent jacket settling into my brain. I shut the briefcase again, opening it a second later. When the message started playing again I shut it quickly and shook my head, before leaving it on the desk as I left the room, making my way back to the stairwell.

I needed to get out of this building.