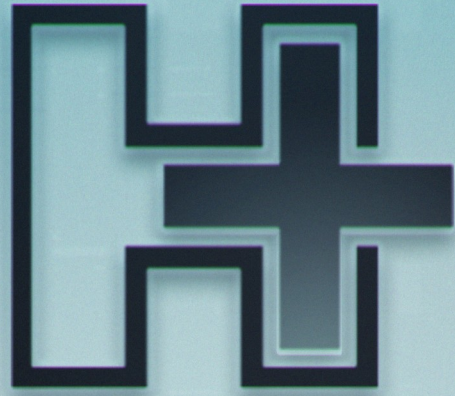
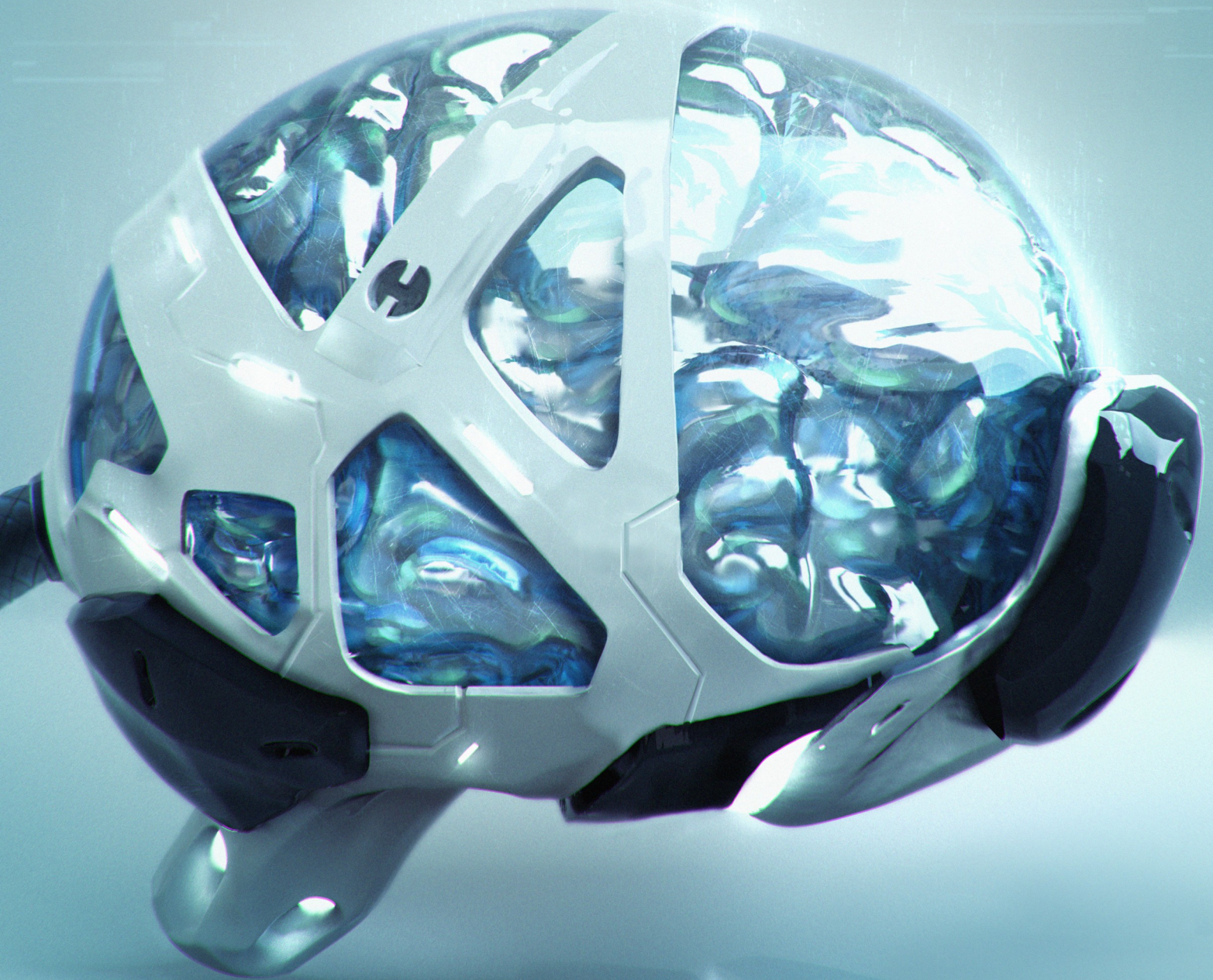


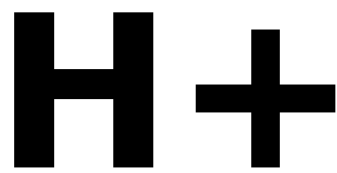
GARY DEJEAN



I N C O R P O R A T E D



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Prologue

It blips, it flickers, and suddenly it's on: the bluish light of neon tubes falls upon a dozen cheap folding chairs in a windowless room. Footsteps follow; silhouettes limp inside, accompanied by the soft purring of rotors, the friction of steel against plastic, the clinking of canes and prostheses. The figures arrange the chairs in a circle as quietly as their bodies allow.

The paint on the walls of the common room is crumbling, ceiling panels are missing, and the fake wooden floor is stained with suspicious patterns. A man with a prosthetic jaw pours himself some coffee from the nearby table while a fifty year old biker takes off his leather gloves, revealing metal hands. A Chinese woman in her late twenties, a third of her face covered in crude cybernetics, helps set up the remaining chairs. A quadriplegic man in an exoskeleton sits down next to a woman with prosthetic legs, the pair bumping fists together with a complicit smile.

David and Jake sit next to one another, a chubby Indian and a six foot tall android with a white motionless face, painfully aware of how their brand new clothes make them stand out among the group. To a casual observer, they might appear to be a wealthy eccentric playing dress-up with a smart mannequin, but not in this place. Here, murmurs and glances are exchanged, because everyone is aware that Jake is not merely a machine.

A Brazilian rasta makes his way to the circle of chairs and casts a quick glance at the small crowd, pausing briefly on David and Jake. "Couple new faces today," he declares in a thick accent. "Welcome. There's donuts and coffee, if you want. We'll get started in a minute." He then turns to address the middle-aged biker: "How's the elbow, Bill?"

Bill curls his right arm a few times in demonstration, producing a light squeak with each motion. "Much better, thanks. You saved me a trip to the choppers with that."

"Great! That's great. See, I told you, it's the little things."

"No joke. You could be a mechanic."

"What's the difference, brother?"

They chuckle. Tying his dreadlocks back with wires protruding from his skull, the rasta finally sits. "So! Before we go around, how's everyone doing?" he asks. The group mumbles assorted, half-hearted variations of "fine" in response; they've all seen better days, but it doesn't seem to affect the rasta's enthusiasm. "Great! Now let's go around the room and introduce ourselves, yeah? Hi. I'm Malcolm and I'm the... group coach, so to speak."

One by one, the group identifies themselves. Jake pays little attention to their names, focused instead on their handicaps and the strange solutions modern technology has provided them. When they're done talking, each looks at him with pity. And before he's even thought of what he's going to say, David is already taking his turn. "Hi, I'm David," he says. "Nice to meet you all. This is my son, Jake."

Jake's embarrassment at being the object of every gaze in the room renders him incapable of more than a slight nod and a soft "Hi." His unease is palpable and the room is rendered silent as it spreads from one member of the group to another.

So as to break the spell, Malcolm speaks up cheerfully. "It's nice to meet new folks. David, Jake, you're among friends. OK! Who wants to go first?"

The room remains quiet as glances are exchanged. Seeing the awkwardness of the moment, Bill raises his metallic hand. With relief, Malcolm points to him. "Yeah, Bill?"

Turning to Jake, the biker speaks in a playful growl. "These people are too polite to say it, but that's quite a getup you got there, kid."

Jake is startled. He had hoped after the introductions that he would be able to fade into the background, but all eyes remain fixed on him. After a moment of stunned silence, he responds: "What?"

The bald, armless man points with his prosthetic hand, grinning like a scoundrel. "I'm talking about your workout, son."

Malcolm suddenly raises a hand, motioning Bill to shut up. "OK! Thank you, Bill." His voice adopts an apologetic tone as he turns to address David and Jake. "What he's trying to say is we've never had someone with such... extensive prosthetics. But that's not relevant. Everyone's welcome here."

David looks a bit concerned but does his best to mask this with a reassuring smile, as he and Jake exchange a glance. Inside Jake's face, soft panels start moving beneath his artificial skin, mimicking a frown. "OK. Err... Thank you?" the boy timidly replies.

"Like he said. You're welcome," Bill contributes, seemingly happy with the discomfort his directness has caused. Pressing further, he asks: "So, how old are you?"

Malcolm shoots a disapproving look at Bill before forcing another smile at David and Jake. The Chinese woman leans in, spectating intensely, her artificial eye capturing every moment of the encounter.

Jake takes his time answering, and the reply comes in fits and starts unbecoming of his smooth features. "Ha... You can't tell. That's kind of funny ain't it? Yeah, I was going to talk about my height... This..." He pauses to look at his plastic hands as he gestures; he has no nails, no lines, no veins, no beauty spots or inconsistencies of any kind. "Custom bodies are expensive. So, I'm taller now. It's pretty weird."

"How tall were you before?" asks Bill. The sense of unease still lingering in the room regains in intensity as Jake sits up straight and uses a hand to draw a line across his chest, his perfectly indistinctive face bearing a blank expression, his eyes locked with Bill's. From his seated position, the meaning of the gesture is unclear and several of the group members exchange tense glances. Bill frowns, realizing the implication, but presses on. "How old are you, kid?"

Jake takes a quick glance to his sides. His voice is faint when he answers: "I'm ten."

Chapter 1

At the turn of the century, pumped up to eleven by digital communication on a global scale, scientific and technological progress entered an exponential growth. If the human genome could be mapped in a matter of decades, uncovering the mysteries of the nervous system would be a walk in the park. By 1999, rats would control a robotic arm with their thoughts and by 2008 monkeys would eat bananas with it. In 2014, a young man paralyzed from the waist down opened the football World Cup with a kick of the ball assisted by the same technology. Direct neural interface in humans was achieved.

All the while, industrial development fed on increasing demand. In this rapidly expanding electronic age, renewable energies piled atop usual forms of consumption rather than supplanting them. Icecaps finished melting, new routes opened to drilling, and sea levels continued to rise. In 2017, green moss was discovered in the Antarctic. By 2020, rivers across Asia would flood every year. In 2023, a hurricane hit Manila.

For weeks, it was as if the sea had risen up and taken the entire coastline with it. When finally the skies cleared, all that remained was a swamp of Babylonian proportions. In the months to follow, humanitarian dispatches relocated the survivors to the surrounding hills while the cash-strapped nation scoured for ways to rebuild its capital. Desperate, its leaders called upon the assistance of private companies across the continent. From the few options presented, a plan emerged to use cutting-edge robotics in the construction of a titanic, flood-proof platform that would cradle the center of the rebuilding metropolis.

By the end of the year, a massive government contract would be approved, a partnership between public and private sector heavily weighed in favor of the latter. With this leverage, the corporations involved exerted their influence on policy to establish the city as a free market bastion with few regulations.

When the humongous platform was completed in 2029, construction began on skyscrapers destined not to the victims of the flood, but to the numerous executives called upon by companies in the haven. The citizens displaced by the hurricane,

most of whom couldn't afford returning to the city, remained trapped in the slums that grew from the former refugee camps.

As development continued, the corporate forces that built the platform turned on each other. Rivalry morphed into vendetta, faceless shareholders pushing unscrupulous board-members far beyond the constraints of the law. Ten years later, on the side of the tallest skyscraper in town, a bright, white logo shines higher than any other: H+ incorporated.

September, 2039. The air outside the common room is hot and dusty. As the group emerges from their session, it's only late afternoon, but the sun is already setting. The street is cluttered with glass fragments, plastic bags and cigarette butts; broken streetlights and cheap smart-cars border the road. Down the street, a driverless truck swallows the content of trash dumps full of discarded computers.

David and Jake exit last, Jake walking with the slow shuffle of an old man, holding his father's arm. A few feet from the door, the Chinese woman with the artificial eye approaches them, her face smiling kindly from behind the bulky prosthesis covering half her face. "Hi again," she greets the pair as they walk.

"Hey," David responds.

She points forward with her chin. "You're going this way?" Ahead of them, a block down the street, citizens are marching in protest, raising banners, chanting, demanding jobs. Jake pulls the hood of his sweatshirt over his head, and puts his hands in his belly pocket.

"Hem. I'm sorry," David apologizes to the woman. "I don't remember your name."

"It's alright! I'm Chloe."

"You know," he starts.

"Yeah," she interrupts with a cheery dismissal. "I get it. A lot of new faces."

"Right."

They creep down the sidewalk until reaching the protest, a slow-moving flood of bodies walking in the perpendicular street.

David, Chloe and Jake stop for a minute, taking in the scene of colorful characters chanting in the early evening. Half naked and drunk young people just here for the party cavort alongside elderly syndicalists reciting slogans through megaphones and too many tired faces to count. The pink evening sky, that rare beautiful byproduct of pollution, barely penetrates the anarchic web of cables connecting dull concrete buildings.

David sighs audibly. "What is it this time?"

On the tips of her feet, Chloe peers over the flow of heads to observe the path of the protest. "They're going towards the center. We can move with them down the block and get out at the next corner."

She pushes in first, attempting to force an opening in the herd for David and Jake to enter. With David close behind, Jake manages to take a few short, shuffling steps into the street before being enveloped by the mass and violently jostled by a passing protester. As he tries to maintain his balance, David throws an arm around Jake's shoulder in an attempt to create some kind of protective space for his son.

Terrified by the noise and activity of the crowd, Jake sinks low, wrapping his arms around David's waist, his head pressed to his father's chest. The pair pitifully crawl in this pose across the street for a long couple of minutes. Reaching the pavement on the other side, where the population is less dense, they stop to collect themselves.

"Unbelievable!" Chloe exhales as she looks back across the half dozen meters they exerted so much effort in traveling. Jake continues to cling to his father's midsection, staring at the ground like a broken doll. David gives him a gentle pat on the back, but Jake's robotic body betrays no indication of comfort. Chloe turns back to face them, crouching to meet Jake at eye level.

"Hey," she says, speaking softly. "You OK?"

A moment passes before Jake meekly responds. "I wanna go home," he says, in the slightly distorted whine of his budget voice synthesizer.

"Of course," she replies before standing to look at David.

"We're parked over there," the father says, gesturing toward a

car parked on the nearby corner. "Chloe, thanks for the help."

"Anytime," she says as she reaches into her purse, produces a poorly printed business card and offers it to David. "I mean it. Call me anytime." Without looking at it, David puts the card in his pocket. He then smiles and turns away with Jake, helping his son into the car. Chloe continues to watch them drive away, Jake waving goodbye as the car's automated system smoothly moves the vehicle out of the parking lane.

After they're gone, Chloe slides comfortably back into the roiling crowd. Walking faster than most, she joins in with the droning chant: "Robots took our salaries! But robots have no families!" As she advances with the discontented flow of humanity, she tries to count how many marches like this have been held in recent months. The new city was supposed to be a beacon of hope through technological innovation but, to these people, all it's done is generate poverty, with basic robotics stealing blue collar jobs and still cheaper algorithms poaching the white collar ones.

Night has fallen when Chloe reaches the front of the protest. A cordon of policemen in anti-riot gear blocks the way to the center of town while megaphones spew orders to disperse and surveillance drones float overhead. As the crowd amasses and the distance between the two groups closes, it doesn't take long for a lobbed bottle to crash on a riot shield, giving authorities all the excuse they need to crack down. Tear gas canisters are fired into the crowd and the police move in to engage, clashing batons rhythmically against their shields.

Chloe pulls a bandana from her pocket, covering her mouth and nose in an attempt to protect herself from the gas. In the chaos of smoke and panicking people, she can hardly see two feet away and is barely successful at staggering her way to relative safety on the side of the street. Those at the center of the swollen crowd are less fortunate, and more than a few suffer injuries due to trampling by retreating compatriots.

As the smoke thickens, the crowd does thin out. Suddenly, from an alleyway less than half a block from the cordon, a decrepit, rusted van swerves into the street, its suspension drawing sparks as it screeches toward the police cordon and skids to a stop. The sliding door opens to reveal two men in yellow industrial exoskeletons, their faces wrapped in clothing behind protective

cages; the van nearly bounces into the air from weight displacement as they disembark and charge the barricade.

Barely able to comprehend what they're witnessing, the riot police are able to do little more than raise their shields before the two workers crash into the cordon, sending cops literally flying from the force of their impact. Stunned but still able to recognize an opportunity, Chloe moves closer to the action and zooms in with her prosthesis. She gives her artificial ear a light pinch, activating her phone. "Call boss," she yells. As the call connects, she does her best to catch her breath. When finally someone picks up, Chloe bursts, "You're gonna want to see this!"

Life on the city platform buzzes with the managed chaos of rush hour activity. Driverless cars shuttle workers home from a long day as police surveillance drones hum through the air, patrolling for any disturbance. At every corner, on every building, in every hand, screens shine with information as data, life blood of the twenty-first century, invisibly directs this transit ballet.

In an upscale apartment dozens of stories above, Jake sits on a cream colored leather couch facing a video wall, casually cycling through streaming video channels with a remote control. On the opposite end of the well-lit and open space, is a kitchen area where David extracts a tray from a microwave oven, setting it on a platter next to a fork and a cylindrical plastic vial labeled, "nutrients."

"Hey," Jake exclaims, pointing at the screen, now showing live footage of a riot in progress. "It's that protest we saw!"

As David carries the platter from the kitchen to the couch, he sees that Jake is correct; the march they had unwillingly participated in just an hour prior has escalated into violence. Two people in construction exoskeletons appear to have broken through a barricade and protesters are flooding out of the previously cordoned area. Overwhelmed police are seeking cover behind water-cannons being fired on the crowd as shoes, glass bottles and general detritus are flung in response. In the center of it all, the two workers in exoskeletons are wreaking havoc, overturning an armed response vehicle and fighting with cops in riot gear.

"Are you sure you wanna watch this?" David asks, putting the platter on a coffee table and sitting next to his son. Wordlessly,

Jake lifts his sweater to expose a small, rectangular panel in his chest. David presses it and the cover slides down, revealing another plastic vial identical to the one on the tray but for the contents, small bits of brown residue clinging to the inside. With a twist, the tube slips easily out of its cavity and David replaces it with the full one before sliding the cover back into place. Jake's face never once looks away from the screen, only acknowledging the ritual's completion by moving his hand back to his side, his sweater falling back into an awkward bunch in his lap.

"Suit yourself," David says. Putting the empty vial on the platter, he turns his attention to his TV dinner, peeling back a layer of cellophane and releasing a small cloud of steam.

Back in the middle of it all, Chloe is streaming video to her employer. Little does she know that the feed is being broadcast live; she has more pressing concerns. She follows the two workers within viewing distance, keeping her head steady despite the clouds of tear gas burning her face and lungs.

Soon, a horn blares and three dozen officers in riot gear march in from the rear, shooting the two workers with flash-balls. Their exposed bodies take a few shots and they can be heard groaning, but only for a second before they charge into the armed forces. With all the terrifying weight of their armatures sent at full speed against the firing line, the two workers disperse the cordon in an instant, laughing audibly at the irony. Chloe moves in closer, thinking about the raise she's going to ask for.

The most brazen of the riot cops, a small-framed blond woman, is the only one left her around as her colleagues retreat frantically. She stands up to the two rioters, gripping her nightstick tight, ready to strike. A full meter taller than her, they approach, a gravelly laughter emanating from their wrapped faces. When one of them gets in range, she leaps forth, aiming for the face, but the worker swipes his arm horizontally and smacks her in the head, throwing her to the side. She lands straight on Chloe, the police helmet split in two like a coconut. For an instant the two women look eye to eye as the officer gets back up and pulls out her taser.

The rest of the police forces having retreated, the protesters cheer in celebration. At the center of the battlefield, the two workers lift their arms up in signs of victory. They've almost

dismissed the five foot tall officer, finding a macho pride in sparing a woman further beatings. Spotting an exposed power unit in the back of their exoskeletons, she swoops in, the crackle of her taser flashing in the ambient smoke. The worker's arms go down, and then the rest of him. He cries as he falls face down, trapped under the weight of his contraption.

Crouched on the ground, Chloe keeps her eyes on the officer. An amazing force of will has her, taser in hand, circling the other worker with cold confidence. Having seen the treatment his friend has just received, he rotates as best he can to keep facing that unexpected nuisance. She takes a step forward, he takes a step back; she starts circling the other way, he mimics her motion, and by then it is obvious that the worker is terrified. Once again, the police officer breaks her movement by throwing her taser at the man and sprinting toward him. Grabbing his arm as he swings it in a panic, she pulls herself off of the ground and lays a foot through the protective cage, right in his face.

"Jackpot," Chloe thinks, when the blond officer lands on the ground and crosses eyes with her again. Behind her, the worker finally tumbles down, his nose reduced to bloody mush. The tear gas is dispersing when the rest of the riot troops reform their ranks.

Sitting on the edge of their seat, David and Jake find themselves cheering the protesters when the feed abruptly cuts to some unrelated breaking news. Jake moans in disappointment while his father chuckles, falling back in the couch.

"That was so cool!" the boy exclaims.

David smiles with a shrug. "These are some desperate people, you know."

As the announcer wraps up and Jake starts zapping channels again, David grabs his platter. "Well, that's it," he says. "Time for bed, little man."

Jake keeps hammering the remote, as if he didn't hear. "Can we watch a movie?" he tries to bargain.

Stepping into the kitchen, David speaks up with a cheerful tone: "You got your first big day at school tomorrow! You need some rest."

He empties his platter in the trash bin and comes back to his son. Nothing on TV seems to hold Jake's attention, who keeps switching channels, not even acknowledging his father standing beside him.

"Come on, now," David insists, gently. He leans down to take the remote and turn off the TV, patting his son on the shoulder. Jake's weak grip presents almost no resistance, neither does his light frame as David helps him up. The father goes on: "I'll read you a story if you want. Like old times, eh?"

The evening is well advanced when Chloe walks down the narrow street of her apartment building. From here in the favellas, she can see skyscrapers rising high, bathing the outer sprawl in an ambient glow. To the west, the old town lies abandoned in risen waters, dark and decrepit. Beyond it, a floating harbor has been arranged, buzzing with automated activity even at this late hour. Habitable outskirts spread to the north and south of the platform, tied together with an elaborate network of sky-trains.

Chloe unlocks the door to her run-down one room apartment. Her boyfriend Angelo is here, cleaning dishes when she arrives. "Hey, baby." he salutes.

Stumbling and exhausted, Chloe takes off her jacket and drops it on the floor. She mumbles a vague reply to the attractive Latino and lets herself fall flat on the bed. Her shoulders are bruised, her knees are bleeding, her clothes are in tatters, she groans.

Looking over his shoulder, Angelo voices his surprise at the state he finds her in: "Woah. You need some ice?"

"I'll live," she replies, her voice made soar by the remaining effects of the tear gas and her uphill walk. Angelo dries up a last dish and places it on the rack. Turning back to Chloe, he bends over to give her a soft kiss. "I saw your report. Prime time! Way to go!"

Unreactive to his praise, she looks up to him with a thousand yard stare, bruised and battered, elsewhere. He pinches his lips in a funny expression: "That thing makes you look like the Borg," he jokes.

Chloe is drifting: "What?" she replies. Angelo moves his hand over her implants, gently sliding the entire eye prosthesis off of her

head. Under the bulky plate of resin covering a shaved half of her skull, she bears no scar or any trace of surgery. He turns off the electronics embedded in the mask and drops it on the bed next to her. She opens her right eye, kept shut all the while by the excessively compact shape of her fake prosthesis, and blinks like a tired child.

"There was a little boy at the meeting today," she starts, meditative.

Gathering his affairs, Angelo takes a second to take in the information. "Damn!" he lets go, before checking the time on his phone.

Chloe still seems a million miles away. She speaks with the monotone voice of someone thinking out loud: "I wonder if I could write his portrait."

Angelo gulps. "That sounds... gruesome," he says, realizing a little late that the circumstances call for encouragement. "And great!" he adds, finally. "Look, I really gotta go; see you in the morning."

He winks at her while grabbing his jacket and heads for the door. Realizing how late she came home, and a little sorry, Chloe raises up on her elbows. "Love you!" she chirps, as he's walking through the door. He blows her a kiss in response. Before closing behind him he stops halfway through, remembering: "There's pasta in the fridge."

"Thanks," she smiles, waving him goodbye.

Arc-lights shine upon the giant metallic structure of the skyscraper, punctuated with surveillance drones and workers in exoskeletons moving heavy equipment through lifts and cranes. At the bottom of it all, in an adjacent lot, a cluster of prefabs buzzes with electric activity, large transformers spreading between them a web of heavy wires. Inside, Angelo is sitting at his console. The narrow, windowless habitat is lit mostly by the brightness of the screens; stacks of computers and cooling units humming their monotonous song. Headphones on, back to back with a colleague busy on some other part of the site, Angelo monitors live video from UAVs and diagnostic information about workers' exosuits on a half-dozen screens.

He's running surveillance on the top floor of the half-assembled complex. Twenty storeys up in the air, workers coordinate with cranes to connect cartoonishly huge red metallic rods to the already existing structure. He, and dozens like him, fit in the few remaining jobs left by rising automation. When the diagnostics system detects an anomaly, he reads the prompt in his radio, coordinating oil changes, battery life and the occasional deadly threat.

Tonight, the wind is blowing hard, and one of the workers just got his first close call. As the crane was bringing another rod around, a burst of tropical wind sent it in a steady spin. Used to such hazards, the workers all ducked at Angelo's warning, except of course for the new guy. It is not uncommon for inexperienced exosuit operators to finish their first day with their brains splattered in the dust, and this one got lucky. Angelo is still catching his breath when the young worker is helped up by his colleagues. The protective cage over his head is busted, but he's without a scratch.

"Come down, you idiot," Angelo barks in his radio, angry yet relieved. "You're going to maintenance." He takes off his headset to wipe his brow with his sleeve, still shaking from the rush. Behind him, his colleague whines in unbelieving astonishment: down at street level, a string of police cars followed by an armored van are rushing into the construction site. Angelo can hear the sirens from inside the prefab.

Two hours have passed, and Angelo is sitting in the back of the now empty armored van. Three dozen policemen have spread across the construction site, bringing everyone down for interrogation. Angelo got his turn as well, and he's unclear why they're still keeping him; out in the back of the van he can see his colleagues returning to work. Two officers stand guard, who made it clear he's not being charged and so, tapping his feet with certain impatience, Angelo finds solace in the arrival of the stern-looking Japanese man in black military uniform.

The two officers walk away while the strange man gets inside the van. He sits in front of Angelo, reading from a tablet without lifting his eyes once. His uniform betrays no visible rank or name, no unit affiliation; Angelo is left wondering if he belongs to one of those paramilitary militias; and yet his rough expression and the way he carries his shoulders point to a background in some army or

other. Everything about him exudes cold professionalism.

Eventually, Angelo decides to open the conversation: "Is this gonna take much longer, sir?" he asks, respectfully. "I'm pretty sure management's gonna take that off our paychecks."

The Japanese keeps reading from his device, answering with a patient tone: "My colleagues are nearly done. When they've interrogated everyone, you can resume work."

"Thanks," Angelo replies. "It's been a long enough night as it is..."

The officer looks up, gauging Angelo's expression for a moment, enough to make him feel uncomfortable. Finally he asks: "Do you like this job, Mr. Saldana?"

Angelo is a little surprised, and smiles as he answers: "Yes sir, and I'd very much like to get back to it." His reply leaves the officer thinking, and guessing that this might go on for another hour, Angelo tries to pick up the pace: "I've already told your colleagues all I know: I've seen the stolen forklifts on TV, I only learned they came from here an hour ago, when they kept asking me about them."

"Oh, I know," the military man replies, candidly. "We've already apprehended the suspects."

Angelo is taken aback. "Oh," he pauses, taking the news in. "Can I get back to work then?"

The officer points to his tablet with a relaxed motion. "I just want to ask you a few questions," he says, "if you'll indulge me."

With relief and a little boredom, Angelo waves his hand. "Sure, go ahead," he enjoins.

The officer's gaze turns sharp when he makes his statement: "I understand that you've spent several years in the US military."

The man is full of surprises. Although Angelo's never hid that part of his background, this isn't something he likes to bring up. All the more, he doesn't see why that's of any relevance. A little annoyed, he replies: "And?"

The Japanese raises an eyebrow, shrugging with genuine curiosity: "Why did you leave?" he asks.

Angelo lets out a long sigh before answering: "All I did was sit at a desk and count casualties on a monitor." Seeing the officer's apparent lack of understanding, he lets his tone grow more sarcastic: "For some reason, I grew tired of it. Anything else?"

"Does it have anything to do with that hippie journalist you're dating?"

The question comes quick as a rebuttal, hitting low only to destabilize. Angelo recognizes that interrogation technique and sneers: "I see that privacy means very little, here as well."

Putting his tablet aside, the suspicious officer looks away, letting his interviewee cool down. "Please answer the question," he insists, firmly.

With the weird sense that somehow he has to justify his decision once again, to a person who might know nothing of his previous assignment, Angelo tries to explain: "You know the U in UAV stands for Unmanned, right? It's all run by AIs. I wasn't needed."

His answer seems to satisfy the inquisitive Japanese, who follows up with another jab: "And you feel that you're needed here?"

Angelo chuckles, his most recent flirt with death dating back only a few hours, though it's not something he feels deserves bringing up. "Yes, I do," he snickers. "Not to mention: we're actually building something," he adds, with a hint of resentment.

His cockiness doesn't impress his stern interrogator. The Japanese officer joins his hands in meditation and ponders out loud: "What if I told you you're needed somewhere else?"

It's three in the morning. Chloe is sitting on her bed, eating the cold pasta from a Tupperware, with a large tablet on her knees. She's downloaded the video recording from the therapy session, and keeps rewatching it, balancing her fascination with a sense of guilt. She doesn't always let people know when she's filming, and this certainly feels like a violation. But as she listens again and again to the words of the child, she trails off to places she never envisioned.

In the corner of her screen, a messenger application pops up.

Angelo's avatar displayed in a small bubble brings a smile to her face. Before even reading the message, she brings up the chat window, her drowsy mood lifted by this interruption. The surprise leaves her gasping when she sees that Angelo's message reads: "Cops offered me a job LOL."

After a second, Chloe chuckles, incredulous. She brings up the tactile keyboard to reply: "Whaaaaat?! XD"

Angelo's reply is laconic, as it usually is: "Talk in the morning, we're behind schedule." That sounds about right. Chloe switches back to her recording. She opens a text document and stares at the blinking cursor for a while. The protest, her bloody knees, Angelo's message; all seem like distant memories, and helped by the exhaustion she raves about the mysteries of the human experience.

Chapter 2

The morning light bathes the primary school in an unreal glow. David parks his car on the opposite side of the road. Sitting in the passenger seat, Jake takes off his seat-belt. Neither he nor David feel any rush to exit the vehicle, and they sit in silence for a moment. On the sidewalk, kids are heading in, the younger ones holding their parent's hand, while others arrive in small groups sorted by families or residential block.

Jake looks at them go by. Among the faces he recognizes some of his friends from the previous year, with whom he hasn't exchanged a word since his accident. His months of reeducation in virtual reality and specialized clinics feel like a lifetime, and as he tries to reconnect to the person he was half a year ago, he wishes that his new body could sigh. David puts a compassionate hand on his shoulder; in reply, Jake pulls the hood of his sweater over his head. "I don't wanna go," he murmurs.

David takes a deep breath: "It'll be fine," he says. "All of your friends are waiting for you."

Stepping out of the car and walking around to open Jake's door, David knows that he's exaggerating that statement. He does his best to keep his composure when Jake shows reluctance, but eventually they cross the road. Before they enter the brick building, David gently pulls down his son's hood. The chatter of little kids coming back from holiday resonates in the hallway. As they walk past parents wishing their children off, Jake can't help but notice them staring at him. Other children, however, seem oddly oblivious to his presence.

Walking at Jake's slow pace, they finally get to his classroom. The open door reveals a female teacher asking for silence to a room full of ten-year-olds, none of whom seem to care for the slightest. As David catches the attention of the lady, Jake discreetly steps in his shadow, hiding as much from the teacher as from the other pupils.

"Madam?" David asks politely.

The teacher needs only a single glance before greeting David by name: "Ha! You must be Mr. Patel." Although they've never met,

she's obviously been informed of the situation and makes sure he's as comfortable as the circumstances allow.

"Yes... Very nice to meet you," David replies. The teacher's kind expression invites him to move on, yet he feels the urge to delay every action. "Jake," he beckons, "come out here now, don't be shy."

The deafening noise of thirty ten-year-olds arguing in a single room vanishes in an instant when Jake steps in front of his father. Thirty pairs of eyes scrutinize him, wide open, thirty mouths agape, thirty humiliating expressions of astonishment. The teacher however does her best to seem unfazed, maintaining a professional smile: "It's alright Mr. Patel," she says. "We've got it from here."

David flinches; the unexpected silence makes him even more uneasy. When he turns to kiss Jake on the cheek he can hear the murmurs of children rising from the classroom. "OK. Hem... Have a good day, son." He hides a quiver.

And just like that, David finds himself back in the empty hallway. The children have all rushed into their respective classrooms and his footsteps echo lonesomely. He hasn't been away from his son in six months, and that tear in his heart is nothing compared to his apprehension at what Jake's schoolday might have in store. Walking to his car, alone, feels like an eternity. By the time he sits behind the wheel, he's in such a state that he bursts into tears.

Chloe scrolls down pages upon pages of unfinished paragraphs, discarded introductions, moot points and confusing digressions. She has written a lot of nonsense overnight, awkward projections of her own insecurities; she feels she's only skimming the surface, that she knows nothing of the experience she's trying to write about.

One after another, the rusty locks on the door open and Angelo walks in. Chloe is still sitting in the middle of her bed, bent over her tablet. She has surrounded herself with junk at arm's length: empty cookie packets, a bottle of rum, an overflowing ashtray. The room reeks of cold cigarette smoke. She turns to Angelo with a tired smile, as he takes his jacket off and bends over to kiss her.

"So get this," he starts, unceremoniously. "A guy almost died on the job tonight." He walks to the fridge and grabs a can of beer

which he opens and drinks a sip from.

Chloe takes a second to register the information. "Damn!" she exclaims.

Angelo makes a face. "Honest to God," he says, "I thought he was dead. Then he gets up. Not a scratch."

They both laugh at the odds. Angelo drinks another sip of beer before going back to his story: "That's when the cops arrive."

The leap sounds like a consequence, as intended. Chloe is having a hard time following. "Whaaat...?" she frowns.

"Yeah, I thought someone called them," Angelo goes on, "but that made no sense. And there's like LOADS of cars." He spreads his hands to gesture his own surprise

Still expressing her puzzlement, Chloe finishes her sentence in a whisper: "...the fuck?"

Angelo is just started with his story. "They park all over the site," he continues, "have construction halt for, like, three hours. And they start interrogating everyone. Turns out: those two forklifts you filmed last night? Guess where they come from." He raises his eyebrows, waiting for Chloe's reaction.

"Oh shit!" she bursts, hearing the implication.

"Exactly! They got stolen in the afternoon, when the shifts changed." Angelo lets that point sink in. "You gotta tell your journalist friends," he adds.

Stunned and still hungover, Chloe slowly absorbs the information. "Yeah!" she pauses, adding: "Thanks!" her thoughts twirling in confusion. "I mean, that sucks, did they get you in trouble?"

While he answers she starts writing an e-mail on her tablet. "Well not at first," he says, "but after they were done questioning everyone, they kept me for a while." He lets her focus on her writing, speaking at a slower pace, still unsure what to make of all this. "Then comes this guy, obviously not a cop, starts asking me questions about my time in the army."

Chloe sends her e-mail and looks up to him; her eyes engraved by exhaustion now bear an added layer of worry. Content with his effect, Angelo drinks from his beer while waiting for her reaction.

She shakes her hand with impatience. Her boyfriend reprises his story: "He keeps asking and asking, until it feels like a job interview. Then he says they're setting up a task force, and that given my background, I'd be a suitable candidate. I ask 'for what exactly?', but he wouldn't say much. I reckon they want me to oversee field ops or some shit."

The words hit her like a ton of bricks. "Shut the fuck uuuuuuup," Chloe exhales, her general resentment against police forces exacerbated by her last encounter and by half a liter of rum. She turns pale, an unreasonable feeling of persecution moving over her.

Angelo however is giggling with excitement. "I know, right?" he boasts. This evening is an unexpected break for him, it pulls him out of a routine which he was beginning to think would be his life's work, but now exciting horizons beckon. "The dude's been tagging along with the police, doing recruitment work," he adds, guessing Chloe's next question.

"But..." She shakes her head, trying to make sense of that event, "for what? Did he give you anything... what's his name?"

"I don't know!" Angelo laughs, throwing his arms up like a little boy during a treasure hunt. "He wouldn't tell me the name of the unit either. He didn't want me to spill the beans so he gave me very little. All I got is this card, take a look."

Chloe grabs the business card Angelo's pulled from his pocket. It's a blank plastic card with only a phone number. "He wanted an answer right then and there," he adds, "but I told him I wanted to discuss it with you, so he gave me this."

Chloe puts her tablet away and gets up from the bed, folding the cover over her electronic devices. She walks to Angelo in order to whisper to his ear. "This," she says, slapping the business card on the kitchen work plan, "this is – by far – the shadiest thing I've ever heard. Mark my words. They're probably listening in on us right now."

She speaks with the conviction of someone well-informed, Angelo thinks, but she sounds paranoid, and she stinks of rum. He tries to laugh it out but she's not having it. "How do you know it's not a covert kill squad you're getting yourself into?" she asks, point blank. "Please tell me you're not considering this..."

Their relationship hasn't always been easy. When they met a year prior, Chloe burst out in a rant when she learned about his past. Now that both feel he's put it behind him, the officer's arrival feels like the hand of fate. "Oh, come on!" Angelo tries to defuse the coming argument. "Look, I know a little: he says they'll be working urban pacification."

"Ah, alright," the young woman consents, sarcastic. "So not the absolute worst: just plain worst."

"Baby..." he tries to ease up.

"Don't 'baby' me!" she yells, her eyes wet.

"OK, chill!" He immediately regrets raising his voice to her level and tries to play it down: "Listen, I know you hate the cops we have, but that shouldn't mean you hate all cops. Perhaps we need better ones."

"With exosuits?" she rebuffs, her mind set on the question.

They've agreed to disagree a thousand times on the methods through which order can or should be maintained. Angelo's recognized the deadlock too many times before, always letting Chloe get the upper hand so long as he didn't want any part in law enforcement; but today's opportunity feels like a turning point. He insists: "Well, yeah! I mean, you've seen the chaos firsthand, someone needs to do something!"

The lid on Chloe's anger blows off. "Have you looked around, recently?" she bursts. "Everyone's corrupt in this town! Now, they're coming for you, and your first instinct is to bend over like a fucking ostrich? Give me a break!"

Angelo sighs in disappointment. In a half-hearted tone, he answers to himself: "Actually, dude's not from here. His corporation either."

"Oh because of course, he's corporate!" Chloe slaps her thighs with a sarcastic sneer. She doesn't need to expand on the notion: he knows that her resentment toward police forces is rivaled only by shareholders' greed.

"Yeah it's a PMC," Angelo replies, defensive. "So what? It's not like governments have a better rep. These guys, they field test equipment. They're trying to help the city!"

Chloe is speechless. Either Angelo's drunk the Kool-Aid, or he's been keeping his feelings from her. Either way, she hates the man standing in front of her at this very moment. "That's gotta be a scoop, right?" he insists, maybe trying to leverage her career with his.

"Yeah..." she absorbs all the unspoken truth that has just arisen. "I can already see the headlines: 'dog-pile of festering warmongers... brings the show downtown'. Don't get me a ticket." Her tone is sour and disillusioned; she grabs his can of beer and starts drinking from it, a bitter gulp.

He puts his hands on her shoulders and talks softly to her: "I know you hate to look at it, Chloe, but this is gonna happen, with or without me, and I'd rather be at the helm than having some guy I don't know do a job like that. Because you're right: it does smell fishy. And the only way to make sure it's not, is if I call this number."

He points to the business card on the kitchen work plan. His voice is calm and resolute, and perhaps for that reason, or because she's had enough shock for one night, Chloe doesn't feel like fighting this one fight. "This is bullshit," she declares, dismissively. "You miss playing soldier boy."

"That's not true," Angelo retorts. "I love the guys at the site, but girl, you know it, I know it: the pay is shit, and it's dangerous. This guy promised me four times as much, rent free."

A hint of despair in her voice, Chloe follows up: "Now you're insisting... You've already made up your mind, haven't you?"

The pain he's causing her now obvious, Angelo sets aside his own excitement. "No," he falters. "Look, it's been a long night, and there's no hurry. I'm trying to piece out shades of grey, and now's not the best time."

She recognizes his apology for what it is: an unwelcome attempt at reconciliation. The taste of tear-gas reminiscing, Chloe fights her nausea by unleashing her anger once more: "Grey my ass!" she barks. "I feel like I'm gonna puke... You know what you should do? Call this fucking guy and don't be surprised when you get blood on your hands!"

She grabs the business card on the kitchen plan, crumpling it into a ball that she throws at him. As it bounces off his chest, he

grabs it and slides it in his pocket. She looks at him do so with contempt.

"Chloe..." he tries to insist.

"Get the fuck out of here," she yells in disdain. "Go home."

When she gets like that there is no discussion to be had anymore, and Angelo knows it. "I'm sorry," he says, truly sad.

"GO HOME!" she shouts, pointing at the door.

A wave of disappointment flows over the young man. He grabs his jacket and leaves. Before heading out, he turns to Chloe, awaiting confirmation.

"Leave your keys here," she says, coldly.

Angelo is hurt, but he knows better than to insist anymore. He leaves his set of keys by the door and shuts it up without saying goodbye. Chloe drinks from the beer, but the sour taste makes her gag. She tosses the can in the trash-bin when her phone starts ringing. The light-pitched sound gives her a jump scare.

Easing down, she lifts the cover and picks up her phone, the call coming from an unregistered number. With a sudden suspicion, she moves to the door to pull up the chain and look in the peephole, but no one's waiting. She moves away and picks up the call, without saying a word, all sorts of fears rushing through her intoxicated brain.

"Hello?" The voice is warm and familiar, but Chloe's in no state to put a face on it just yet.

"Yes?" she replies.

"Chloe, it's David. Is this a bad time?"

It's only been a little over twelve hours since she gave him her card, and Chloe never thought he would call her so soon. "David? What's going on?" she asks, the strain of a restless night taking its toll on her.

"I'm sorry to call..." The family man speaks with unease. "Malcolm isn't picking up..."

"It's alright, I'm..." she interrupts. "This isn't a bad time. How's Jake?"

"Well..." David gathers himself. "That's why I called..."

Vehicles stumble sluggishly in the busy traffic. It's noon already, and the blazing sun is warming up the downtown platform like a hot plate. Chloe crosses the street through rickshaws and honking smart-cars. She enters David's building, where the strong air-conditioning makes her sneeze, and checks herself in the mirrors of the elevator, arranging her fake prosthesis like she's done a thousand times. When finally he reaches David's front door, the brand new decorum makes her feel ill-fitting. She pushes the doorbell; David comes to open and welcomes her with embarrassment.

"Sorry for the delay," she pants, "the bus got into a jam, I finished on foot."

"Don't!" He looks grateful for her presence. "It's so nice of you to come. You look like you could use a glass of water."

Chloe smiles from ear to ear. Her throat is on fire. "I could!" she agrees.

David goes into the kitchen and grabs a cold bottle of mineral water from the fridge, filling a tall glass. Meanwhile, in the living room, Chloe looks around the clean apartment full of new furniture. On a window ledge, one of those tacky slideshow frames displays pictures of Jake and his mother from before their accident.

David walks back to Chloe and hands her the glass of water. "Thanks," she says softly.

He grabs the frame and looks at it with melancholy. "It was his first day at school today. His friends wouldn't recognize him..." he says, looking at the pictures.

Chloe drinks half the glass in a single gulp, thirsty from a night of boozing and smoking. The water feels superbly cold and she catches her breath. "He's in his room?" she asks.

"Yeah, I went and picked him up at lunch, told my boss it was an emergency... which it is, I guess..."

"How is he?"

"I'm at a complete loss here, Chloe. I understand how he feels. I just can't help it."

David is visibly shaken. Chloe empties her glass and fiddles with it. "Can I go talk to him?" she asks.

He locks eyes with her, his shoulders lowered as a sign of need. "Please, do," he invites.

Chloe hands David her glass, making him put the frame back on the ledge without even thinking. She gathers her thoughts for a second before looking away, and walks rather valiantly into the corridor leading to the bedrooms. The door to Jake's room is ajar, and she can see him sitting on the bed, his back to the door. His room is rather tidy for a ten years old boy's, but Chloe understand that all this apparel is newly acquired through insurance money. There's a laptop on a desk, a plastic football in the corner, clothes on the floor.. A screwdriver is lying next to Jake.

She lets herself in. "Hi Jake, it's Chloe," she greets softly.

As she moves to his side, she discovers that the boy has used the screwdriver to pry off his own face. In his hands lies the mask of soft polyamide, a centimeter thick. Where it would normally fit, small motors made apparent are still expressing whatever signals the boy sends, on the outlines of his eyebrows, lips and cheeks. Chloe considers the vision without a flutter, and kneels down next to him. "Your dad told me you had a tough morning," she says, compassionate.

Jake looks down at the mask, the color of old computers. "The other kids said I was a robot," he says, returning to silence.

Chloe considers the phrasing, before remarking: "That's pretty mean. You're way cooler than a robot. These kids don't know the difference."

Jake looks at her, his skinless face multiplying his expression of sadness. Waving the soft mask with contempt, he asks in reply: "What is it?"

Chloe's smile fades when she answers, with an unexpected solemnity that would have any other boy shiver. "A robot only ever does what it's told," she declares, "like a little soldier. And it doesn't know right from wrong."

Her seriousness acting as a distraction, Jake feels his spirit lifted. Still, this doesn't have much to do with his more immediate concern. "I messed up," he says, looking down at the mask. "I just

wanted to see under it, but I can't put it back."

Chloe shakes her hand: "That's not a problem," she replies with a smile, "my buddies and I, we fix that stuff all the time!"

Jake turns to her, his eyebrows expressing relief and surprise. "You do?" he asks, suddenly hopeful.

The young woman shrugs. "Of course! It's very easy, and a lot of fun. I'll show you how."

Chloe walks out of Jake's bedroom with a victorious smile on her face. Staring out the window, David turns around when he hears her footsteps.

"Your son is fine, David," she says, a lighthearted tone accompanying the good news.

"Oh, thank God," the father sighs in relief.

"We fixed his face with a little duct tape," Chloe adds, "it'll hold for a while."

That's not exactly the news he was hoping for, but David's still grateful. "OK, and, err.." he mutters, trying to allude to Jake's state of mind, "other than that?"

"Oh, he's got a good outlook, I think," Chloe replies straightaway. Trying to find something encouraging and yet true, she adds: "He seems very bright."

"Thank you," David blushes, amazed himself at his son's prowess, "he is... Oh, Chloe, you're very kind. Thank you so much for coming."

"It's alright," she assures. After her last twelve hours, Chloe's happy she came here. She enjoys the quiet lull that follows, slightly annoyed by her own understanding of the stakes. "Look," she adds finally, "you probably don't want to bother with this right now, but..."

"What is it?" David interrupts, his worry showing.

Chloe takes a deep breath to explain the situation concisely. "When Jake clipped his face off," she starts, "he broke the seal. The warranty, on his body? It's void now."

David shakes his head in disbelief at the seemingly absurd statement. "Hem... I'm sorry," he begs. "What?"

"His body," Chloe insists, "I assume you got it with a warranty?"

She can read his confusion plain as a layman's. "Err... I guess," he answers, full of doubt.

Wanting to minimize the gravity of the situation, Chloe attempts a metaphor: "Well, just like your computer, once you fiddle with it, the manufacturer won't take it back if it fries..."

She regrets her choice of words as soon as they exit her mouth. David's dazed expression speaks volumes. "My son's gonna fry?" he asks in terror.

Chloe shakes her hands in an apologetic motion. "No!" she corrects, her heart suddenly racing, "I just meant... it's, like, his life insurance, but only for the artificial bits!"

Keeping aside the fact that she dreams to make a living off of her words, that's what lack of sleep will do to a person, Chloe thinks to herself. She clenches her teeth with regret. David is at a loss for words. Seeing her efforts at reassuring him brought down so easily, she pats him joyfully on the shoulder.

"David," she reprises, "now's not the time to worry about that! I swear: it's not as big a deal as it sounds."

Her persistence seems to eventually pay off. "OK," David mumbles, forced to trust this unusual guide across uncharted waters.

Jake walks out of his bedroom. His mask is back in place, slightly bent along the edges where the clips have been damaged. A long strap of silver duct-tape goes around his forehead like a bandage, and he sits a baseball cap on top. Approving of his street-wise looks, Chloe winks at him.

"Besides," she adds, "I know exactly the kind of place that will cheer you both up."

Chapter 3

Angelo hasn't been able to catch a lot of sleep. The remains of his excitement almost spoiled by Chloe's tirade, he's ended up calling the number on the business card to set up a meeting. Turning down a proposition without first learning about it doesn't conflate with his values, however this might affect his relationship. As he steps out of the subway and walks to the police precinct, he musters his resolve to see this offer through.

The precinct is one of the first facilities built on the platform after its completion, and it shows. The young man walks past graffiti and bullet holes up to the main entrance. Inside, a hive of cops and delinquents is buzzing in a crowded rumble. Thugs in cuffs are being processed by overworked officers sweating behind bulletproof glass. Angelo walks past them up to the reception desk. "Hi, my name is Angelo Saldana," he tells the distraught rookie, "I've got a meeting."

After being asked to leave his passport and sign a non-disclosure agreement, Angelo receives a pass on a lanyard. A quiet officer escorts him to the back of the building, where they cross into a small courtyard. Compared to the rotten atmosphere of the precinct, Angelo feels like he's stepping into a brand new compound; a sleek-looking apartment building on one side faces a wide hangar on the other. These large blocks of concrete have a cold atmosphere to them, but the young man sees method, discipline and, more importantly, budget.

He follows the officer through magnetic locks and cement corridors, until he finds his way to a catwalk overseeing the warehouse. Below, escorted by flying drones and autonomous shielding units, five troopers in combat exoskeletons are training their deployment tactics in a maze of plastic walls and springing cardboard silhouettes. Looking down from a railing, the Japanese officer is standing above them, communicating with the team through a radio headset. The police officer motions Angelo to wait while he catches the attention of the man. After a quick exchange, the Japanese takes off his headset and walks to Angelo.

"Good to see you, Mr. Saldana," he greets with placid contentment. Here in the confines of their headquarters, he's

wearing a uniform showing the rank of Major. His name tag reads: "Hanzo."

"Glad to be here, sir," Angelo replies with mixed conviction, as the memory of Chloe's diatribe lingers still.

The Major looks down at the group of assisted troopers, who are pursuing their training exercise under the supervision of the squad leader.

"So! What do you think?" he asks Angelo while keeping an eye on his troops.

Angelo follows the harmonious deployment of embarked soldiers and defense peripherals with the fascination of an engineer. "Impressive, sir!" he blurts out.

The Major locks eyes with him in a manner typical of inquisitive people. "I need an overseer, young man," he says, straight to the point. "Do you want the job or not?"

Angelo feels a thrill rush along his spine; this is a job like no other, a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. "Yes, sir!" he replies, proudly standing at attention.

The tour of the building is exhaustive. Before they even get to the outfitting department, it feels like visiting a chocolate factory; but when they enter the rigging room, bordered on each side by railings sustaining militarized exosuits, Angelo's mouth drops to the floor. He's only read about this equipment in military publications and doesn't even recognize most of the attachments.

While he's busy geeking out, the Major casually walks to a group of technicians gathered around a woman strung up by the shoulders. She's wearing an incomplete set of combat exoskeleton, while the engineers finish outfitting her. Captivated by this ludicrous amount of tech, Angelo doesn't first pay much attention to her, but as her blond hair reminds him of Chloe's report, he eventually recognizes the female riot cop.

"Meet our last recruit," hails the Major. "Patricia Gillian."

Caged in her mechanized suit, the young woman smiles like a child in an amusement park herself. "Call me Patti," she greets.

Angelo walks across the room to observe the outfitting process. "Hey!" he says, a little hesitant. "I think I saw you on TV last

night!"

The Major nods quietly. Patti seems to hear about this for the first time, her own evening having apparently been busy as well. "You did?" she asks with a curious expression.

"Miss Gillian is a last minute addition to our team," the Major interrupts. "Her show of initiative yesterday is exactly the kind of out-of-the-box thinking we look for in our employees."

The sudden flattery seems to baffle the young riot cop. "Wow, thank you sir," she humbly replies.

The Major turns to her, motioning at Angelo: "Mr. Saldana, here, is our new overseer. Unlike your teammates, you won't have to go through training listening to my croaky voice."

His deadpan self-deprecating humor draws her smile, that she then turns to Angelo. He smiles back, and by that time, whatever remained of his doubts has quietly gone with the wind.

It's late afternoon when Jake, Chloe and David get to the convention hall. All sorts of fanciful characters are gathered by the entrance for a breath of fresh air or for a cigarette: tattooed roboticists and pierced engineers, most of them. Above the large open doors hangs a banner that reads "CYBERCON Manila 2039."

Chloe walks in confidently, Jake follows, and David closes the march, astounded. As soon as they enter the main hall, they're faced with rows upon rows of stands managed like hybrids of a comic book convention's, and a Brazilian carnival's. Each has a dedicated specialty: prosthetic hands, legs, drones, wigs, piercing, tattoo and implants, software upgrades; the list goes on and on, as far as the eye can see, illusory holograms flashing elaborate logos. As they walk through the alleyways, surrounded by visitors in incredible outfits, Jake looks around with absolute wonderment.

"Wow, this place is something!" expresses David.

Chloe replies over her shoulder as she makes way for him and Jake: "You'll see, my buddy Sergei, he's really good."

Dazzled by the many flying objects and amazing costumes, Jake lags a little behind. A man sitting at a stand with no current visitor waves at him, strange colorful objects lying on the table

between them. "Hey man!" he calls out, "You wanna try on one of my models?"

Jake comes closer to inspect, with little understanding, the set of prosthetic genitalia displayed on the table. Myoelectric phalluses of all sizes and colors lie next to artificial vaginas. "They're all one hundred, up to two hundred percent sensitive!" the stand-owner points out. "And they got vibrate, remote, glow in the dark: you name it!"

A few meters ahead and chatting with David, Chloe looks back only to see Jake standing at the booth. She tells David to wait while she walks back and grabs Jake by the hand. As she pulls him, she turns to the peddler of genitalia: "Dude, not cool!" she exclaims.

The man smiles joyfully: "Hey Chloe!" he bursts, throwing his arms up.

She's not responding to his friendliness: "He's a kid," she explains, scoldingly.

The peddler is astounded: "You are?" he blurts out, as they walk away. "Cool!"

Chloe and Jake have caught up to David. She looks slightly ashamed. "Were these...?" David asks, still unclear.

"Yep!" she replies, dropping the subject immediately. "Now, moving on: I think I see my buddies over there."

Jake laughs to himself. He and David exchange a glance and a giggle.

"Sergei!" calls out Chloe, waving at a stand owner further into the hall.

She pushes through the crowd, opening up a path for David and Jake. As she approaches, the people standing in front of the small kiosk turn to her, and David recognizes some of the faces: Bill the biker is here, Malcolm the Brazilian rasta as well. A thin humanoid robot stands by on a set of track wheels, a seven inch vertical screen where its head would be displaying a video call from its remote owner, a disheveled Chinese woman in her sixties.

"Chloe!" goes the woman on the screen, visibly surprised.

"Mum!" Chloe replies joyfully, embracing the narrow-framed drone. "Taking a break from work?" she asks, complicitly.

The woman sneers: "Ah, you know, I'm multi-tasking."

Turning to her guests, Chloe makes the introductions: "Guys, this is my mother: Morgan. Mum, this is David and his son, Jake. He unclipped his mask and we need a fix."

"Oh!" The woman bursts. "Well, you've come to the right place! This young man here is the best face artist in town!"

She points at Sergei, a young Russian man at a stand covered with ultra-realistic faces, molded and hand finished, most of which would readily fit the slot in Jake's skull. Every skin color, every nose type, every eyelid profile seems here, on the table; some faces look more masculine, and some more feminine, but disembodied and lying flat next to one another, most seem androgynous. The face-maker looks proudly over his confections, letting Jake absorb all the input.

Taking his time, the boy finally leans over the table to pick up the mask which most resembles his previous appearance. He lifts it up to look at it from up close, the strange impression of holding a mirror moving over him.

David is looking over his shoulder with a growing sense of success, when he feels a tap on his back. Behind him, the biker from the group therapy is smiling at him: "Hi, David," he says, cheerfully.

David would rather focus on his son but he's grateful for the welcome. "Oh, hi. Hem..." he trails off.

"It's Bill," the biker reminds.

"Funny seeing you here."

Meanwhile, Sergei and Chloe are helping Jake take off the duct tape from his head, preparing to switch his current mask with the one he just chose.

"Chloe brought you?" asks Bill.

"Yes! She's been... extremely helpful," David replies, a sigh of emotion rushing through his lungs as he observes his son try on a new face.

The biker isn't paying nearly as much attention to the scene, instead asking: "You're coming to the Workshop later?"

Slightly annoyed but still polite, David turns to him. "I'm sorry," he says, "the what?"

Sitting at a console twice as complex as the one from the construction site, Angelo tries to keep track of the long list of devices pointed out by the technicians. Facing him from inside the training hangar, the six troopers are in full gear, standing in a row while awaiting orders. Major Hanzo walks back and forth, routinely inspecting their equipment. Everywhere, engineers in full-body suits amass in small groups to clean up and maintain this expensive equipment.

A technician looking over his shoulder, Angelo boots up the console. In quick succession, his screen starts displaying the point of view of each assisted trooper in smaller windows, along with their heartbeat, systems integrity, and dozens of other cryptic diagnostics. Meanwhile, the smaller screens on the outside rim of the console remain black, but there's enough already to let Angelo feel overwhelmed.

The Major walks to the console, now far enough from the troops to appear facing away on each of their screens. "Are you getting ready, Mr. Saldana?" he asks patiently.

More than a little pressured, but able and willing, Angelo does his best to smile with confidence: "I think I got the basics, sir," he replies.

"Alright, boot them up," orders the Major.

Angelo presses a series of buttons to launch the boot-up sequence; on his screens, signals turn from red to green as one after another the six exoskeletons power up. The suits straighten up in a quick and threatening fashion, extending their height by half a foot. Once their motors activated, the troopers pull up their high-tech rifles.

"Good," deems the Major. "Miss Gillian, are you comfortable?"

From inside her exosuit, Patti replies through a radio: "It actually is!"

"This is the Achilles exosuit," the Major moves on, pacing in front of his troops while reciting his pamphlet like a professional salesman. "It provides protection from heavy caliber gunfire, as

well as close ranged attacks. Servomotors embedded under the armor carry the weight of the equipment and assist the user with a better range of motion than any traditional heavy gear. It complements your motions in order to augment your physical capabilities from three to ten times, in areas such as endurance, strike force, or stopping power. It's effective against chemical and biological threats, and it allows for twelve hours of autonomy, which is a hundred times more than any of our engagements will require. Any questions?"

The squad leader raises a hand: "Sir, I forgot the button for the cup holder," he jokes, drawing chuckles from all except the commanding officer.

"Very funny Mr. Bautista," slams the Major, his trademark deadpan chilling the room's atmosphere. "Your second piece of equipment is the Percival smart rifle. It comes with automatic two twenty-three fire and an underbarrel twenty millimeters rifle. On-board computer systems take care of the targeting and firing mechanisms, sending direct feedback to your suit, as well as to the overseer's console." He marks a pause, certainly aware that half of that techno-babble went over everyone's head. "Under your thumb, next to the safety, you'll find the muzzle camera switch," he dumbs down. "Give it a try, Bravo Three."

Realizing that the instruction is purposefully lacking, Patti first looks down at her smart-rifle to find the power button. As she switches it on, the rifle comes alive, speaking with a genderless synthetic voice: "User online."

She aims down at the ground and pushes the muzzle-camera switch with her thumb. On Angelo's console as well as in her own display, a window pops up from the rifle's point of view, telemetric lasers simulating bullet trajectory in real time. She moves the rifle around carefully, unfamiliar with hybrid weapons such as this. "Alright! We can use this to shoot around corners!" she appreciates, profanely.

"That's just one application," the Major expands, leaving to the imagination. "Top to bottom, these rifles are designed to be carried by suit operators. They link directly with your operating system, allowing the overseer complete supervision of the operation. Full recording of our engagements will allow our clients to make a... more favorable assessment of this technology. Provided that you

don't screw up, of course."

While the sarcastic warning washes over the troops, technicians show Angelo how to activate thermal vision and light amplification for the troopers. The Major continues his briefing: "This is essential to our assignment in this city. Once your training is complete, our government contract will allow us to take on assignments usually reserved to Special Forces, as a means of demonstration. If the mayor's office is satisfied with our results, we pack up and move on. If they're not, I'm the one who's gonna have to explain why to management."

He pauses, letting the idea sink in. "I don't look forward to that. So you'll do me the favor of behaving like exemplary civic servants, at all times," he emphasizes that last part. "I don't want to see your ugly mugs going viral on the web! Finally, I don't want to hear about any petty beef between army, navy, police or the secret service. You left all that behind when you signed your contract. Do I make myself clear?"

The order couldn't come out in a more crystalline fashion, and the six troopers all reply at once: "Sir, yes sir!" Angelo joins in, uttering the words from mere reflex memory.

Satisfied, the Major swirls a hand to the attention of the technicians: "Now roll in the hive," he orders.

The outer rim of Angelo's screen lights up with three dozens small windows, when an orchestra of peripherals fly and roll in from their respective stations, surrounding the troops in all-terrain bulletproof shields and surveillance UAVs.

That same evening, following Chloe's directions, David drives his car down a dirty alleyway, up to an industrial warehouse located on the edge of the city platform. Above the large open door shines a red neon sign: the word "Workshop" made out of disparate letters projects its warm glow over a small set of stairs. Stepping out of the car, Jake looks up to the luminescent skyscrapers rising high above them. From inside the Workshop, he can hear the chatter of the group of friends they met at Cybercon.

Chloe lets the boy walk in first, checking his reaction with glee when an automaton springs out to welcome the new guests. Standing on a bent axis, a top hat sewn to its head and a red

tailcoat on, the burlesque figure sends its rag doll arms flying as it swings around, a small speaker on its painted face greeting: "Welcome to the Workshop!"

Jake turns to Chloe and David with a radiant smile; he's now sporting a brand new custom face, the brown-skinned mask oddly framed by a beige jawline and neck. They found him a wig though, and this fake curly hair is enough to make him resemble his old self. As they walk past the automaton, and inside the warehouse, Jake discovers a large circular room full of electronics and celebrating friends. Under a wide glass rotunda through which the downtown skyscrapers appear, stands a grotesquely huge humanoid robot. Jake freezes with excitement.

Chloe motions him and David to join her friends inside the main room, where rugged couches, patched-up bean bags and truck tires serve as seats. They sit down at the bottom of the Behemoth, surrounded by adepts using screens for all sorts of purposes – from 3D printing to retro video-games. Red drapes hang over them on the outer rim of the ceiling, the high concrete walls bear some elaborate graffiti, everywhere old movies and twenty-four hours news channels play on shattered monitors, while away from prying eyes less licit activities are carried out.

One of Morgan's slender drones comes by, two beer bottles in its hands for Chloe and David who welcome the refreshment gratefully. "Young friend," Morgan addresses Jake through her telepresence device, "you must be getting hungry."

Jake scratches his head, out of mere habit, prompting Morgan's amusement. "Ha, I wouldn't know..." he admits. "But yeah it's dinner time."

He looks at his father: they both let time fly. Morgan's screen stops displaying her video call, her face replaced by a smiling icon as the drone stands, inert. Interrogative, Jake turns to Chloe, who's observed the exchange and now pouts reassuringly. An instant later, another of Morgan's drone rolls up to Jake with a vial of nutrients in its hand, this one controlled by her in real time, while the other one resumes idle mode and goes on to more menial tasks. "Here you go," she presents.

Jake is about to grab the vial when David gets it first. "Thank you!" he says, "I didn't think to pack up dinner."

"It's alright," assures Morgan. "I'm glad you stayed with us. We all love having new guests!"

Chloe smiles at Jake while David changes his nutrient vial. A waist-high service drone passes by, small baskets of french-fries arranged on its platter, and the young woman picks one up for David and herself. Jake looks at it, and everything else around, with pure child-like wonder. A small robot dog comes and sits next to him, wandering around on its own. Jake pets it with amusement; Chloe taps her right eye to take a picture.

When he's done changing the vial, David turns to Morgan: "Don't get me wrong," he starts, apologetically, "I'm really amazed, but... what is this place, exactly?"

"Well," she replies, meditative, "Cybercon only happens once a year. The rest of the time, we gather here. This is a place of exchange, and good will."

"The electric bill alone must be through the roof!" David exclaims. "Who pays for all this?"

"Oh, we all pitch in. If you'll excuse me, I'm needed elsewhere."

"It's been very nice meeting you, Morgan."

"You too David, and Jake. Enjoy your evening."

Playing with the dog now rolling on its back, Jake raises his head. "Thanks!" he says, cheerfully. Morgan smiles before disconnecting from her drone.

Sitting next to David, Chloe takes it upon herself to answer him properly. "My mum started this place as a pet project a few years back," she starts. "Her job keeps her very busy, and she thought she could make fun friends this way."

"What does she do?" the father asks, stuffing french fries into his mouth.

"She works at H+, as head of R&D."

"I see," David acknowledges, "very impressive!"

Chloe doesn't look all that impressed: "I don't know..." she trails off. "She makes a buttload of cash, and she throws it around... It's kind of her own charity work."

David's not inclined to see anything wrong there. "That explains

where your generosity comes from," he flatters.

Chloe laughs. Jake looks at them bonding, a little annoyed. They both eat fries and drink beer, small pleasures of the flesh he might never again have a chance to partake in.

"Still," Chloe goes on, "it quickly grew, and people started bringing their own machines. Before you knew, the place was open twenty-four seven..." She looks around the room with nostalgia.

Malcolm walks in, carrying a bundle of wires that he's trying to untangle. He looks at the small trio from a distance, seeing the child sat down somehow lonesomely, and catches his attention: "Hey boy," he beckons, "you wanna try something new?"

Jake straightens up, excited, and turns to David and Chloe, who gesture him to go on with reassuring nods. In his awkward shuffle, Jake rushes to Malcolm while David and Chloe groggily follow. They walk around the Behemoth to the other side of the room, where a dozen flat screens of various sizes are set up in a semi-chaotic fashion.

Malcolm finishes untangling a long wire from the bundle, and walks to a computer connected to the TVs where he connects one end. He walks back to Jake, standing very close to him at an angle where the boy can see both the screens and the rastafari's temple. Picking fries with the curious demeanor of two passers by, Chloe and David observe the scene from a few feet away.

"You ready?" Malcolm asks, playfully.

Jake is unsure what he means. "Err, yeah?" he replies, in doubt.

Malcolm plugs the other end of the wire in one of the multiple outlets set in his skull. Each screen starts broadcasting his point of view, oddly deformed to fit a rectangular frame. Jake can see himself in each and everyone of them, his new face expressing utter puzzlement as he's still not used to his own appearance, and certainly confused by the filming equipment. He bursts into laughter, prompting smiles on everyone's face.

Malcolm moves back and forth around him, looking at the Behemoth, the robot dog and everyone around, while Jake is hypnotized by the spectacle of the dozen flat screens.

Amused and astonished, like by some magic trick, the boy asks: "How does that even work? You've got... you've got real

eyes."

Malcolm taps his temple, not far from where the wire goes in his skull. "I had my visual cortex replaced," he says. "All the images, they go in through here."

"Why did you do it?"

"Because I was born blind," the rasta replies, as if it were nothing. "Hey, Jake, you wanna try? You know you can."

"Yeah, that looks fun," the boy consents.

Chloe interjects: "Hold on, Mal. He hasn't got the setup."

"So?" The Brazilian shrugs. "It takes like one minute."

David has very little idea what's going on: "What are you talking about?" he asks.

Chloe explains: "If he wants to do that, we need to go into his settings first."

"His what?" Quite legitimately, David intrudes on the conversation. Being surrounded by people who are more familiar than him with his son's body makes him really uncomfortable, and that much is obvious to everyone here except Jake.

"Dad! Can we do it, please?" the boy asks, excited.

"Look, it's safe," assures Chloe, "and we can revert it. I just need to plug into him for a second."

David eases up, curious to learn more anyway. "How do you do that?" he asks.

Chloe motions Jake to sit on a nearby stool. Behind his ear, a discreet rubber panel comes off under her fingernails, revealing a small port. Malcolm hands her a tablet, which she connects to this port before reaching into Jake's operating system. He doesn't seem bothered, instead looking at Chloe's tablet with great interest.

While she goes through the sub-menus of his BIOS, she gives a crash-course to both David and Jake: "Your body is a downgraded version of a stock model," she explains. "They actually lock away some of the functions reserved for more expensive ones. I'm just going to unlock your HUD."

She taps her tablet and Jake is jump-scared with a laugh.

Malcolm disconnects himself from the TVs, turning their screens black, and hands the wire over to Chloe. She disconnects the tablet and places the other wire in the same port. When she's done, she tells Jake: "Now you can move your cursor by looking around, and pretend that you blink to click."

"OK," the boy replies, confident.

"Bring up the settings," Chloe goes on, "it's the icon in the..."

Before she's done explaining Jake raises a thumb. "Yeah I got them," he says.

Chloe smiles to David who looks confused and worried. Staring at the floor, Jake is slightly bobbing his head: it is a strange sight indeed. Chloe keeps giving him indications: "OK now, video, output, EXT 1." Jake nods a few times, and suddenly the screens light up, showing the concrete ground overlaid with a translucent unfolding menu.

Jake looks up to Chloe and David, who can now see themselves in the screens behind him. This seemingly benign use of his features astounds David. Chloe turns to him, smiling with confidence: "You ever wondered what you looked like through your son's eyes?" she asks.

A little overwhelmed, David starts to tear up before laughing with relief. Jake is already walking around, toward the screen; as he looks at the TVs from a straighter angle, the HUD menu reflects a thousand times in the multiplied frames.

Chloe tries to help: "You can minimize your HUD if you..."

Jake has closed the menu before she's done talking. He moves back and forth in front of the multiple screens, greatly amused by the psychedelic effect.

Chapter 4

The following three months, Angelo spends his days training with the troopers. The military routine quickly comes back to him: waking up at dawn in their five stars barracks, entire mornings of physical exercise, followed by afternoons spent honing their tactical combat skills. In the hangar, he would change the configuration of the maze on a daily basis, for the troops to deploy in mock-up facilities where cardboard gangsters would hold cardboard hostages.

Assemble, breach, rinse and repeat would be their daily bread. Strategic scenarios would vary only in theme, the exercises always revolving around taking down humanoid targets, with laser pointers, then paintballs, then live ammunition. By the time the targets would get paintball guns of their own, the troops would take them down in less than a second. Avoiding fire would prove to be a greater challenge however, the shielding units offering limited protection against heavy resistance. At the end of each day, technicians would bring out high pressure cleaners to remove the many paintball splashes on the suits. The Major would always close the day off with a lecture, sometimes demeaning enough to make them bring their A game the next day, sometimes purely strategy-driven. And soon enough, they would become a unit.

All the while, David would arrange for Jake to stay out of school and spend his days at the Workshop, dropping him with Chloe in the morning and picking him up after work. From his office, he would sometimes receive videos of Jake shot from a drone, that Chloe would send him just to stay in touch. She would send videos of Jake learning tricks, often challenged at first in replicating them, but always overcoming any difficulty he would face. Together, they would tweak and upgrade his body, helping him recover a child's flexibility. In a matter of months, Jake would be able to ride a motorized unicycle around the room, filming himself with the drone by remote control, with the robotic dog chasing after him.

Once, after a long day, David would get to the Workshop and find everybody partying without a clear occasion. They would've booted up the Behemoth in the center of the room, controlling it to shoot bubbles and foam from the guns attached to its wrists and shoulders. The robot dog would bark. David would hardly believe what his life had become. Later they would let his son control the

giant robot and he would remember, as a kid, dreaming of toys like these. Jake would suggest to add a confetti gun, and by their welcoming reaction David could easily tell that this lovable band of misfits considered them both a part of their improbable family.

It's a warm night in early December and the six troopers, along with their technical team, are enjoying the rooftop lounge of their classy barracks. A large TV is playing music videos, and they're having drinks on black leather couches, arguing about policy making. No one remembers what really prompted the topic, and no one really cares.

"No," contradicts Yuwono, the Indonesian ex-policeman, "I'm saying that the minute you make something illegal, criminals will try and make a profit."

"So what?" objects one of them.

"He wants to legalize everything," jokes the Bravo team leader.

The squad leader cuts out the banter: "Then we'd be out of a job, wouldn't we?"

All laugh except Yuwono. "I'm no lawmaker," he says, frowning. "I was just making a point." His expression quickly turns to surprise when he sees the Major walk in, and everybody mirrors his attitude as he straightens up.

"Relax, we're all off duty here," says the Major, approaching. Angelo and the technicians gather close by. The squad leader grabs a beer from the cooler and offers it to the Major, who accepts it with a nod. His presence here is highly unusual, and everyone is quietly waiting for him to give it a justification, which he eventually does: "I was just on the phone with the head of Public Safety," he says, affecting a dramatic pause. "Your last performance review was judged 'satisfactory'," he adds, finally.

The troopers seem confused, Angelo walks in closer. Seeing nobody's sure of what the Major means, the squad leader leans in: "We're a go, sir?"

The grim Japanese nods with a stern expression: "We're a go." They all cheer. Bottles are opened, glasses are emptied. The Major and the troops raise their beers. "That's not all," adds the commanding officer, "our last piece of equipment is on its way and

should arrive right about... now."

He looks up at the sky above the precinct, but only dark clouds made crimson by the light pollution are visible. Everybody's frowning in an effort to spot whatever he means, when a large helicopter bursts out the clouds, four rotors carrying this obsidian brick like some magic bus, its flight utterly silent. Heading for the precinct, it lands effortlessly on the rooftop of the training hangar, next to the barracks.

"Say hello to our automated stealth dropship," points the Commander. The transport is resting on the opposing rooftop, its sleek curves reflecting the shining city. Just looking at it is enough to let the troopers feel imbued with its obvious raw power.

A few minutes later, the Major gives Angelo a first look at the dropship from up close. "The troopers are ready," he confides, "but there is one last task you need to familiarize yourself with."

Angelo gets curious: "What is it, sir?" he asks.

There is no cockpit or window on the dropship, only two large lateral doors that pull up under the turbines. The Major uses a remote to open the vehicle, revealing large racks designed to load in the whole strike team along with their escort of drones. At one extremity of the vehicle, Angelo sees what he assumes is his console. A few steps away, a bare-bone version of a combat exoskeleton is hanging from the ceiling.

"During assignments, I want you on board, working this console to minimize latency," explains the Major. "The link with the strike team is heavily encrypted and this vehicle can withstand rocket fire, so there's no real downfall compared to working from the base."

"Alright," Angelo approves, inspecting the layout of this new console.

The Major steps to the hanging exoskeleton. "Do you know what this is?" he asks, gauging Angelo's reply.

"That's a remote control frame, isn't it?" attempts the young overseer. "They're used to evacuate incapacitated troops."

"Very good," deems the Major. "While you monitor the whole of the squad, I'll be here, behind you, ready to override any of the exosuits on the ground, should the necessity arise."

"You mean..." Angelo pauses, unsure of the implication, "we'll be using this all the time?"

The Major looks at the device. "I understand your concern," he assures. "This was designed for emergencies only. Soldiers need to be accountable for their actions."

"Yes, that's exactly..." Angelo mumbles.

"In our engagements," the Major interrupts, "we'll be facing emergencies all the time, Mr. Saldana. You'd be surprised how much the troops welcomed the idea of this system."

"Really?" It does come as a shock, and Angelo's not quite sure what he should make of it.

"I know I was," admits the soldier of fortune. "They all said something about having an experienced veteran watching your back all the time," he adds, somehow sarcastically humble.

"Of course, when you put it that way..."

Angelo drops the subject. After all, he's not the one who signed up to get his ass into gunfights. Still, looking at the interior of the dropship, he's amazed by the meeting point between drone and soldier that has been achieved here. The loading racks leave very little room for the troopers to get out of their suits. Calling this a transport is a stretch, he thinks: this is a flying tin can made to deliver heavy ordinance.

The Behemoth has found stillness again. It's now wearing Christmas decorations, presiding over the holiday like a giant robotic Santa Claus. Malcolm has grown tired of getting beaten by the ten year old boy at video games, and he's pulled out an old version of a fighting game that he played as a kid. Both of them have connected their controllers to outlets in their heads, for a faster and more responsive duel, as Jake has learned to do with many appliances. He is standing close to the screen, trying to replicate his character's movements, more out of childish amusement than of necessity. All around them, friends are betting on the outcome of the fight.

"You think you're good but you're not old school," throws the rasta as he gets on the offensive.

"It's just slower, and ugly," Jake teases, skeptical. "You're still gonna lose!"

A few feet away, David is watching the scene unfold with a serene smile. Not too far, lost in her own bubble, Chloe is checking on her phone a string of messages from Angelo to which she hasn't replied. Since that fateful day when she pushed him away, she's only felt resentment at the thought of him, and now that he insists they remain in touch, resentment makes room for contempt. With resolve, she deletes his contact info. She is still bitter when she pockets her phone but, soon, her eyes falling on David's expression, she eases down.

"David?" she mutters.

"Hm. Yep?" Hands in his pockets and a peaceful smile on his face, the father turns to her.

"You seem happy."

"Look at this." David laughs as he points to the virtual fight. Jake is having intense fun, throwing his arms around as they play and exchanging taunts with Malcolm. The proud rasta is refusing to yield, his health bar reduced to a tiny speck while Jake's character assaults his fearlessly. Because of the loud cheering, David leans over to Chloe: "He's back!" he says. "I never thought I'd see him like this again."

She smiles, having really nothing to reply. David continues: "I really have you to thank for that... and those scientists like Morgan."

Chloe's anger dissipates. She's profoundly humbled by his thanks, a rare feeling of meaningfulness warming up her heart. "You never told me..." she hesitates. "What happened?" She has delayed time and again to ask that question, her awkward attempts at writing about Jake remaining fruitless all these months.

"Oh, that's right," David ponders. He gulps quietly before retelling the events: "Well, we used to live in an apartment outside the platform, built before the rise of the sea levels. It was supposed to be stable..."

"Oh my God!" Chloe bursts, realizing the implication.

"When I came home from work, I could see the smoke from a mile away."

"You lived in the Caloocan Plaza! I'm so sorry, I had no idea," Chloe apologizes, remembering the press coverage of the catastrophe.

David acknowledges her compassion with a grim nod. "Police kept the whole area on lockdown for days," he moves on. "I... I was certain I lost them both, and I drank my heart out. I slept wherever I'd fall down... and then I got a call, telling me my son had lived." He lets go of a heavy sigh. "I thought it was a bad joke... but you see, we lived on the last floor. His mother shielded him, and they were among the first to be evacuated."

Images of the disaster reminiscing as they talk, Chloe feels a vague vertigo. "So, you went to the hospital?" she presses on.

"After I sobered up, I went there, yeah," David replies, his soft cheeks caving as he ventures into the confusing corners of memory lane. "They explained that the damage was severe, but that they managed to save most of the important parts of his brains..."

"You mean..." Chloe attempts to specify his phrasing.

"Well you know," he interrupts, summing up, "those we can't replicate."

She nods, understanding the gist. Still, reminded of recent research, she raises a pedantic finger, adding: "Yet."

"Sure," David concedes, "anyhow, I work for an insurance company, we're well covered. So the next day, there I am, with a son again."

They take a moment to appreciate this unexpected turn of events. "You know," Chloe digresses, "his life expectancy is off the charts, now."

David nods quietly at the remark. "That's what they told me," he confides. "But... what kind of life? That's what I wonder."

More than a little jealous of the boy, Chloe dismisses this concern. "Give him some time," she says. "He seems to be doing pretty well right now."

She points at the virtual match, and Jake taunting Malcolm. David chuckles. "You've got a point," he admits. "The past few months have been a blessing."

Feeling their friendship grow, Chloe allows herself a more

personal statement. "I'm sure he misses his mother," she says, "but at least he's made real friends here."

That mention of his wife sends David's thoughts drifting. "I wonder if it's time to send him back to school," he ponders out loud, a curious sense of guilt in the back of his mind.

"You know," Chloe objects playfully, "I think he's learning more here than he would in school!"

They share a laugh. Meanwhile, Jake tricks Malcolm into attacking and knocks him down by surprise. The rasta can't believe his eyes: "Oh, no you didn't!" he explodes.

"Oh, but yes I did! In your face!" The boy boasts, as people cheer and bets are settled. Standing at his feet, the robotic dog he's befriended joins in on the celebration, skipping around joyfully. "Dad! Did you see that?" calls Jake, referring to his victory.

David gives him a thumbs up, a wide smile on his face, while Morgan's drone rolls in, carrying a small suitcase marked with the H+ incorporated logo. "To the victor go the spoils!" she declares, opening the suitcase on a table.

Around the main room, lamps turn off and tone down, before a swarm of robotic flying insects takes off from the suitcase, shining like fireflies. They spread across the room with an odd precision, hovering in position and forming an elaborate fractal pattern. Morgan hands Jake the control device used to order the swarm around. As he connects directly to it and starts waving his arms, the cloud of miniature drones follow. In the relative darkness of the room, their hypnotic movements capture everyone's gaze. Chloe and David smile at each other.

Troopers and technicians are having lunch in their automated self-service restaurant. The steady noise of platters sliding on aluminum railings fills the room, when suddenly an alarm blares. The troopers freeze, the voice of their commanding officer barking from the speakers: "Lunchtime over," he growls. "We've got our first assignment. I want troopers suited up in fifteen minutes. Get moving!"

The lunchroom is emptied in a matter of seconds, the teams rushing to their respective stations while cleaning drones come out

of theirs, discarding platters and dishes left behind.

An hour later, the six troopers are all geared up, hung to the ceiling of their dropship by outfitting armatures, getting ready to drop. The Major is wearing the bare-bones exoframe; he walks toward Angelo's console from the back of the transport, inspecting his troops' equipment. When he's satisfied, he grabs the wire hanging behind Angelo to connect his own suit to the overseer's interface.

Keeping the virtual reality headset over his forehead to address his troops, Hanzo starts: "We're going after a band of pirates who have taken a group of tourists hostage." His voice as loud and resolute as ever, he goes on: "The government is trying to stall, but these guys have a reputation for violence, and we can't afford to wait until nightfall." He pauses, letting the notion sink in of an attack in broad daylight. "You've been through this scenario a hundred times, so remember your training."

Angelo brings in aerial images of a middle-sized yacht surrounded by a few zodiacs. Of the many silhouettes on board, the threat algorithm paints red those carrying firearms. On the exterior sections of his screen, pulled from the briefing material, Angelo displays pictures of the gang leader, both his forearms replaced by rusty submachineguns; the rest of his crew are, like him, shirtless Oceanian cripples with wooden legs, metal hooks for hands and scavenged cybernetics all around.

"They have seven hostages," continues the Major. "Satellite imagery shows eleven boogies. Archangel, can you confirm?"

Angelo checks live infrared footage from the array of drones deployed out of the pirates' sight. Kneeling in the ship's hold, seven silhouettes get highlighted in green.

"Eighteen targets confirmed," Angelo reads from the monitor. "Looks like they took them inside, sir."

"The leader of this gang is on board," informs the Major. "If you get the option, leave his head intact for the press."

The dropship comes to a stop. Lowering the headset over his eyes, the Major barks: "Prepare to drop."

In one voice, the troopers all reply: "Ready, sir!"

"Make me proud," the Major orders without a hint of irony.

Angelo engages the airdrop sequence, pulling both lateral doors open while the ship starts descending rapidly.

The sun is shining brightly and pirates with binoculars keep scanning the horizon. Descending at high speed in the zenithal path of the sun, the dropship extends its mechanical arms like a set of wings; and when she sees the emptiness below her feet, Patti feels her heart skip a beat. A second later they all drop, slowed down only slightly by industrial-grade winches; and twenty seconds later they stand in the middle of a bloodbath.

The operation is a show of pure processing power and human coordination. Before their feet have even touched the deck, the troopers have neutralized half their targets, aiming their silenced rifles as they fall and letting the targeting system do the rest. Two slugs in the heart and one in the forehead is the only ransom paid to the pirates.

The heavy weight of the troops' equipment sends the yacht shaking as they hit the floor, their footsteps muffled by soft materials. Quickly followed by their shielding units and a cohort of UAVs, the team deploys all over the main deck, Patti staying behind while Alpha team storms the inside of the ship and the rest of Bravo clears the sides.

She has locked onto one pirate, lucky enough to have been spared the first salvo, and who's now hiding under a tarp at the front end of the yacht, behind the stacked anchor rope. Unbeknownst to him, three flying drones monitor his thermal signature. Shaking with fear after having seen his friends brought down in a flash, he's arming a rocket launcher, a stream of urine pouring down his leg.

In her radio, Patti can hear the chatter of the team: "Sir, Target is using human shields," says Ocampo, her only female coworker.

Using infrared, the Nigerian team member is aiming his rifle at the pirate's head through the floor of the living room. The man is hiding among the hostages, both his Uzis pointed at them.

"I've got a clean shot," says Owusu, "but I doubt the picture will look any good."

The Major thinks fast: "Take it," he replies.

The trooper shoots his twenty millimeters underbarrel rifle at the floor, blasting a hole through the thin structure. Hostages are jump-scared by the noise when the bullet bursts through the ceiling right over the pirate, entering his head from above. For an instant, silence falls, as hostages are holding their breaths. The pirate's arms, still raised, limply fall, but only halfway before his head explodes, scattering brains and bone fragments all over the hostages, who scream in a panic.

"So much for the newspapers," declares the Major with a careless tone. "Alpha One, check for explosives and get these hostages out."

Speaking through his radio, the squad leader executes the order. "Acknowledged."

"Bravo Three," the Major moves on, "any word from your target?"

Patti takes a deep breath. "Negative, sir," she replies.

"Try talking him out. Our job is done, here."

"Roger that."

From behind the waist-high wall of Kevlar erected by the shielding units, Patti speaks through speakers embedded in her shoulder plates: "This is the Police!" she yells. "Lay down your weapon and come out with your hands up!"

From the dropship, Angelo watches the scene nervously: "Don't take any chances," he invites, reading from live simulations, "you can hit him through those ropes."

Down on the yacht, the pirate is panicking. Cornered and desperate, he decides to blind-fire his rocket launcher above the piled rope.

Angelo bursts: "RPG!"

Patti sees the rocket coming right for her face, in what feels like an eternity because she freezes solid. She would later remember seeing her entire life flash before her eyes, forever unable to tell if this isn't a trick played by recollection, but for the short while when the explosive projectile flies through the few meters that separate her from death, all she can think about is that she's not ready. Under the weight of her suit she curls down, letting the tip of the

rocket fly above her shoulder, and pushes it upwards with her wrist.

She and her colleagues standing on the deck see the rocket fly high into a spiral before exploding in midair, damaged from the collision. Patti is forgetting to breathe, when the video feed of her muzzle camera pops up in her field of view. Her rifle is still aimed at the pirate, showing through infrared the man behind the stack of ropes.

Only then does she realize that the Major has just used – and released – the override system, effectively saving her life. Suddenly, her suit regains flexibility: the override is off. In her radio, she can hear the Major's voice: "He's all yours," he says with a final tone.

Arms still stretched and looking at the fading smoke of the rocket, Patti shoots a burst of three, hitting the pirate through his cover, twice in the chest, once in the head.

When the night falls that day, the troopers celebrate with beer and loud music. The whole team of technicians are here too, along with the Major, everyone very happy with themselves. They cut off the music as a large TV reports on the successful operation, and the first official mention of the task force.

Angelo is leaning on the guardrail, looking at the colorful display of lights coming from the city. Patti joins in, her walk revealing a certain degree of inebriation; he is rather buzzed himself. She yawns, stretching her chest in a not-so-subtle manner, her sharp blue eyes reflecting the giant screens plastered on the skyscrapers.

"So, guardian angel," she starts. "That was interesting, having you in my ears earlier..."

Angelo coughs his sip of beer: "Haha! Gross," he laughs.

She leans over closer, bobbing her head so as to shake off the joke. "I mean it," she insists: "I've never had a rush like that... It was a real turn on." Angelo smiles meaningfully. Later that night, they would end up in her barracks, celebrating survival, and merit, and all virtuous things that one can get high on. They would ride each other until dawn, until exhaustion, until slumber would take them and they would sleep the sleep of the just.

Chapter 5

It's Christmas 2039, Jake and David's first Christmas since their life took a twisted turn, and they've decided to spend it at the Workshop, where Jake spends most of his days. With the help of his friends, he's just finished installing a leaf-blower on the shoulder of the Behemoth. Funneling glitter and confetti through a large tube, they spray the room in colors.

Apart from the group, Chloe is lying on an old sofa, sorting through prosthetics manufacturers' websites on her phone. Once they run out of confetti, Jake walks to her, glitter encrusted in his hair and clothes. He glances at her phone and asks: "You're checking upgrades?"

"Hey Jake!" she replies, surprised in her solitary contemplation. "Nice work on the Behemoth!"

"Thanks!" The boy giggles. "It was really fun."

She pockets her phone in a hurry, but when she sees the child raise his artificial eyebrows as a sign of interest, she changes her mind. The screen displays the specifications of a highly realistic eye prosthesis. "I'm just browsing..." she mumbles.

Jake looks over her shoulder. "This one looks really cool," he says. "You should get it!"

"Well," Chloe objects, "the optics aren't that great... I like this one better."

She switches to another tab showing a more sophisticated model. Unlike the other, this one looks nothing like a human eye, and more like the lens of a reflex camera. The web-page has a button to order; it's an expensive model.

Jake snaps his fingers, amazed. "Oh, wow," he exclaims, "it looks bad-ass! You gonna order it?"

"I don't know..." She looks at him with melancholy. It's very obvious she's trying to speak, but nothing comes out.

"What's wrong?" he asks, walking around to sit beside her. He's never seen her like this.

"Oh, Jake," she sighs. "You make it sound so simple... You

know? You're pretty lucky somehow."

"Me?" the boy replies, incredulously sarcastic. "Lucky? Yeah, OK. Sure."

Chloe's immediately embarrassed by her remark. "I'm sorry," she stutters, "I didn't mean it like that... it's just... You know..." She pauses, looking for the root of her indelible jealousy. "You're gonna live a thousand years!"

This is not the first Jake has heard of this, as during his reeducation the topic came up a few times. Still, not even halfway through his eleventh year of life, the boy can hardly fathom what that means. He shrugs in silence, seemingly unfazed.

"I'm not kidding!" she insists. "For someone like me to get where you're at, that means a lot of surgery. Even just for this eye, I'd need an operation."

"You wanna get the other one done?" the boy replies, confused by the young woman's honesty.

"No! I..." Chloe quiets down. When she opens her mouth again, Jake finds her tone strangely serious. "Look," she says, "I don't want you to feel betrayed, but this has been weighing on me. I'm a fake."

"What?"

"I've grown among people like this, but... I've lied to you Jake: my eyes are intact. This... this is a mask, I use it for my job..."

Chloe takes off her mask and looks at Jake with a sorry expression. He takes his time to react, dismissing the gravity of the situation by waving his hand. "I don't see your problem, here," he says, "you're the lucky one."

"I know," Chloe admits, shameful. "You're right."

"Are you gonna order it, then?"

The boy's instantaneous reply washes away her feeling of self-pity. "You know what?" she declares, with renewed enthusiasm. "I'm gonna do it right now, it's Christmas for God's sake!"

Jake clenches his fist as a sign of victory. "Yesss!" he approves, excited.

Chloe makes the order, the weight on her chest lifting up. Once

she's filled in all the required fields, she turns to Jake and wraps an arm over his shoulder. "You're a good kid, you know?," she tells him. He smiles in reply.

On the first floor of their barracks, the troopers are finishing their daily physical exercise. Under the supervision of technicians, they take off electrodes from their chests and listen to their trainers' personal recommendations. Patti and Ocampo turn off their treadmills. The simulated uphill run has left Patti breathless, and she looks at her Filipina counterpart who didn't break a sweat with annoyed envy. They both get relieved first out of professional courtesy and leave for the showers.

Patti takes off her training outfit and gets under the shower-head next to the one Ocampo is using. She hasn't had many occasions to exchange with her only sister in the brotherhood, but she has heard rumors. A little intimidated, she is hoping today to set the record straight.

"Hey, Ocampo," she greets, friendly.

"Gillian," the stern Filipina replies, vigorously washing her armpits.

Patti does the same with a smile, a little trick she hopes will make her question easier: "Is it true you come from the secret service?" she asks, nonchalant.

Her colleague smirks to herself. "I can't say I do!" she replies.

"Haha! OK, cool!" Patti gets the message. "Look," she moves on, "I've seen your heart-rate, I'm just jealous... You got any tips?"

"Ask your trainers," replies the former secret agent, dousing shampoo over her hair.

"No, I meant like pro-tips," Patti insists. "Stuff you've learned with time."

"Have you tried meditation?"

"Should I?"

"I'm just messing with you."

Laughing to herself, Ocampo walks out of the shower and under a large drying blower. Followed by Patti, she grabs a warm towel to

wrap around her torso before heading to the next room.

Six massage tables are arranged side by side, separated only by white translucent screens. Above each table, an automated masseur is hung to a railing, a dozen bumpy foam rollers pointed downward like the maw of some strange marine creature waiting to swallow its prey whole. Used to the devices, Patti and Ocampo take off their towels and lay head down on the tables while the machines descend on their backs and scan their respective anatomies.

"Oooh, damn! That feels fine," lets go Ocampo, as the machine rolls from her feet to her shoulders.

Patti laughs. "You getting naughty on me?" she teases.

Her colleague snickers. "You're one to talk!" she rebuffs.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"You think we wouldn't notice you left lunch to get some extra desert, yesterday?"

"Ho! Oh no..." Patti shivers at the implication. "Have you guys been talking behind my back?"

"Girl," Ocampo replies, a hint of humor disguised in the reprimand, "only when you walk away from the squad!"

"That's not cool..." Patti trails off.

"Yes it is!" her colleague refutes, letting the massage rollers dig into her back. "It's very cool. There's no rule against fraternization, I don't know why you two are hiding like highschoolers."

Patti hasn't heard a word on the subject. "You shitting me?" she asks, rarely able to tell her colleague's sarcasms from her otherwise cold demeanor.

"Why would I?" Ocampo insists, her face stuck in the hole of the massage table. "You can go after the Major for all I care."

"Nah, I'm good," Patti states, content. "You can have him."

"I'd rather you share your Latino plaything!"

"How do you know I call him that?"

They both laugh at their banter. While the machine undoes muscle knots in her neck and shoulders, Patti marvels at the treatment they get every single day. Her heart warmed by her

relationship with Angelo and by her colleague's acceptance, she blissfully lets herself sink into the doughy massage table.

Coming out from the showers, their male counterparts are taking their place on the other tables when an alarm blares in the building. Patti raises her head, looking to cross Ocampo's gaze and gauge her reaction, but the Filipina's already getting up. They all know the proverbial drill.

A delivery UAV flies down to the entrance of the Workshop. Chloe's there to greet it, presenting a QR code on her phone to the drone's scanner. She picks up her package, the drone thanking her for her purchase before flying away.

Heading back inside, she spots Jake playing with 3D printers and goes to sit next to him. She wants him around for the unboxing of her ideal eye, the one he encouraged her to buy a few days earlier, the one she's always wanted but never dared order.

"Is it your new eye?" asks the child.

"Yep!" Chloe chirps. "It just arrived."

"What are you gonna do with it?"

They're interrupted by their friends, gathering quietly around them with amused yet secretive smiles. Morgan's drone emerges from the group, followed by the robotic dog Jake has grown accustomed to.

"Jake?" asks Morgan. "We've got a late Christmas present for you," she says. "It's a team effort, and it took a little longer than expected."

The dog quickly goes to Jake. Turning around, it sits down; its back snapping opens reveals an alcove the size of a melon.

"We've retrofitted your little friend for you," Morgan explains. "It's... a little weird, but we believe you'd find it fun."

Knowing nothing of this, Chloe interrupts: "Hold on, you want to put his brains in this?" she asks, a little chilled at the idea. At the very mention of it, however, she can see that Jake's interest is struck.

"Like I said," Morgan replies, "only if you want to try, Jake."

Otherwise the dog's unchanged."

"I love it!" the boy exclaims, ecstatic. "Thanks! Can we try now?"

Chloe feels out of bounds. "Maybe we should wait for David..." she says, hesitant.

"Why?" asks Jake straightaway, as a manner of rebuttal. "Is it dangerous?"

Morgan smiles reassuringly through the seven inch screen of her telepresence device: "Oh, it's completely safe."

The boy can't wait. "Let's do it then!" he exclaims.

He finds a stool to sit on, before Morgan directs her drone to connect itself to the port in his ear, and unlock his braincase. Morgan removes his wig and the skull of the little boy snaps open, revealing his brains encased in metals and plastics. Small LEDs shine on the surface, witnesses of life support systems running their course.

"You're going to lose your senses for a bit," warns Morgan. "Don't be afraid," she adds, but Jake shows no sign of fear.

By remote, she delicately lifts up his braincase to disconnect it from its prosthetic body, before pivoting to the dog and sliding it inside. While the dog reboots, Morgan watches it close its back and calibrate. It stays still for a while.

"Jake?" Chloe calls.

Finally looking up, the mechanical dog barks in response.

Chloe turns to Morgan: "You didn't install English?" she asks, annoyed, thinking the voice synthesizer is leaving the boy mute.

Morgan smiles to her daughter, knowingly. Of course, Jake is only playing: "Dogs can't speak! Woof!" he chimes in, his pitch slightly higher than his usual voice. Someone with a ball catches his attention, and soon Jake is running after it like a young poodle. Chloe relaxes and decides to let them be. Her vacuum-sealed prosthetic eye, shining brand new in its blister, is the only thing on her mind.

Back in their uniform, Patti and Ocampo enter the briefing room

together. Major Hanzo is standing in front of screens and white boards, exchanging with a man wearing a black suit and tie, his eyes hidden behind cybernetic glasses; an outlet on his temple suggests that his implants are far-reaching. Angelo is sitting in front; as he turns around and smiles at Patti, she smiles back shyly, before sitting next to Ocampo. The Filipina is staring at the man in black with intense scrutiny.

Reading her, Patti asks: "You know this guy?"

"Ha!" her squadmate exhales. "You're good."

"You mean, he's..." Patti lowers her tone even more, "a former colleague?"

Ocampo nods quietly, which Patti finds very promising. Their male colleagues enter and sit down next to them, before the Major starts talking.

"Alright troops, we have a new assignment. This one is coming to us from the National Intelligence Coordinating Agency, so I'm gonna let Agent Dimaguiba, here, do the briefing."

The NICA agent walks in, his eye-less face giving a new definition to the word "cold." He's talking in the calm monotonous tone of spy agencies, making his words articulate enough not to repeat himself.

"Thank you Major Hanzo. This morning, at approximately oh six hundred hours, H+ incorporated has undergone a cyberattack. They've lost data regarding classified government contracts, as well as one of their prototypes. We have reasons to believe that this is an inside job. Our primary suspect is Dr. Morgan Zhu, head of the R&D department. She's been missing since this morning."

Angelo stiffens as he hears Morgan's name. Among the redacted data displayed on the screens, he spots her in an old professional picture; the woman he knows seems a lifetime away from this one, and the young overseer feels his blood pumping, a taste of metal in his mouth.

"At the time, it is unclear whether Dr. Zhu is directly responsible for the attack, or if she's been coerced," continues the agent. "We're interrogating personnel at H+, and we want your team to secure Dr. Zhu's known relations outside the company. They gather most evenings in a warehouse downtown. You're to go in and round

them up for interrogation while police forces cordon the area.”

Under the agent’s command, the screens play CCTV and aerial surveillance of the Workshop. A drop of sweat dripping along his temple, Angelo raises his hand to the attention of the Major.

“Mr. Saldana?”

“Sir!” Angelo speaks fast, hoping for a misunderstanding. “I know this place, I’ve met Morgan Zhu. These people aren’t criminals!”

A quiet murmur fills the room as the troopers hear this. Sitting in the middle of the pack, Patti doesn’t know what to think.

The agent resumes his briefing, pointing to information that seems to contradict Angelo’s assessment: “We’ve tracked several automated deliveries, illegally rerouted to this location in recent months. Something’s definitely going on, there.”

“Thank you, Agent Dimaguiba,” concludes the Major.

Angelo gulps; he turns to Patti and they share a quick compassionate glance before the Major steps in.

“This operation’s gonna be very different from your last,” he begins. “We’re going after civilians. I want you to exercise extreme restraint, and caution.” He pauses, contemplating the possible outcomes of this operation. “This is our occasion to show a little finesse to the Mayor’s office. We’re going in non-lethal: rubber slugs and dazzlers only. I want no shots fired unless fired upon: intimidation should be quite enough. Now, give me the layout of this place...”

Aside from the main room, the Workshop is built around smaller alcoves along its back corridor. The one furthest away has long been arranged into a clandestine operating room, where friends unable to pay for proper medical services can get cheap surgery from Morgan. Several of her drones are stored here, some offline, some on idle mode performing menial tasks.

Chloe is well aware of all that, which is why she’s come here to talk with Morgan privately. The exchange has already heated up, as do most debates one has had many times in the past. Her prosthetic eye in hand, Chloe is arguing her case. “I’m telling you,”

she insists, "I've wanted this for fifteen years, and you can help me make it right! You've performed dozens of operations here, it's just not fair to hold back on me!"

"Oh, baby..." Morgan sighs, her face masked a moment by her own hand in the frame of the screen, "I know it means a lot to you, but you need to understand: I can't disfigure my own daughter!"

That much, Chloe understands. She knows she's asking her mother to overcome her own feelings, that there is no debate there. She has tried bargaining in the past, now she's reduced to begging: "You'd be making me how I want to be!" she pleads.

"Zuzu, take it from me," the mother refutes, "before long you'll be full of machines anyway, so why the rush? For a camera?"

"Stop playing dumb!" Chloe explodes, her lips quaking under the weight of this issue. "You know it's not about that! I want a neural interface! You've got one, for crying out loud!" she yells, pointing to the back of her neck. "You know what life is without it."

Meanwhile, David is just arriving from his day. As soon as he passes by the front-door automaton, he's welcomed by Jake in the body of the dog, who drops the ball at his feet.

"Dad!" the boy greets cheerfully. "Check out what Morgan got me!"

"The dog?" David replies, guessing from previous occurrences of Jake remote-controlling other toys.

"Throw me the ball!" Jake moves on, excited by his new perspective on the world.

David throws the ball in a bouncing arc while scanning the room for Jake. A few feet away, he can see him sitting on a stool. He takes his jacket off, and walks drowsily to his son, tired from a long day. When he gets to Jake and finds his skull open, David's heart starts racing. He looks around, dizzy, eyeing for the dog, but it is nowhere to be found and David doesn't know what he should make of this. Bill walks in with two beers and hands one to David. "No need to freak out, my friend," he says, chuckling.

The ball bounces off the walls of the narrow corridor and ends up rolling the rest of the way, closely followed by Jake. He grabs it in his mouth, when he hears Chloe and Morgan talking in the next room. He stops and listens in, his robotic ears turning accordingly.

Morgan is brushing off Chloe's arguments: "If it's that important, I'm sure you can find someone else."

But the young woman will hear none of that: "I don't trust someone else!" she implores. "Do you know anyone willing to toss their medical license for me? I don't mind butcher shops for a piercing, but not for my eye, Mum! Please! You're the only one who can do this for me!"

Packed into their transport, the assisted squad is preparing to drop on the Workshop. The Major has finished inspecting each of them and connects his own suit to the override software.

During final approach, he yells a reminder of their prime directive: "Remember, if you fire even a single shot, I'll have you do so much paperwork it'll turn you into bureaucrats!" They chuckle at the joke, aware still that he means every word. "Fear factor first, self-defense second. Am I clear?"

All in one voice, the squad barks: "Sir, yes sir!"

The doors are about to open. Behind him, Angelo can hear the Major pull down his headset. Only a few more seconds before he gives him the green light to drop heavily armored troops onto his soon-to-be former friends. The young man shakes with fear.

Chapter 6

Bill's inebriated chatter is starting to help David relax, despite his son's whereabouts remaining unclear. He sits next to Jake's empty body, the face of which is stuck in a single expression of excitement, uncanny like a painted porcelain doll. Glitters and confetti are still stuck in his clothes, and the father brushes off the shoulder of the mannequin as if removing dandruff.

Suddenly, the shriek of police sirens coming from a distance grows louder, and occupants of the Workshop are pulled from their merry celebration as the building gets surrounded. At the front entrance, an armored vehicle parks sideways, followed by dozens of patrol cars blocking the street up to the intersection.

Intense searchlights light up above the rotunda, bathing the room in blinding whiteness. A few meters above, the silent dropship is hovering, its metallic wings spread wide and three tons of robotic equipment ready to drop through the ceiling. The glass shatters as the heavily armored troopers fall through, in a circle around the Behemoth, quickly followed by personal shielding units armed with submachineguns.

A dozen flying drones detach from shields and troopers to scan faces around the room. The occupants are terrified by the dramatic intrusion of armed men, the small UAVs adding to the panic as they fly around, flashing laser dazzlers at unarmed civilians and uploading their pictures to a matrix of face-recognition databases.

From loud-speakers located on the transport, the voice of the Major resonates: "This is the Police. Lay down on the ground and place your hands behind your neck."

At the back of the building, in the operating tent, Chloe can hear the ruckus, hardly muffled. "Five-O!" she whispers, taken aback, her delinquent jargon speaking for herself.

"Oh, no!" Morgan whispers. "Come with me!"

The drone rotates to face the back wall, covered by a plastic curtain that Morgan pulls open. Behind, a heavy metal door rests on massive hinges, a magnetic lock devoid of apparent interface buzzing open. On the other side, Chloe discovers a small room she never knew existed, the pungent stench of sewers coming from a

drain savagely enlarged with a jackhammer. A small one-seat hovercraft, parked next to a ramp leading down below, has been supercharged to move crates in and out surreptitiously.

Chloe can't believe her eyes. She shakes her hands, incredulous. "What the fuck's going on? Mom?"

Morgan turns around, her face showing little surprise, which Chloe interprets as consciousness of guilt. "There's no time!" says the mother. "Hurry!"

Cables are retracting and arms folding back inside the transport while Angelo monitors the scene. Cameras on the belly of the ship display thermal signatures all over the central area of the Workshop. One additional signature in the backroom catches his attention.

"Ground team, there's one more in the back," he warns, highlighting the subject on everyone's radar.

Behind him, the Major switches from point of view to point of view, looking for sudden moves among the terrified faces. "Bravo team, go after the target," he orders, focused.

With dozens of targets to deal with, the ground drones stay with Alpha team while Patti heads first into the corridor. "I've got movement!" she warns, spotting Jake's canine body in the darkness. Seeing the troopers freeze a second, the boy rushes inside the operating tent, fearing for his life.

He runs under the operating table and through the heavy metal door, surprising Chloe as he passes her by. "Jake!" she bursts, slamming the door shut while Morgan boots up the hovercraft.

"What's happening?" he asks, lost and confused.

Morgan readies the vehicle to drop in the tunnel below: "Get in there you two!" she screams, snapping them out of their moment. "The destination is set, you'll be safe."

Without an instant of hesitation, Chloe grabs Jake between her arms and sits in the hovercraft. She turns to her mother, speaking with a disappointed tone: "You've been holding out on me!"

"I know," Morgan replies, gravely. "Just trust me."

The hovercraft launches into the tunnel, its modified engine propelling them at high-speed over a flow of black water. Jake curls

up against Chloe, scared and worried for his father.

Morgan doesn't take time to watch the vehicle disappear inside the tunnel: she can hear the troopers clearing the operating tent on the other side of the door. Pulling a crate open, she reaches for a set of experimental stun grenades, a discarded prototype buried there years prior. When the door behind her gets busted open by a single kick from Patti, and Bravo team storms the room, Morgan pulls the pin out. They do not pay much attention to her drone, having checked others like it a second before.

"He went in there!" shouts Patti, following Chloe's thermal signature. Morgan's drone pivots, grenade in hands, lifting the device high above the troopers' heads, whose expression she can only guess. The magnesium blast tears off the hand of the fragile drone, shattering its screen and frying its electronics. Patti, Reyes and Yuwono are knocked deaf by the blow.

On Angelo's console, alarm signals go off next to Bravo team's vitals, displaying increased heart-rates and head concussions. The Major growls: "Dammit." He activates the override, two clamps descending on his shoulders to lift him from the ground. The man motions a jump.

With her ears still whistling despite her protective helmet, and eyesight blurred by the sudden flash, Patti lands in sewer fluids up to her knees, locking her feet in a firing position. The narrow tunnel extends deep into the belly of the city platform, pitch black. "I can't see shit, Major!" Patti complains in her radio.

Inside the transport, the Major speaks with cold resolve: "Give me light-amp." Angelo executes the order, activating light amplification and turning Patti's point of view viridian green. Following the Major's manual commands, her HUD zooms in, revealing the fleeing hovercraft within firing distance.

On the tiny vehicle, Chloe can hear the voice of the Japanese officer coming from Patti's armor, his tone just as threatening as the words he utters. "Stop the vehicle," he yells, "or we will open fire!"

Looking over the rotor, she can see the trooper under a ray of light. During the fraction of a second when her head is exposed, before the Major mimics the motion of squeezing the trigger, and Patti feels the recoil of her rifle, Angelo recognizes Chloe. He hasn't

even time to blink before a rubber bullet flies through the underground tunnel, hitting her in the eye and shattering her mask. The cold realization of what just happened is still unfolding onto him.

Chloe cries in pain when her face is hit and her fake prosthesis explodes into fragments. She curls into a ball to protect Jake, as the tunnel makes a turn and they get out of sight.

Freed from the Major's override, Patti shakes her head, fuzzy. She peers into the darkness while two small flying drones pass her by in pursuit of the hovercraft, at a pace too slow to catch up.

In the main room, police officers and NICA agents are swarming the area, wrapping handcuffs and zip-ties around every visitors' wrists. Neither gently nor politely, each of them gets dragged into a police vehicle, rounding them up like dirty criminals.

David still has no idea where his son has disappeared to, and in the maelstrom of screams and insults, he does his best to catch anyone's attention. "Jake? Has anyone seen my son?" he cries, desperate. "Officer, my son is missing!" he insists, but the general agitation is too much for the agents to care, and no one pays attention to his claim. Like Bill, Malcolm and the rest, he ends up locked in the back of a patrol car, his phone taken away and thrown in a large evidence box.

Chloe slowly feels consciousness escape her when she and Jake reach the end of the tunnel. They exit the sewer from under the city platform, jumping over a waterfall of feces and plastic packages in their fast-moving vehicle. Jake's sensors only give him a vague idea of the horrible ambient smell.

They sail through the half-submerged old town, leaving a trail of thick moss behind them. As they pass abandoned buildings, Jake can see faint fires and cheap LED lights illuminate forsaken floors in which squatters have moved. Fishing lines are hanging from window-ledges; fortune row-boats slowly slide on distant waters. The entire sprawl is home to a livid population, living off the waste excreted daily by the platform's gaping holes.

"What is this place?" Jake asks, stunned by the discovery. The

boy has never heard of this part of town, full of secrets too shameful to lend to a child's ear. Chloe doesn't answer, she only moans in pain, half of her face turning purple from the strike. "People live here?" The boy trails off.

Soon before the hovercraft reaches the side of the swamp, where an old building stands next to one of the few dry roads, Chloe faints. The vehicle slows down and drives itself inside the building's moist ground level. Algae and reed have grown all over the puddle, and they park next to the stairwell leading to the second floor.

One of Morgan's drones is here to greet them, its uneven wheels bent over the steps. At the sight of the familiar silhouette, Jake feels intense relief. When she sees her daughter unconscious however, Morgan hurries to carry her upstairs, devastated, the narrow frame of the drone lifting up easily the equally thin young woman.

Jake precedes them into an abandoned apartment lit by camping apparel; computers are arranged atop stacks of crates bearing the H+ logo, the decrepit walls are covered in a silver fabric marked with circuit patterns, a distinct hum fills the entire room. From the back of the apartment, a large fuel generator is pumping noisily.

Morgan's drone carries Chloe to an improvised operating table, an ergonomic desk chair urgently bent backwards by her other drones, under the strongest lights in the room. The three drones immediately bend over her to clean up her wound. Resisting shock as only a child's psyche does, Jake looks at the machines coordinating their first aid effort with apprehension. From his small canine stature, they look like giants, and so does Morgan's wheelchair when she passes him by.

It is the first time that the boy and the scientist meet in person, and beyond that surprise Jake is also struck by her looks. Her long skinny arms hover around tactile screens arranged in front of her, sending commands to her drones, and a messy set of wires connects the chair's neck guard to the back of her head. Below the screens, two curved and atrophied legs are hanging in floppy sweat pants.

In this far removed room, in the middle of nowhere, he pains to recognize the woman he knows as a friend. Still, Morgan smiles to

him, for a second before returning to her more pressing task; and when Jake tries to smile in return, he feels his tail shaking.

The Workshop now empty of its original occupants, NICA agents have swarmed the area. Inspecting any electronics they find with their own devices before consigning them, and letting hard-working cops carry them to safety, they sort through the hundreds of items and personal effects left behind by heart-wrenched visitors. Among the gaming consoles and 3D printers, Jake's body gets carried like some improper toy, thrown in the back of a van with a paper tag taped to his sweater.

Agent Dimaguiba is directing the operation when he's approached by the police Lieutenant in charge of the officers on site. Taking off his cap and rubbing his brow, the man scoffs to get the agent's attention. He points to the Behemoth behind him, asking: "What about this big boy, sir? You want us to dismantle it?"

Dimaguiba grins in response while a strong wind invades the room again. An NICA helicopter pulls over the rotunda, deploying four strapping cables around the Behemoth. "You need to widen your scope, Lieutenant," taunts the agent.

The troopers are back in their support frames, snapping their suits open and pulling themselves out. Looking at them arms crossed, a discontent Major is waiting for their attention. Alpha team is exchanging high fives and bro-hugs, while the members of Bravo are pressing their temples and blinking like idiots.

Hanzo barks a quick debriefing: "Bravo team, that was amateur work at best. How are your ears?"

"Buzzing, sir," replies the team leader.

"Me too," Patti admits, rubbing her ears to little effect. She immediately stops when the Major looks at her, feeling like a freshman at the academy. In the noisy dropship and with her ears whistling, she can hardly make out the conversation.

"You deserve it," says the Major. "Now find a seat, you don't need any more concussions."

He walks back to the front of the ship. Angelo can hear the loud

clinking of his metallic boots over his shoulder. "ETA five minutes," the young man announces, a bitter taste in the back of his mouth.

"How are you, soldier?" asks the Major, somewhat surprisingly.

The young overseer sighs loudly before swiveling on his chair. He lets his distress show, lips pinched, but keeps a lid on it. The Major only expresses his stern form of sympathy.

"You know who she was, right?" Angelo asks.

The Major replies with a simple nod.

"Then you know how I feel."

Jake has moved to the next room when he hears Chloe wake up. She hasn't been unconscious very long and, sitting a few feet away, Morgan is busy piloting her remaining drones to clean her daughter's wound, pouring iodine over it like syrup on a dessert. When Chloe regains consciousness, she sends her feet kicking in a panic, toppling one of the drones over while screaming in terror.

Morgan moves in closer, hoping to calm her down, but now an absolutely awake Chloe explodes: "Mom!" The surprise lasts only a second. "Where are we?" she asks, looking around the place.

"It's alright! You're safe," quickly appeases Morgan.

Out of breath, Chloe asks all the questions running through her mind, as quickly as they come: "What the hell is going on? Are the cops after you? What the fuck is this place?"

"I told you I'll explain," delays the mother.

Seeing the crates of equipment stashed in every corner, Chloe yells: "Is this a secret LAIR? Why do you have a SECRET LAIR, Mom?"

"Baby, you're hurt. I need you to lie down."

Remembering the shot to her face at last, Chloe touches her blood-dripping cheek. Her eyeball pierced by debris is trapped behind swollen eyelids; it feels like a truck full of hammers fell right down on her. "I can't see," she says softly, yet unsure if that's cause for panic.

Morgan presses a hand on her chest to push Chloe back inside

the improvised operating chair. "You're full of painkillers, ease down now," she says, her brow pinched with loving concern.

Reassured to find his friend in good care, Jake walks farther away into the apartment, the sight of blood worrying to his young mind, despite the irony that it would never be his. He reads on the side of crates inscriptions he doesn't understand, serial numbers, past delivery dates and cryptic prototype descriptions.

"What are you gonna do?" Chloe asks, while Morgan resumes cleaning her wound.

"I can't treat your eye properly here," the mother explains. "I'll stop the bleeding, then you're headed to the hospital."

The statement has Chloe stiffen; she refrains from raising up. "You can't be serious!" she spits through her teeth. "What about the cops?"

"They're obviously set on finding me," Morgan points out. "I'm going to surrender."

"What?" Chloe's breath cuts short. "What do they want with you?" she asks, her journalistic instincts alive and kicking.

Morgan pulls out a large shard from Chloe's eyeball. "I've deleted research they want to use for weapons..." she says, moving to other debris.

This is all breaking news to Chloe, and she needs a little time to catch up. When she does, she speaks with incredulity mixed with fear: "For real?"

Morgan nods slightly, focused on the task at hand.

Chloe opens wide her valid eye. "Mum," she exclaims, "I'm one hundred percent with you on this, you can't surrender!"

"If I run, they'll tag me as a terrorist."

"Because that's what they do! Doesn't make it right!"

Morgan looks away to sigh, trying to avoid additional contamination of her daughter's wound, and terribly ashamed. "They weren't supposed to be that aggressive," she confesses.

"That's because you hurt them, Mum!" encourages Chloe. "You can't quit now, or it's all for none."

Filled to the brim with adrenaline and virtuous anger, the young woman reaches for her jacket pocket to pull out her prosthetic eye, still intact in its sterile packaging. "I've been telling you again and again," she declares, "this is the eye I want!"

Morgan takes a moment. In the next room, Jake is hearing everything of the exchange, but dares not intrude. He hardly understands what's at stake anyway. Finally Morgan speaks: "I'll have to put you under."

He can hear them hugging, Chloe's voice shaking with fear and conviction: "I'm with you all the way, Mum," she says, devoted. Morgan's lack of a reply leaves them both hanging.

Jake ventures deeper into the apartment while Morgan prepares the operation. Raised on his rear legs, he manages to peer inside a few crates, pushing away their lids with his muzzle. Inside each of them, he finds a different electronic device cushioned in foam peanuts. He hasn't got a clue what all this is about. Moving from one room to the next, he finally reaches the bedroom in the back, where the loud noise of the generator beats like a jungle drum.

In the middle of the room, a strange transparent plastic coffin contains what looks like the robotic body of a child, its surface a matte shade of black, its shoulders, knees and elbows mounted with small rubber wheels, and wires running out of its extremities. Jake has no idea what this body is for, or who it belongs too, but when he lays eyes on it he feels immediate desire.

Midnight is nearing and, in the police precinct, visitors of the Workshop are all thinking they should've stayed at home. Under the supervision of NICA agents, zealous police officers confiscate every single electronic device they can get their hands on; phones, laptops, accessories, even detachable prostheses, all get labeled and carried away.

David is still trying to have his case heard: "Have you found a toy dog, officer? My son's brains are in it!" he asks repeatedly, only half-aware of the apparent absurdity of his words.

It's not much of a surprise when a cop grabs him by the elbow and throws him in a cell: "Get in here, you junky!" the man shouts, excruciated.

A few feet away, standing at the check-in desk, Bill is seeing everything of the exchange. Disgusted, he pays little attention to the cop asking for his fingerprints until he raises his voice. The biker turns a scornful face, lifting both his stumps above the counter. "It's not obvious," he says, "but I'm flipping both fingers."

Chloe's operation over, and the sedated young woman's head heavily bandaged, Morgan leaves the living room to refresh herself. Jake hasn't left the bedroom where the child-sized full body prosthetic rests in its plastic box; he's been admiring the design with intense curiosity. Morgan enters, a vial of nutrients in her hand that she offers to the boy. He shakes his head in reply.

Morgan sighs, and bends over to put her hand on his shoulder: "I'm very sorry for all this, Jake," she says, her eyes speaking louder than her words. "It will all be over soon."

"Are you really gonna give yourself up?" the boy asks, having had time to digest the whole situation.

"I'm at a point in my life," Morgan explains, pausing, "where I can't tell whether I've gone mad, or if the rest of the world has."

Jake looks down. He understands knowing little of the larger picture, but Morgan is being deliberately obtuse, and he doesn't feel like overstepping his bounds.

"In any case," Morgan goes on, "I can't have my daughter pay for what I've done." She breathes in, keeping her lungs full as she speaks in horror. "I never thought they would come at you like this. And I've put you, David, and the others, in way too much trouble already." She exhales, her eyes fixed to a horizon behind the concrete walls. "I need to end this."

"But..." the child objects, worried, "what are they gonna do to you?"

"That's a minor concern..." Morgan retorts, "I'm an old woman, Jake. All that matters to me now is family. Chloe... you, and your Dad: it's not my place to make you go through this." She rolls over to the transparent sarcophagus, within which the obsidian body seems to look back at her. She lays a hand on the container, looking at the prosthetic body with the strange mix of love and concern parents show over progeny. "Besides," she adds, "I didn't

tell Chloe the whole truth... I've worked on a number of classified contracts throughout the years..." When she turns to Jake, pride and shame oddly meet in her regretful expression. "This is my masterpiece."

Like an appetizer to a starving person, this little information has the boy wanting more. "What does it do?" he asks, fascinated.

"It's an infiltration unit," Morgan replies, "for spies essentially. It's undetectable, and it can take over any electronics within its WiFi range."

The dog's tail starts shaking again, a signal Morgan knows how to interpret. "Awesome!" Jake chuckles.

"We called it the Little Blackjack," Morgan states, a deep melancholy brought forth by the years of collaboration with friends and colleagues she has now betrayed.

Trapped in his own feelings of excitement and gleeful curiosity, the boy asks: "Can I try it?" pretty sure Morgan's answer will be negative.

The old woman takes a second to consider the request. "Sure," she agrees, strangely easily, "why not."

Morgan's grand betrayal to her company isn't nearly as organized as it could be. She has no idea what to do with the prototype, having stashed it away in a hurry a few days before its final test phase. Now, given the option to let her dear young friend use it, before she has to either destroy or give it back, there is little hesitation to be had. The boy, of course, is surprised by this unexpected success, tempted an instant to say he was joking, but refraining.

Morgan chuckles as she snaps open the locks of the sarcophagus, letting its forward half fall to the floor in a slam. Jake steps forth, letting her reach for a button to split his back open, and just as easily she grabs his brains and slides them inside the head of the Little Blackjack. As soon as she closes the head compartment, the body boots up, wires retracting in his wrists and chest before plates clip into position. Its two black beady eyes start moving, slowly at first.

The military-grade interface of the Little Blackjack is years beyond that of Jake's other body. When regaining his senses, made

sharp by the crisp definition of the body's sensors, the boy looks around him with amazed interest. Through the walls, he can see electronic devices highlighted in the next room, Morgan's drones mopping the concrete floor a little farther, and Chloe's heartbeat monitor. Despite himself, he lets a raucous laugh escape his lipless mouth, surprised by the low pitch of his new voice as he hears it for the first time.

"Don't mess with anything," warns Morgan, "Chloe's still sleeping."

"Yeah, of course," he replies, stepping out of the sarcophagus. "Woahaha! This is the best!" he exclaims, barely able to contain himself. He experiments with basic motions, walking around and clapping his hands, thrilled with the responsiveness and flexibility of the body's articulations.

Morgan watches him silently, knowing this may be her last occasion to revel in the spectacle of innocent child's play. Jake quickly moves to advanced protocols, folding his legs in a crouch position and using his wheels to roll around the small room, like some half-man sitting on a motorized skateboard. She would love him to be able to go on forever, but her mind is elsewhere. She asks: "Jake, can I pick your brains for a minute?"

"Yeah?" he replies, distracted.

"Would you say that this wheelchair is a part of me?"

"What?" The boy stops in his tracks. "Of course not..." he replies, as if this were a prank. Realizing it may not, he adds: "Is it?"

"What about my head," Morgan presses on, her fatigue making her metaphor sound like dementia. "Is it a part of me?"

"Maybe you should rest for a while..." Jake suggests, a little worried for her sake.

Morgan locks eyes with him, insisting to pursue her lecture. "The law states that this is only property, but that this is 'me'" she says, pointing to her wheelchair before pointing to her head. "Do you understand, Jake?"

The boy is only paying partial attention to their conversation, exploring menus in the HUD of the Little Blackjack as they speak. However, he does not drift off, finding instead comfort in the

machine enough to let his mind follow Morgan's once more. After a pause, he replies: "Because you were born with your head."

"Exactly!" Morgan snaps her fingers, her eyes opening like those of a magician. "You can use any body you want, they will never let you say it's YOU. It's only property. Do you understand?"

"Who does this one belong to?" Jake asks, trying to follow the thread.

"Corporate government spooks..." Morgan dismisses the question. "What does it matter? Stay focused. It's a riddle."

"Ooooo-K," Jake consents, now almost quite certain that Morgan needs a nap. Deep in the HUD's menus, he discovers combat subroutines, sets of close combat moves embedded in the body's operating system. The boy is in heaven. One after another, he tries them all out, as if only playing some video-game. Jabs, uppercut combo, swooping kick, jump kick; he comes close to hitting furniture but retains full control.

Morgan, meanwhile, starts thinking out loud all the notions she hoped she would get to teach him, and that she can now only touch confusedly: "We can lose bits and pieces of ourselves," she explains, "have them replaced by property. We can never BE property, we can only own it. And so the question is: what are you?"

"If you're trying to make a point," the boy replies with humor, trying to lift his friend's spirit, "it's not working."

Morgan absorbs the spectacle of this ten year old boy using her prototype, a machine built for espionage and assassinations, as if it were a toy. Whatever sense of responsibility led her to act like this, she tries to make up for with guiding principles. "You're going to have to fight for your right to be whatever you want to be, my boy," she foretells. "Because you may be born a human little boy, but even people without your history do not stay that way. And THAT begs the question, Jake: what will you become?"

Morgan swallows painfully. Jake stops kick-punching the air and stands still for a moment. He knows he can't answer the question yet, but the compelling point hasn't been lost on him. His tone is soft and neutral when he says: "I'm just a brain in a plastic casing."

Morgan tears up, her stomach clenched by the boy's cold

pragmatism. "You're much more than that," she tells him, choking on her own words.

Silence falls for a second, except for the drumming noise of the generator. "You don't have to comfort me," Jake says finally.

Morgan laughs, surprising herself in the process. She can feel the fear creeping, of what will happen to her, to her daughter and friends. "You find any of this comforting?" she asks, hoping he doesn't reply.

Jake stays silent, but not for long. "Oh, I get it now!" he exclaims suddenly.

"Get what?" Morgan asks, rapidly sinking in her own depression.

"No one knows you kept this, do they? No one knows I'm using it."

In a surprising turn of the tables, Morgan finds herself confused by Jake's line of questioning. "What are you getting at?" she asks, her dreary mood set aside by the annoyance.

"Can't you tell the cops you destroyed it?"

And just like that, the woman forgets her sorrow and the fear sweeps away. Of course, Jake is mostly joking, but he's making a point she hasn't considered: the Little Blackjack now has an operator. "Oh... Oh, you little genius!" she mumbles.

Glad to find Morgan willing to hear him out, the boy suggests more foolishness: "And then I can keep it?"

He shrugs exaggeratedly, to a certain comedic effect. Morgan laughs with him, at least. "You know," she says, lingering on the sweet feeling that the little boy's humor has instilled in her all these months. "I'm pretty sure it's meeting you that led me to do this." She looks at Jake, and the Little Blackjack, now fused into one being. "It just felt wrong to let anyone else have it..."

The small boy, who at last is in a child's body, and the older woman crippled by disease smile at each other, the best way they can.

Chapter 7

On the rooftop of their barracks, troopers and technicians are lounged in celebration of their successful mission. As usual, the technicians have formed a group away from the loud troopers who, barking like a pack of dogs, cheer themselves in front of the TV report of the operation.

"At seven o'clock this evening," the news anchor begins, while Bautista motions his squad to shut up, "the National Intelligence Coordinating Agency carried an enormous operation downtown, against what they described as a robotics black market. But some claim that's not the whole story... Some sources talk about corporate espionage, although so far, we haven't been able to confirm these accounts. More from our correspondent on the ground."

The screen cuts to a reporter stationed at the entrance of the Workshop, now barred with yellow tape. "I'm here at the scene, and according to some of the local residents, the police raided some sort of homeless shelter, in what some describe as, quote: 'complete overkill'."

The troopers burst into laughter. Bautista raises his glass: "That's perfect! That's what they should call us: the Overkill Squad!"

His subordinates all raise their beers to the idea, although Patti feels the joke was rather tasteless. She turns to Angelo, sat among the engineers, who's looking at the squad leader with disgust. The Latino says good night to his colleagues and heads for the stairwell; he really is in no mood for that kind of celebration, haunted by the vision of his ex-girlfriend shot in the face, instead looking forward to drink himself alone into a stupor. The intrusion of the Major takes him by surprise; he makes an effort to smile a minimum.

"Ah, Mr. Saldana," greets the Japanese, "have you had dinner yet?"

"Sir!" Angelo replies, standing straight. "Actually, I was about to."

"Will you join me?" Hanzo asks, somehow disarmingly.

"Hem..." Angelo replies, surprised and frustrated, "with pleasure!" He doesn't want to go, but one doesn't simply refuse.

"Good," approves the Major. "My quarters, fifteen minutes."

"I'll be there."

The Major smiles and walks off to his troops. A little stunned by the interaction, Angelo heads downstairs to wash off his face and change into his uniform. From a cupboard, he pulls out the home-brewed bottle brought some months ago by visiting relatives, and heads for the Major's barracks.

He checks his watch before knocking, for the sake of punctuality; when the Major opens, he's wearing an apron over civilian clothes, something Angelo certainly did not expect. Hanzo invites him in. The young man hands over the bottle, "Los Hermanos Saldana" reads the label.

"Here, sir," he presents, "I brought this. My uncles distill it themselves."

"Ha! Very nice!" grants the Major.

They walk in, leaving the door open. Hanzo drops the bottle on the kitchen counter. Dinner is set for three, and the Major is working overtime preparing sashimi and rice stew. Feeling like he just stepped on the set of a TV cooking show, Angelo observes the scene from a respectful distance, discovering a surprising aspect of his commanding officer. "I had no idea you doubled as a chef!" he jokes.

The Major chuckles: "Please, have a seat, I'll be done in a minute."

Angelo sits down and notices the door still open, when Patti appears in the doorway; she too has changed into her formal uniform. Seeing Angelo, she's as surprised as he is; they exchange an interrogative smile before getting the Major's attention. "Good evening," Patti says, hesitant.

The Major invites her in as well. "Come in, Miss Gillian," he beckons, tapping a screen on his kitchen desk to close the door behind her while keeping an eye on the stew. Patti sits at the table, communicating with Angelo their respective surprise through looks and nods. His sadness has faded before the unusual atmosphere of the situation.

The Major pours porridge in small bowls, sprinkling it with freshly cut chives, and brings sashimi expertly arranged on three bamboo plates. Patti and Angelo gaze at the craftsmanship with admiration, while the Major serves beer.

"Don't look so surprised, now," he says, humbly, sitting at the table. He raises his glass and they both follow.

"Kampai!"

"Cheers!"

"Salud!"

The Major digs in nonchalantly but, at their first bite, Angelo and Patti both let moans of pleasure escape them. "Sir, this is the best fish I've had in years," confesses Patti, taking another bite immediately while Angelo nods in approval.

Hanzo peacefully smiles in reply, rinsing his mouth with a sip of cold beer. "This job comes with a number of perks," he points out. "One of them is the food. Another is the time off."

Cut in their enjoyment, Patti and Angelo raise their eyes with concern, checking each other's reaction. "Sir?" asks Angelo.

"You're both going to take a week of paid leave," the Major says, relaxed. "Go to the beach or something."

Patti puts down her chopsticks, intervening solemnly: "Sir, with all due respect, that's really not necessary."

"That's an order, Gillian," replies the officer in a snap.

Patti is astonished; her appetite vanished, she looks at her superior, mouth agape. Angelo understands this is more a favor to him than to her; it's the last days of the year and they're not expecting another assignment anytime soon. "Thank you, sir," he says, pitiful. "It's... kind."

Satisfied, the Major goes back to his meal. After a moment of silence, filled only with the noise of him chewing his food, he adds, without crossing their eyes: "Take it from me, your careers will still be here in seven days. Don't sacrifice good things to it."

Angelo and Patti exchange another silent gaze. Despite the encouragements, she can't help but feel reprimanded, and his sorry smile has the flavor of a consolation prize.

The evening is well advanced when Morgan's driverless van parks in front of the precinct. In the back, hiding under a blanket, Jake can see highlighted all electronic devices in the vicinity. The bright overlay covering the darkness from under the blanket, the boy observes the outside of the vehicle with anticipation.

Her wheelchair parked in the driver position, Morgan turns to him, apprehensive. "We can still change our minds, you know," she says, hesitant. "It's OK if we both go in."

The blanket moves rapidly, Jake's voice coming from underneath: "What? No, come on! We agreed!"

Morgan laughs silently. "Worth a try!" she lets go, setting up the van's itinerary. "Alright. Be careful, Jake."

"You too."

A ramp unfolds from under the vehicle, and Morgan exits through the lateral door, slamming it shut behind her. As the ramp retracts and the van departs, she rolls across the street to the precinct's entrance. The van takes the next turn, driving along the side of the elongated building. From inside the moving vehicle, Jake sees the whole electric grid of the police station, his on-board interface detecting and painting surveillance equipment.

The drive-by completed, and the security systems of the precinct mapped and analyzed, the van parks in a back alley. Jake crumples the blanket and pushes it aside, disconnecting a wire coming out of his wrist from Morgan's device. It is an odd contraption, the size of a handball, and two retractable handles protruding from one side. The schematics of the police station downloaded into the object, he stashes it into a backpack and exits the vehicle.

Crossing the road with ease, Jake marvels once again at the Little Blackjack's attributes. For the first time since his accident, he feels like his body is responding properly, without lag, without glitches, without having to wait for the slow processing of his thoughts into actual movement. When nobody's in sight, he grabs the bottom of a light-post between his heels, where small wheels exert their rubbery pressure. The same wheels in his wrists and elbows let him roll vertically along the light-post, at a speed that surprises him. Jake lets go when he reaches the top, using his

momentum to jump on the roof of the precinct.

Surveillance cameras are sweeping the roof; Jake sees their field of view signified in red, the infiltration protocols of the Little Blackjack overwhelmingly qualified to deal with such basic security. He walks between the projected patterns, that look to him like dangerous spotlights, to a ventilation shaft covered by none of the cameras.

A set of versatile screwdrivers accessible at the tip of his fingers, he unscrews a panel less than a foot in diameter before crawling in, head first, folding his legs at inhuman angles. He lands in the vent below and, locking his knees to his chest and his ankles to his buttocks, as compact as the backpack that he drags behind him, he sets forth, Morgan's instructions in mind.

The old lady rolls up the handicapped access ramp, into the entrance hall of the precinct. Metal detectors bar the entrance, and the police agent standing guard is watching TV on his cellphone. She coughs, prompting the policeman to look up. "Ma'am?" he asks, tired, hoping she goes away.

Morgan smiles: "Hello officer," she says. "My name is Dr. Morgan Zhu, I'm here to surrender."

Less than a minute later, all the NICA agents on site have invaded the room, and the scientist is carried to a mechanical wheelchair, her electronics scanned and shut down by highly suspicious agents.

Dimaguiba walks to her, seemingly pleased by this turn of events: "You keep surprising us, Dr. Zhu," he compliments, a victorious grin betraying his smugness.

"You really didn't have to pull off that kind of show, Agent," she replies. "I was about to come forward on my own."

"Enough talk," decrees Dimaguiba, bending to face her up close. "Where is the prototype?"

Morgan answers straightaway: "It's in pieces at the bottom of the ocean. I wiped all software."

Dimaguiba's face switches from blatant contentment to rage, his brow and mouth expressing more than his eyes would if he had

any left, but every agent is wearing the same set of implants resembling sunglasses from the nineteen-eighties. "How dare you?" he explodes, drops of spit jumping from his mouth.

Morgan is tempted to smile, but refrains from doing so. "And now, if you'll excuse me," she explains patiently, "I am a very sick, old and tired woman. It's been an extremely long evening. I will give you my full deposition, but can I please have a few hours of sleep, first?"

Boiling in anger, Dimaguiba scowls. "Let's see how that version holds up after I'm done with you," he suggests, menacingly.

"Agent," Morgan objects. "I strongly suggest that you respect my basic rights."

"You're a traitor and a felon," the agent retorts, disdainful. "You have no rights."

"Perhaps the press will disagree. I called them before coming here."

"You better watch that tone!"

Tires screech outside the precinct, as news vans and reporters gather. Policemen rush out to bar them from entering. Morgan frowns at the agent: "Or what?" she asks. "You'll have me waterboarded? You've taken innocent people hostage, only to get to me. Now stop being such a child if you really have this nation's interests at heart."

She faces Agent Dimaguiba with contempt, certain he can share the blame for her daughter's wound. The agent's words come out like a spit of vomit: "Get her the high-security cell!" he orders.

In her new electronics-free wheelchair, Morgan is carried to an isolation cell at the heart of the building. Locked behind three grates at the end of a corridor, she chuckles at the treatment reserved to dangerous criminals and herself alike. The agent instructs her not to move until he's walked out of the room, and locked the transparent door behind him. Morgan lifts herself up and moves to the hard cot, where she lies, exhausted and patient.

Meanwhile in the main hall, NICA agents index her personal effects, storing them as evidence in a secured hangar full of equipment brought from the Workshop. Morgan's custom wheelchair, once safely powered down, ends up in company of her

remaining drones, steps away from the Behemoth lying under a tarp.

The sick scientist lies, awake, reviewing the plan in her mind, her eyes directed to the only tiny air vent on the ceiling of her cell, when Jake shows up. He waves her a silent hello, pulling the device out of his backpack to place it on the grate, the two handles facing up. Slowly, he unscrews the panel halfway from the inside.

Morgan is smiling to him when he waves her goodbye, leaving the device and the backpack in place behind him. On his way out, now familiarized with the entire compound, Jake decides to pay the other cells a visit. While they planned this whole charade, his elder friend made sure he would follow her instructions to the letter, but now that the mission is essentially accomplished, the boy is feeling cocky.

He passes by the cells containing Malcolm and Bill, quickly scanning faces of piled-up detainees, and moves to the next one until he finds his dad. Lying in the corner, his back against the wall, David is the only one still awake in his cell. Jake whispers: "Dad!" but David doesn't hear him. He insists: "Dad! Look up!"

Upon hearing the voice, puzzled, David looks out the door into the empty corridor. Jake has to insist once more for him to notice the small grate on the ceiling. He stands up, looking closer, only to find Jake waving at him, or rather the carbon-black face of a man he doesn't recognize, waving, in the air-vents. David rubs his eyes, astounded, while Jake folds the grate like a Venetian blind. Both speak in murmurs.

"Don't worry Dad, you're getting out of here!" the boy says, excited.

"J-Jake," an unbelieving David stutters, "is that you?"

"Yeah, I shouldn't stay," the child replies, as if merely skipping a schoolday. "Just wanted to say: I'm fine. See you at home!"

David is starting to wonder if he took a baton hit during the raid, or something. "Wh... What?" he asks. "How the hell did you get in there?" but Jake is already waving goodbye and rolls off, just as silently as he came. "Wait! Come back!" begs David. His voice resonates in the ventilation shaft and soon enough he stands, alone, looking at the bent grate of the air-vents, his head full of even more questions than a minute before.

Hanzo, Patti and Angelo have just finished dinner when the Major's phone rings; he steps away from the table to pick up the call, leaving the young couple in an awkward face to face. When he returns, the bottle of tequila in hand, the Major looks quite satisfied.

"I've just received a message that Morgan Zhu has surrendered," he says, unscrewing the bottle's cap. "Congratulations are in order!"

Patti and Angelo need a second to register the information. "That's amazing!" the young woman bursts with enthusiasm.

Angelo takes a little longer. "Wow!" he starts. "This... this is good news!"

The Major pours three drinks, emptied just as quickly by the glorified mercenaries. The strong flavor of alcohol wiping away remorse, Angelo smiles again, thinking the situation is now under control.

Jake exits the air-vents through which he came, closing the grate behind him. He walks calmly to the edge of the roof, avoiding cameras made literal child's play by his augmented sight.

Once near the lamp post, he slides elegantly down to street level and, as the van drives by with its side door open, he skips in, closing the door behind him. Inside, he hides under the blanket but can't resist looking out the window. As he passes by the entrance of the precinct, he sees press vehicles, reporters, lights and cameras, swarming the area. All he can do is wait, while the van automatically carries him back to Chloe.

Chapter 8

That night, the police officer in charge of surveillance is beating his record on his favorite mobile game. The dozens of cameras blanketing the precinct are showing little movement in the early hours of the day, and he's doing his best to keep himself awake.

But all the while, the device Jake left behind is running a string of programs. Piggybacking on the precinct's security system, it accesses Morgan's chair in the evidence room. The chair boots up, only a few meters away from her drones and from the Behemoth, lying flat on a large trailer.

The surveillance agent sees none of that, as the image to the evidence room freezes for a minute. When the clock on the screen starts running its normal course again, the drones have pulled wires from the local electric grid into the Behemoth. Back in their original position, they remain, inconspicuously active.

When the sun rises over the precinct on that last day of the year, David hasn't caught a single minute of sleep. The rattling of the grates, when all cells suddenly open, pulls him out of his eerie state of mind. "Come on, get up! You're released!" shouts an officer to the attention of the civilians, packed in overcrowded cells. Painfully they get up, sore from a night spent sleeping on concrete, and queue up in the main hall to sign off their belongings. In a hurry, David is first to check in with the clerk.

"Name?"

"David Patel."

"Ha, yes, the one with the missing son. We've put out an APB. Call us if he gets home by himself."

The policeman walks to the back and returns with Jake's body on a trolley, before carrying it to the desk. The light armature of the prosthetic, swung awkwardly by the officer, bobbles like an oversized puppet, its arms flinging around and a blank expression stuck on its mindless face. David signs it off, along with a bag of miscellaneous items, pulling the brainless shell over his shoulder in order to carry it to his car. Brought to the precinct's parking lot by

vindictive agents, David's sedan has been searched to and fro, instilling a sense of violation in the already vulnerable man.

He hasn't told anyone about his odd midnight encounter, and a sleepless night is enough to make him doubt any of it even happened. Sitting the prosthesis in the passenger seat, he reaches for his cellphone in the bag of personal effects. Praying all the while that Jake kept his own phone with him, he shuffles through the few items only to find it there. David gasps as he sees it; knowing that his son is out there, beyond reach, tears his heart to pieces.

Back in the belly of the abandoned building where Morgan was hiding, Jake is exhausting the Little Blackjack's functionalities, while passing time in the company of the robotic dog, waiting for Chloe to wake up. The last of Morgan's drones are running on auto, monitoring her vitals and cleaning up around her.

Her head half covered in bandages, she opens her eye, feeling like she's waking from the worst hangover of her life. "Good morning," greets one of the drones. "Breakfast is served." On a platter the drone is holding a measly juice-pack, a protein bar, and a cup full of painkillers and antibiotics. Jake rushes in to find Chloe awake. He greets her, audibly relieved.

"Chloe!"

"Jake?"

"How are you feeling?" he inquires.

Chloe swallows the pills and struggles to place the straw in the juice pack. "Fine, I guess..." she says, still drowsy. Though visibly high-tech, the Little Blackjack looks to her like any custom prosthesis. "What's this body?" she asks.

Jake answers partially: "Morgan gave it to me," he says, quickly dropping the subject.

Chloe finally manages to drink a sip of juice. Looking around at the drones, all displaying their idle avatar, she asks: "Where is she?" obviously alluding to her mother.

Jake looks away, embarrassed. Even if he had the courage to tell her, he wouldn't know how to explain. "Jake?" Chloe insists.

The boy dares not look her in the eye. "Play recording," he

says, to the attention of the drones.

The one with the platter starts displaying a recording of Morgan: "Zuzu, I'm sorry I won't be here when you wake up," she starts, while Jake quietly walks away. "You're not going to like this. I surrendered. I am guilty."

Still only half awake until that moment, Chloe feels her heart racing; breathless, she stays quiet, knowing that the recording won't react to her sorrow. Still, Morgan marks a pause, herself trembling with emotion. "I'm glad I got the chance to give you the eye you wanted," she confesses. "If I'm correct, our friends will have been released by the time you see this. I need you to bring Jake back to his father, and I need you to stay on your toes, baby girl. You'll hear from me soon. I love you."

Chloe can hardly take the blow. "What? Mom!..." she whimpers, touching the screen in front of her.

In her wheelchair, both hands on a metallic table, Morgan is serene, sitting in front of a wide mirror covering the entire wall. For the past half hour, a special agent has been sticking electrodes to her chest, while setting up a lie detector. He hasn't said a word, and neither has she, but Morgan refrains from smiling because the man is clearly struggling to find her heartbeat, when the lady has none: most of her internal organs have been replaced by artificial counterparts. The scientist knows, unlike the agent, that her blood flows continually, and that he's wasting his time and efforts.

Finally, Agent Dimaguiba enters. He sits in front of Morgan and sets up a recording device. "Good morning, Agent," she greets him.

Meanwhile the other agent is getting angry at the machine, slapping the side of it like that of an old radio. "There's a problem with the detector," he complains.

Morgan decides to put an end to the joke: "Your machine is fine, agent," she informs. "My heart is non-pulsatile."

"What?"

"I have no pulse."

The agent looks at her with exasperation, knowing she could've said so when he opened the box. Morgan smiles in response, like

some gentle grandmother. Dimaguiba takes it from there, severe and threatening: "We won't be needing this. If you lie to us, you'll never see the light of day. You understand?"

"I'm here to tell the truth, Agent."

The other agent packs up the lie detector in its suitcase and goes to stand by the door. Agent Dimaguiba turns on the recording device on the table.

"State your name and profession for the record."

"My name is Dr. Morgan Zhu, I am the director of the Research and Development department at H+ incorporated."

"Where were you on December thirtieth, between four and six AM?"

"I was at the H+ headquarters, downtown."

"What were you doing there?"

"I was destroying the fruit of six years of work."

"Can you clarify, for the record?"

"Of course. I deleted the blueprints of the Little Blackjack stealth infiltration unit, as well as all of the research associated with its development. I also destroyed every cloud-based backup, and ran a full wipe to ensure that the data couldn't be recovered by anyone."

"What about the prototype?"

"Ah, yes. I had drones deliver the prototype to a secure location, then I erased their logs so it couldn't be traced."

"Where is it now?"

"Dismantled. I made a backup of the software, and destroyed the original. It can be found in fragments down the shoreline."

"Where is that backup?"

"Let's not get ahead of ourselves, Agent. You told me I could give a full deposition, so let me start at the beginning."

Morgan checks the agent's reaction, salivating like a sniffing dog: visibly upset, he sits back without a word, which the scientist interprets as her cue. "I came to Manila with my daughter back in

2024," she starts, "soon after the hurricane, when H+ raised an antenna designed to assist in the construction of the city-wide platform."

Dimaguiba exchanges a glance with the other agent, and sighs, while Morgan goes on: "We already dealt in government contracts back then," she continues, "but nothing like today..."

Jake and Chloe do not talk much on the way back to town; the boy is too shy and afraid to admit what he's done, the young woman is too devastated to ask. She drives her mother's automated van to his apartment building, accompanying him up on that late morning.

Before ringing the doorbell, she hugs him from the side, unsure when or even if they'll ever meet again. They can hear David rushing on the other side of the door before it opens. "Thank God!" he cries, hugging his son immediately. Jake remains stiff in his embrace; David looks at his new body, the alien-looking military design made even scarier by the fact that he recognizes it from the night before.

Standing right next to them, Chloe feels invisible, taking a strange comfort in the notion. Father and son reunited, she's now free to indulge in self-pity, and whatever other complacent feeling might come up. David turns to her, noticing the mountain of bandages covering her face at last. "Chloe, what happened to you both?" he asks, keeping his tone down.

Jealousy and nausea keeping her throat choked, she answers, exhausted, choosing her words with parsimony: "We made it out the back. I got hurt. Got Jake another body..." She swallows bitter spit, certain she's about to puke. "My Mom's with the cops, David. I can't stay."

"Thanks for looking after my boy," the father says, his voice made deep by genuine gratitude. Chloe quickly turns away, waving them both goodbye as she swallows her tears and heads down the stairwell. Jake remains silent, knowing his friend's sadness will only last so far, and yet he discovers how painful such secrets can be.

His regrets only grow once he steps back inside their apartment. His usual body, now customized beyond recognition, is sat on the couch of the living room, glitter still encrusted in its

clothes. His father starts pacing, agitated by the realization that their midnight chat was no dream. "You owe me an explanation, young man," he starts. "What were you doing at the precinct?"

Jake lies by omission: "I was there with Morgan," he says. "She surrendered."

"What? No, I mean," David shakes his head, confused. "What were you doing in the vents?!"

"I came to tell you I was fine! You didn't have your phone!"

"That's not... How did you manage to get inside? Where did you get that body?"

"Morgan gave it to me."

A wave of disgust flows over David. Made sick by the impotence to which he's been reduced, he's not taking lightly the news that his son is committing felonies. "That's it," he snaps. "You've spent way too much time with these people. Get back into your own body and this one's going to the cops."

Jake shakes his hands in surprise, the fluid motions of the Little Blackjack convincing him even more that this is a mistake. "What? No!" he bursts.

But David is relying on the type of phrases his parents used on him: "That's not a vote, Jake Patel!" he shouts. "Now do as I say."

Jake looks at his former body, its disparate pieces oddly fitting together like the harlequin figure of some old scarecrow. Through the overriding interface of the Little Blackjack, he boots it up and controls it to stand on its feet. The body moves like a string puppet, bobbling its head and swaying its limbs as it walks in David's direction, the voice synthesizer uttering sardonic words.

"OK, Daddy," the machine says, under Jake's control. "What's wrong, daddy? I did what you asked. Wha-- what's the problem, Daddy?"

"Alright, that's enough!" David waves his arms, almost in a panic, pushing the remote-controlled body away. Jake sends it signals to twist its arms and legs at unbearable angles, and soon the shell contorts, crumpling to the ground like a desiccated mummy. Jake and David stand, silently furious at each other. "Go to your room!" bursts David at last. "And get some clothes on!" he

adds, grasping at any straw of authority he can get his mind on.

Jake shrugs, amused by the mundane absurdity of that last remark. "To hide what?" he asks, defiant, before grabbing his cellphone from the table and storming off to his room.

David watches the body on the ground, the lifelike face of an Indian child, mouth agape, with a thousand mile stare. Wires are jolting from every joint, plates fractured, rotors bent. The thing is ruined beyond repair; he sighs. From the bedroom, he can hear his son crying, a continuous digital moan made chilling by the fact that Jake never needs to catch his breath.

The father is feeling horrible. He grabs his cellphone and calls the police precinct, civil duty taking priority over his personal concerns. "Hi, this is David Patel," he starts. "I'm calling about my son. Yes. Yes, he got home, you can stop looking. Thank you, you too."

When he's done with his call, he pulls the destroyed body up and sits it on the couch. The familiar shell seems to look back at him, its disturbingly alive eyes filling David with questions.

Morgan's van parks down the shabby garage. Chloe honks and exits, locking the vehicle behind her. From a second floor window, Malcolm waves her to come up. She climbs the narrow stairs and walks through the open door, into the messy apartment shared by the mechanic and his rasta friend. It is still quite early to call it New Year's Eve, but after the night they endured, sore and exhausted, they're treating themselves to an early celebration. Bill is filling a fluorescent water pipe with thick buds of weed; Malcolm is standing inches away from one of the many screens hanging to the walls, listening to a news report about Morgan's arrest.

Bill sees Chloe first, her face covered in diagonal by white gauze. "What happened to you, girl?" he asks, lighting the pipe.

Malcolm turns to see the sight. "Eww!" he voices, with a note of compassion still. "You look like a Q tip!" he adds, hoping to lighten the tone.

Chloe walks past Bill, who hands her the water pipe. She's not laughing. "Pigs shot me in the fucking face," she says, visibly hurting to even say the words.

She crashes on an armchair, breathing in the smoke left over in the pipe, as Bill throws her the lighter. Malcolm turns back to the report: "at the time," continues the anchor, "Morgan Zhu, who stands accused of leaking classified information, is still being questioned, here at the thirteenth precinct. We haven't been able to confirm if she got legal counsel, but you have to remember that these rules don't apply in national security cases such as this one..."

The rasta rubs his forehead. "Shiiiiit. She gone for good!" he bleats, catching up.

Chloe groans, depressed. "Can we talk about something else?" she asks, feeling like she just spent the night in the septic tank of hell.

They shut up for a second, finding another topic being easier said than done. The news report is still showing footage from the precinct, where reporters are gathered. Malcolm lowers the sound. "We're gonna go see the fireworks tonight, you in?" he asks.

Chloe cracks the lighter and pulls a long puff from the bong. "Hmm. Maybe..." she says, grateful they're at least trying, but emptied and exhausted from her operation and the constant stress. She leans over in the armchair, hoping she could just sleep forever.

The noon sun is shining bright outside the precinct but, inside the interrogation room, only neon illuminates the exchange. Morgan is still busy telling the agents about the circumstances leading up to her crime: "... and because I was the only one on the board to vote against it, we still went on with the military contracts. But as head of R&D, I was the only one actually working on them. You see the irony, here?" she shakes her hand, trying to get some kind of reaction from the two agents, whose prosthetic eyes mask most emotions.

"Dr. Zhu," groans Dimaguiba, "we've been here for hours. Stop wasting time! Where is the backup?"

Morgan shakes her head. She speaks with the tone of someone holding a public debate, knowing quite well that the exchange is being enjoyed by more agents beyond the mirror. "Agent," she starts, "this government has been suppressing political dissent for more than twenty years, through blackmail, intimidation and murder. What do you think they want this for?"

Dimaguiba scowls. "It's not my place to ask."

"I disagree. You see, like I said, I felt my voice had been muffled. So when we started discarding prototypes instead of sharing with the scientific community, I felt I was betraying my own beliefs." Morgan looks away, introspective. "I guess that's why I started extracting them, and piling them in the Workshop."

Dimaguiba sighs exaggeratedly. "This has nothing to do with this investigation, you're stalling," he accuses, yet contrived to let Morgan's deposition play out.

"You're joking, right?" she objects, well aware of what little rights she has in such a dire predicament. "This is motive. You can already place me at the scene, because I've admitted to it. And forgive me if I feel that it's important for me to state, on the record, that my friends had absolutely no knowledge of that equipment's origin," she insists, speaking loudly into the microphone, "nor did they participate in the theft in any fashion whatsoever!"

"I've had enough of this," Dimaguiba spits, rising over the table and clenching his fist in front of her face. "Where is the backup?"

At the agent's impatience, Morgan's tone switches from virtuous indignation to a friendly quiet chatter. "You know Agent," she says, "it's really not easy to remember things on an empty stomach. Are you going to order lunch? I have a very specific diet."

"We'll get to it," replies the agent, unimpressed at her attempt to be disarming.

"Nice goggles by the way," she adds. "Is that the 40-B variant? You know, I designed these. So it's really unfair to call me a traitor, when you literally owe me your eyes."

The paid leave forced upon Angelo and Patti, they wander the Christmas market while trying to have a good time, but taking selfies with new year's eve 2040 plastic glasses, eating street food together, all of that feels very unusual. Daughter of an emigrated policeman, a law enforcement career woman herself, Patti's still considering this all as a form of punishment, though admittedly a rather sweet one. She gazes at her boyfriend, his dreary mood made more obvious by all the radiant smiles around them and,

trying to understand the Major's strategy, she decides to approach this all as a team-building exercise.

Finally, she asks: "Can we talk about the elephant in the room?"

"There's no elephant," the young man replies, willing to drop the subject altogether.

"Angel," Patti insists, "I'm sorry I shot your friend."

"You didn't! The Major did... and you shouldn't be sorry."

"But I am! I..."

"She was a suspect, in a high profile case," Angelo interrupts. "There's no room for 'sorry'. I'm just glad we weren't using live rounds..."

Patti is surprised by how much sense Angelo is making. All day she's been thinking he was angry at her, and now she realizes that he's only genuinely sorry. "You're right!" she says. "She was fleeing... and she did get away from us."

Angelo looks away, disgusted to be set against his former friends. He feels relief that the Major has cast him aside, and he's glad that Patti is along with him. "Let's not think about that, OK?" he suggests, depressed. "What do you say we get blind drunk tonight? We can watch the fireworks, and sleep on the beach..."

He grabs both her hands between his, looking like he's begging for simple pleasures. To the young woman this couldn't be more welcome. "You really are a catch, you know," she replies.

They kiss softly, pushing away the thoughts they have little control over.

When the workday finally ends, the technicians of the task force shut down all the machines and lock the doors behind them, looking forward to a night of revels. Inside the outfitting room, the mainframe hibernates, silent. Once everybody has gone, made clear by the smart cameras monitoring the hangar, Morgan's great hack begins.

Triggered by the device in the vents, Morgan's drones reach out to the overseer's console, and boot it remotely, using the data

extracted by Jake. In the darkened room, its multiple screens light up, launching command windows and shutting down countermeasures as quickly as they pop up.

Farther down the room, automated cartwheels start rolling under the command of the central computer. The shielding units are outfitted with submachineguns loaded with rubber bullets, and disengage from their support.

It's almost dinner time. The interrogation room smells like Chinese takeaway, empty food cartons and water bottles left over the table from a late lunch. Agent Dimaguiba and his colleague are feeling sticky after spending the entire day in the room with little ventilation. Morgan, on the other hand, retains great dignity, concluding her deposition with an endless monologue.

"I did all that, alone. Although, along my career, I have been contacted by many shady actors, I never worked with any of them. I had no contact with any foreign power or competing company. I wasn't motivated by money, or the desire to publish classified information. As a matter of fact, I do not believe that full governmental transparency can, or should, be attained. When it comes to the Little Blackjack, which was a finalized prototype, and without a doubt the most dangerous item I ever worked on, my plan only ever was to destroy it thoroughly; which, by the way, would already be done, if you didn't run your little circus. Perhaps you can pat yourself on the back – I'm sure your superiors will appreciate it – but my point is that I wasn't planning to take it anywhere."

"Are you done?" Dimaguiba asks, bored and frustrated.

"I suppose I am," the old woman admits. "Thank you, Agent, for your very civil behavior. I'm very grateful for the opportunity to set things right."

The irony of her phrasing doesn't escape the agent, or her blatant attempt to play for time, but there's only one thing that matters to him now. "Where is the backup?" he asks, his tamed ferocity made audible in his intonation.

"It's on a hard drive," Morgan replies, plainly. "The GPS coordinates are 14 dot 4-1-3, 2-3-8 North, by 120 dot 8-7-3, 6-9-8 East."

Agent Dimaguiba gets up, full of scorn. "Get her to her cell," he orders his colleague. Looking across the mirror at the other agents, he communicates with them wirelessly as they all pull the map of the swamp where the coordinates converge. Next to a dry road, Morgan's improvised lair is waiting for them.

Meanwhile, lying on his bed, Jake has plugged into the recharging socket he uses every night, the batteries of the Little Blackjack emptied by hours of physical exertion. David walks in, a nutrient vial in hand and peacemaking intentions in mind. Jake is playing a video-game on his phone, his back to the door; the boy doesn't turn around when his father sits on the side of the bed.

"Son, it's dinner time," David says, apologetic. The boy doesn't reply, the sound effects of his game answering for him. "Come on, Jake," the father insists, "you need food like everyone else."

Jake grabs the vial from his hand and slides it into his torso himself, removing the empty vial one-handed before tossing it expertly in the bin on the other side of the room. Silent, he goes on with his game, obviously brooding. Stunned at what just happened, David sits there in silence, putting his hands on his lap. He feels horribly useless, and tries his best to muster some joy to bring to his son.

"You know, it's New Year's Eve tonight. You wanna go out?"

Jake doesn't even acknowledge the question. David puts a hand on his shoulder, the cold touch of coated titanium chilling his heart. "Tomorrow's a new day," he says, encouraging, "and a new year. I love you son."

He kisses Jake on the cheek and exits the room. The boy waits a few seconds after his dad is gone, and turns off the video-game. His forearms are covered in retractable wires, one for every standard. He pulls one adapted to the port on his phone, and uses the device to boost his reception. Across the city, police frequencies exchange a monotone chatter of code words and street names, which he listens to in silence, a cybernetic spider sitting on a web of radio waves.

Chapter 9

In the early evening, when the skyscrapers shine as brightly as they can, the swamp water drowning the old city reflects their light in a perpetually moving rainbow. Agent Dimaguiba steps out of the NICA helicopter landed on the rooftop of the unstable building, uninterested in the spectacle. His field of view shares that of the other agents, rummaging downstairs through Morgan's hiding spot.

He joins them, suspicious of the fabric spread across the walls to impede thermal surveillance. Everywhere, his colleagues are already inspecting and archiving every single piece of equipment they find. Dimaguiba walks through the corridor, up to the room where the sarcophagus of the Little Blackjack lies, empty. Sitting next to it, seemingly shut down, Jake's little robot dog is holding a hard drive in its mouth.

When Dimaguiba bends down to grab the storage device, the dog stands up on its legs and starts barking at him, letting the drive fall on the floor. Surprised but focused, Dimaguiba quickly catches the small object when his vision starts glitching. It begins with just a flicker, before one after another, additional windows pop up in his field of view, displaying video adverts for porn sites, penis enlargement treatments, quick money schemes, and all their entourage of obvious malware.

Other agents in the building start gasping when the pop-ups reach them as well. Still sharing some of their field of view, Dimaguiba yells, furious: "It's a decoy, warn the precinct!"

"I can't!" replies the agent closer to him. "There's a jammer in the building!"

Dimaguiba clenches his teeth while his antivirus software starts closing the windows. Slowly, his field of view regains visibility. The hard drive he's holding has a sticker on it, of a winking character pulling his tongue out. "Find it, now!" he demands, boiling.

Morgan has just finished eating when the robotic dog sends its signal across the web. Still hidden on top of the grate of the only air-vent in her cell, and riding on the wireless network of the precinct, the device Jake left behind transmits the order. Bouncing

on her wheelchair's on-board computer, to the remaining telepresence drones, the signal powers up the Behemoth and directs the shielding units to follow a route across the compound.

Out in the parking lot, two officers are smoking cigarettes when the initial tremor happens. At first, it sounds like a distant thunder strike, but when the loud noise of metal against metal resonates again, they return to the evidence hangar, the specter of fear looming over them. The shabby building stands, its garage door large enough to slip the Behemoth through on its back, silent until the roof of corrugated steel flies up in the air. Flung by the rising giant, who immediately starts unloading its weapons, the sheet of metal lands next to the terrified agents running for cover.

Emerging from the waist up, the Behemoth is firing foam, glitter and T-shirts all over the parking lot, when the column of shielding units rolls in. Targeting the officers escaping the scene with their submachineguns, they open fire all at once, a hail of rubber bullets falling on the panicked policemen. And as one by one the law enforcement agents fall, the automated drones mark their advance in a cold, synthetic voice.

"Target down. Target down."

Intimate with the sound of gunfire, the Major walks out of the shower to look out the window overseeing the precinct. Decades of private military contracting have left his dry muscles marked with an array of scars. From here, he can see the entire compound, made a mess by the colossal toy pouring harmless ammunition, and by the much more dangerous automated shielding units.

He grabs his cellphone and calls the Alpha team leader: "Status report," he prompts.

Bautista shouts through the noise of automatic gunfire. "Sir, our drones got hacked," he says. "They're all over the place. We can't access the exosuits."

The Major gauges the battlefield from his living room window. "Stay low," he orders, making sure his team remains operational. "Get to the precinct and help evacuate the wounded."

Angelo and Patti are eating street food and sharing life-stories when the Major calls. "Vacation over," he bursts, "get your ass back

here. Gillian too. NOW!" They pay in a hurry. The satisfaction of being pulled back is of small comfort next to what sounds like a terrible emergency. In the taxi leading back to the precinct, Angelo feels his guts jumping. For Patti however, the experience isn't nearly as unpleasant. She focuses on her breathing to keep her heartbeat slow, thinking of Ocampo's taunt.

Two NICA agents are standing guard in front of Morgan's cell, when the column of ground drones rolls in. The agents open fire, desperate, quickly rendered blue with contusions as they collapse, unconscious. "Target down. Target down," the drones keep repeating in a chilling litany.

Inside the cell, the air-vent grate pops out, busted open by the device extending its two handles, and the machine in the backpack falls down on Morgan's lap. She hangs the bag to the back of her wheelchair, pulling the two handles out and clipping them to her wheels. With a battery pack in the device and small rotors in the handles, she just has to push a thumbstick to propel her mechanical chair forward, out through the grate of her cell opened by a security system on the fritz. When she rolls over one of the collapsed agent's leg, she does so with vengeful pleasure.

Chloe wakes up, curled up on the old couch of Bill and Malcolm's apartment, covered by a blanket she doesn't remember grabbing. Her mouth is so dry that she drinks the entire contents of a water bottle left to her attention. In the next room, Malcolm is cooking and chatting with Bill. The young woman slowly gets up and walks to them, her legs trembling with hypoglycemia.

"Guys?" she greets, blanket over her shoulders.

Busy with the cooking pans, Malcolm turns to her. "Look who's back!" he jokes.

Chloe can hardly see straight, she chuckles but remains on point. "What smells good?" she asks, her stomach growling.

Bill points at the food. "He's making gumbo," he says. The smell of celery, bell peppers and onion stewing in meat juice fill the room. "You look like you could use some," adds the mechanic.

Chloe nods, groggily. The pain in her face moves in waves. She pulls a few tablets from a pill bottle Morgan left her with,

swallowing them straight. "You're going out tonight?" she asks, shyly.

Malcolm laughs: "You ain't goin' outside with that shit on your face," he starts, "and I'm not leaving you alone with my machines! We're gonna baby-sit your ass!"

Chloe's touched, and in her weakened state she looks like she's about to cry. Seeing her reaction, Bill tries to keep the tone light: "He's right," the biker adds, "you look like crap."

"Thanks guys..." Chloe replies. She knows they're just being good friends, avoiding entirely the topic of her mother's crime and subsequent surrender. The warm and spicy food lets the young woman feel alive again, and maybe even accept the most recent events, when the news breaks on TV of Morgan's daring escape. Live helicopter footage is showing their collaboratively crafted Behemoth standing, making a mess, while ground drones take control of the precinct's entrance.

The reporter is still commenting: "... a scene of absolute chaos here today at the thirteenth precinct, where Dr. Morgan Zhu is still held, after a day, and as you can see, this incredible sight appears to..."

Chloe explodes: "What the fuck?!"

The three of them are too stunned to notice, in the courtyard, that Morgan's automated van boots up, driving away on its own.

A few minutes later, Morgan rolls out the front door of the precinct, escorted by a straight line of drones forming a shield wall and providing suppressing fire between her and the policemen entrenched in the parking lot. The scene is a war zone, hundreds of bullet impacts rendering the police cars unrecognizable, shattered glass, foam and glitter everywhere.

The automated van drives up the street and the lateral door opens, the ramp for the wheelchair coming down just as Morgan reaches the sidewalk. She enters the vehicle, which starts driving before the door is shut. And as soon as she's away, the drones cease fire, their central processors fried by a security exploit.

Suddenly, silence befalls the precinct once more. The moans of wounded policemen snapping out of shock those who were spared,

no one launches in pursuit, every vehicle in the parking lot a potential deadly trap.

Once the precinct is secure, Major Hanzo walks into the surveillance room. Humiliated NICA agents are reviewing past video surveillance in great detail, looking for a cause or culprit, when one of them spots David talking through the ventilation grate the night before. "There! This one," bawls the agent, "he's making contact!" The face recognition software brings up David's social status next to him.

The air is electric. The Major calls Angelo on his encrypted radio. "Status report," he demands.

From their training hangar, feeling awkward in civilian clothes, the Latino fresh from his date is running diagnostics over the entire system, his team of technicians having forsaken as well any plans they had for the night. "She routed through the console to bypass the encryption," he tells the Major. "It must've taken hours..."

The commanding officer sounds skeptical. "She designed it," he reveals. "What about the suits, are they compromised?"

"Diagnostics are clean," quickly replies the overseer.

"Run them again."

"Yes, sir."

Not easily bored, David is sitting on his living room couch, watching a TV report on New Year's Eve celebrations around the world. Manila will of course be among the first cities to enter the new year, while countries on the other side of the planet are just waking up to this day. The father finds comfort in the banality of the program, letting his thoughts drift in the back of his mind.

Suddenly, the door gets rammed open by NICA agents who invade the room. Dimaguiba emerges from the group, placing a firm hand on David's shoulder to sit him back down.

"David Patel?" he asks.

"Yes?"

"We're here on a matter of national security. Where is your

son?"

David's blood suddenly turns cold, the anticipated fear of this moment giving directions to his thoughts. "In his room," he answers candidly, adding with hopes of clarifications for Jake's missing hours: "why?"

Pistols drawn, agents rush in to check both bedrooms, but that of the child is empty, a curtain waving in a draft through the open window. "Target is on the move," inform the agents.

Under the cover of night, Jake is standing on the rooftop of the opposing building, cargo shorts and a hoodie grabbed from his wardrobe on. Through the open window of the living room, he can clearly see Agent Dimaguiba questioning David, and when the agent moves out of sight, infrared sensors still let him follow his movements.

His feet in rooftop gravel, the boy leans down to grab a pebble, gauging its weight in his hand. Despite the noise of traffic, he can even make out their conversation: "Trust me, Mr. Patel," threatens Dimaguiba, "if you don't tell us what you know, you're going to regret it."

David is still sat on the couch, surrounded by menacing agents, when Dimaguiba pulls his gun out. He's just about to point it at the father when a pebble bounces off the window ledge and hits him straight in the face, shattering the lens of his optical implant.

The terrified father has, once more, no idea what's going on, unlike Dimaguiba who rushes to the window, his on-board processor replaying the last minute and extrapolating the pebble's trajectory.

Thinking that the cover of darkness is enough to keep him concealed, Jake is having a laugh, until Dimaguiba points a finger at him. "He's on the roof!" shouts the agent.

Instantly, two columns of red light fall on Jake, revealing the stealth dropship silently hovering above the street. Its two ruby searchlights look down at the boy with the ominous aspect of demonic eyes, the dark figure of the dropship cutting a patch in the crimson sky.

"Hold right there!" the Major shouts through loudspeakers.

Startled, Jake bolts, running to the adjacent building. The

searchlights track him with only slight delay, as he tries to use rooftop equipment to break line of sight. The dropship goes after him, while down in the street police officers board their patrol cars to get in pursuit.

Built on a square grid like the rest of the platform, the residential block lets Jake jump with ease from rooftop to rooftop. Soon NICA helicopters reach the site, their dragonfly silhouettes shining their white searchlights on him.

The boy hears a beeping sound, followed by Morgan's voice: "Jake, are you receiving?" she asks, the spectrometer of her sound-only call appearing in his field of view.

"Morgan?"

"I've opened a secure channel. They can't hear us, Jake. You need to keep moving."

"They've got my Dad!" the child yells, desperate, while running away from the vindictive searchlights.

"I know. Follow this route."

Based on technology similar to the exoskeletons used by the task force, Jake's new body has been designed to link with an overseer. Morgan brings up a GPS pathway in his heads up display.

"Woah!" the boy exclaims.

"Do you still have your phone?" the old woman asks.

"Should I toss it?"

"No. Keep it for now. They're using it to track you."

Eventually, Jake runs out of rooftops to jump onto. Twelve floors below him, smart cars buzz in all directions; he leans over the edge when a Secret Service helicopter flies up, its open side housing a sniper aiming at him with a portable Gauss canon.

The heavy rifle connected to his eye socket, the agent opens fire. His targeting mechanism unable to lock onto Jake, the magnetically accelerated bullet whizzes by, blasting a hole in the ventilation shaft behind the terrified boy. Other helicopter snipers open fire as well, blowing gravel upwards all around him.

"You need to get down to street level," urges Morgan. "They won't shoot you inside the crowd."

Rushing to the other side of the building facing the shopping district, Jake leaps off, slowing his fall by swinging from neon insignia to commercial plasma screens. Devastating projectiles anticipate his movements imperfectly, and behind him the boy leaves a trail of sparks and exploding lights. When finally he lands on the pavement, surrounded by civilians filming the scene with their phones, the helicopters stop firing.

For a second, the boy gets a sense of relief, before Police cars swarm around the corner, quickly surrounding him in the middle of the four-way street. Encircled, he raises both hands above his head, as police officers get out of their vehicles to point their weapons at him.

NICA helicopters are shining their searchlights, the dropship nearing on his location. More and more patrol cars converge on his position, imbuing the child with a mixed feeling of fear and pride. An armored transport even enters the scene, its yard-high wheels sustaining the weight of a dozen men in heavy combat gear.

The police agents surrounding Jake are too focused on him to notice at first that the armored transport is gaining speed. Only when it knocks the first patrol car off its path do they turn around, quickly rendered white before they jump out of the way. Heading straight for Jake, the transport rolls over the encircling vehicles, squashing them under its mass like rotten fruits beneath a boot.

Jake leaps up, grabbing a ledge on the roof of the transport when it passes under him. The boy lands flat on the roof of the cavorting vehicle; rotating his wrist one hundred and eighty degrees, he gets face down and stabilizes himself with his feet. Now headed out of the cordon, he controls the vehicle remotely.

Meanwhile, inside the transport, special troops harnessed to their seats are shaken up like a Daiquiri.

"What the hell, man?" they shout at the driver, who's trying every lever and button at his disposal.

"It's not responding!" he cries, panicked, the driving wheel turning left and right with a life of its own.

Freed from immediate pursuers, Jake directs the massive vehicle into the public traffic, his eyes laid on a driverless double-decker bus full of commuting cadres. He lines up the transport next to the bus before jumping from one rooftop to the other, seizing

control of both vehicles.

A hundred meters ahead, police cars are quickly lining up to deny him passage. Jake adjusts the trajectory of the bus, propelling the armored transport forward, so as to use it as a battering ram. Terrified commuters loaded under him serving as human shield, the boy drives through the police barrage like a record-breaker through a finish line.

Chloe and her friends are still stunned by the ongoing news reports. They've fallen back on the couch, passing the water-pipe around, when suddenly the young woman's cellphone rings. Seeing an unknown caller, Chloe freaks out, jumping on her feet and holding her phone like a hot potato. Less impressed, Bill and Malcolm look at her with pity.

"It's the pigs!" she whispers, placing her thumb over the camera.

"Babylon..." mumbles the rasta, high as a kite, reminded of conspiracy theories he heard growing up.

"Give me that," Bill interjects, snatching the phone from Chloe's hand.

He picks up the video call, very relaxed; Morgan appears on the screen, in some sort of metal container. "Bill?" she asks, surprised.

"Morgan! What's up?" replies the biker, cheerful to find his friend alive and well.

Chloe freezes for a second. "Mom?" she whines, incredulous.

"Where's Chloe?" asks Morgan.

"Oh, she's right here," Bill replies, twisting his wrist so mother and daughter can see each other. Chloe steps up; behind her, the rasta is waving to the camera.

"Malcolm, you're here too!" Morgan rejoices. But her tone is as grim and serious as ever when she explains the reason for her call. "Listen," she says, "David and Jake need our help."

A few minutes later, Bill is sitting on his motorcycle, putting his helmet on. Chloe and Malcolm are walking toward the rasta's car, a hand-assembled pile of salvaged parts. "Can you drive?" he asks,

tossing his car keys to Chloe.

She's too surprised to catch them, and the keys fall at her feet. "You want ME to drive?" she asks, doubtful.

Malcolm sits in the passenger seat. He opens the glove compartment, unfolding a keyboard, and pulls down a flat-screen attached to the ceiling. A mess of cords unfolds which he connects to the ports in his skull. "Well," he says, "I'm gonna have my hands busy, so..."

Chloe picks up the keys, hesitant. Bill kick-starts his bike and rides toward the downtown platform. They've changed her bandages but the young woman still sits one-eyed behind the steering wheel, and follows the motorcycle out of the favellas to the best of her capacity.

David is getting cold sweats when agent Dimaguiba and one of his lookalikes escort him out of his apartment building and into their black government car. Dimaguiba takes the wheel. Sat in the back, David is desperately trying to think of a way to reach out to Jake.

The black car is just leaving when Bill gets in sighting distance. A few hundred meters behind, Chloe takes a quick turn, cutting across traffic to grab a shortcut. Malcolm starts hammering his keyboard. "Get closer!" he goads. "We need to bombard their ECU."

Chloe is in the zone, slaloming between rickshaws and driverless cars toward the Secret Service vehicle. "Hey!" she rebuffs, "I can only see in 2D right now! And I'm high as fuck, so just chill, OK?"

She floors the accelerator and catches up to the sleek black sedan. Malcolm types feverishly on his keyboard, opening all kinds of applications on his tinkered desktop. On the car's rooftop, a small circular antenna turns forward, locking onto the vehicle's electronic control unit, and preparing to send thousands of requests per second.

Bill thrusts past them. Getting right to the government car, he motions David to put on his seat-belt. The father looks at him worriedly, and carefully obeys, when Agent Dimaguiba notices the motorcycle. The biker flips him a finger, before suddenly the car

takes a steep turn, heading into a lamp-post. The agent in the passenger seat goes straight through the windshield as they collide, while Dimaguiba gets face down in the airbag.

Chloe drives by without stopping, stunned by the damage. Bill makes a U-turn, accelerating as he drifts closer to the totaled car and, using his momentum, punches through the side window, shattering Dimaguiba's implants, nose and teeth, all at once.

In the back, his chest compressed by the collision, David is shaken. He takes off his seat-belt, grasping his chest and catching his breath. "Who are you?" he asks, terrified.

Bill opens his helmet visor, revealing his face to his friend, and pulls the car door open. "It's me, you dumb-dumb!" he chuckles. "Come on!"

Still shaking, David gets out of the car and onto the bike, hugging Bill as they burn rubber and quickly leave the scene.

All the while, Jake is driving the bus at full speed, while controlling the armored transport between him and his pursuers. Swaying left and right all over the road, the heavy vehicle slams into police cars trying to close in.

Overhead, the stealth dropship is observing the fight, unmanned aerial vehicles deployed and locked onto Jake. Over Angelo's shoulder, the Major studies the moves of the prototype, eager to confront it.

When the bus reaches the edge of the city platform, Jake hits the brakes, prompting its passengers to scream in a panic. The driverless double-decker skids sideways, barring the road to pursuers, while the boy jumps off and runs across the large pedestrian area.

Patrol cars circle the bus, parking at the entrance of the touristic viewpoint, and unleash a horde of agents on foot. The ground starts to rumble as they pull their guns out, the sight over the outskirts following the rails where the subway turns into a skytrain.

Unheeding the policemen's injunction to stop and get on the ground, Jake jumps over the railing while they open fire. They run after him, leaning over the guardrail, expecting the train that they

felt under their feet to have crushed the boy. But below, quickly carried into the distance, Jake has landed on the rooftop of the first wagon.

Fear washed away by his state of high alert, the little boy gets up. He can see the helicopters flying after him, but even at this distance he has no trouble overriding them. With only a few commands, he sends the NICA helicopters in a spin, focusing then his attention on the black aerial transport. Contrary to every other vehicles, the dropship doesn't even appear highlighted by his interface.

Circumspect, Jake moves on. He jumps down between two wagons, Morgan still communicating with him. "Now's a good time to ditch your phone, Jake," she says.

The boy looks around, but there is little room in the narrow space between wagons, and nowhere to slide his phone stuck. He takes off one of his shoes, freeing his wheeled heel, and puts his phone inside before using the laces to attach it to one of the doors.

"Very good!" appreciates Morgan, seeing everything he sees. "Now, I want you to get off the train in five hundred meters. You can't let the helicopters see you, Jake."

The child looks down at the ground beneath him. It's moving very fast. He's scared.

"Jake?" Morgan insists, feeling his hesitation. "Don't worry, my boy, you can do it. Three hundred meters."

Jake uses cameras embedded in his fingertips to look under the train. There's not a lot of space, but compared to the air-vents he crawled through, this poses no challenge, except for the ground moving at thirty meters per second. Mustering his courage, he climbs down, hanging to thin ledges like a lizard crawling on a wall; he gets under the train, his back to the ground, suspended over pointy rocks swooping by him at menacing speed.

"Alright, I see you've got this," encourages Morgan. "Now don't worry: the Little Blackjack can take it. One hundred meters."

His feet facing the front of the train, and more than a little frightened, Jake pulls the hood of his sweater over his head.

"Now!" shouts Morgan.

Jake lets go, crossing his arms as he falls, burying his feet in gravel and sending it rattling against the train's belly. Inside, blissfully ignorant commuters, puzzled by the helicopter searchlights scanning the wagons, share amused reactions to the ruckus.

When the train ends up moving over Jake, freeing the night sky over him, he can see, from under a blanket of sharp pebbles, the helicopters still chasing. A minute later he's alone, getting up unscathed except for scratches on the coating of his titanium body, and a million holes in his clothes, gravel pouring from them as from a broken hourglass.

Following her mother's instructions, Chloe has parked under a bridge. She's stepped out of the car and looks at the city platform over them. From this narrow road at its bottom, the skyscrapers seem to be bending over like a gigantic hand about to squash an insect.

Jake slides off the wall, jumping and grabbing a lamp-post before swinging to street level. "Jake!" Chloe calls.

Feeling relief at last, the boy runs to his friend and hugs her at waist high, like he would his mother. Chloe is surprised, moved, taken aback by his justified anxiety. He's tall as a child now; she pats him on the head, a little awkwardly.

Chapter 10

Hovering silently above the station, the dropship shines its two searchlights on the train parked below. Passengers are being escorted out while a swarm of agents invade the track. Angelo zooms in on the situation; he and the Major, eyes peeled, are focused on the reticle stuck between two wagons.

Harnessed inside their combat suits, the troopers are awaiting orders; they've opened their helmets to breathe the comparatively fresh air of the dropship's interior. Impatient, Patti is trying to get ahead of oncoming developments. When struggling, she asks: "Permission to speak, sir?"

Undisturbed, the Major replies: "What is it Bravo Three?"

"Why are we going after this kid?" the young woman questions. "I thought our target was Morgan Zhu."

Having encouraged critical judgment during their training, the Major lays out the facts in a placid voice, without looking away from the screens: "He's going to her. We track him, we get them both." His parsimonious choice of words leaves Patti thinking. Apparently, the Major as well, she observes, when he prompts: "Archangel, bring me every plane, ship and train leaving the city in the next three hours."

"On it, sir." Angelo executes the order, quickly starting to compile data.

On the monitors, agents finally emerge from between the wagons. One of them is holding Jake's shoe and cellphone, which he brandishes high for his colleagues to see. Their pride stung, Angelo and the Major both refrain from any comment, as the means of transportation away from the country amass on the screens one under another.

Malcolm drives Chloe and Jake along the road leading to the floating harbor. As they pass the sunken city, public lighting goes dimmer, giving them a vague sense of security in an otherwise horrendous night.

When they reach the harbor, Malcolm drives his vehicle off the

road and through a hole cut open in the fence by their biker friend. They remain out of sight from cameras, slowly driving between interminable rows of containers until they meet David and Bill leaning over one of them. All around, automated cranes and driverless trucks coordinate to deliver the containers onto the massive freighters that come and go, at all hours of the night. Everywhere, corporate logos are dancing the ballet of wild capitalism, the only few workers on site locked in distant air-conditioned rooms.

When the car approaches, David gets agitated. Jake exits first, running to his father and hugging him with all his might. Chloe and Malcolm gather with Bill, moved by the reunion. "Tell me you've ditched your phones," asks the biker. The young woman and her rasta friend nod in reply. The circumstances are dire for each and all of them, and they remain silent for a while, their hearts still racing.

It's David who breaks the silence: "Is anyone going to explain to me what's going on?" he exclaims.

Chloe replies as best she can, herself still caught up by the events. "The spooks are after my mum, David," she explains. "They're using us to get to her. We need to go."

"What?" the father explodes. "This is crazy! What has she done?"

Jake wiggles his shoulders, softening his father's grip so he can look up to him. "Morgan can explain everything, Dad," he says. "We really should go."

"We're not going with them!" David bursts. "It's all their fault!"

Chloe turns to her friends, exchanging with them regretful glances. The three of them hardly know what they've implicated themselves in, and David's objection might well be legitimate. They don't need to speak to agree on that, having placed their friendship in front of their personal interest without thinking twice about it.

Chloe sighs. "Fine," she says, willing to hear him out. "Where will you go?"

"We're going back to tell the truth," David replies, vindictive.

"I don't think they'll listen, Dad," deplores Jake, who's been spying all the while on radio communications.

"Shush, boy!" David spits, trying to assert his own conviction.

"He's right," Chloe approves, "they're not interested in you, they'll use you and your son as bargaining chips."

"Listen," Malcolm intrudes on the conversation, "we're skipping town too. This is serious shit, David. You should go with Morgan."

Bill lifts up the metallic curtain of the shipping container. Inside, smart-cars fresh from the factory are waiting to cross the ocean and meet their new owners. Chloe walks inside, beckoning David and Jake to join her. "I want some answers too, you know," she points out.

"Come on, Dad," Jake insists. "You should at least talk to her."

Stuck between a rock and a hard place, the father grumbles. "God dammit," he mutters, reluctantly walking inside the elongated metal box.

Bill pats Chloe on the shoulder: "Tell your mother she's the craziest woman I've ever met," he kids, with a deadpan tone.

"And we're going to miss her," Malcolm adds, always the cheerful one. "All of you."

Bill pulls the curtain down, closing the container behind them, before the electromagnetic crane descends and locks its jaws on the storage unit. A second later they're lifted, and transferred onto a large automated freighter, stowaways on a ship conducted remotely.

Left behind, Bill and Malcolm take a deep breath, proud of their principled stand. They look at the container until it gets out of sight, and turn to each other.

"You wanna catch the fireworks?" the biker asks.

Malcolm laughs at his friend's perspicacity. "Get out of my head!" he chuckles. With a fist bump, they drive away in their respective vehicles.

A little shaken and in utter darkness, Chloe, Jake and David listen to the noises surrounding them with anxiety. Jake turns on LEDs embedded in his face, lighting the obscurity with a faint glow, enough to outline the contour of their respective features.

David is still catching on. "Bill is correct," he proffers, "this is

madness."

Chloe's expression is that of someone afraid that the truth will sound ludicrous. "These guys were going to take you to a black site, you know," she explains, marking a pause. "I'm not joking."

David can't believe that, not at first. He exchanges a glance with Jake, hoping to reassure the boy who, unbeknownst to him, has been listening to radio chatter. Without a word, Jake nods in confirmation, sowing doubt in the father who simply drops the subject, flabbergasted.

The automated system lands the container near the center of the ship, quickly piling another on top of it. The curtain gets pulled open by Morgan's last drone. Across the alleyway, from inside another open container, the mother is waving at them. Chloe runs to her, while David and Jake tiptoe into the open, weary of the monitoring drones scanning bar-codes on freshly loaded containers.

They close the units behind them, taking refuge in the cramped-up area of Morgan's improvised cabin. Her van takes a large portion of the space, and she's arranged a cot next to a chemical toilet. Weeks of food and water pile up along the walls covered in cooling fabric, shielding the interior from thermal detection while keeping the air breathable. Crates of H+ equipment have been arranged into a makeshift desk where, taped to the wall, a paper-thin screen is displaying video feeds from the freighter's security cameras.

Still using the rudimentary wheelchair assigned to her at the precinct, Morgan hugs her daughter with a shared relief. Once the wave of emotion has passed, Chloe stands back up, siding with David and Jake. "What the hell kind of stunt was that, Mum?" she entreats. "Did you really have to go that far?"

Morgan looks down, ashamed to tell the truth. "I'm glad you're all safe," she confesses. "David, I'm so sorry I've put you through all this. Giving myself up was the only way to get you out. These agents are out for blood."

David steps up, boiling with controlled anger. "What have you done, Morgan?" he asks through his teeth.

"I've destroyed sensitive data," answers the scientist. "And I've stolen a prototype," she adds, crossing eyes with Jake.

The boy looks up to his dad, awaiting judgment, but David needs a moment to wrap his head around the notion. "You mean?..." he gestures at the Little Blackjack; Morgan nods in reply, leaving the father breathless. "You've made my son an accessory to your crime!" he bursts finally. "That's unacceptable!"

"You're right," Morgan admits. "I let him use the prototype so I could escape. It was selfish."

"It was my idea!" Jake interrupts. "She only went in to get you out, it's not fair!"

Chloe gasps, checking David's reaction. "Son," he says, with a shiver, "you should've let her." Fuming with rage, he turns to Morgan, adding with growing contempt: "These people have been using you."

Morgan stops Chloe from jumping to her defense with a glance. "Your resentment is justified, David," she agrees. "You have a right to be bitter. But what's done is done, and now we need to discuss our options."

"All I want is for you to take my boy out of that thing," David answers immediately, prompting Jake to back away from him.

"Dad, no!" the boy begs.

"Enough!" bursts the father. "The adults are talking!"

Chloe gulps in silence, letting Morgan lead the exchange. "I can do that," the scientist replies. "I have a life-support device somewhere that we can use to house his brains. But I have to tell you, David: the NICA won't stop until they've put me down. It's how they operate. I'm a liability, and you're a means to an end."

"I can talk my way out of this," David rebuts, his confidence wavering as he utters the words.

"If that's what you want..." Morgan deplores, pointing Chloe to a crate behind her.

The young woman extracts a device the size of a rice cooker, vital monitors covering its sides. When he sees the object, Jake scampers farther away, anxiously imagining himself deprived of any senses for an unknowable amount of time. He's filled with horror at the notion of perpetual blackness, absolute sensory deprivation, a hell he has glimpsed into thrice before and emerged from,

transformed, every single time.

"Please, Dad," he implores, "don't put me in that."

Feeling guilty for the wedge she's driven between father and son, Morgan interrupts, hoping an alternative will mend the relation: "This ship is headed for West Africa," she informs. "There's a giant dump over there, where H+ discard their older models. We can easily give Jake a new body, one that cannot be traced. Then, we'll get out of your way, I promise." She marks a pause, looking at Jake for a second before locking eyes with David. "You'll never hear from us again."

"And live as fugitives?" David lets the question sink in. "I'll take my chances with the cops, thank you," he concludes with audible resentment.

Jake doesn't give them time to find an agreement. Overriding the automated van's operating system, he opens the side door and locks himself inside, keeping his hold on the door mechanism. "You can't make me!" he yells through the windshield. "If you wanna get off, just do it, but I'm staying with them!"

Faced with the child's tantrum, David and Morgan drop their conversation, the father moving to the vehicle trying to appease his son. "Don't be stupid, Jake. If you stay on this boat, you'll never see any of your friends again," he tries to argue.

"They're my BEST friends!" Jake insists, pointing at the Zhus.

David tries to forcefully open the van's door, but the child's abilities keep them both locked apart from one another. Seeing that the exchange is likely to go on, Morgan motions Chloe to sit next to her, and pulls out fresh bandages and gauze to clean up her implants.

Now that most questions have been answered, the young reporter tries to tie up all ends. "Why the big showdown, Mum?" she asks. "You could've found a way to escape without wrecking the whole place."

"I'm sorry, Zuzu," the mother replies as she takes off her daughter's bloody bandages.

"That's it?" Chloe whispers so as to keep their conversation private. "You're sorry?"

Morgan throws down the dirty gauze, putting aside her sweet manners for a second. "Fine. I wanted payback," she admits. "Is that what you want me to say?"

Her face bears the traces of overflowing anger, the likes of which Chloe has only ever witnessed in herself. The young woman sits back, troubled by the fact that she has nothing to object, and lets her mother apply balm and clean gauze on her wounds.

The exchange between Jake and his dad grows louder. Morgan sighs with a heavy sense of guilt. "I should've destroyed everything on the spot," she regrets.

"Why didn't you?" Chloe asks, still trying to piece out her mother's sketchy strategy.

"It won't take long for my colleagues to recreate the work," the hunted scientist argues. "I figured I could buy enough time to extract the override software, and leak it to antivirus developers."

"That's genius, Mom!"

"I'm not sure," Morgan concludes, unable to distinguish between virtue and madness anymore.

Forsaking any hope of making Jake obey, and having heard the last part of their conversation, David comes back to Morgan. "That's what this is all about?" he vociferates. "Some computer virus? You're destroying our lives because of a program YOU created?"

He looks down at Chloe, at her shaved head freed by lighter bandages. Understanding at last that her mask was a fake, he swallows his pride; the law-abiding family man can't contain his anxiety, a feeling of entrapment closes down on him. Hyperventilating, he staggers to the chemical toilet and leans over it, certain he's about to either throw up, faint, or do both at once.

Inside the control tower of the humongous freighter, the ship's captain and only human staff on board is preparing his station for three weeks alone at sea. Lewd posters on the walls, a duffle bag full of cracker packets at his feet, next to a cooler full of beer cans, and a virtual reality helmet filled with movies and video games are all he need to keep himself busy. His station overlooking the main deck, he pays little attention to the automated cranes loading the cargo area.

Once finally the operating system of the ship signals it is ready for departure, the captain selects a route on the touchscreen of his GPS. Connected to a cloud of meteorological and navigational systems around the globe, the ship departs with blaring horns, its hull heavy with hundreds of driverless vehicles.

The captain sits back in his armchair, throwing his bare feet on the dashboard. He pops open a beer, before pulling down his virtual reality headset, delving deep into a collection of artificial worlds.

Back at their headquarters, the task force has landed on the roof of their training hangar. Standing next to his console, Major Hanzo is checking ship manifests with Angelo. One after another, the young man brings up freighters leaving the country. "What about this one?" he asks. "Fully automated, left the docks fifteen minutes ago."

The troopers have gotten out of their suits. Right outside the transport, they have sat on the ground, stretching their legs while awaiting orders. A few steps away, Patti is pacing, impatient to settle the score.

"Gotta admit, that's not how I was planning to spend New Year's Eve," jokes the Indonesian.

"You got a problem with this, Yuwono?" burst the squad leader, hardly able to contain the adrenaline leftover from the chase.

"Come on," interjects the Bravo team leader, "he's joking."

Bautista doesn't seem amused. "That Dr. Lady put twelve cops in the hospital!" he rebuffs. "This is no time for jokes."

"Having a laugh doesn't mean we don't care, man," mediates the Nigerian. "But we're stuck!"

Ocampo looks away from the group, at Patti walking in circles with her fists clenched to white knuckles. "Gillian sure is brooding," she remarks.

Her team leader looks over his shoulder at the obviously upset trooper. "Hey Gillian!" he calls. "These were your people down there. What's your take on this mess?"

Patti stops and stares at the precinct below, still bearing the traces of Morgan's great escape. The Behemoth has been shut

down, but it's still standing tall, its grotesque silhouette a blatant reminder of their humiliation. "I'll tell you what," she replies between her teeth, "I sure hope I get to her first."

The troopers are nodding approvingly when the Major walks out of the dropship. "Gather up!" he prompts. Pulled out of their banter, they quickly stand at attention.

"It's not pretty out there," he starts. "That old woman has put bleeding edge military hardware in the hands of a ten-year-old. I don't know what she plans on doing with it, but we all know what she's done so far."

His tone is grim as he continues his briefing: "The Secret Service and the cops are spread thin. Technically, we're on standby, but I doubt we'll be getting news from them anytime soon. Our targets have received outside help; right now, my guess is they're either hiding under the city platform, or trying to get out of dodge." Turning briefly to Angelo, he exchanges a glance with the overseer. "We've spotted a freighter about to reach international waters," he points out. "I've passed the word, guess what they told me."

The tease is too obvious for the troopers, who await the answer with gleeful anticipation, but the Major disappoints. "They told me to stand by," he lets go, his own frustration audible. "So," he concludes calmly, his voice dimmer than they've ever heard it, "if any of you want to stay here and watch the light show, well... these are the orders."

Each member of the squad is feeling let down; the night is a real blow to their operation, an old albeit savvy lady having made fools of them all.

Finally, the Major adds: "Personally, I'm going to check out that freighter."

They can't believe his words at first, but when one of them cheers in relief, the entire squad bursts out loud. "Let's make our own fireworks!" boasts the squad leader, his troops barking in approval as they return inside the dropship to suit back up.

Hanzo looks over the city while the troopers embark the transport. A proud smile escapes him, which he quickly conceals. "Prepare for take-off," he orders. Angelo locks down the lateral doors, and the dropship flies up into the clouds.

Now that the freighter is at sea, Jake has come out of the van. Sitting next to the surveillance console, David slowly sips through a straw one of the protein shakes Morgan stored as rations, his head still spinning from the realization that his life has been upended despite his best efforts. On the monitor, the city looks tiny, its blinding lights reflected over the sea conferring it the aspect of an exploding star in the night sky.

Jake and Chloe are sitting on crates, jokingly talking about her implant which the young lady dares not turn on. With the weight of the decision to flee lifted by the departure, they tease each other like the children that they are. Jake, whose entire body has been prosthetics for the better part of a year, can hardly remember how it felt to wake up in his artificial shell. "I mean," he teases, "I don't even know why you're waiting."

"Give her time," advises Morgan. She still has difficulty believing she's not making that trip alone, and every second of it is a blessing.

Chloe smiles, thankful of her understanding and a little ashamed of being bullied by a ten-year-old. "I'm just..." she tries to explain, shyly. "It's a big step for me, OK?"

Jake shrugs. "You're a chicken!" he asserts, moving his elbows like short wings.

Chloe and Morgan both laugh at his remark. "Ah! Unbelievable!" the young woman exclaims. "You know what? I wish I'd been filming that, so there you go. The chicken roosts."

Pulling the bandages over her forehead, she palpates her temple in search of the implant's digital interface. Keeping the power button pressed for a second, Chloe sees her new eye come into focus, its visual quality oddly similar to her natural eyesight. As soon as she's comfortable, she presses the record button, bringing a red dot in the corner of her field of view. The experience is just like she's been dreaming of half of her life; she laughs, at herself, at the circumstances, at her overwhelming lack of regrets.

Morgan feels the weirdest pride at seeing her own flesh and blood rejoicing about her body modification.

David, meanwhile, is slouching more and more, hoping he could

just disappear and wake up the day before. The security cameras still allowing a distant view of the city, he notices the dark silhouette of the dropship approaching from the East, a black spot on the bright background which at first looks inoffensive, but soon reveals itself to be frighteningly familiar.

“Hem...” David voices, hesitant.

Deep in their conversation Morgan and their respective children do not pay attention. “HEM,” he insists, louder.

Chapter 11

Flying low over the dark sea, the dropship approaches. Inside, Angelo is trying to contact the freighter's captain who, lost in a virtual reality, doesn't hear the ringtone coming from his console.

"The ship's command is not responding, sir," informs the young overseer.

"Sweep for thermal signatures," orders the Major.

Angelo launches surveillance drones to circle the freighter. Switching their cameras to infrared, he scans containers on the main deck as well as the control tower. "Well, the ship's clear," he says. "There's someone at the command deck, though."

Behind him, Hanzo sounds suspicious. "This feels off," the veteran grumbles. "How far are we from international waters?"

"Thirty minutes."

The Japanese turns around to address his troops, now packaged once more in their combat suits and looking for a fight. "Morgan Zhu may be using concealment from our equipment," he begins. "I want that ship anchored down until we've run a full check. Bravo team will rendezvous with Alpha as soon as they're done."

The lateral doors pull up under the turbines, revealing the cargo deck of the freighter below them. "Let's get one thing straight," adds the Major, shouting over the noise of the ocean, "if any of you spot that prototype, I want you to shoot on sight. Target the legs to impede movement. No customary warning, you got that?"

"Sir! Yes, sir!" the squad barks in unison, turning on their assisted rifles.

The Major pulls down the cord fitting behind his neck, connecting his own exoframe to the shared interface. With their shielding units destroyed by Morgan's malware, the squad drops Alpha team at the bow of the ship, before the dropship moves to the control tower.

In formation, the troopers face hundreds of containers piled up three levels high. Two thin alleys link the bow to the control tower.

The three men team engages itself in, opening one by one the units on ground level.

Chloe, Morgan and Jake have now gathered next to David around the surveillance console. The scientist reaches for a soft keyboard, directing a camera to face the dropship now landed on the roof of the control tower. Bravo team exits the transport, jumping down on the metallic staircase leading to the command deck.

"Look!" David points out, his blood running cold. "They have rifles! This has gone way too far, Morgan. We need to surrender."

The mother sighs in great despair, Jake and Chloe awaiting her reply with anxiety. "I agree," she admits finally. "They're relentless."

"Come on, Mum," Chloe intervenes. "For real? This is loser talk."

Morgan rolls over to the life support unit, pulling it on her lap, and boots up the device. "Jake, come over here," she says.

As he sees her do, the little boy takes refuge behind Chloe, keeping a watchful eye on his father as well. "I recognize this ship," he says. "I couldn't hack it earlier."

Morgan nods. "It's another one of our contracts," she shrugs. "They must be using secure encryption."

Chloe grabs the soft keyboard to zoom in on the ship. The doors left open, she recognizes Angelo sitting at the console; it's hardly a surprise, still, a resentful sneer escapes her. Quickly, she studies the remote control system used by the Major. "These two must have the cipher, don't you think?" she asks, rhetorically.

David scoffs. "I can't believe you're even taking part in this conversation," he tells Morgan, behaving like they're the only adults in the room.

The lady shakes her head off. "There's no way Jake can get in there," she asserts, depressed.

Chloe turns to the little boy. "Jake?" she asks, forming in her mind a last stand strategy.

"They're leaving the doors open," the child remarks. "That's just sloppy," he concludes, his tone excessively confident.

Chloe doesn't leave David and Morgan a second to interrupt. "Alright," she declares, "this is the plan: try to get in there before they take off. We'll use the van to get to the control tower."

Jake nods. "I'll make a mess to keep them distracted," he agrees.

This is too much for David who steps forth. "OK," the confused father interrupts. "I'm putting my foot down."

Jake raises a hand, peacefully motioning his father to back off. "Don't worry Dad," he says. "I got this."

David grabs him by the wrist, gripping it so firmly that Jake's receptors transmit a faint warning to his HUD. "That's ENOUGH, Jake!" the father snaps. Yet, aware of the strike team's proximity, he keeps his voice down. "You wanna get us all killed?"

But behind him, Morgan's going back and forth on the issue. Faced with the child's terror at the sight of the life-support casing, she drops it aside and pushes open another crate of H+ equipment. Inside, hundreds of insect-sized drones lie dormant. Morgan pulls the control device stored in protective foam and turns on the swarm remotely, lighting the miniature robots which quietly hover out of the crate, pouring to the ceiling like fluid in an inverted space.

"You'll need these," she tells the boy. "We designed them as peripherals for the Little Blackjack. They're routers, Jake. Do you understand?"

Giddy with excitement, Jake overrides the device, seizing control of the drones. To his back, the container is facing another, separated only by a foot. Opening the electronic lock, he lets the mechanism pull up the metallic curtain, before sending the drones dispersing outside.

All the while, still holding him tight, David looks at the swarm with growing terror. "You're staying here, son," he orders.

"Relax Dad," Jake replies. "I can send one of these drones inside the ship and do it from here, right?"

Morgan shakes her head off. "I'm afraid you'll need direct access," she replies, fully aware of the dropship's electronic countermeasures.

Jake doesn't mind. "Well, either way," he concludes, rotating his wrist three hundred and sixty degrees. The friction forces David to release his grip; he tries to grasp Jake again but the boy swiftly retreats, lifting the tip of his feet and rolling backwards in a surrealist fashion, out of the container.

Stabilizing himself with his elbows between the rows, the boy gets ready to propel himself upwards. He looks at his father once more, his coy demeanor masking a more somber fear. "I'm not putting my brain in that box, Dad," he insists, final.

And a second later he slides up, vanishing as a theater actor hanging from a wire. Chloe doesn't waste time; getting inside the van and to the driver seat, she ignites the engine. Atop the third layer of shipping containers, Jake emerges springing out, softly landing in a crawl position. Silent, he moves to the edge like a spider, his limbs unfolding to cushion his movements.

Cameras in his fingertips let him spy down the alleyway. Alpha team is already a third of the way; their exoskeletons ill-suited for searching the inside of the cars, only one of them goes in while the others keep their heads on a swivel.

Up in the command deck, the ship's captain is holding his controllers like an assault rifle, his feet on the dashboard, immersed in a photo-realistic battlefield. Headphones on, turned to maximum volume and blasting explosive sound effects, the glorified watchman remains deaf to the signal on his console warning of an incoming call.

Bravo team walks in from the outdoor stairwell, their heavy armors filling the confined space. Reyes and Yuwono move to the elevator while Patti closes in on the captain and snatches off his headset. Thunderstruck by that unexpected invasion of his personal space, the man who thought he was alone at sea turns around frantically; his yell turns to a whimper when he discovers the menacing figure standing over him, her enormous rifle held with a single hand.

Patti drops the headset to the ground. "You gotta answer the call, man," she says, with a hint of disappointment in her voice coming through speakers on her shoulder plates. Leaning forward to pick up the incoming communication, she steps on the headset,

crushing the device into tiny fragments under the weight of her heavy armor. "Oops," she adds, sardonic, before joining her teammates in the elevator.

Angelo's face has now appeared on the monitor. The ship's captain, turned pale, is still looking over his shoulder, shocked and awed. Trying to get him to focus, Angelo snaps his fingers repeatedly, talking to the man as some would to a dog.

"Hey, over here, buddy."

The freighter's engine emits a loud noise as it cuts off all thrust. The sudden deceleration sends the troopers shaking, drawing a metallic moan from the pressurized hull. Lying flat over the containers, his dark figure concealing his movements, Jake hangs tight. And soon enough, silence falls, leaving only inertia to move the ship forth. The sound of water rippling against the vessel is all that can be heard.

Alpha team is advancing through the alley, methodically searching ground level containers while scanning those above. Only a few meters separate them from Morgan's camouflaged unit. Under Jake's command, the swarm of insect drones spreads between the rows, dispatching each of them to a separate unit. They latch onto the magnetic locks keeping the units closed, they latch onto the driverless cars left exposed, and out of sight they infest the entire freighter.

Near the bow of the ship, in one of the first containers searched by the ground team, a car suddenly powers up, its two headlights flashing while the alarm starts to shriek. Alpha team pull up their rifles, hurrying back to check the inside of the car, where there's nothing to discover.

"I don't think that's random, sir," Bautista suggests in his radio, speaking over the high-pitched sound reverberated all across the ship.

Inside the dropship, the Major silently agrees. "Get the NICA on the line," he tells Angelo.

Alpha team exit the container when at the other end of the alley, a dozen storage units open, in which the headlights of as many cars light up. "Heads up!" bursts the squad leader. Driving

out of their respective compartments in orderly fashion, the vehicles turn for the bow and start accelerating, their width filling the entire alleyway as they rush one after another at an increasing speed.

Meaning to get back inside the container they just searched, the three troopers are forced out when the car comes alive before them, pushing them out of its way. Bautista and Ocampo take refuge at the bow, where the cars rush off the ship like a train derailing from a cliff, but a few meters behind, the Nigerian gets hit in the back.

The ceramic plates of his armor crush the hood of the car below him, the man tipping horizontally. He lands through the windshield, carried away like a bride across a threshold, first in a long line of vehicles to land in the ocean. The mercenary cries as it happens, and hits the water hard. Safety buoys inflate around his neck, pulling him back up to the surface and keeping his head above water. Knocked down, the trooper floats, under a continuous string of cars rushing off of the ship.

At each corner of the main deck, a loading crane unfolds from its travel position and starts rotating randomly. Above the noise of alarms, car engines, screeching metal, the troopers can hardly hear each other. The cranes rotate faster and faster, sending their claws swinging at an oblique angle. Alpha One and Alpha Two stand back to back, on edge.

Using the distraction, Jake silently descends upon them. He lands between the troopers, unleashing a series of jabs to their lower backs, but their ceramic armors easily cushion the blows. As each of them pivots, their rifles converging into a deadly combination, the boy grabs the squad leader's shoulder and swirls around him, landing his foot in Ocampo's face as he comes back around. The female trooper tumbles back a single step, Bautista thrown off balance by the monkeying boy who disappears between the rows of containers just as quickly as he appeared.

"Contact!" Alpha team shout in their radio, a little late, while trying to reestablish line of sight.

With chaos erupted over the main deck, Chloe floors the gas pedal and throws the van into a straight turn toward the control tower. In the back, David and Morgan are keeping their heads low. Jake sends a few cars in front of them to serve as cover, when

Bravo team shows up on ground level. Cameras set to infrared, they detect the heat signatures inside the moving vehicle, and shine their laser dazzlers at it.

"Stop the car!" shouts the Bravo team leader through his speakerphones.

Chloe's natural eye is forced shut by the headache-inducing lamps, but her cybernetic optics narrows its aperture; and when she realizes what is happening, the young woman roars with exhilaration. Other cars move in between the van and the troopers. "They ain't stopping!" cries Patti, locking her rifle on Chloe.

"Open fire!" orders Reyes.

Bravo team lets their automatic rifles speak. The windshield of the van blows into fragments sprinkling on the passenger seat, and unto David and Morgan lying in the back. Chloe's face gets scratched as well, though the adrenaline coursing through her veins wouldn't let her know. Bullets deviated by the driverless cars, she feels their impacts all around her.

When the first cars reach Bravo team they make a turn for the troopers, armor-piercing bullets tearing their structures like delicate origami. Faced with a wave of vehicles careening at high speed, the troopers unload their underbarrel rifles. The explosive bullets ignite fuel reserves, prompting a chain reaction resulting in a fireball. In the turmoil, Bravo One gets thrown out of the ship's side by the rest of an inbound car, turned into a flaming pile of scrap.

From atop the containers, where he's controlling the hundreds of remote units, Jake sees the cloud of flames rise along the control tower. As more cars get destroyed or sink in the water, he sends a signal to the insect drones latched onto the locks of the second level. Lifting up their metal curtain, storage units release another wave of vehicles that awkwardly land on the debris of their predecessors, before entering the flow leading them off the ship.

Chloe glimpses the explosion in her rear-view mirror as she makes a hard turn toward the open staircase leading to the command deck. "Holy shit!" she whispers to herself, while Morgan and David hug each other in terror. Up there, the freighter captain too sees the fireball crawl up his windows. White with fear, he slowly gets under his station.

Patti and Yuwono painfully get back up, patches of flames still

clinging to the fabric covering their armors. Beyond the mess of burning cars, they spot the van parked at the corner of the control tower. Chloe and David are carrying Morgan by the shoulders and making a run for the stairs. Patti cries in her radio: "They're on the outside stairwell!"

The Major sees the fireball climb up to the roof and vanish before his eyes. Stepping to the gun racks, he grabs a spare smart-rifle which he loads and turns on, planting his feet at the edge of the open dropship. "Get us in the air," he orders Angelo.

The transport takes off, slowly sliding toward the corner of the control tower, where the Major can look down the stairwell. He shoulders his rifle; below his feet, through the metal grate, he can see Chloe, David and Morgan heading into the second level. Focused, he addresses his squad: "The prototype is not with them."

Angelo activates thermal imagery on the belly cameras of the ship, tracking the fleeing trio while the Major scans the main deck, trying to spot Jake with his bare eyes. All the while, the boy is sowing confusion, making rapid passes at Alpha team, who can't lock their rifles on him. "He's here!" shouts Bautista.

The Major spots Jake retreating to a supposed safe spot on top of the containers. He takes careful aim and fires a burst of three rounds. Grazed by the bullets, Jake turns to see the ship hovering above the control tower. Having done all he could to delay the strike team, the boy realizes that he has wasted time. With the dropship in the air, there aren't many options left. He slides down between containers and enters the trunk of a car on the third level.

Meanwhile, the voice of the Major starts blaring through loudspeakers. "Jake Patel, this is the Police," he says, menacingly articulate. "I'm glad to see you're having fun, but it's time to put down the toys. You've been very naughty, and now it has to end. This ship isn't going anywhere. The Secret Service are on the way. Surrender. Now. Before things get bloody. Because I swear one thing to you, little boy: if you live through tonight, you'll regret everything."

Jake isn't really listening to the threats. From inside the trunk, his visual feed linked to the bumper camera, he directs his car remotely out of the container, onto a pile of disabled vehicles and among the other ones driving nonsensically.

Patti and Yuwono have rushed inside the ground level of the control tower, where the unresponsive elevator displays only glitches. Through their infrared cameras they can see Chloe, David and Morgan above them. Patti spots an indoor staircase and runs in head first, taking the door off its hinges, followed by Bravo Two.

Jake nears a crane at the bow, turning the car toward the one at the other end of the storage deck. When no one can see him, he pops the trunk open and crawls onto the roof of the car, accelerating along the side of the ship. As the claw swoops over the containers he jumps off, grabbing it in mid-air, the heavy weight of the object bending his trajectory and, balancing his legs before he's gone a full circle, he lets go, flung upward toward the open dropship.

Still carrying Morgan by the shoulders, Chloe and David get to the elevator left open to their attention. They're about to get in but freeze when the rest of Bravo team burst out of the staircase, their exosuits still smoking from the explosion. Tall in their armors, the two hellhounds point their rifles at them.

The Major is still trying to locate Jake, when suddenly the boy flies in, kicking him in the chest with both feet. The blow sends the veteran backwards, throwing him out of the transport through the opposite opening. His back hits the ledge of a chimney on the way down, before his legs go over and he falls inside. Jake softly lands on his feet and walks toward Angelo.

"Get off," the boy says, his words alone implying a threat Angelo doesn't care to find out about. Taking off his headset, he steps away, scared to death. Jake pulls a wire from his wrist and connects it to the main console.

Down on the second floor, Patti and Yuwono are aiming their rifles point blank at Chloe, David and Morgan. Full of spite, Patti is getting ready to complete the mission. "This is for all the cops you've put in the hospital," she says, chilling their blood as she pulls the trigger.

Her rifle only releases a strange buzzing sound. Her superior in the chain of command, Yuwono is taken aback. "The fuck you doing?" he asks.

She tries firing again but her rifle repeats the loud buzz. "Something's wrong," she remarks.

"Did you just try to shoot them?" Bravo Two insists, his own confusion spreading to their captives.

Suddenly, a synthetic voice comes from Yuwono's exosuit: "Powering down," the emotionless voice of the interface informs.

"What?"

The trooper stiffens inside his armor, but under the weight of the ceramic plating he falls to his back, a loud thunk echoing across the entire level.

"Shit!" Patti bursts, dropping her rifle. She unclips her chest and belt harness, freeing herself from the dying contraption just as it is powered down. Chloe and David use the distraction to carry Morgan into the elevator, but behind them the vengeful private contractor is already springing out of her suit, rolling on the ground and pulling her pistol.

Patti gets a clear shot just as the doors of the elevator close, and pulls the trigger. She sees the bullet enter Morgan's throat, an instant before the doors close. Jake has brought up the live-feed from the elevator camera onto Angelo's console, and both of them see Morgan falling to the ground, her neck pierced and squirting blood everywhere.

"Morgan!" the child cries. Standing right next to him, in shock, Angelo feels his legs shaking.

The boy lands the dropship back on top of the control tower, near the ladder leading to the command deck. Down in the storage area, Bautista and Ocampo are taking aim with their rifles, and he closes the door of the dropship through which they can see each other. Angelo stumbles backward, leaving the transport, his eyes locked with that of the child.

"This is a mistake," the young man tries to reason.

The Little Blackjack's military design doesn't let Jake's face express much, but it's obvious when he frowns. Angelo shuts up, anxiously gulping.

Patti stands back up, satisfied with her quick thinking. Behind her, Yuwono is lying on his back, as impotent as a turtle. "Hey, help me out, here!" he calls but, without a word, Patti runs back into the

staircase, rushing upstairs after the survivors.

Meanwhile, Alpha team have suffered the same fate. Exiting their exosuits, they aim their pistols at the top of the control tower. "They're tryin' to get to our ship," Bautista tells Ocampo, deprived of any radio to reach the rest of his team.

Inside the freighter's chimney, the Major has managed to impede his fall by spreading his arms and legs. Assisted by his exosuit, he slowly climbs up backward.

Lying on the floor of the elevator, Morgan is coughing blood, a bullet hole in her neck spurting more and more blood by the second. Her eyes are almost empty. Knelt next to her, Chloe is trying to stop the bleeding with both hands. "Mum! Please hang on..." she begs, the obvious gravity of the wound defying her denial.

Gathering her last breath, Morgan squeezes her daughter's arm. "Save yourselves," she whispers, before her eyelids come down for the last time.

Her hand goes soft and releases its grip before the elevator reaches the bridge. When the doors open David grabs Chloe by the wrist and pulls her out, tearing the young woman out of her thoughts. "We need to go!" he shouts.

They run through the command deck, where under his dashboard the terrified captain sees them pass by. Alpha team unload their pistols but, at that distance and without assisted aim, their shots only shatter the windows. David and Chloe run outside, when Patti bursts out of the indoor staircase. She launches in pursuit, checking the open elevator with her gun up, the sight of Morgan's corpse filling her with pride, before catching up to the fugitives.

David climbs up the ladder and runs straight to Jake, checking his body for wounds out of protective instinct, but the boy is only hurting on the inside. Staring at the screen, where Morgan's body lies in a pool of blood, he whispers, his tone inflected despite himself in the form of a question: "I can still go get her!"

David puts a hand on his shoulder. "I'm sorry, son," he mumbles, aware of the trauma the child is undergoing.

Chloe is right behind them. "Let's go," she says, shivering, as her eyes land on Angelo standing just outside the transport. He's

looking at her, hands apologetically open, seemingly about to speak but frozen rigid. His eyes carry more regrets than he'd know how to phrase, but his sympathy is worthless to the freshly orphaned woman. She looks away in disgust.

As the turbines blow stronger and the ship takes off, Patti finishes climbing up the ladder. She shoves the young man aside, planting her feet in a firing position, ready to empty her clip.

"No!"

Angelo yells as he diverts her aim. Far in the distance, the bullet hits the water. Her targets having retreated inside the transport, Patti is fuming. She steps away from Angelo who lets go of his grip; the young woman can hardly recognize him and they both stand, speechless at each other.

Startled by the gunshot, the passengers of the dropship do not pay attention to the Major as they fly by the freighter's chimney. Crouched on the edge of the large cylinder, he leaps into the transport, landing heavily at the opposite side. Jake immediately closes the door behind him, trapping them all inside the flying tin can.

In the distance, Secret Service helicopters are on approach. They're nearing the freighter when the swarm of insect drones takes off from its many hiding spots. The cloud of electronic fireflies dazzles the troopers left on the ravaged storage deck as it rises above them, before converging above the incoming helicopters.

From atop the control tower, Patti and Angelo are observing with awe their fluid motion as they spread high and descend, pulled down into the air column generated by the rotors. As water through a sinkhole, they spiral through the blades, destroyed by the dozen, a handful of them enough to latch onto the cockpits and carry a flurry of contradicting commands to the electronic control units. All kinds of signals light up on the control boards, and soon all three helicopters go down in the ocean.

Freed of any pursuer, the dropship is already flying away, quickly gaining altitude and disappearing in the darkness.

Chapter 12

The mechanism of his suit purrs as the Major stands up. At the other end of the ship, David steps in front of his son, while Chloe nabs the last spare rifle from the gun rack and aims at it the Japanese. Jake engages stealth mode on the transport, switching the white lighting of the interior to a gloomy red.

"I have to admit I'm impressed," congratulates the Major as he steps closer, his behavior contradicting his words and an oversized revolver hanging from his hip. Chloe advances between him and the Patels, pointing the muzzle of her rifle straight to his face. The man raises both hands above his head with a sarcastic grin. "You won't be needing that," he says, his raucous voice almost tender. "I was hoping we could talk. You know our prime suspect is down. We're not after you. Where does that leave us?"

"Stay back or I'll shoot your face off!" Chloe shouts. The Major stops halfway through the central lane of the transport. "I understand you're upset, Miss Zhu," he grants, "but do you really want to become a murderer?" The question strikes them all as a genuinely good point. "What about you, Mr. Patel: nothing to say about this whole situation?"

Singled out, David tries to play down the mess. "Listen officer," he exclaims, jumping on the chance to plead his own case at last. "We don't want any more trouble here!"

"That's good," deems the Major.

The stress of the situation is making Chloe see red, even more than the lights alone would. "Don't start apologizing!" she yells at David over her shoulder. "This fucking bastard got my Mum killed!"

The Major looks at the boiling young woman, speaking more softly now that he addresses her directly. "I'm sorry it came to that," he declares.

"Sheesh! That doesn't mean much," ironizes Chloe. "Jake, can you find a place for us to drop that shitbag?"

"Stay out of this, Chloe!" David bursts, trying to regain control of the situation.

Jake's reply comes quickly nonetheless. "I got just the spot," he

says, his own anger, colder than that of his friend, tainting his synthetic voice.

The stealth dropship emerges above the clouds. In the distance, the top of the H+ incorporated skyscraper is shining with decorations celebrating the dawn of a new decade.

"Since we got a few minutes," the Major adds, "can I just ask... What's your plan, here?" He pouts, perhaps trying to look harmless despite his combat exosuit. "You know men like me will keep coming for you..."

Chloe looks at him with disdain. "Then we'll just have to go through them too, won't we?" she says, locking the stock of the rifle in her shoulder.

"Stop antagonizing, already!" David insists, leaving his son at the console to join Chloe and the Major.

"Alright," the Japanese grants Chloe, doubtful. "But... for what? Your mother was very clear that you're all no accomplices. Why carry on?"

David grabs the rope held. "Thank you sir," he articulates respectfully. "I see you're a reasonable man. I hope we can come to an arrangement."

"Again, with the bargaining!" explodes Chloe. "Seriously, David: the guy's a merc. Whatever comes out of his mouth is snake oil!"

"I said 'stay out of this,' Chloe!" David roars, his negotiating facade crumbling in an instant. "You've done enough!"

The words chill her to the bone. At the front end of the ship, Jake feels equally hurt.

"And what's your plan Miss Zhu?" asks the Major, this time a note of criticism in his voice. "You really wanna go to ground with a classified prototype? You know that's the only thing they're after."

David turns to Jake. Seeing the expression on his father's face, the boy takes a step back. "Sir," David asks, looking at him with despair. "Can you give me your word that my son and I won't be separated?"

The Major takes a second to consider the request. "I wish I could," he replies in plain honesty, "but you know that's going to be up to a jury after the mess he made. I can swear to you that I'll put

in a good word."

"Not good enough!" Chloe spits through her teeth. She would blow the man's head off, was it not for the child's presence, but the Major isn't intimidated.

"As for you Miss Zhu," he adds, "if you would stop pointing that gun at me, that would be a good start."

"Oh, you'd like that, huh?" she sneers, sticking the muzzle to his face.

"Very much, yes," he replies with a polite smile.

Understanding that Chloe won't listen to him, David tries his best to keep the conversation civil: "Officer," he starts, unfamiliar with the Major's rank, "my son will need a new body, we can't just take his brains out like that."

To the boy, this last statement sounds as a betrayal. "Dad!" he erupts, disappointment rivaling the surprise.

"What?!" Chloe blurts out, herself astounded at David's decision.

"I understand," says the Major. "That shouldn't be a problem, so long as you cooperate."

David walks back to his son and kneels in front of him. "Jake," he says, his face distorted by the gravity of their predicament. "I need you to be a good boy, now."

Despite the discouragement, Chloe doesn't let go of her heavy rifle. Jake shakes away his father's grip, weary of his trail of thoughts, and secures the port connecting his wrist to the console under the palm of his hand.

"I know you loved Morgan very much," David insists, "but she's done some bad things. And it's not our place to pay for her mistakes."

"Seriously?!" Chloe gasps, caught up by the father's version of the events.

Jake hangs on to the console, before everyone else is sent stumbling by a sudden deceleration. When the side door opens, they're hovering a few feet over the heliport of the highest tower in town. Five hundred meters below, civilians have amassed to watch

the fireworks.

"You're still not getting it, are you?" Jake hollers. He stands up to his father, carrying himself with a menacing demeanor that David doesn't recognize. "Morgan made this body for me. It's mine!" he yells, pounding his chest. "I'm not giving it back."

Chloe looks at the boy over her shoulder, moved by his false understanding. She is leaving ample time for the Major to deliver a sucker punch, yet the man still refrains from using violence, instead rolling his eyes with growing odium.

"Well," David declares, addressing his son like a reproachful teacher, "the Policeman says it belongs to the Government, so it's not yours. You'll get a new one! Now land that ship and let's all get out."

Jake shakes his head off. "No," he states, his tone unmistakably final. "You're getting out, Dad. Him too."

He points a finger at the Major over David's shoulder, staring defiantly at the Japanese who only smirks in reply. Immediately taking sides, Chloe backs away from the Major, keeping her rifle aimed at him with precaution.

"Now, don't be ridiculous, son!" David shouts, baffled by Jake's newfound rebelliousness.

He's about to go into a tirade when the Major interrupts: "I'll take it from here," the man snarls. The loud clink of his metallic boots echoes in the vehicle. Before he reaches Chloe, the young woman is trying to shoot her rifle, but locked by the embarked computer the trigger doesn't even budge and she insists, startled, while the Japanese calmly walks past her. The Major's movement prompts panic aboard the ship, and as he draws his revolver, David steps in front of Jake, imploring mercy.

Hanzo grabs David by the collar and throws him aside, standing face to face with Jake who holds the console tight. The boy is about to send the ship tipping so as to throw the Major out once more, but neither of them is inclined to waste time. Following his own advice, the Japanese fires his revolver point blank, tearing a titanium plate off of Jake's thigh as the magnum bullet pummels through. The deafening noise freezes them all solid, safe for the combat hardened veteran now running the show. With a powerful lateral kick, he throws Jake out of the ship down onto the helipad.

"You maniac!" David cries when he finally regains awareness.

"Asshole!" Chloe bursts as well. She tries to hit the Major on the head with the shoulder guard of her useless rifle, but the noxious man grabs it tight and, assisted by his exosuit, sends it back in Chloe's face. Her prosthetic eye in pieces, the young woman falls on her behind, concussed.

The Major holsters his revolver and turns on the rifle. "User Online," greets the synthetic voice of the weapon. Standing over Chloe, he looks down on her, expressing a contempt which she gladly returns. Turning menacingly to David, who steps back, in shock, the Major walks to the main console and pushes a series of keys. The ship exits stealth mode, bringing white light back to the interior.

"Commander Override, Security Lockdown," the rudimentary AI comments.

The Major takes another look at Chloe, nose bleeding, and David, shaking. "Don't mess with my stuff," he orders, a little nonchalantly, before jumping out after Jake. As soon as he's out, the lateral door closes on David who's trying to follow, and the ship ascends into the air where it hovers in place.

Light on the helipad shines brightly. In the middle of it, Jake lies, getting back on his feet despite his damaged leg. Speaking through the radio transmitter embedded in his wrist, the Major is calling reinforcements. "Send aerial units to my GPS," he orders. "I've got the target pinned down."

Ten meters above them, locked hermetically, the dropship levitates out of reach. Jake looks around the helipad, where cast shadows eat up the rest of the rooftop. As the Major steps forth and aims the rifle at his legs, the boy jolts, immediately disappearing behind ventilation equipment. The noise of gunfire reverberates up to the transport. Down at the bottom of the tower, revelers are counting down from ten the last few seconds separating them from a new year.

"You thought I'd just let you walk," the Major shouts at the fleeing child. "After what you did to my squad?"

The first fireworks whistle as they climb past the building,

exploding above the rooftop and turning night into day for a second at a time. The Major goes after Jake, calmly walking down the flight of stairs leading to the darkened rooftop.

Inside the transport, Chloe and David are getting their bearings. Still sitting on the floor, humiliated, Chloe is picking up pieces of her ruined eye. David, breaking down, is banging against the door. "Let me out! Let me out!" he screams, panic having overtaken the desperate father.

Seeing him freak out quite legitimately, Chloe pulls herself together. She jumps on her feet and starts examining the console, knowing that the central interface may be their only way out. All the while, David keeps shouting and banging.

"David! Please!" she begs. "It's not helping."

"My son's out there getting shot at!" the father replies, choking on tears of panic. "What do you want me to do?"

"I don't know!" she whines. "Just be quiet about it."

"This is all your fault!" he concludes, resuming his useless attempts at forcing a pneumatic lock open.

Chloe doesn't react to that spiteful comment, admitting to herself that her plan has gone south. The computer rejects all of her commands with the same message: "Request denied. Security lockdown in effect." She sighs and looks around, her gaze stopping on the telepresence headset hanging from the ceiling.

Searching for Jake among ventilation equipment, the Major circles the helipad at a careful pace. The nearby flashes of the fireworks cast strong fleeting lights over the rooftop, letting him spot the boy's shadow moving from cover to cover.

The mercenary's taking aim when a bright rocket explodes before him, his eyes forced almost shut for an instant. Through the blinding light he does see Jake swoop in from the side, having misjudged his location. Compressed in his compact form, the small boy thrusts right to the Major's chest, extending into a bipedal posture and spreading the man's arms with his own.

He lands a palm in the face of the veteran, hoping only to

distract long enough to unclip the magazine from his rifle. What little blood he has left running through his brains via his life support system, Jake feels it pumping strong. Every fragment of a second extended by stress and heightened by the Little Blackjack's combat protocols, he spends fearing for his life and altogether thrilled. Dropping the rifle's clip, he kicks it off the roof with a twist of the heel, impressing himself in the process.

Immediately he regrets his own cockiness, the arms of the Major closing down on him as he tries to pin the boy down. Jake retreats through his legs, crawling like a reptile when the Japanese grabs his foot. The strain tears off more circuits on Jake's already damaged leg. Yelling in a panic, he can see over his shoulder the man aiming his rifle one-handed at the spot in his thigh he already shot before.

The piercing bullet blows through the main axis of his thigh, biting through titanium as if it were paper. The Japanese pulls the leg up, tearing off more wires and freeing Jake who, even more lizard-like than before, retreats to the shadows while his leg keeps twisting in the Major's hand. Tossing his empty rifle down, the man pulls out his revolver and resumes his chase, undisturbed.

David is now trying to pry a door of the ship open using whatever equipment he finds lying in the racks, with very little success. Chloe pulls the Major's headset down, looking for a wire she can disconnect, but the military design is too tightly arranged. Losing patience, she pulls on the cord once more, bringing the device low enough for her to smash it with her knee until it breaks open.

Once she isolates the cable feeding visuals to the headset, she unscrews her broken optics and prepares to connect the remote control system to her eye socket. David is catching his breath when he sees her do this. "What the hell are you doing?" he asks, panting.

"Trying something," she replies, encouraging. "If I catch fire, unplug me, OK?"

"What?" he exclaims, taken aback.

Chloe blinks with her only eye before she slips the plug inside the port lodged at the bottom of her eye socket. "That was a wink,"

she explains with a humorous smile. "I've got some sort of access, here, but the menus are all weird."

David suddenly feels hope, his breath returning instantly. "Can you open the doors?" he asks in a hurry.

"Err... I don't know," she admits, confused by the complexity of the military interface. "Holy shit!" she bursts finally, "I've got the ship's external cameras!"

She displays on the main screen the feed from the belly cameras. Ten meters below them, Jake is fleeing for his life, the Japanese unloading high caliber rounds through every cover.

"My God!" the young woman whispers, in awe at the violence deployed against the child. She presses the record button on her temple, storing the visual feed inside the memory of her prosthetic.

Now that the shrieks of fireworks and those of shots fired at his son have become distinct, David trembles from head to toe. He rushes back to the large door, pushing and pulling frantically, to absolutely no effect.

The Major is keeping careful track of Jake, marking every refuge that the boy finds with a foot-wide bullet hole. Keeping low on his three remaining limbs, the boy crawls like a silverfish, his mercurial movements and his small size alone keeping him safe.

"Nice effort," Hanzo shouts, confident despite the fact that Jake keeps disappearing. He has nowhere to go, after all. "The Secret Service are coming now, boy. Those guys don't mess around. I suggest you give up, NOW."

Pulling rounds from his belt, he reloads his revolver. He's only put one inside the cylinder when Jake bursts out from a nearby cover, striking him in the face with the tip of his fingers. Stunned, but focused, the Major closes the cylinder of his revolver, chambering the bullet, while Jake unleashes a flurry of jabs to his legs. He pulls the screwdrivers out of the top of his fingers, using them as claws, to strike behind knees, under the armpits, in the face, anywhere that seems vulnerable on the otherwise thick-skinned enforcer.

A close-quarters combat expert, the Major blocks most of Jake's attacks, keeping his revolver away from the child who repeatedly

tries to snatch it out of his hand. When the timing of Jake's strikes finally allows it, Hanzo points the muzzle of his revolver to the boy's chest and pulls the trigger. Thrown backward by the mere strength of the blow, Jake rolls on his back and disappears once more in the shadows, the main armor plate of his chest fractured in the middle.

"I've had enough of this," Hanzo roars, over the noise of fireworks and that of cheering voices rising along the tower. "Dead or alive, you're coming with me!"

Deep inside the menus of the overseeing interface, Chloe's attention finally sets on something she can understand. "I've got it!" she cries. "Ship's controls!"

David is still trying to pry the door open when it suddenly pulls up, a deadly drop separating him from the fight below. At their altitude, the wind is blowing strong and he steps back instinctively. "Whoa," he exclaims, the cold midnight air freezing his blood and cooling his mind down.

"I think I can move that thing too," Chloe adds, keeping her left eye closed to limit the blurriness of the interface's signal. "Hang on."

David inspects the fast-rope mechanism for just a moment and pulls a lever, extending the unloading arm out of the ship's side.

"What are you doing?!" she exclaims, opening her eye to find the father pulling the wire down and tying a knot around his chest.

"There's no time," David yells, "he's gonna kill him!"

"David, no!" the young woman cries as, without any second thought, the dedicated father turns around and jumps out of the ship. The cable unwinds at a frightening speed just in front of Chloe. Thinking fast, she pulls the emergency brake on the side of the winch to slow down his fall.

David hits the ground hard, freeing himself from the wire and quickly getting back on his feet. He's hurt his leg, and starts limping toward the Major as quickly as he can, tunnel vision channeling his fatherly instincts and rightful indignation all at once. "Get away from my son," he bawls, "you filthy fucking lying piece of shit!"

The Major doesn't even turn to him, having cornered Jake at two edges of the rooftop. "Back off!" he shouts, raising a disdainful finger at the father. "You'll get your turn."

At the same time, overhead, Chloe has seized control of the dropship, awkwardly bringing it down against the edge of the building. Spying over the corner of his last remaining cover, Jake is tracking the Major's approach with the cameras in his fingertips. The man has finished reloading his pistol and now stands, a few meters away, waiting for the boy to make his final move.

Now that Chloe has stopped the ship around the corner, the Major knows for sure where the boy is hiding. Behind him, David is closing the gap, his fists clenched and ready for a fight. Jake considers Chloe, who's extending a hand in his direction, beckoning him to jump; he considers his father, who minutes ago he meant to leave behind. He considers the Major, who will shoot him either direction he leaps to. Staring Chloe in the eye, Jake pulls a wire from his wrist and slides out of cover.

The sparkling explosions of the fireworks multiply, bathing the rooftop in daylight, their concussive waves blending with those of the Major's revolver as he unloads, as fast as he can, the magnum rounds of his weapon. Swirling on three limbs, his erratic movements made unpredictable, Jake feels the murderous projectiles miss him by a hair. Three, four, five; the deafening roar of the revolver throws David to his knees; Chloe, who screams her heart, out can't even hear her own voice.

Once in striking distance, Jake pounces, aiming high, at the man's head left exposed by his combat suit. Having miraculously avoided every shot, he faces the Major, now close enough to deliver a desperate fatal blow. Hanzo extends his arm and stops him in his track, grabbing the boy by the neck and shooting his last round, point blank, at his already damaged chest.

In a mess of wires and titanium plates, the entire lower half of the Little Blackjack comes off. Jake's punch lands weakly on the Major's shoulder. All around them, the fireworks are coming to an end.

David's cry fills the silence in the moments to follow. From half a kilometer below, they can hear the voices of unaware citizens, basking in the celebration of time gloriously fleeting. Through the cameras of the ship, Chloe has recorded everything. She zooms in

on the Major, still holding Jake high like a gruesome trophy. The boy's hand slides off his shoulder, both his arms left hanging, lifeless, under him. Out of his wrist, an extensible wire connects to the back of the Major's neck.

When he sees the cord, Hanzo's smirk vanishes. He's about to pull it out before Jake overrides his suit, trapping the veteran and freezing him in place.

"What's it gonna take?" Jake asks, his voice distorted by failing systems. "What's it gonna take, for you to leave us alone?"

"Easy, boy," the Major replies, fully aware that the tables have turned.

Behind them, David is getting back on his feet, as always, lost to what's happening. Suddenly, he sees the Major's arms twist backwards, his legs bending at the wrong angle, fractured bones springing through his flesh. Within a second, the man crumbles down, his strong attitude erased and replaced by the screams of an imploring victim. Above his body reduced to a crawl, Jake rises, grabbing the man's throat between his hands and squeezing slowly.

"You wanna die?" the boy barks. "Is that it?"

"Jake, stop!" David cries. Having sprung back on his feet, he rushes to the scene, grabbing his son with both arms and pulling him away from the bleeding mercenary.

Chloe halts the ship in place. Pulling the cord out of her eye, she rushes to her friends, hugging each other with all their remaining might. Lying a few feet away in a pool of his own blood, the Major sees her help them up. The young woman makes sure they board the ship safely, before she squats in front of the Japanese. High on adrenaline and pain, Hanzo is doing his best to express his resentment, face down on the dusty concrete rooftop.

"I wish I could take a snapshot," Chloe taunts, exhaustion leaving her tender.

The Major fights through the pain to express pure disdain in a silent reply.

"You know," she adds, standing up, "you're lucky."

She walks back to the ship which Jake has taken control of. The large door closes on her and soon enough, they take off and vanish,

H+ incorporated, by Gary Dejean

a drop of ink in the night sky.

Epilogue

It's barely dawn on January first when agents from the National Intelligence Coordinating Agency invade Malcolm and Bill's garage. Having extracted the visual feed from Agent Dimaguiba's implants, they've easily located the messy chop shop. When they raid the place, left deserted by the two expatriates, all they find to carry away are old computers patched up from the dumpsters.

By that time, halfway through the country, Bill and Malcolm unload their vehicles from a ferry and ride farther south, the rasta's subwoofers blasting music loud enough for the biker to enjoy. They're headed for Indonesia, paying cash along the way and hiding their faces as people take selfies; but their hearts aren't heavy, they're galvanized by having "finally stuck it to the Man, you know... for once."

Before two days have passed, Major Hanzo has heard a dozen doctors confirm that he would never walk again on his own. He's still fuming from his encounter with the little boy when he agrees to cybernetic implants. With all the budget of the H+ corporation at their disposal, the scientists outfit him with state-of-the-art osseointegration techniques, lading his bones with metal and filling his muscles with young blood to accelerate rejuvenation.

As he falls asleep on the table that day, the Japanese remembers Chloe's farewell. Perhaps due to the anesthetics kicking in, he finds himself appreciating her meaning.

By the end of the month, the task force is ready to go back to work. The Major's departure has shuffled the cards, and their relative success at stopping Morgan Zhu has guaranteed that their services will remain required.

Promoted to the head of the Manila unit, Patti is getting ready to break in new recruits. The rest of the team has been dispatched to Davao and Cebu, Yuwono alone left by her side, now her second in command. Two dozen young men and women, the best and brightest from various law enforcement agencies, stand at attention.

Angelo has just finished packing up his bag, his two-weeks notice coinciding with the arrival of the new recruits. Before closing the door, he looks at his barracks once more, thinking back to a time when he found them appealing.

He leaves the compound as quietly as he can, walking across the courtyard during Patti's introductory speech. The young recruits are riveted. When he goes through the door leading to the precinct, Angelo looks back at his now former colleagues. Having himself grappled with the situation, and made the opposite decision, Yuwono salutes him with a nod. Patti, on the other hand, doesn't even seem to realize his presence; she's launched in a tirade that will make or break her students.

The Latino walks away with more regrets than he can count.

As far as the eye can see, scrap metal, discarded circuitry and plastic melting in the tropical sunlight pile high. With the color of rust, dusk radiates over the heaps of electronic garbage, scavengers hurrying to fill up their baskets before night turns their expeditions deadly.

David ventures deeper into the flea market bordering the scrapyard, where hundreds of shabby booths are selling salvaged equipment. Among the faces of West-Africans, his dark complexion lets him walk around unnoticed, a prosthetic leg thrown over his shoulder. He stops in an area of the bazaar he's become accustomed to, a small district where dusty prosthetics hang in disparate rows. Calling the shop-owners by their names, he asks around for a small piece needed to fix the knee joint.

He's been fooled enough times to reach a decent deal, and fixes the leg himself before paying. As he walks away from the market and back into town, he passes by a group of children kicking a plastic football around an empty lot. Of ages ranging six to twelve, a good half of the kids are wearing prostheses found in the scrapyard. They've all grown up scavenging, sometimes losing a finger or foot among the sharp debris, and having to go back the next day. Now that their work shift is over, they're enjoying their time off.

"Hey, kids!" greets David, familiar with their faces.

"Hi, Mr. Abrantie!" they reply, all at once, calling him by his

recently assumed name.

The content father smiles as he walks away. "Can Jake come play with us?" asks one of the children.

"I'll tell him you're here!" David replies over his shoulder.

He walks down the dirt path, up to a small concrete house rented with cryptocurrency. All his assets having being frozen as soon as they left Manila, David has since found ways to monetize his experience as an insurance broker, teaching online scammers how to maintain a low profile.

He climbs up to the second floor, where Chloe has turned the dinner table into a workspace, the remnants of the Little Blackjack lain connected to several computers patched together into a fortune parallel-cluster. Jake is sitting on the edge of the table, in a body assembled from disparate salvaged parts, missing only a leg, which David is bringing back.

"Did they have it?" the child asks as soon as his father returns, referring to the fixture for the knee.

"Yeah, they did," David replies, handing the leg over to his son who clips it in by himself.

Jake gets off the table and flexes his knee a few times, the plug-and-play interface of the prosthetic linked to his central system. "Nice!" he rejoices. His cheap spatula feet might not compare to those of the Little Blackjack, but he can now run as fast as he did before his accident.

Feeling his need to exert, David points out the window. "The other kids are playing football by the bazaar," he hints.

Jake answers with a smile, his mask of hard plastic still a work-in-progress, and rushes downstairs.

"Be back for dinner!" the father yells before Jake is out of the house.

He watches out the window as Jake run to his new friends, friends his age, with whom he can share something vaguely resembling childhood. When he turns back around, he finds Chloe smiling at him with similar contentment, and they share a chuckle. Both of their lives unexpectedly changed forever by the actions of her mother and his son, neither of them was expecting to find

peace, at least not the way they've found it in this part of the world.

David looks down at his fingers, stained with oil and dust from his trip to the flea market. He looks at the broken half of the Little Blackjack, its tenebrous features bringing back nightmares. Having learned to deal with one issue at a time, he walks to the kitchen where he cleans up his hands.

"How long before you're done with that thing?" he asks, over the sound of running water.

Sat at the dining table, Chloe takes a deep breath. She's more than aware of all the discomfort she's imposed on him, and now that she's extracted the software from the prototype, it's time to make a decision.

"I'm finished," she admits finally, a little overwhelmed.

She hears David turn the tap off and walk back inside. Drying his hands with a rag, he stands on the threshold, himself taken aback. Chloe looks away from her screen, rubbing her natural eye with a slight headache.

"What are you gonna do with it?" David asks, worried.

It's only been a few months since they went off the grid, and they've been expecting this moment ever since. Only now that their options are literally on the table, do they experience the freedom they've been looking for, which, grandiose and terrifying, keeps them both paralyzed. Displayed on the monitor, Chloe's testimony and her recording from the fight, along with exabytes of decrypted data, are begging to be leaked.

Chloe takes a minute to ponder the question. She looks out the window, where Jake has joined the football game in the evening sunlight. She turns to David and looks at him too for a while. He shakes his hands, impatient.

The young woman can't refrain from a smile when she finds herself admitting: "You know... I'm not sure!"

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