

“You lot stay there and no funny business, we got the NFPD on speed-dial, and for a GeoSynth loader, they’ll come right-quick.”

While tattoo-guy was giving us the pep-talk, I realized his right arm was cybernetic. It’d been hard to notice under the overall and the gloves, but now that I had a good angle, the seams of synthetic skin were glaringly obvious.

“You must be paid well to afford a cybernetic like that, sir.” I complimented, trying to ease the tension.

Four people immediately chuckled.

“Forgive him, he’s from the frontier,” Bob said. “Cybernetics are crazy expensive over there.”

Tattoo-guy whistled. “Frontier? No shit. Who’s your overlord?”

“Uh... NexCorp?”

“Never heard of them.” Gun-guy butted in. “Must be some shitty-ass village.”

I bristled a little at the jab. “I’ll have you know we have four megucas.” The chuckling turned into laughter, my face immediately felt hot. I petulantly crossed my arms and grumbled. “It’s not a village, it’s a couple million people in size.”

“They have a single wall and everything.” Moreau nodded.

“Wh-what’s that supposed to mean?” I sputtered. “It’s a good wall!”

Tattoo guy pipped up. “Just the one?”

Snapping my mouth shut before I could make more of a fool of myself, I simmered in my own annoyance. Of course a frontier city would be peanuts compared to a mega-city, but that didn’t justify them calling it a “village”!

Bob spoke up. “Think you can give the boy a good view of what a real city looks like?” He sounded honest, but it was easy to see the corners of a grin underneath his beard.

“We ain’t no tourist ride, but he’ll be getting an eyeful anyway.”

“See?” Moreau elbowed me, face full of mirth, voice full of mockery. “I bet you didn’t even have a high enough internet subscription to get content from outside your zip-code. You’ll get to see the big city! ”

I neither confirmed nor denied her claim, but it was irritating all the same. There was no internet access that went beyond the city walls, not for a pod-guy like me, that required satellite comms privileges. But there were plenty of AI content creators that would concentrate and spread news and memes from the upper internet levels. So of course I at least heard of some of the stuff that happened in the big city, even if it tended to come in a week or five later...

Oh God, I grew up in a village.

In the grips of this horrible terrible realization, the transport had taken off, sliding out of the hangar like a pizza out of an oven, rattling once the arid winds outside took hold. We lifted off, and were soon gaining altitude. The way the transport moved gave me the distinct impression of an air-hockey disk traveling through the air. It had the capacity of spinning on the spot, but it had no ability to take a curve or alter its trajectory in any timely manner.

At first there was not much to see, the only thing ahead of us but a dull blurry gray mountain in the distance. Yet the closer we got, the weirder the mountain looked. Too spread out and uneven, with jagged sharp drops and... pillars? I squinted as we kept approaching.

It was no mountain.

The mega-city of New Francisco stood upon the continental shores overlooking the Pacific ocean like some sort of technological hive that had grown bloated. There were four sky-scrappers a kilometer high, surrounded by hundreds if not thousands of “smaller” buildings, each one capable of dwarfing the singular NexCorp building in my city. The skyscrapers varied in shape and sizes, betraying as many styles and forms as there were buildings, yet they were all connected with one another through dozens of sky-tunnels, sometimes even having entire platforms connecting dozens of buildings.

As we continued getting closer, I began noticing other details, how the area with sky-scrappers had a wall criss-crossing in between the towering buildings. It was almost hidden from sight, not like the second wall further out. None of the buildings beyond the second walls were taller than it, having blockier and grayer designs, far sturdier and more reinforced than the skyscrapers, looking more like fortifications upon which people were meant to live and work in. The sky over this area was clogged with flying vehicles,

a swarm following no apparent rhyme or reason as each vehicle moved in its own direction.

A swarm, where each individual has its own purpose.

The third wall was the most substantial, thicker than any building. A behemoth of engineering. Yet, this wall that had to be large enough to be able to house a million people, was cracked on one side, and another had an entire portion missing. And with the transport getting closer, I could see hundreds upon hundreds of ships and drones moving in and out of these wounds.

And as we got closer, I noticed something else.

A sea of off-white and metal houses and factory plants that spread out beyond the third wall and into the badlands. Smog covered this area beyond the third wall, making it hard to identify the buildings therein.

“Where’s the wall?” I leaned forward, trying to get a better view of the world below. “There should be a fourth wall.”

“There isn't one.” Moreau answered as if it was the most mundane thing in the world. “The city might start construction for a fourth wall, but not before repairs to the third are finished, at least.”

“How do they remain protected from the monsters?” I asked, bewildered. “What happens if there’s an outbreak?”

“What’re you talking about? Of course we have a fourth wall.” Tattoo guy laughed. “It’s just made out of rubber.”

The comment got nods out of the others, I glanced at Moreau in confusion. “Don’t worry, you’ll get the chance to see what he means sooner or later.”

My desire to complain some more was contrasted with the knowledge this was probably not the best time. It still bugged me, however. The whole point of the pods and walls was to protect humans from monsters... and to prevent monsters the opportunity to grow stronger. What would happen if some high-class just waltzed in there and began a massacre?

“How many people are there?”

“Latest estimates put the population at one point three billion.” The doctor intoned. “Not that there’s been a proper census since the refugee crisis started.”

“Crisis?”

“You know about how Los Angeles fell?”

“About thirty years ago, a B-class got through.” I nodded along.

“Correct. But thing is, the city wasn’t wiped out. The monster did a lot of damage, but most of the population had survived... unfortunately, most of the key infrastructure had not.” She explained. “Overnight, the city could only sustain a tenth of its population, so people started making a run for the nearest mega-city, New Francisco.”

“Second generation, gramps talked about that all the time.” The copilot chipped in. “Lots of cons running back in those days, promising safe passage and leaving you for dead without a credit.”

“NF would’ve been able to cope if it’d been the only case. But it hasn’t.” Moreau shook her head. “Now we’ve got a whole thing going on. I won’t bore you with the politics of it. Suffice to say, all the major players have spent the last decade trying to see who’d get to foot the bill.”

“While all of them get all the labor for cheap.” Tattoo nodded. “We’re getting into regulated space, time to pull the curtains.”

Before I could get to ask what he’d meant, Bob had pulled me back on to my seat, and a metal divider rose. “Faraday cage.” Moreau explained, tapping on the metallic divider. “Makes it harder for external scans to see what’s inside.”

“Wouldn’t they be able to tell if something’s not showing up?”

“It would draw attention if they didn’t have this up on every trip.” The doctor shook her head. “Everyone knows they’re smugglers, but they don’t smuggle often enough that a random stop would warrant the cost. Whether they’re guilty or not, GeoSynth would make the PD cough up for the losses and delays.”

Bob scoffed. “The best way to survive in NF is to make sure that if someone goes after you, they’ll get caught in someone else’s crossfire.”

Moreau nodded back. “Wiser words have never been spoken.”

Fortunately, we weren't randomly stopped for inspection.

When the divider came down, we were in a warehouse of some sort. The vehicle had been plugged up and emptied by a dozen different hoses. One of them, I noticed, led to a smaller set of containers, ones that would be far easier to get on to a truck.

"What's shroom-juice anyway?" I asked Bob as Moreau was finalizing something with the duo.

"It's a special kind of nutrient paste." He shrugged. "It's just barely preem enough it'll get them a pretty penny. But at the same time not illegal, so it'd be hard for anyone other than GeoSynth to nail them for moving it around."

"Huh." I was fairly sure I'd never eaten any shroom-based protein foods, it'd been bug and algae all the way. I made a mental note to try it out at some point. "What now?"

Moreau came back, confidently puffing up. "Now, young man, we temporarily part ways."

"Could you elaborate?"

"Bob and I are, as they say, going to be laying low for a while." Moreau explained.

"Basically, once word spreads I'm back in the city, several people will be hiring mercenaries to see if they can kill me." She flashed a confident smile. "So we'll hide and wait them out. Sooner or later the bill will have run high enough they can't justify keeping a whole goon squad running around, so they'll just slap down a bounty and call it a day."

That couldn't be good.

"This can't be how that works."

"It typically is." Bob confirmed. "Not the first time we've done this."

"Indeed." Moreau patted my shoulder. "And since you've got no business getting tangled in this mess, you'll be going on your way now." Her smile broadened. "Unless you'd like to spend the next month or two basically locked in a bunker with no access to the outside world."

"I'll pass."

"Good." She reached over, handing a very familiar red credchip. "You really should be more careful with your money."

"I..." It took me a moment to remember, snatching it. "I won this from a bet."

“I added the twenty thousand from the original deal,” she said. “The moment you step out of here, head straight for the nearest weapon vendor and get yourself a gun. No pea-shooter either. This city eats up people like you for breakfast.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.” I nodded, already trying to run the maths of how much that might end up costing.

“Your neuralink has a folder, it’s just a bunch of zeroes. I’ve included instructions and guidelines on how to... keep things safe. About yourself.” She pulled out the quill to threaten me with it. “Follow those instructions like your life depends on it, because it does.”

“I... thanks?” When had she added this? Before handing it over the first time or while I wasn’t looking?

“Here.” She reached into her pocket and handed me a small brick? It had two buttons and a speaker. “If shit hits the fan and you think you’re about to get kidnapped by some corpo goon-squad, or worse, some gang, then press the red button. Help will show up.”

“And the green button?”

Moreau cracked a smirk. “That establishes a secure call with me. Don’t use it willy-nilly though, don’t want to risk someone latching on and tracing it.”

“Uh-”

“You should have plenty to rent out a place. Go to ‘Motel 18’ in the fourth district. No questions asked, and cheap. It’s a good place to use until you’ve found a proper living arrangement.”

“I-”

“I’ve also contacted the Gutter Saints. Nothing concrete, but they should be open for meeting you in a few days. They’ll be dropping a message in Motel 18, the code is ‘Green Eyeballs’.”

She was talking fast, and I was having trouble getting any word in edgewise. “Th-”

“And keep in mind your new metabolism. From what I’ve seen, you keep to roughly human caloric intake standards, but based on what happened after that first night, you’re likely going to need to gorge up every time you... change.”

“B-”

“Seriously, stock up. You need to stay healthy. Do exercise every day, and don’t stuff your face with whatever crap you find. Sure, you can probably keep healthy from eating rocks, but it shouldn’t be something you should test outside of a controlled environment.”

“Wa-”

“And don’t trust anyone! Doesn’t matter who, don’t tell them, don’t show them, don’t let anyone know. The last thing you need is a two-bit greedy bastard selling you off for-”

Bob reached out, gripping her shoulder. “I think you’re overwhelming the guy a little.”

I stared at the doctor and nodded.

She looked slightly ruffled about that. “Right.” She stepped closer, looking me dead in the eye. “Don’t die, Axel. At least not until I can run some proper tests on you.”

“Same goes for you?” I gingerly shook her hand. “And thank you, for everything.” I smiled earnestly. “Well, for most. I still don’t like how...”

Rolling her eyes, she wriggled her hand free. “Yeah, yeah, you’ll get over it,” she said. “Now shoo... but give me a ping once you find a proper place to stay in.”

With one last round of goodbyes, I headed out of the warehouse. The instant I stepped out, I looked around the dozens of equally unmarked bland gray buildings in every direction, and frowned. Bringing up the pad Moreau had given me, I confirmed that indeed it had no map function, because it had no connection to anything.

I stepped right back inside, catching the doctor slightly by surprise. “Could I get some directions to that gun-store... and everywhere else you’d mentioned, please?”