

Prologue

By the year 2328, the human race had firmly entered into what many experts considered a golden age.

The world had shifted significantly over the span of three centuries, with many of humanity's worst problems solved with cooperation and science. Most experts agreed that the shift started with a small Swedish laboratory in 2046, where the secret to stable and safe fusion energy generation was discovered. Almost overnight world's energy crisis was solved, with hundreds of reactors planned and constructed over the next ten years.

Global Warming, a catastrophe that was reported to be responsible for nearly a hundred thousand deaths and trillions of credits in damage, was next. The world struggled for decades before eventually developing a solution, using a combination of weather-controlling technology and the nearly limitless energy provided by the thousands of fusion reactors that now dotted the globe.

By 2158 cancer, along with hundreds of other illnesses that used to threaten human lives, were a thing of the past. There were now dozens of different treatment methods, thousands of cures, and comprehensive vaccines to treat, prevent and cure almost every ailment known to man. Even the threat of genetic disorders faded from humanity's concern as treatments were developed to repair their symptoms. These disorders were then completely eradicated when preventative treatments for people who were carriers of these conditions prevented them from passing them on to their children.

Even old age, humanity's greatest enemy, suffered a grievous blow when pharmaceutical companies began selling age treatment supplements, drugs that slowed the decay of telomeres during cell division, resulting in the life expectancy of humans skyrocketing to three to four hundred years in its first few iterations.

With the discovery of a realistically functioning ion thruster, travel between Earth and other planets in our solar system became a reality. By the year 2226 humanity's first underground Martian city, Prosperity, reached a population of twenty thousand. As interplanetary travel became a reality, humanity reached a point where material scarcity was no longer a concern. Many believed we could finally begin to transition into a post-scarcity society, especially with the advent of robotic helpers and VI factories.

Humanity continued to push the boundaries of science, even as many of our immediate problems were solved. Research turned to more exotic fields, and the study of more fantastic concepts became more and more popular, funded by the wealth created by tapping into the resources of space.

In 2241 the graviton particle was observed for the first time. Based on that discovery, the first antigravity technology was developed fifteen years later. This allowed the creation of one of humanity's oldest dreams, the flying car. Soon exotic creations and even more exotic effects were on the tip of everyone's tongues, in the minds of every researcher. Science became akin to a race, with researchers and businesses competing against each other to discover and create, feeding humanity's hunger for new and amazing things.

Energy shields, biological regenerators, personal independent flight, technopathy, human enhancement through cybernetics and genetic manipulation, mind linking, and genetic body modification. The true time of the rockstar scientist had come, as the scientific community enjoyed an explosion of private funding to develop and cater to humanity's fantasies.

Decades passed, but the drive to push boundaries in fantastic ways endured. In the year 2292, privately funded scientists discovered a method to travel between dimensions, to Earth's that ran parallel with our own, though often at a different time scale. Originally an attempt to find a method of teleportation, the project was further funded in an attempt to find a more efficient resource-gathering method. Ultimately it was declared a failure when the limitation on how much energy it took to transport any significant amount of material between dimensions proved impossible to overcome.

Several years later, however, scientists funded by private entertainment companies refined the technique, and while the trip was still exorbitantly expensive, costing almost a million credits for a single person, eventually they began selling inter-reality trips to wealthy individuals looking to explore unknown worlds or go on grand adventures.

None of them, however, were ever at any risk. Each of these travelers arrived at their destinations armed and armored with the latest technology they could afford, often meaning the latest and greatest that humanity had to offer. Gene treatments to increase their strength, durability, stamina, and healing, armor that could survive everything from the depths of space to weapons fire from some of humanity's deadliest weapons. One traveler even witnessed the detonation of a nuclear device and survived the blast unharmed for a full five seconds before the emergency return feature that all travelers carried pulled them home.

It was no wonder that an enterprising business attempted to market recordings and live streams of these adventures. Despite the initial spike, however, viewership quickly fell. Beyond the excitement of new worlds to explore there was no risk, no sense of challenge involved. There was still a small audience who was interested in exploration, but it was not nearly enough for the company to consider the idea a success. The concept was considered a failure and alternate reality travel became nothing but a fanciful vacation option for the high class.

Between the spike in scientific discovery and the implementation of those discoveries into real-world luxuries, it was easy to see why so many experts considered this to be humanity's golden age.

Of course, anyone not being paid off would know that was a load of shit.

While many of the old issues of the world were solved, many more developed in their place. Cancer may have been a thing of the past, but it was replaced by hundreds of different variations of exotic energy sickness. The early versions of antigrav caused horrible mutations in people who were around them for long periods of time, causing thousands of repairmen and chauffeurs to suffer, and that was only one example among hundreds.

The first attempt to fix global warming was more of a patch than a fix and caused drought and famine to affect several countries. It also encouraged superstorms to develop in areas not under the control of the weather satellites, which just so happened to be in poorer parts of the world.

While science took leaps and bounds into the future at the cost of ethics, the gap between the rich, and everyone else continued to grow. By 2175 around one-tenth of the population was incredibly rich, while the remaining population was locked in somewhere around the lower middle class. People crossing from one class to the other became less and less frequent. Cities, sometimes called utopians or golden cities, began to develop where the prices and living space was strictly controlled to prevent anyone under a certain level of wealth or influence from moving in. These cities were largely automated and filled with cutting-edge technology and obscene luxuries.

In 2198 a cabal of the wealthiest people on the planet formed. Scared that a post-scarcity society would strip them of their power and influence, they began orchestrating markets, influencing politics, and controlling the media to cement the separation between the poor and the rich. What had once been an unintended side effect of greed was now being focused and directed to ensure that the rich stay rich and the poor stay poor. By 2250 this cabal of wealth gripped the world so tightly that they no longer bothered to hide. The rich became like royalty, and while they held no inherent political or legal power, their words were quite frequently taken as law.

By 2298 the world had grown used to the division, the forcible separation between the wealthy and the poor. The majority of the population was focused on doing what they had to do in order to support themselves and their loved ones, occasionally affording luxuries that were out of date by decades, if not centuries. Even the ability to slow down aging was restricted, with pharmaceutical companies insisting that only a small portion of the population could safely consume the treatment.

The chance to move up, to cross between poor to wealthy, from one of the masses to a member of high society became a thing of fantasy, something someone would daydream about. The idea of self-made wealth or making it big through investments or even just gambling disappeared as the people in charge manipulated laws to prevent people from gaining wealth without their permission.

While normally people are stuck at the level of wealth in which they are born, occasionally the fantasy does come true. Once in a blue moon, when it suits those in control, an opportunity presents itself. It may be a dream come true to some, but any reasonably intelligent person knows that such an offer does not come cheap and that while the reward may be honest, you are nothing but a number to them.

Chapter 1

The heavy garage door rattled as I pounded on it. It was just about ten in the morning and I knew Steve would be up in the front of his store, meaning I would have to get his attention. Eventually, the small square buzzer next to the door lit up.

“Leon? That you? Hold on, I'll be right there.”

I stepped back from the garage door, waiting patiently for Steve to finish whatever he was doing to come to the back and open the shuttered entrance. The pawn shop he ran wouldn't be too busy at this time of day meaning it probably only took a few minutes. I tugged and pushed my black polymer mask around, settling it down as I waited, wincing as the strap that kept it in place tugged at my short black hair. The air quality today was pretty bad, the hot and still summer air meaning that the smog just hung around the city. It got so bad in some places that it made your eyes sting.

As I was waiting I caught a look of myself in the corner mirrors for the garage door, the kind that let you see what was parked in your blind spots. The all-black mask covered the majority of my face and made me look intimidating, despite me being slightly shorter than average. My dark hazel eyes moved as I double-checked my jacket, pulling it straight.

After a minute or so the heavy door shuddered and the security fasteners on the bottom clunked open, allowing the entire door to roll up into the ceiling. Inside was an older man, about fifty years old, with a smooth-shaven head and scar that ran along his face, narrowly missing his eye. He was wearing a plastic mask as well, though his model was minimalist, tightly covering his mouth and nose.

“Leon, you're here a bit early,” He said, turning back into the storage area for his show.

“My earlier delivery canceled on me,” I explained, following as Steve walked further in, in between rows of stored merchandise.

Job cancelation was something that was unfortunate but unavoidable in my line of work. Well in my second line of work. When you ran a no-questions-asked courier service inevitably someone was going to try and skip out, or cancel with no warning. Luckily my reputation had grown enough at this point that people rarely tried to screw me out of my paycheck anymore.

“Well be careful, Alex don’t really appreciate mixing up the schedule like that,” Steve warned, still facing away from me.

“I know Steve, but I’ve been doing this delivery every day for four months, I think I’ve earned a bit of flexibility.”

Steve was a well-known supplier of many things, able to get his hands on a whole host of items that were of questionable legality, and I had been running deliveries for him for around two years at this point. At this point, he was my longest-running client, and most frequent, with a half dozen deliveries a week, all over Outer York City. He was far from the only person I delivered for, but he was one of the few I could trust.

To a degree.

Steve shrugged in response to my statement and kept walking, leading me through the storage area to the back left end of his shop, the area farthest from customers shopped. He started fiddling with a locker, placing his hand on the ancient bio scanner. A barely audible thump came from the old armored locker, the bio scanner taking a painless blood sample, its internal locking mechanism coming free with a louder series of clunks.

He pulled open the lock and stepped out of the way, revealing a mostly empty space, with a singular small plastic box about a foot long and half a foot tall and wide. It looked pretty much the same as every other package I had delivered for Steve to Alex and his gang.

I examined the package for a moment before pulling out my communicator chip, thumbing on the small square of metal. The projected monochrome screen flickered once before stabilizing. Steve was quick to pull his own chip out, unclipping it from his belt. He fiddled with the screen for a moment before tapping the chip against mine. My screen changed, showing off a deposit of two hundred and fifty credits to my bank account.

“Alright, thank you Steve,” I said, leaning forward and picking up the package. “I’ll call you when the package is delivered.”

The older man nodded, stepping out of the way as I leaned into the locker a bit and lifted the package, shifting my hands around a bit to get a better grip. It wasn’t heavy by any means, only about eight pounds, but I knew that whatever this delivery was, it was fragile. I held the package carefully, walking out of the building with Steve right behind me. As I stepped outside I could hear him hit the close switch on his garage door, the metal contraption jerking and starting to lower down behind me. I turned to watch the door close p[ast the halfway point

“Good luck!” Steve called out from under the closing door, the metal shutter slamming closed and the locking clamps latching it that way.

I shook my head and smirked, carrying the package around the shop, stopping just short of the corner where my cycle is parked. My cycle was cobbled together from several different models, fitting together through sheer luck and a strong metal bonder. It was a normal singular wheel model, with a spot for me to sit on, the HUD and console in front and a small non standard, very aftermarket storage unit on the back, the sleek single-person cycle was the heart and soul of my side business.

I popped open the storage unit and slid the package inside. It fit, with enough room that I had to add a strap around the package to keep it from rattling around. With a quick tug to make sure it was secure I closed up the storage unit and reached under the seat, pulling out my helmet, still in its folded-up form. With practiced ease I flicked it open and clipped it around my neck before activating it, the protective headgear extending up and around my head with a series of soft clicks. When it settled over my eyes it took a second for the helmet to click on, the face panel lighting up and clearing letting me see out of the face shield easily.

I climbed onto my cycle, putting my feet on the pedals and my hands on the handles, my helmet screen showing an accelerometer and the power gauge. It was supposed to show things like directions, road warnings, and several hazards, but the cobbled-together nature of my cycle and its own second-hand nature meant most of those options were broken.

“Let's go,” I said simply, the voice command starting my cycle up, its motor whirring as I leaned forward.

I pulled around from the back of Steve's pawn show and out of the alley access. The old polycrrete structure was the cleanest building on the block, even though the whole street was populated with shops.

After checking both ways I pulled out onto the street, taking a right and accelerating away. Steve's neighborhood was far from the worst Outer York City had to offer, but hanging around while carrying a package of probably questionable contents was always a bad idea. Still, I kept it legal speeds, knowing that getting picked up and reported by a traffic drone would be a big hassle.

After a while of driving, I merged onto the wider main streets, accelerating by leaning forward, my cycle easily keeping up with the cars and trucks that were already on it. I had an hour-long drive ahead of me.

Eventually, I reached my destination, the warehouse district. Usually, this part of the city would be inaccessible to anyone on a vehicle, and just entering through one of the checkpoints was enough to get you blacklisted on several lists. Luckily, I had a bit of a secret for getting in and out of areas like this with my cycle.

The warehouse district itself was a combination of support communities and gang activity, with plenty of blending between the two. The support communities converted

warehouses into massive living spaces, the communities forming around it and supporting each other by pooling resources. Gangs would then form around them in the name of protection. It wasn't uncommon for a support community to slowly convert into a complete gang, before being stomped flat by the OYCPD when they overextended and caused trouble.

The man I was currently on the way to see was the leader of one of those communities.

I kept my head on a swivel as I drove through the warehouse, having to weave between old car wrecks, dumpsters, and plenty of other trash that partially blocked the roads left overs from riots or thieves. This whole thing made me nervous, but I couldn't turn down a thousand credits in three hours, that was a full day of work at my other job.

Eventually, I arrived at my destination, pulling into a parking lot that was surprisingly clear of wrecks and trash. Instead, all of the old, stripped-down cars were pushed around the edges of the parking lot line a barrier. As I pulled in several people stood up and looked at me, hands reaching for a few suspiciously shaped bulges in their clothes.

I managed to hide my surprise well. It wasn't that they had access to guns that shocked me, those were easy enough to get despite the fact that they were very illegal. What threw me for a ride was that they were more or less openly carrying them.

One of the guards recognized me and waved down the others. They watched me warily though as I drove around, leaving the parking lot and continuing around into an alleyway. It was a bad habit for anyone to park out in the open like that, even if I knew none of these gangers would do anything to my ride. Traffic drones were one of the few police drones that came out to this part of the city regularly, and while me driving around was easily explainable, being parked in front of a known gang base was something else entirely.

I hopped off my cycle and collapsed my helmet, tucking it under my seat before cracking open my storage unit. I unclipped the package, tucked it under my arm, and made my way back around the warehouse, entering through a familiar door.

Stepping into the warehouse was like stepping into a different world, and not a peaceful one. Rust was the primary color inside, offset with blue of all things since the majority of shipping containers that Alex's gang stole sheet metal from were blue. A few dozen alcoves were set along the far wall, small rooms with beds and other small comforts filling each one. Along the other wall were communal living spaces with tables, chairs, and open fire pits. It was like a miniature village, all tucked up inside one warehouse.

I got a few waves as I walked deeper into the community, eventually stopping in front of the far wall, where Alex had claimed some sort of overseer's office as his own room. I stood beside a crate as I looked up at the room, which sat on top of a solid structure, with vents under it leading to who knows where. I didn't have to wait long for Alex to come out of his room. He leaned against the railing that ran along the walkway his room exited out onto.

The man was thin, reedy almost, with dark teeth and a surprisingly pale complexion that hinted he might not be working as hard as his subordinates. He also had some sort of pistol on his hip, openly carried in a worn leather holster.

“Leon!” He said, all smiles. “You're a bit early.”

“Yeah, sorry about that,” I apologize. “My first delivery for the day was canceled.”

“Ah, well you're lucky that I was free, otherwise you would be waiting for a while,” The man said, gesturing to a man about ten feet to my left, who stepped closer without a word. “Now, my package?”

I nodded and passed the package to the man, who took it and ran it up to his boss, climbing up the walkway ramp to get to him. Alex took the package and flicked out a simple plastisteel knife, slicing the box open.

I tried my best to be as neutral as possible on these deliveries, but I couldn't help but frown. One of the core tenets of being a courier in a time when commercial delivery services regularly canceled service for entire areas was plausible deniability. My client cracking his package open in front of me was not something I was used to.

Seemingly unaware of my nervousness, the gang boss reached into the box and pulled out another gun, a compact rifle that I recognized as being one of those cheap guns anyone could afford, right up until they were made illegal a decade ago. With a seemingly practiced flick, he extended the gun's barrel and clicked open its stock and grip, the sleek black frame locking open. It looked old but serviceable.

“Ah... Steve comes through again!” Alex said, smiling as he showed off the firearm. “Thank you Leon for getting this to me so quickly. It's been slow getting our hands on so many guns, but with a few more we can finally be safe. Now, let's get you your payment.”

He gestured to another subordinate, who nodded and rushed off. When he was out of sight Alex focused on me again.

“You know Leon, we would readily welcome you to our community,” He said as if that was some sort of grand offer. “A runner like you would be invaluable, and you have earned a place here with your hard work.”

I bit back a curse. Alex had hinted at this idea before, skirting around the concept of me joining up, but he had never explicitly invited me. Normally I would just politely decline offers like these, but Alex thought his little fiefdom was some sort of communal paradise. He would take a flat no pretty badly.

“I appreciate the offer,” I said, trying my best to sound like I was genuinely flattered. “But I have too many obligations. I couldn’t leave them behind.”

“Ah, but outside obligations mean nothing. We would protect you from any debts you may have, and you would be part of our little family.”

“I am sorry, but I have people depending on me,” I said, trying to stay calm.

Alex’s face went dark for just a moment, the violent tendencies that ran under his facade shining through for a moment. Before he could offer again, probably with an added undertone of me not really having a choice, the man he had sent to fetch my pay returned. He reached out to pass me a stack of physical credits, a stack of bills that I would have to deposit on my own, as they were mostly useless like this.

Before I could accept them, a muffle thump reverberated lightly from outside, catching everyone’s attention. As one we turned to one of the larger doors of the warehouse, the sound coming through gain.

Suddenly the door exploded, crumpled metal and broken glass raining down as a dozen cop bots stepped into the warehouse, guns raised and aimed at us.

“This is the OYCPD! Surrender now!”

I could hear the sounds of a dozen gangers pulling their weapons. I had just enough time to dive behind the crate next to me before both sides opened fire.

Chapter 2

I should have passed on this job.

It wasn’t exactly a difficult conclusion to reach as I leaned against the crate of what I’m pretty sure was some sort of centuries-old baby formula, bullets, and zap rounds flying over my head and slamming into my cover. I looked around and saw that the man who had been holding my money was twitching and seizing on the ground, the brick of credits on the floor. I reached out to grab them, only for them to explode and scatter when a bullet slammed into them.

I could hear the artificial voices of nearly a dozen police bots, demanding that everyone surrender. I of course wasn’t a member of their group, but that hardly mattered to them, especially when everyone else responded to their request with another barrage of bullets.

I really should have seen this coming. Communities turning bad was as near a constant part of life as taxes, and Alex and his gang were showing all of the signs of going bad. Apparently, my deliveries had been part of the problem.

Guess I should have expected it to go to shit sooner rather than later.

A bullet hit the top of my cover and ricochet up, sparking against the metal walkway and taking out one of the gangsters' feet, knocking him down. He screamed out, doing his best to stem the bleeding with one hand while firing back at the cop bots with the other.

I ducked lower and focused, doing my best to ignore the rising fear and adrenaline. If working this job had taught me anything it was that adrenaline was useful, but adrenaline-fueled choices were how you ended up dead.

I looked around, ignoring the cracking whip of close-by bullets and the sizzling sound of zap rounds hitting surfaces solid enough to activate their "non-lethal" bursts of electricity. As I scanned the walkway in front of me I spotted something, a rusty grate, leading to some sort of vent or crawlspace.

I took a deep breath and waited for some sort of lull in the flying bullets before shaking my head and crawling forward, doing my best to ignore the shrapnel and sparks as bullets pinged off the polycrete floor and plastisteel walkway. When I reached the rested grate I spun around, laying on my back, and lashed out at the metal with my boot. It held for the first kick, though only just barely, but I could see the metal screws holding it up give and pop free with the second.

I spun back around to my hands and knees and crawled into the space, finally letting my adrenaline fuel me as I pushed through cobwebs and dust, thankful that my full face mask would filter all of it out.

If the warehouse had been any newer, I was pretty sure this crawl space would be almost pitch black. Instead, the almost two-hundred-year-old building was full of rust and holes, meaning just enough light bled for me to see. I turned a corner and kept crawling, pausing at an intersection to quickly work through what direction I was facing. The sounds of shouting, screaming, and guns being shot still reached me, though it was distorted by the reverberations of the metal surfaces.

I turned left, hoping I picked the right direction before finally coming to another grate, this one with some sort of environmental barrier on the other side. It was more rusted out than the first grate and popped free after a few shoves.

I peeked out of the vent and looked around, once again cursing the fact that I had taken this job, despite all the signs saying it was a bad idea. I took a deep breath and focused, knowing that I needed to concentrate and not dwell on what I should have done.

I had been running deliveries on the side for almost seven years now, and this wasn't exactly the first time things had gone sideways. Sometimes the money was just too good to say

no, and we needed every credit we could get our hands on. Courier work was decent paying work, and with courier and delivery companies pulled out of dangerous lowie neighborhoods, I was in relatively high demand, especially after I proved I could be trusted.

What had started as a way to earn a quick buck on the weekends on my beat-up old cycle, had turned into a substantial part of my family's income, especially after my father died.

Another quick look around and I climbed out of the vent and dropped down to the ground, managing to not roll my ankle or break my wrist as I landed awkwardly. Another quick look at my mental map and I turned down the alley I had escaped into, running away from the sirens and towards my ticket out of there.

I knew that I was a relatively well-known staple of the area, but the cops also knew I was neutral. I had a few friends I had delivered for the force for this district who would vouch for me. With any luck, if I didn't get spotted by someone with a camera, they would ignore the scans that showed my ride was here. All I needed to do was avoid getting close to-

A thump sounded behind me, and I had just enough time to look and immediately dive behind a dumpster before the police bot turned to look down my way. It was armored in beat-up blue metal, about six feet tall with a gun in one mechanical hand and a glowing baton in the other. I bit back a curse as I could hear its metal feet clanking against the trash-covered alley road. The robot was close enough that I could hear its micromotors and servos moving as it shifted.

If it spotted me, my only chance would be to destroy it as quickly as possible. With how old the cop bots were in this area, there was a chance, however small, that I could destroy its transmitter before it notified the entire district that it had found someone. I might have been wearing a mask that covered most of my face, but that wouldn't mean much if they got a close-up of me.

The bot cast a shadow around the corner of the dumpster, forcing me to pull my feet in closer to keep from being seen. I gripped the handle of my knife, hoping that the induction blade would be enough to cut through the armor around its head.

Just before I was about to jump out, the radio buzzed with a burst of what I thought was static. Clearly it understood something I didn't, because it turned around and bolted in the other direction, its feet making heaving clunking noises as it ran.

I half collapsed against the dumpster, my heart thundering in my chest. I would have attacked the bot if he had spotted me, but my chances of actually taking it down would have been close to zero.

When my heart finally recovered I stood from my spot and ran further down the alleyway, making the first left down another. Eventually, after a minute of running, I made it, skidding to a stop by my cycle.

After taking a short thirty-second break to calm down and recover from my run I reached under the storage unit and flicked a switch, a low hum emanating from the bike. I then reached down, grabbed the normally close to two hundred pound cycle, and threw it over my shoulder as if it was a particularly heavy backpack.

The hum, made by the mass reducers scavenged from a one-in-a-million find at a junkyard, reduced the weight of the cycle to a measly thirty pounds, letting me run on foot, sneak through smaller areas, and, most importantly, travel silently and without giving off any energy or heat that would be picked up on any scans the cops would be doing. After all, what would a lowie like me be doing with mass reducers? And what would a noble being doing here? This ability to pick up my cycle and carry it around was what allowed me to get around several of the restrictions in place for traveling between the more or less lawless and abandoned warehouse district of Outer York City and the more populated sections. Vehicles were generally stopped and turned back if they got close to that part of the city, making it difficult for couriers to deliver there.

I carried my cycle for a while, stopping every five minutes to let the fusion battery that ran the mass reducers cool down. That was another piece of tech I really shouldn't have, though this one was even less likely to be noticed as fusion generators didn't give off energy. The most I would get for the generator was a slap on the wrist, while the mass reducers would get my license revoked at minimum for reckless use of dangerous technology or some bullshit like that.

When I was finally done sneaking through small alleyways and broken down warehouses, I took cover in an abandoned office building of some kind, the boarded-up front door long smashed down. I found a small room, leaned my cycle against the wall, and sat down beside it, hunkering down to wait a few hours until the heat around the warehouse district had settled.

Eventually, after three hours spent listening closely to passing cars and keeping an eye out for any drones, I got ready to leave. After a quick search of my cycle's storage, I pulled off my black mask and held my breath, quickly replacing it with a new red one, all while still holding my breath. I wanted to breathe as little of the outside air as possible.

With the straps secured I turned the mask on, the cloth and plastic pulsing a vibration once before settling down. I took a small breath to make sure it was working before taking a deeper one. I quickly stripped off my shirt and grabbed a spare, folded and sealed inside a palm-sized package in the bottom of the cycle's storage. I did the same to my pants, switching to a pair of cargo pants. Finally, I put my thick riding jacket over it, zipping it up completely. Now, if I had gotten unlucky and someone had managed to get some footage of me as the raid on the warehouse started, I would look as different as possible.

I made my way back out of the building and onto the street, carrying my cycle on my back again. I quickly set my cycle on standby, the single-wheeled cycle stabilizing itself as I put it down. I quickly grabbed my helmet and hooked it around my neck, already climbing onto the cycle as it unfolded and covered my head.

“Alright, let's get out of here,” I said, and the one-wheeled cycle whirred to life, responding to my voice command.

With a smile I angled my feet against the pedals, leaning forward and pulling out into the street. The sun was sinking down over the horizon as I drove down the mostly empty road, having spent almost half the day on an errand that was supposed to have taken an hour at most.

At least I had already gotten the first half of my payment.

The ride home took a bit longer than it usually would as I took a roundabout route, driving through the Outer York City limits to make sure I wasn't being followed. Eventually, I pulled into the parking lot for my family's apartment, locked my bike up in the vehicle storage lot, and tapped in my code, the single-wheel vehicle sinking down into the ground on a platform, to be stored in my parking allocation. The platform rattled and shook a bit as it moved, showing its age and poor maintenance.

With my cycle stored away, I unzipped my jacket as I made my way into the apartment complex, ignoring the hawkers and buskers that populated the bottom floor of the massive building. I waved off a rather persistent woman, trying to sell me vegetables from her own balcony garden, and stepped into the elevator, pressing the button for the 57th floor. The long-since broken speakers spit out random spurts of soft elevator music as the doors closed.

Not long after that, I was stepping into the apartment. It still smells vaguely of dinner, which after a quick check turned out to have been meatballs and spaghetti. I grabbed a small container of it that Mom set aside for me, and sat down at the table to eat. Before I could even start the floorboards from the hallway creaked.

“You wash your hands before you eat young man, there is no way they are clean after you have been out all day,” My mom said, stepping into the kitchen in an old shirt and sweatpants, her hair pulled up into a bun. “And take your jacket off.”

I chuckled and nodded, stepping up from the table and stripping off my jacket before kicking off my shoes, and returning to the kitchen to wash my hands.

“How was work?” I asked as I scrubbed my hands under the sink, drying them off with a pass through the beat-up old hand dryer next to the sink.

“Fine, Mr. Sheffield was in a good mood for once,” She said, sitting down next to my spot at the table. “Why did it take so long for you to get back?”

One of mom's bosses had a habit of taking his bad days out on the people who he knew could afford to lose the job. I let out a sigh, leaning on the counter for a moment before turning back around and sitting down. Mom had gotten me a beer from the fridge when I wasn't looking.

“There was a raid in the warehouse that I was delivering to, but everything was fine,” I explained reluctantly, wanting to be honest but still downplaying. “I had to let the heat die down before leaving. It was fine though, nothing dangerous, just some quiet arrests of some gangers.”

“Oh really? So it wasn't a shoot-out? Not something the news would pick up on and broadcast?” She asked, raising an eyebrow. “Honey what if-”

“Mom, I couldn't say no to a job like that,” I explained, cutting her off. “They were paying above premium for safe and quick delivery. We need the money too much for me to say no to that. Getting caught up in a raid like that is unlucky but... We need the money.”

For a while we were silent, mom letting me eat my dinner in peace. I know she hated me taking risks for my courier service, for exactly this reason. But she also knew I was right.

We did need the money.

“How's Olivia?” I asked, taking a sip from my beer.

“Mrs. Lee said she had a good day,” Mom responded, looking down the hall to the room she shared with my youngest sister. “Only had a few coughing fits, and none with blood.”

I nodded and took the last bite of my dinner, taking my dishes to the sink and rinsing them off before putting them in the sonic scrubber.

“Go get some rest mom, you have work early tomorrow,” I said as I was done, my mother standing up from her chair and tucking it back under the table.

“So do you,” She countered, shaking her head.

I crossed our small kitchen to give her a hug, holding her tight for a moment, releasing her only for her to hold on tighter.

“Thank you, Leon. Thank you for working so hard,” She said, her head on my shoulder.

After another long moment she let me go, turning back to her bedroom without another word. I could tell she was crying even if I couldn't see her face.

Chapter 3

The next morning I woke up as Tyler, my little brother, was getting ready for school. He was eleven years old, and try as he might there was no way he was going to be quiet enough to not wake me. Which in the end was fine, because I was due to wake up around that time anyway. I helped him get some breakfast, had a meal bar of my own and quickly got ready for work. Mom had already left for her first job, meaning I was in charge of making sure Tyler got out the door.

“Where were you last night?” He asked as I poured him a bowl of cereal. “Mom made spaghetti and meatballs!”

“I saw, it was good!” I said with a smile. “I’m sorry I missed out on eating dinner with you guys, but work was busy.”

“It’s okay, will you be home tonight?”

Dinner had always been important to my family, something Mom and I tried to keep going after my father died. It didn’t always work out, but we both tried to be home for dinner, even if we had to move it earlier or later for work.

When Tyler finished eating I helped him get ready, packing a lunch in his bag before handing him off to the family across the hall. They had a kid Tyler’s age and they would take him down to the fortieth floor, where the apartment held its virtual interactive classes. It wasn’t the best education, but it was free.

With Tyler gone it was time to get Olivia up. I knocked on the door, mostly out of habit as there was no way she had gotten out of bed herself. Opening the door I made my way to her bed, walking around Mom to get to it.

“Olivia, it’s time to get up,” I said, shaking her gently, making sure not to disturb her breathing apparatus.

Olivia was twelve, but she was smaller than my brother. Pale, skinny, and weak, with black hair like my own, and green eyes like my mom, she was struggling through the same thing that had killed my father.

Just around three years ago, while my father was picking her up from a friend’s house they driving on the highway when a noble lost control of his hoverbike and crashed into a nearby transport truck. The noble survived unscathed thanks to some bullshit tech built into his

bike, but the transport truck was carrying hazardous material, and the same tech that kept the noble safe broke the truck's containment.

The storage ruptured violently and spread its contents in a fine mist over fifty meters in all directions. I couldn't tell you what its technical name was, but the doctor claimed it was an artificial purple crystal and that it was used in making batteries the size of pinheads that held a large amount of energy. All I know is that my dad was one of the seventy-eight people who died in minutes from breathing it in, and my sister was one of ten that survived, though she was one of three who were still alive. It destroyed her lungs and poisoned her blood.

I gave her another shake and eventually, she opened her eyes and weakly reached out, taking my hand, and giving it a squeeze.

"...Morning" She wheezed, slowly struggling to sit up.

"Morning, how do you feel?"

"Good," She said, breathing a bit harder from the effort of talking and moving. "Slept well."

"That's good to hear. Now let's get you into the shower and ready for the day."

I spent an hour helping Olivia shower, change and eat, as well as take her medications. Whatever that purple crystal had been, it required daily regenerator pills to keep it from eating her long to shreds, as well as a half dozen drugs to keep the poison it filled her blood with from killing. These drugs cost a significant portion of what my mother and I made, but they were all just stopping the symptoms since we couldn't even step into any clinic that was capable of actually fixing her. Instead, we were doomed to barely patch her up as she slowly withered away.

Just about when she was set and sat in her favorite chair, tucked into the corner of the small space we called a living room, the door buzzer went off. I quickly went to answer it, finding Mrs. Lee at the door. She stepped in with a smile, a small bath of knitting goods hanging from her shoulder.

"Hello Tyler, good to see you, dear," She said. "How are you?"

"I'm doing well Mrs. Lee, how are you?"

Mrs. Lee, an aging Asian grandmother who lived down the hall, had volunteered to watch over Olivia while mom and I were at work. She was a godsend and insisted that she didn't need any payment beyond making sure we had a decent teapot in the cabinet.

"I'm doing well enough dear, my old bones are sore but they still work fine!" She said as she made her way into the living room. "Good morning Olivia."

"Morning," Olivia responded with a small cough, managing to give the elderly woman a small wave as well, saying something quietly that I couldn't quite make out but Mrs. Lee heard.

"That's good dear," She said with a kindly smile, putting down her bag of yarn before turning to me. "You best get going, unless I'm mistaken you're already late for work."

A quick check of my chip and I couldn't help but curse.

"Thank you, Mrs. Lee. Sorry, Olivia, I need to get going. I'll see you tonight, alright?" I said, giving my younger sister a kiss on her forehead before rushing out of the room.

I got ready quickly, pulling on my boots and uniform before covering it all in my jacket, calling out a final goodbye before stepping out of the apartment. I rushed down to the parking lot, punching in my code and waiting for the rickety and rusty vehicle storage lot. It took a minute or so, but eventually it all but spit out my cycle. I quickly grabbed my helmet and hopped on, riding out of the parking lot before my helmet could even deploy.

It was a short drive to the mechanic's shop where I worked. The traffic was low because of how early it was and because I was traveling out of the city rather than into it. I pulled into the parking lot and slid up into a small corner spot, pulling off my helmet and tucking it away before half jogging to the back door. I was immediately greeted by the sounds of power tools and loud talking.

I quickly hung up my jacket and pulled on my coveralls, stepping out into the main working area of the decent-sized garage.

"Leon! Nice of you to join us." The voice of my boss, Reese, called out.

"Sorry, had to take care of my sister for a bit," I explained, turning to see my boss, who had been previously hidden by a truck.

"Right, well I guess it happens. Do me a favor and check over Lenny's work and close up that skimmer." He said, wincing when I mentioned my sister.

I nodded, letting out a long breath. Reese was a bit of a mixed bag when it came to strictness. Sometimes he was understanding, and others he could be a stone-cold bastard. You could sometimes tell by his mood, but other times it seemed to just be random.

I quickly walked to the skimmer he had been talking about, sitting on a lifter, its bottom hatch open. Skimmer tech was the predecessor to full-on hover or antigrav tech and was the closest to it that a lowie would ever get their hands on. This skimmer was an old version of an

already outdated car, beaten up and covered in bumps and scratches. Still, they had been made to last and its repulsor drive was still fully intact and in good condition. I quickly scanned and looked through the drive, using my chips flashlight to look for anything wrong.

Lenny was a pretty good mechanic but had the tendency to let things slip his mind. Reeves blamed drug use when he was younger before the nobles started spreading all of their “harmless” drugs. Lenny, of course, insisted he never did anything beyond smoking a few pecco-cigs when he was much younger.

Luckily he seemed to have done a pretty good job finishing this up, which left it to me to seal the vehicle all up and to clean up any messes. When I was just about done Reese tapped me on my shoulder. I turned to find my boss behind me.

Reese looked nervous, his eyes darting around and sweat dripping from his brow. For a moment I panicked, thinking maybe the cops had tracked me down after all, before I remembered that Reese would sooner go down swinging than sell anyone out to the cops.

“What's wrong Reese?” I asked, looking over his shoulder to see if anyone else was there.

“T-there's a customer here,” He explained. “They are looking to get their car washed.”

“What?” I asked, shaking my head in confusion as I looked back to the car. “There's a carwash down the road, tell them to go there.”

“Leon... It's a noble,” He explained, shaking his head. “He specifically asked for you. By name.”

I stopped and turned back to Reese, my eyes going wide as I waited for the punchline, only for Reese to stay silent. He just looked scared.

All lowies reacted differently to Nobles, and it was often hard to tell in what way someone would until you saw it. Some got angry, though only idiots actually did anything about that anger. Others did their best to get on their good side, schmoozing and ass kissing in hopes they would get whatever crumbs and leftovers they brushed off their plate. Others, apparently like Reese, were terrified of them.

“Fuck... I have no idea what that means,” I admitted, honestly baffled. “Why would a noble want anything to do with me?”

“I don't fucking know,” He responded. “But I want you to wash your hands, put on some clean overalls, and get the fuck out there.”

I nodded, quickly gathering some car cleaning supplies and changing into a clean outfit. While I didn't fall into the same category as Reese, I wasn't stupid. You never really knew what a noble was going to do.

Once I had neatened up and gotten everything together, including a sonic scrubber and a vacuum, I stepped out into the front polycrrete parking area for the garage. According to Reese, it had once been a large fuel station, which he bought and converted into space to park and keep customers' cars.

Off to the side of the large polycrrete platform was a beautiful hover car. It was sitting on deployed landing legs, the sleek angular lines of this model highlighted with long strands of slowly pulsing lights. The paneling was completely white, while the windshield was opaque deep blue. Between the bright light coloring and the direct sunlight, it was easy to tell that there wasn't a spot on it.

Next to the vehicle, sitting in some sort of comfortable-looking framework chair, was the noble. He was clearly a noble, though he lacked some of the crazy additions and modifications that a lot of them had. His clothes were clean and sharp, his hair perfectly styled. He smiled when he saw me, his teeth the perfect level of whiteness. The only visible augmentation I could see was a singular straight black line that ran along his lower jaw and angled up to connect to his ear. The line ended along his jaw with a small circle, which was currently glowing green.

"I'm sorry but I have to go, the lowie I was talking about is here... Yes, I'll talk to you later... ciao!"

The glowing circle went dark as he seemed to have hung up on whoever he had been talking to. He focused on me with a rather stunning smile, though it only made me feel more on edge.

"Leon! Thank you for indulging in me, I know it's a bit ridiculous to come out here and ask to get my car cleaned but I made a bit of a mess inside in the passenger seat."

"I... It's fine," I said, debating a moment before finally asking what I wanted to know. "I'm sorry, but do I know you?"

"Nope!" He said with another smile, this one cut with an edge of enjoyment.

When I realized he wasn't going to explain his annoyingly vague response I picked up the vacuum cleaner and walked around to the opposite side, cracking the door open slowly. The inside was even more spotless than the outside, with perfectly maintained carpets, seats, and everything else... Save for the passenger seat and floor, which looked like he had literally just upended a fast food box onto the seat. A quick test showed that the food was still warm.

I took a long breath, calming myself down before I started cleaning up the food, dropping it into a synthetic bag. I was halfway through the fries when he spoke again.

“You know, polite to ask someone their name,” He said from right behind me, making me whirl around in response.

Somehow he had moved his seat directly behind me, startling me into bashing my head on the edge of his door.

“Sorry, what’s your name sir?” I asked, rubbing the back of my head.

“Ilbryen Middison, at your service.” He said.

The name was strange but was honestly standard fair for eccentric nobles. It was a pretty common theory they just made them up when talking to lowies to mess with us.

“Nice to meet you,” I responded, though by now I was biting back my annoyance.

A few more minutes pass and I finish cleaning up the big chunks of food, meaning it was time to vacuum up the crumbs and smaller chunks. Luckily while the loud, powerful vacuum was going there was no way they could ask any questions. I got almost all of the crumbs sucked out of the seat and floor, trying my best to walk the line of getting this over with and making sure that I actually did a good job. It was humiliating, especially since I was pretty sure he made this mess on purpose.

When everything was vacuumed I pulled out the handheld sonic scrubber and started working on the condiment and grease stains, getting each spot wet with cleaning solution and breaking the stain down with the sonic scrubber before wiping it all up.

“So... I have a question Leon,” Ilbryen said, still watching me as I worked. “Why work this job and do your deliveries? Wouldn’t it make much more sense to just work as a full-time courier?”

I froze, halfway inside the hovercraft, before slowly pulling out and turning to face him. The worry that had been sitting in the pit of my stomach ever since Reese had said he was asking for my name expanded, and my heartbeat picked up.

“How did you know that?” I asked, resisting the urge to lean on the doorframe of his craft. “I don’t exactly advertise that to everyone.”

“Oh please, you expect a noble not to have access to that kind of information?” He said, rolling his eyes. “What you should really be worried about is why I decided to bribe the police to lose the footage of you running away from the warehouse raid last night. That is the real big one.”

Chapter 4

I stared at the smug, smirking noble, my fist gripping the sonic scrubber tightly. What was already a concerning situation was quickly going downhill. I fought the urge to raise my voice and shout at the man who could very likely kill me with his bare hands, brag about it openly, and still get it pinned as self-defense. It took several deep breaths before I felt like I was ready to speak.

“Why would you bribe the police to keep them off my trail?” I asked deliberately slowly.

Instead of answering, the noble simply reached behind his chair, pulling some sort of cube out and dropping it next to him. After a moment a chair just like his unfolded in a way that made me want to rub my eyes and look again.

“Take a seat,” He instructed, the only thing keeping it from an outright order was his lackadaisical gesture. “It’s a bit of a tale to tell, and I wouldn’t want to rush.”

After a long moment, I walked closer and sat gently in the seat. It was one of the most comfortable things I had ever sat in, supporting me perfectly while still offering the best cushioning I had ever felt. It took me a minute to remember what kind of situation I was in, only to find Ilbryen chuckling at my enjoyment.

“It’s nice, right? Twenty thousand credits well spent, right?”

I froze, my eyes widening, as I realized I was sitting in a chair that was worth just about as much as I made in a month if I was lucky. The noble bastard only laughed harder, shaking his head as if it was the funniest thing in the world. When he eventually calmed down he let out a long sigh and looked at me, folding his hands in his lap.

“Where were we? Right! I was about to tell you a story!” He said with an excited smile on his face. “This story starts before you were born, in a research company called Trend-Tech. Their primary purpose was to discover a method of teleportation, something a great many companies are still trying to figure out.”

As he talked he raised his hand, a hologram projecting from his palm showing off a simple logo for Trend-Tech. The logo looked familiar, but I really couldn’t place it.

“While they never did exactly crack that mystery open, they did stumble upon a relatively interesting discovery,” Ilbryen continued. “They discovered that running alongside our reality,

were other realities. Some of them were like ours, some of them very different. You might have heard about such a thing in school.”

I nodded, finally placing the company logo. Their discovery was mentioned briefly at school, and I remembered a lecture about how such a technology could hold the key to filling in the gaps of many historical questions. Not surprising that the tech went nowhere, and lowies would never get to use it.

“A project was created around the discovery, with the final goal being to find a way to colonize empty earth and harvest their materials, thereby cutting the need for expensive fleets of asteroid miners and transporters.”

As he talked, the projection hovering above his hand shifted, showing a massive raised platform with two massive arches over it, crossing each other in an “X” shape. The incredibly high-quality projection showed every detail as a large box was carried onto the platform. When everyone was clear the arches glowed with red energy that swirled around the platform before finally blasting out. When the screen cleared the box was gone.

“Unfortunately, as the mass of the target being sent increases, the energy required to send that target exponentially increases. To put it in perspective, just ten tons of material would require an amount of energy equivalent to the sun's entire output for a full five seconds. Further, in order for the trip to be safe for humans, they must be stored in a specialized container that itself costs an exorbitant amount of money and could only last a few jumps.”

His projection shifted again, now showing the same raised platform and arches, now with an open metal container in the center. As the projection played a man climbed into the container, while two lab coats wearing scientists closed and secured the lid of the container behind him. The same process repeated, and when the flash of red energy dissipated the container was gone. The hologram seemed to fast forward, scientists rushing around for a while before it slowed back down to normal speed. The same energy swirled around the platform, only this time instead of exploding outward it imploded inward, revealing the same container as before, though it was smoking and scared with black lines. Scientists in hazard suits rushed in and freed the man, who seemed fine but was non the less rushed off on a stretcher to be examined.

“Needless to say with such a high cost and unavoidable restrictions the idea of using this as a way to gather materials failed almost immediately,” The artificially enhanced noble said. “The technology, however, was almost immediately converted into a tool for entertainment, with nobles paying exorbitant prices to travel and experience new and weird Earths. Imagine the adventure!”

The projected hologram now showed a heavily armored individual running and leaping over what appeared to be burnt-out houses and firing lasers at... zombies?

“You’ve got to be shitting me...” I said, my eyes wide, my words sneaking out through my shock. “There is no way that’s real.”

“In fact it is! What wonderful adventures are available through those arches!” Ilbryen said with a smile. “This particular world fell prey to a bioengineered virus that turned all humans on the planet into mindless, hungry rage monsters.”

I watched as the footage continued, showing the Noble as they smashed through a building and dispatched zombies with ease, blasting them with powerful laser weapons and their bare hands.

“Of course, someone had the rather brilliant idea to start a live stream of some of the more interesting explorers,” He explained, the footage shifting until it looked like some sort of live streamed event. “It succeeded for a while, but viewers quickly got bored. While watching someone tear through a horde of rage monsters might be fun the first time, eventually, it gets boring when everyone realizes that the nobles were never actually in any danger. No noble in their right mind would give up their enhancements in normal situations, never mind these adventures that could actually be dangerous!”

The footage changed, showing the same armored noble sitting down eating a sandwich, their now empty armor rampaging around them, several drones floating above them and firing down at the mindless hoard around them, all while the zombies were held at bay by a massive glowing dome.

“With no risk, no tension, only a small audience of people found the broadcasts entertaining,” He explained, closing his fist, the hologram flickering and disappearing. “This leads us to our current situation. The company I represent is certain that the live broadcasting of dimensional travelers *is* the next big thing in entertainment. We just need to change the circumstances.”

The pit in my stomach felt like it dropped to my feet, but I couldn't bring myself to say anything.

“Ah, I see you have figured out where I am going with this! Very well, I will cut to the chase. We believe, with the proper personality, and the proper level of danger, we could create the next big thing. Imagine, a live broadcast adventure of a lowie, struggling against the great dangers of an unknown world. Think of the excitement, the drama, the prestige!” He explained, excitedly. “Think of the brand deals, the merchandise, the advertisement revenue!”

It took almost a full minute for Ilbryen to finally come down from his fantasy. He coughed, shook his head, and looked at me, looking slightly sheepish.

“My apologies. Where was I?” He said, rubbing his face for a moment before perking up. “Right! My company wishes to offer you the chance of a lifetime. We will raise you and your

family up to the noble class. Pay out a massive sum of money, provide a new place of residence, the very best of education and luxury. Your brother would get the best education available, no settling for free V.I. classes. Your mom could quit her jobs, enjoy her hobbies or maybe even get her own education... But perhaps even more importantly, your youngest sister would have access to the same level of health care that I do. Lung replacements, muscle revivers, bone stabilizers, everything she could possibly need to recover from her ordeal. Just imagine, by this time next week, your dear Oliva could be walking around in a noble park, enjoying the flowers.”

For a moment the noble businessman was silent, letting his offer sink in. Despite myself, I couldn't help but imagine all of it as he spoke.

“All you would need to do is spend six months in another dimension,” He explained, holding up his hand to stop me from immediately responding. “Before you say anything, let me explain the general concept at least.”

He extended his hand again, a map of the east coast popping up. A few dozen dots appeared scattered around, mostly focused around Outer and Inner York City.

“Here is the deal. You would be sent to a preselected Earth that diverges heavily from ours, one where there will be challenges and struggles that you will need to overcome. We will allow you to pick one enhancement from a shortlist beforehand, to give you a slight advantage,” He explained, one dot turning red and pulsing. “Once you arrive you will be given this map. The dots, which may or may not be different in the final version, will lead you to further enhancements or technology. You will have to travel to one, make it through whatever challenge awaits you there, and claim the reward in order to gain access to it.”

The hologram flashed and changed, showing a small off-white crate, before shifting to a green, then blue, before stopping at purple.

“Some of the challenges will be easy as searching a large mall for the crate, others will be more difficult, like slaying a dangerous beast or surviving a potentially lethal location. The rewards will reflect the difficulty you faced when earning them. With each one, you will become more and more powerful, and the challenges will increase to reflect that,” He explained, doing his best to make it seem like no big deal. “Once your six months is up you'll be brought back here. You'll have six months to enjoy yourself, basking in the greatest luxuries available, spending plenty of time with your loved ones, and recovering from your ordeal. After that, we will find another dimension for you to explore.”

As he talked, my mind struggled to keep up. What he was offering was beyond insane, beyond what I could wrap my mind around.

“Wh-why me?” I asked, trying to buy time. “Why the hell would you pick me?”

“Well... I could say I had some sort of grand reasoning, come up with some sort of lie or cheesy platitude of wanting to give someone who needs it a chance. Which don't get me wrong, is a nice addition. Should get plenty of good press,” he said, the last part barely a mumble. “But really, you just got lucky. My department has been keeping an eye open for people who fit what we need. People who are desperate enough to accept the risk, who wouldn't immediately die it, but who will also be legitimately challenged. Sure we could find some spec op lowie who would eat this challenge for breakfast, but that's not the point. Your secondary job is high enough stress that we know you can handle that, and you're just desperate enough to consider this a possible solution. Basically, you're the first fit that we found.”

I struggled to wrap my head around his offer, around what he was proposing. It still sounded insane, but my brain was slowly coming to terms with the idea. I could already hear my mom shouting that this was a terrible idea, and that putting myself in more danger wasn't worth it.

I knew from personal experience from the accident that took my dad and left my sister in her horrible state, that dealing with nobles was always risky. They would keep their word when they signed and made deals, but their word hardly ever meant what you thought it did. The bastard responsible for the accident had thrown money at everyone to get the situation handled, but even the large sum we got was nothing compared to Olivia's medical bills. To say I was skeptical of what he was offering was an understatement.

“Now I know that this is a lot to take in all at once,” He said, yanking my attention back to the conversation. “So I will leave you with my card. I happen to think you are a pretty good match for what we are looking for. Like I said I've done my research and what I learned was good. That said, I'm not the only one who is looking. If we stumble on a better match there's a good chance we will go with them.”

As he talked he stood, my body following suit with what felt like no input from my brain. He reached out with a small chip, no bigger than my thumbnail. When I touched it lit up with all of his contact info. A useless luxury considering communicator chips only needed to touch to share contact information.

“Think about it, talk to your mother, but get back to me soon,” Ilbryen said, giving me a nod. “Times a' ticking!”

He snapped his fingers and the two deployable chairs folded up and flew up, neatly sliding into the passenger seat of his hovercar. The door shut behind them and he walked around to the other side, stopping for a moment.

“Oh, I bribed your boss to give you the rest of the day off so you can spend some time thinking of my offer. Ciao!”

Before I could say anything else he climbed into his hovercar, which thrummed with energy as his door shut. Without any fanfare at all the angular vehicle rose into the air and blasted off, leaving me alone on the polycrete platform, still holding the sonic scrubber in one hand, his card chip in the other.

Chapter 5

It took a while for me to get back into the shop, my eyes following the hovercraft until it disappeared into the distance. When I did finally recover enough to head back in, it was only to clock out, my boss hardly even looking at me as I hung up my coveralls. A minute or so later and I was on my cycle, riding along the backroads, my mind slowly starting to break down what Ilbryen had offered. Part of me considered going home, but it was very unlikely that I would get any sort of peace and quiet there.

I drove around for a while, eventually stopping to get some lunch from a cheap fast food restaurant. The fact that I was now buying fast food after Ilbryen had just gotten me to clean his mess up was not lost on me. After putting the bag of grease and salt into the cycle's storage I pulled out of the parking lot and kept driving, heading to a spot where I occasionally took my lunch breaks on.

Eventually, I pulled into a vertical parking structure, heading directly to the back, where I knew there was a big elevator. A quick look around and I guide my cycle up close, before hopping off and guiding it inside, making sure to click on the mass reducers. I could have driven up, but it was forty floors and a pain in the ass on a cycle.

Eventually, the elevator dinged and I guided my cycle out onto the top level, leaning it against the wall a few feet away. I grabbed my food and walked around the cap structure, which was basically a polycrete box that protected the elevator from the elements. On the side opposite the parking lot was a singular old metal chair, a table with an ashtray, and a pretty decent view of the surrounding neighborhood.

I sat down on the chair and put my bag of food on the small table, nudging the ashtray to the side. I had found this spot making a delivery to a nearby business, and would occasionally come here when I needed to think.

Like now.

The offer was still rattling around in my head. It was insane, something out of a story. I knew that dimensional tech existed, though I had no idea that nobles were using it as entertainment. Their concept sounds interesting. Explore new Earths, and have a bit of fun in a place that is no real threat to you. I could honestly see the appeal.

The idea of being stranded for six months in a place like that, with nothing but a small advantage to start out with? That idea was a lot less appealing.

Still, I couldn't help but consider it. My whole family, set up for life, enjoying the same luxuries, the same advantages that a noble did...

I had heard plenty of stories, plenty of rumors, and hearsay that some nobles liked to elevate lowies that they liked. Some people clung to the idea like a lifeboat, wondering if they were ever going to meet a noble who would do that. I knew plenty of people who spent plenty of their hard-earned money making themselves as pretty as possible in the hopes of snagging a noble partner, just for a taste of that luxury. I knew that it did happen.

I also knew it almost never ended well.

I'd heard plenty of horror stories of nobles using a person up, bullying them, getting them to do increasingly terrible things, only to cut them loose when they got bored. I'd heard stories of nobles promising to lift people up, only to use them as a glorified slave workforce, all while promising that they would uplift them soon. There were rumors going around constantly of this or that person disappearing for weeks, even months to "party" with a noble only for them to come back... different.

A noble always kept their word, it was just a matter of what they could get out of you in the process. They saw us as a resource, like tools, to use and replace when we can't function anymore.

I couldn't risk it.

I leaned back in the old metal seat, looking out over the buildings around the parking structure, shaking my head.

The offer seemed too good to be true, which usually meant that it wasn't. If I took Ilbryen's insane offer, and something changed, if they decided it wasn't going to work, if they just abandoned me over there, in some sort of hellish version of Earth, my family would never be able to recover. It took me working two jobs, putting almost all of my time into them, along with my mom's three jobs and the occasional chunk of credits from my older sister to stay afloat. There is no way my mom could keep paying for Olivia's medications, her doctor's visits, and everything she needed to survive, as well as normal living expenses. We already cut it pretty close.

I let out a long sigh, opening my food and starting to eat, though my mind was still trying to puzzle out what I should do. Eventually, after about twenty minutes I finished my food and started making my way back out of the parking garage.

Pulling into the apartment parking lot about thirty minutes later I still hadn't come to a conclusion. It all boiled down to whether I was willing to trust a noble not to screw me over, or was I willing to risk what little stability we had in hopes that our life could get better.

I made my way up to our apartment, stepping in and locking out the front door behind me. I could hear people talking in hushed tones, so I kicked off my shoes and stepped further in, following the voices. I found my mom on the phone in the living room, talking quietly into her chip, having a quiet yet energetic conversation.

"I know... I understand... If more work-... yes, thank you Caroline..." She said, her chip going dark as whoever was on the other side of the call hung up.

She stayed where she was standing, her head hung, her hand coming up to rub her face. Concerned, I knocked on the wall to get her attention without scaring her. She still whirled around to face me.

"Leon, oh! Welcome home." She said, quieting herself after getting over her initial surprise. "What are you doing home so early?"

"... Reese gave me the day off," I lied. "What about you?"

For a long moment she didn't respond, just stood there and chewed her lip. She looked away eventually, unable to look me in the eye.

"I... I was let go today." She explained. "Mr. Sheffield is downsizing and needed to... clear up his slower workers. I was just on the phone with Caroline, asking if her temp agency had any work..."

I closed my eyes for a minute, hanging my own head. Mom stepped closer, giving me a hug.

"Don't worry baby, I'll find something soon," She said, leaning on me a bit. "It will just be a tight month."

"Yeah... yeah. I'll pick up some extra deliveries... Steve probably has some for me," I assured her.

In reality, this was a pretty bad time for this to happen. With Alex and his gang undoubtedly taken down by the OYCPD, I had lost one of my higher-paying deliveries. Steve would probably have some extra work for me, and I could reach out to some people and offer lower rates to entice more customers... but it would be hard to match what I was making from them. Still, this wasn't the first hurdle we had to overcome.

Once again I considered my most recent offer. The sheer ridiculousness of the idea, the level of danger involved with such a concept... it was still hard to comprehend. But I was confident that not indulging in a noble's pipe dream, especially one as dangerous as this, was the right choice. I gave my mom one final squeeze before pulling back.

"It will be okay. Worst comes to worst I will quit working at the shop and focus on being a courier full time. I know that the garage offers the stability we needed when... In the beginning, but now I have a reputation and a few repeat customers, it's not all going to just disappear."

"Thank you, honey. Your father would have been so proud," She said with a watery smile, cupping my cheek. "I'll send your sister a message, and see if she can't spare a bit to help."

I rolled my eyes but reluctantly nodded as well. I hadn't seen my older sister in around two years, since she packed up and left one morning. She sent money occasionally to help, but neither of us had any idea what she was doing. Mom was worried she was wrapped up in some sort of gang or worse, and I didn't have the heart to tell her it was much more likely she had been snapped up by some noble.

"Have you heard from her recently?" I asked, walking around my mother and stepping into our small kitchen.

"Not for the last couple of weeks," She admitted, shaking her head. "She did say she would be very busy last time we did though."

Mom and I spent the rest of the day planning out where she would be looking for work, and talking about possible ideas to save more money. The latter part was a familiar conversation, one that unfortunately frequently led nowhere. A few hours after I came home Tyler returned from school, rushing through the apartment before rushing back out to go spend some time with a friend a few floors down. Mom left with him to walk him down, returning a few minutes later.

Not long after that mom and I started working on dinner together, something we hadn't done in a long time. It was nice, even though the reason we were both home at the same time kept nagging at me. The last few days had been eventful, to say the least. Ilbryen's offer still rattled around in my head, though I was convinced that I wouldn't accept his offer. By the time the family gathered around the small kitchen table to eat I had moved on to worrying if I should call and tell him I wasn't interested or if I should just leave it alone and let him assume for himself.

As we ate dinner we listened to Tyler talk about his day, Mom helping Olivia eat while nodding and smiling. Luckily neither of them could see the anxiety that was behind both of our smiles. Eventually, dinner was done, and Mom helped Olivia back into her bed. Between her

heavily damaged lungs and atrophied body, just having dinner with us was enough to exhaust her.

While Mom helped Olivia, I helped Tyler with his homework. Or I tried to at least. My brother had definitely inherited my father's intelligence, easily understanding his lessons. I was basically just there to keep him on task and focused. Hell half the time I felt like he was helping me relearn the things I had forgotten from my own lessons.

When he was finished with his homework he spent some time watching media on his chip while laying in bed, while I compiled a list of people I needed to call for extra work. It wasn't a bad list, and I was relatively sure at least a few of them would be tempted by a small price cut. By the time I was done Tyler had fallen asleep, his chip turning off automatically when it couldn't track his eyes anymore. I pulled his chip from his hands and placed it on his charger before waking him up gently to rinse his mouth with teeth cleaner. Not long after that Mom came in to tuck him into bed. I went to sleep not long after, tired from the mentally exhausting day.

The next morning went on as normal. Mom was already gone when I woke up, so I got Tyler ready and out the door, before helping Olivia take her medication and have a quick breakfast, before helping her settle down in the living room. I left immediately after Mrs. Lee arrived.

I made my way directly to Steve's first. Given how long I had been working with him he was my best bet for more work. Not to mention that while he probably already knew that something had gone wrong with Alex and his gang, he would also want to hear about what happened from me.

I made good time getting from the apartment to his ship, pulling around back like I had many times before, letting my cycle steady itself as I got off and knocked on his garage door. Almost immediately the security clamps opened with a heavy metallic *thunk*. I waited patiently for the large door to open, only to lean back instinctively when his face came into view.

Steve looked upset and frustrated, but looked at me with a frown, shaking his head.

"Leon. C'mon," He said, simply turning around and walking away, not offering any more explanation.

I followed behind him, my nervousness starting to spike as he led me into his office. He sat down on the other side of a cleared wooden desk. Before I could say anything he held up a hand, reached into his desk, and pulled out two glasses and a bottle of brandy. He silently poured the two glasses before pushing on towards me.

"Steve, what the fuck is going on?" I asked, taking the glass on autopilot.

“You know I’m not good with words kid, so I’m just gonna be blunt,” He said, taking a sip of his drink before looking directly into my eyes. “You’ve been blacklisted.”

My eyes went wide, my brain chugging to start, unable to wrap my head around what he was telling me. Before I could say anything Steve continued.

“Seems like Alex and a few of his higher-ups managed to escape the bust. I don’t know what you did, but you really pissed him off, because he is pulling every favor and every dollar he has to make sure that *everyone* knows that the cops were there because of you.”

“I had nothing to do with that! They would have arrested me just as eagerly as them if they had caught me!”

“I know, kid, I know. You’re not the kind of person who would do that, even if your family wasn’t depending on you,” Steve said, shaking his head. “But I’ve already gotten three calls from regulars that they won’t accept anything if you show up to drop it off.”

I struggled to understand what he was saying. This job had just become much more important, something I would need to lean into hard to get my family through the next few months! I needed the extra work!

“I’m sorry Leon, you’re not going to be able to find much delivery work around here, at least not for a while. The problem is that while Alex had been getting more and more aggressive while building up all the guns I had been selling him, he still had a reputation for running a tight community,” Steve explained. “I know he had some ideas that would have changed that, but he hadn’t done anything with them yet. As far as a majority of people know, you sold out a decent and relatively peaceful community to the police for having weapons that you delivered yourself. Your black listing is...almost complete coverage.”

I leaned back in my seat, stunned into silence. A blacklist like that... I wouldn’t be able to deliver anymore. I was done.