

CHAPTER ONE

30:12:04 BC

The elevator rattled its way up toward my floor as I leaned back, eyes closed and only half-aware of the world around me. The bitter aftertaste of Zen oil lingered on my tongue, and while it still had me pleasantly disconnected my thoughts buzzed around in circles beneath the haze. I felt like I should be upset, or afraid...like I should be freaking out or something, but I wasn't any of those things. I didn't know how to feel anymore, about anything.

"To anyone receiving this transmission..."

The voice, a foreign man speaking butchered Mandarin, sounded distant, rising through a faint static whine from over the ad box, maybe? Somewhere nearby.

"...the race you call the haan are not..." More static. *"...this is not a dream..."*

I snorted as the elevator jostled me out of my trance, and shook my head to clear it. I rubbed my eyes, and as I took a wobbly step forward I saw the ad box screen mounted inside the door flicker to display a panel of cool electric gray.

"Xiao-Xing?" a female voice asked, issuing from the speaker underneath. When I didn't answer, it tried again. "Sam?"

"Not now," I said, chewing my lip.

"Sorry, but elevators cost money you know. I have two names on record matching your ID. Which do you prefer?"

"Sam, I guess." The box screen flickered, updating info. "Was that you talking, before?"

"Sorry?"

"Something about a transmission? The haan? I thought I heard something."

"It wasn't me. Since you have a moment, though, I would like to talk to you about-"

"Do you have any news?" I asked it. "About the bombing? Do you know anything?"

The A.I. paused, then tried another tack.

“Would you like to be sexy?” it asked.

I laughed quietly at that, a giggle that sounded a little more unhinged the longer it went on.

“I am sexy,” I breathed.

“Well, maybe,” the A.I. responded uncertainly.

The screen dissolved the standby gray, and splashed the Sultrex logo while saxophone music began to pipe softly through.

“Look, do you know anything about the bomb?” I asked again.

“No, Sam,” it said, “but I do know this; as you’re probably aware, given your calorie allotment it is impossible for you to naturally develop the kind of curves all women want and all men desire, but why be a victim of circumstances beyond your control?”

The elevator shook to a stop, and I hoisted my gear as the screen displayed two images of me. On the left, under the word ‘before’ was a shot it had taken of me when I first got on, standing there with my gear and covered in sweat. On the right, under the word ‘after’, was the exact same shot manipulated so that in place of my more-or-less flat chest was a big set of computer-generated tits. They strained against the material of my tank top, while a drop of sweat did a slow roll down into the crevice between them. I laughed again, a little.

“Nice touch.”

“It came out of the latest eye-tracking study,” the A.I. admitted.

“Uh-huh.”

“For a very reasonable fee you could be one of the most desirable young women in Hangfei-”

“Who says I’m not?”

“More people than you might think.”

“I gotta go.”

“Don’t forget there is a scheduled demolition along the Impact rim tonight,” it said. “Curfew will be in-”

The A.I. was still yammering as the elevator door squealed open and carried the screen away with it into the wall. I stepped out under the buzzing overhead in the hallway and dug into one pocket to find my last loose cigarillo, bent but not broken. I stuck it in the corner of my mouth and crunched down on the end with my teeth as I cracked my back. With the heat wave, washing windows up on Ginzho tower was brutal, and a day of squeegeeing biocide and smog resin off of hot glass had left my brain cooked. The cool air felt like water trickling down over my burned face, chest and shoulders.

As I started down the hall I crooked my neck, a motor cortex key that brought up the 3i front end. The braided lanyard from my wet drive implant brushed my shoulder as the holographic display appeared in front of my face with its candy pink neon borders, and immediately social taps from friends, notifications, and ads sprinkled into the foreground. The word cloud that formed in the corner of one eye was ugly, full of variations on bomb, suicide, attack, and dead. That last one flashed on headline tickers, the feeds a fever of rising death counts while laying bets on what horrible thing might come next. I glanced left to screen out the static and most of the little icons scattered. I tapped friends back to let them know I was okay, and then tuned out the tide of chatter as I headed down the hall toward home.

The other apartment doors were all showing red locks and I clomped past them, searching my pockets for a light. When I turned the corner I heard my surrogate haan, Tānchi, crying, and his low, shuddering keen snapped me out of it a little as it carried down the hallway. Already I could sense him, a faint haze of anxiety, fear, and hunger – always hunger.

I sent him a single ping and immediately the wailing stopped. His mood turned on a dime and the cluster of haan brain-band mites tingled deep in my forehead as he reached out to make contact. Requests started trickling in and getting rejected by the 3i's junk call filter as he picked at any and every open socket, trying to say hi. When I got a little closer the mites locked in fully on his signals and he was there, like a tickle at the edges of my mind. An excited signal spiked through and nicked my visual cortex causing two ghostly scaleflies, their single compound eyes flashing, to jitter through the air in front of me along with a brief, flickering image of a surrogate formula bottle that quickly faded.

“Mommy’s home,” I sing-songed around the cigarillo.

He heard me and I felt a surge, a happy bubbling that always made me smile no matter how bad my day had been.

It faltered as I approached the front door, though. I could see the spray paint from down the hall. Tānchi was my third surrogate so far since we moved here and I'd thought the people in our building were starting getting used to it. As I got closer I could make out the sloppy squiggles of hanzi that had dribbled before drying.

THEY EAT - WE STARVE

I abandoned the cigarillo, tucking it behind one ear and spitting out a fleck of tobacco. My mood soured, and pulled me from Tānchi's happy little wave but I tried to shake it off. It was just paint. I didn't want get Tānchi upset with a bunch of bad bleed-back, and it wasn't like there wasn't any truth to it. With the world population at just under fifteen billion, food scarcity was a problem even before the haan showed up. Even our country had been affected and now there was no getting around the fact that the haan took the majority of the food we produced just to survive. The gamble would pay off in the long run, or so they said, but it was easy to forget how much they did for us when you went to bed hungry every night like some lost worlder.

I took a deep breath, and let it out slow. It wasn't worth scaring Tānchi over. It wasn't a bomb, say, or something even worse. It was just paint.

I used my badge to trigger the lock and then pushed open the door, feeling the anticipation rise from the direction of the junkyard crib across the room where a single scalefly buzzed in a lazy circle around a hanging mobile. It lit down on the edge of the crib's backboard, scraping its wings together as it used its hook-like forelegs to preen its stinging proboscis and its black marble eye. The shadows of Tānchi's spindly, delicate little webbed fingers danced on the wall next to it.

I put down my washer rigging, along with the bucket of squeegees and glass cleaner next to the worn counter where a tin pot sat still dirty on the hot plate. Even in the dark I could see the clutter that had built up. Dirty clothes were draped over the sofa and chairs, and pretty much every counter and tabletop had hit capacity. I had some major cleaning to do.

Ling hobbled out from the kitchen, peering up at me from under heavy, wrinkled eyelids and looking tired. She noticed the spray paint on the door as it swung shut, and put one hand over her mouth.

“It’s okay,” I told her. “It’s no big deal.”

“I didn’t even hear...”

“It’s okay, Ling, really.” I glanced back. “I bet you anything it was that little Heng shit. Punk’s going to end up in jail for sure. Everything go okay?” She nodded, and wrinkled her nose.

“I fed it at the times you said. I entered the log too, like you said.”

I peered through the bars of the crib, the worry an unconscious habit. Ling noticed, and added; “I know they’re delicate. I was careful.”

“Sorry, I know. Thanks for doing it.”

“They’re so ugly.” She frowned, the wrinkles in her face deepening. “Do you need the stipend that bad? Doesn’t your father take care of you?”

“Guardian,” I corrected. She waved a bony hand at me. “We both work, what do you want?”

She looked at me critically.

“You’re twenty now,” she said. “Why are you still here anyway? You should be on your own.”

“I was on my own until I was twelve, cut me some slack.”

“You’re not twelve anymore. You’re a woman, now.” She shook out a cigarette of her own, staining the end pink as she held it between her lips.

“Yeah, I know.”

“Find a man,” she said, lighting the smoke and sucking down a small gray cloud. “Get on the list to have a real baby, not one of those.”

My face flushed, making the sunburn flare up. I reminded myself that Ling didn’t know.

“Why don’t you like them?” I said, nodding over at the crib.

“They don’t belong here.”

“Well, they’re stranded, Ling, it’s not like they have a choice. Besides, we’re better off now, aren’t we?”

She waved her hand again, dismissive. Ling was old, and probably didn't care much about brain band, jumpspace gates or graviton tech. I thought she would have at least cared about the defense shield the haan were building for us, but maybe she didn't care much about that, either. It was a big ticket item for me. When the first pieces started going up in six months, I'd feel a lot better.

Ling watched Tānchi paw at the air, the scalefly buzzing in a circle above him, and sighed. "We shouldn't let them breed."

"They have to have some or they'll die out."

"Let them die out. Governor Hwong should put a stop to it. He would never agree to this."

"He did, though."

She frowned again. She wouldn't criticize Governor Hwong, it was too ingrained, but a look of betrayal flashed in her eyes. No one was sure exactly why the haan wanted the human-haan surrogate program, or exactly why Hwong agreed to it. Some thought the haan were controlling him. Others thought the haan had made the flow of tech and the promise of the defense screen dependent on it. There were a million theories as to why the haan would put their fragile young in our brutish hands, but if nothing else it was a good show of how little a threat they really were. They were immune to all disease and most toxins, but their bodies broke all too easily. Wherever they came from, it was a gentler world than ours.

"They know how hard they make it, Ling," I said. "They hate how hard they make it. They'd leave if they could."

"Your father should put a stop to it," Ling said. I almost corrected her again, but didn't bother. "How is he, anyway?"

"Okay I guess. He's on patrol in Měnggǔ province and I haven't heard from him in a while. He's been kind of blowing me off."

"Maybe he found a girl there," Ling joked.

“He wouldn’t-” I started, meaning to say that Dragan wouldn’t hook up with a Pan-Slav when of course, he was Pan-Slav himself, or used to be. “He doesn’t have a girl,” I snipped instead, and Ling smiled. “They’ve probably got him off dodging bullets, or...”

I stopped myself before I went down that road again. I didn’t like to think about him over there. The foreign buildup to the south and offshore was bad but the Pan-Slav border territories, especially the Měnggǔ and Hasakesitan provinces, were the worst. The Pan-Slav Emirates were falling apart, and they were looking across the border at us like we were the last floating straw to grab onto. All kinds of weapons, even nukes and biological stuff had been split up by new borders and the pieces were getting grabbed up by desperate, starving lunatics with Dragan right there in the thick of it.

“Your father is brave,” Ling said. “He is there to keep us safe, to keep you safe.”

“Once it’s up we should just wipe them out,” I muttered. “We could do it, then. Six months to start, another year to build, and then we should just...wipe them all out.”

“It’s not so simple.”

“Well, not easy like Měnggǔ or Hasakesitan, but once the shield’s active, what’s to stop us?”

“Those territories were spent,” she said. “Without the tech to make the space valuable it was barren. They had to let us take it. This is different.”

“I know,” I said. “I’m sorry, Ling. I’ll just be glad when he’s back in Hangfei. He should be in tomorrow night.”

“Good.”

“Look, thanks for covering, really. I know you don’t get it, but I need this gig.”

I pulled out a short stack of coin and put it in her hand, curling her knobby fingers around it.

“You’re a good girl,” she said.

“Thanks.” I pulled a crumpled red bill from my pocket and smoothed it out so she could see.

“Got any shine back in your place?”

She grinned, pinching the cigarette in her lips, and reached into the pocket of her knit shawl. She drew out a glass pint bottle filled with crystal clear liquid and handed it to me. As I took it, she plucked the bill from between my fingers.

“Thanks again,” I said. “He’ll settle down once I feed him. You have a good night Ling.”

She patted my cheek, and her smile faded a little.

“They are a mistake,” she said, nodding toward the crib.

She hobbled past me, then out the front door and back down the hall toward her apartment. When the door closed Tānchi keened again, and I saw him fidget behind the crib’s bars.

“Hey sweetie.”

I scratched my head and remembered the smoke tucked behind my ear. I found my lighter in the bottom of one pocket and sparked it up, dragging until the crackling fibers formed a cherry. I sucked in a lungful, and felt the nicotine-tetraz blend begin to calm the gnawing in my belly, at least a little. I blew the smoke out through my nose and felt the kid relax a little. Not because of the chems – they didn’t have any effect on him – but because the mite connection worked both ways and so when my brain chilled, his did a little, too.

It meant he sensed when something was wrong too, though, and I could feel anxiety pricking in his mind as I approached the crib. His big, flat, ember-orange eyes glowed in the shadows, looking up at me as I leaned over and planted a kiss on the cool, glassy surface of his forehead.

“It’s okay,” I told him. I wasn’t sure he believed me, but then, I wasn’t sure I believed me either. One bombing had shocked me. Two had worried me. After that...I wondered if this was going to pass for normal, now, if it would just keep getting worse. Were the days leading up to that first attack the last normal ones any of us would have and we just didn’t know it? Was this really just the beginning?

Tānchi’s eyes stared up at me, more anxiety bubbling up over our connection.

“Sorry.”

I reached down and carefully picked him up out of the crib still in his swaddle of blankets, then cradled him in my arms and let him reach up to paw my face.

“Don’t listen to Ling,” I told him. “You’re very cute.”

Tānchi farted sour air out of his feeding vent and I laughed to myself. I carried him across the room and took the second-to-last surrogate ration from the satchel hanging next to the fridge where the display said there was one human ration left – scalefly, of course. The fact that the haan pests were edible was supposed to be the one consolation for getting stuck with them, but considering how they tasted it wasn’t much of a consolation to me.

Taste aside, my stomach felt hollow but I didn’t want Dragan to come back to nothing at all. They’d send him home with a fresh ration punch sheet, but they always back-dated them and the punches wouldn’t be redeemable until the next day. I took another puff off the cigarillo then went back to plop down on the couch in front of the TV. My reflection looked bony in the windowed wall behind it, a pale ghost in front of the city lights beyond where streams of air traffic painted lines in the night sky.

The canister’s black haan certificate overlapped the human one, both stickers askew above the Shiliuyuán logo. The round authorization stamp, basically a haan signature, was orange this time around instead of red like it had been since my first surrogate at thirteen. The symbol was different too, I’d noticed. Under that were my surrogate ID number and the name ‘SAM Shao.’ Tānchi began reaching for the canister as I found the remote.

SAM. Dragan tagged me with the nickname after a detail with an American expat – it stood for Surface to Air Missile, and was also a western name. He said it fit me because I left everywhere I went looking like a bomb went off. Now practically every A.I. in Hangfei used it.

Guardian. I thought about how quick I’d been to correct Ling. True, Dragan wasn’t my real father, but I still felt guilty for saying it. It wasn’t like I was any great prize. There was a reason meat farmers grabbed people like me – when they chopped us into scrapcake and sold us on the black market no one cared. When Dragan broke me and the others out of there I wasn’t anything to take home - a used-up twelve-year-old train-wreck who kept a knife under her pillow and had panic attacks - but that’s what he did. He took me home. He never judged me, or pitied me. Why couldn’t I call him my father?

Tānchi pawed my face, the ghost image of his bottle appearing then fading as a throb of hunger seeped in through the mites. It ached, making my own stomach feel even hollower, but beneath it was that constant warm thread that bonded us and I smiled. Ling thought she was helping with her prodding about a family but I'd lost that option a long time ago. Haan were the only children that would ever truly be mine, and I was okay with that.

“Sorry,” I told him. “Long day.”

I cracked the seal on the top of the bottle, and felt it warm in my hand as I pulled out the rubber tube. At the sound, two little hands with their five delicate fingers reached out of the cocoon of blankets and began to grope at the air in front of his face which was the color and texture of smoked crystal. The wrinkled gray mass of brains that lurked behind his bulbous forehead shifted eagerly, the second, smaller one drawing up beneath it and shuddering in the dark fluid there. Behind his honeycomb lattice of ribs, his tiny heart beat a steady samba at the thought of gorging. With my free hand, I used my phone to enter the feeding time into the online worksheet.

Once I got the confirmation I pointed the business end of the bottle toward his wide, contoured face, making a spaceship noise in the back of my throat as he chattered happily.

“Coming in,” I said, moving the bottle closer, “Beginning docking sequence...”

When the tube touched his glassy lips, his mouth and chin dissolved into cool smoke. As the tube was sucked down into the tiny cloud to coil inside his belly, his hands grabbed hold of the bottle and I heard a greedy sigh.

“Easy there,” I said.

My stomach growled as I watched the haan child eat, and I took another drag on the smoke to compensate. Swaddled in his blankets, he clutched the silver canister to his little chest in a death grip, consuming calories at a rate that still amazed me every time I saw it. The cylinder, a variant on haan inversion tech, contained liters even though it fit neatly in my palm. Calorie-wise that one bottle alone could easily feed me and Dragan for a week if it weren't for the fact that, despite being processed from feedlot stores, haan formula would rupture a human's intestines inside of a minute.

The scalefly landed on the canister's bottom, and I waved it away as I put one foot up on the coffee table next to a cluster of shot glasses packed with chewed, lipstick-kissed butts, and flipped on the TV.

The channels were full of bomb news. I'd thought I wanted to know, like it would help somehow, but the barrage of video footage, blood, bones and black smoke turned me off. I couldn't watch it, not right now.

"...explosives were smuggled in via a one-man skiff and then carried across the tidal flats to avoid detection at the Hangfei gates," a reporter rapped out as I flicked past. On the next channel, the headline 'CYBER ATTACK' hovered over another talking head. A crawl at the bottom of the screen showed the current food index for the different feedlots. Most stayed steady while one, feedlot five, had gone up another tick. That was eighty three point one percent in total now being sent directly to the haan.

"...suspect that the mysterious signal, first noticed a month ago buried in the time server feed, may be part of an ongoing cyber-terrorism attack whose purpose is not yet known. All attempts to block the signal have so far failed, as have all attempts to decipher..."

I flipped again.

"The bombing took the lives of sixty-three people, and completely destroyed the largest ration distribution center in the borough..."

Flip.

"...how long before a conventional bombing turns to something far worse such as nuclear, or even biological? We need to strike first or..."

The camera zoomed in on the ocean's horizon where the ever-present fleet of foreign ships sat like a city skyline, the sky above it streaked with jet contrails.

I punched in the code for my friend Vamp's site and jumped away to Channel X, replacing the stream of reality with a welcome splash of electric glitz.

He'd changed his site backdrop to a new fan pic, a tall, whip thin black girl in a two piece that didn't leave much to the imagination. She had a big afro, lip gloss, and made the signature X sign with

her index fingers. At the bottom of the screen the countdown to the Fangwenzhe festival ticked off the remaining thirty or so hours second by second.

I glanced down as Tānchi's little body shuddered with pleasure, and smiled. After a minute the last of the gelatin disappeared and he squeezed the canister one last time before stretching, shivering, and then going limp in a fit of post-gorging bliss. He groped with one little hand and when I reached down he gripped my index finger. The tube slithered back into the bottle and his face turned solid again, lit by the mellow orange glow from his big, lidless eyes. When the twin trios of pin-prick pupils found me, I felt a low rush of exhausted happiness. Then his digestion kicked into overdrive and he passed out.

As he snoozed, I cruised to Channel X's main page where a map of the city displayed the blue specks of active users like scattered stars. Under that he'd posted a countdown to the haan's Phase Five tech which was due to be released to us in six months, along with a copy of the catalogue. We'd get the Escher Field, second generation rations, limited free-standing gate portals and of course, the defense shield.

One of the little pink hearts throbbed in the corner of the 3i window where a tap from Vamp let me know he'd posted the music cracks I'd been after. I pulled the files down to my phone and rang him up.

"Hey, Sam." he said. "You get my post?"

"Yeah, thanks. Nice backdrop."

"I thought you'd like it."

"That your new girlfriend?"

"She wishes. She's the lucky winner."

I rolled my eyes. "Tell me you're not still doing that."

"Jealous?"

"Hey, I just feel bad for her," I said, a smile creeping over my face.

"It's for a good cause."

"What, the 'you getting laid foundation'?"

“In my heart, Sam. That’s where that hurts.”

“Upkeep for your pirate site and spying on security doesn’t count as a good cause,” I said, a smile creeping over my face. “You just like to date your fan mail.”

“Fame is a blessing, but also a curse I’m sorry to say. Besides, how else would you have met me and then subsequently gotten both of us banned from the Joy Coffee Bar for life?”

“That was your fault.”

Normally he would have kept ribbing me. Our infamous contest date which also got us kicked out of the skate park was usually ripe territory, so when he didn’t respond my smile began to fade. I knew what he was going to ask next.

“You see the bombing from where you were?”

“No,” I said, “but I heard it.”

“Did you see the blast site on the-”

“I don’t want to talk about it right now, okay?”

“Sure. Okay.” He got quiet for a minute. “You getting psyched for the festival?”

“Totally. I need it this year.” I paused. “Can we do something fun tomorrow?”

“Like what?”

“I don’t know. Something fun. Here, though, I’ve got the kid. Is that okay?”

He didn’t let on but I knew haan babies creaped Vamp out a little. He hesitated a little, so I pushed.

“I just want to forget all this, you know? Just for a while.”

“No, I know,” he said. “You got it.”

“You don’t have plans?”

“Nope, I’m all yours.” My smile came back.

“Dragan’s back tomorrow, right?”

“Yeah, but not until late.”

“You must be relieved.”

“Yeah.”

“How’s he holding up over there?”

“I don’t know...he’s been kind of blowing me off.”

“He probably scored some primo Pan-Slav tail.”

“He did not,” I said. My hackles went up, but just then the floor vibrated, and outside a soft rumble began to swell. Through the plate glass window I saw a distant light flash above the clouds and I looked off toward the skyline for the source. At first I thought it was another bomb, but it wasn’t. Past the colorful sprawl of neon lights, flashing ads and coursing air and street traffic, off where the electric pulse trickled and faded to black at the rim, one of the dark towers there had begun a slow motion fall. I could see it silhouetted against the faint blue light of the dome behind it as crews chipped away at the urban ruins that still surrounded the Impact site.

Right, the demolition. The ad box had tried to remind me. They were doing more demo tonight, and right in our backyard this time. Any drug cookers and meat farmers they shook out would come running right into our little warren of Tùzi-wō, with security right behind them.

“Perfect,” I muttered, hoisting myself off the couch and carrying Tānchi over to the window.

The rumble swelled above the shaking of the air conditioner as hundreds of stories worth of concrete and glass collapsed into a growing black cloud that billowed out in front of the blue force field and the towering hulk of the haan ship behind it.

Over thirty years they'd been here now. A stray graviton eddy on the platform of what used to be Shiliuyuán Station was about all the warning anyone got that they were coming, or so the story went. Then a quarter million people were gone in the blink of an eye, the haan's force field dome growing around the hulk of their ship while the rubble still smoldered. They hid then, safe behind that field until they could convince us that what happened was an accident and not an attack. I understood the haan better than most, I thought, but even so I had to wonder when I looked at that field what promise they could possibly have made that kept us from retaliating when people still screamed for it even now.

I'd never know. It was all classified, and it all happened before my time. Even Dragan was just a kid, drinking vodka or whatever eleven-year-olds did over in the Pan-Slav Emirates. Whatever they'd promised, it wasn't anything they'd given us so far--the food was payment for that. Not the defense shield. Something else. Something better.

We will save you. It's all they would say.

"You're inside, right?" Vamp asked.

"Yeah but I have to go back out."

"You're nuts, the sweep's going to be up your ass in like an hour."

"I know, but I'm out of meds."

"Are you kidding me?"

"Don't start."

"I'm not starting, I'm just saying a little Zen oil here and there is one thing but--"

"That's starting."

"I'm just saying there's a reason all that shit got legalized. They want to keep everyone fuzzy, don't play into it."

"I want to be fuzzy," I said. "I need to be fuzzy. When I'm not fuzzy I..."

I didn't know how to put it. When Vamp and I met, I'd already been living with Dragan for a couple years. He didn't know what things were like before that, the things that happened to me and the things I'd done.

"What do you want me to say?" I said instead. "I'm a mess."

"It's okay," he said. "I get it."

He didn't, though. He thought he did but he didn't, and I didn't want him to.

"It's not narcs anyway," I said as a warble snuck into my voice. "These are legit meds. I don't sleep without them, Vamp, I--"

"It's okay. Sam, I know."

The bundle of blankets had begun to get really warm as Tānchi slipped deeper into his food coma. I could feel his rising body heat against my chest and neck as I looked out the window to where the distant dust cloud formed a column, rising high into the night sky. If I was going to go, I had to get out there and back before the sweep, and before Tānchi's last feeding.

I realized then that I really didn't have very much time at all, and if I didn't make it I was going to be in for a long night.

"I have to go," I said.

"What about the kid?"

"I'll bring him with me. It's just down the block, I'll be careful."

"Ok, get going. Run the new eyebot build though. We're tracking the sweep live and the more nodes the better."

"I'll be back in before they get this far."

"Just run it, you never know."

I lowered Tānchi back into his crib and tucked the blankets around him, then crossed to the balcony door and slid it open. The concrete floor outside vibrated under my feet as the racket rolled across the city like thunder. A blue arc of electricity snapped up from the expanding cloud and flashed over the rim, a huge, electric tentacle that touched the bubble of light in the distance. A bright, hexagonal mesh pulsed around the strike point, lighting up the northern face of the looming ship. White hot flakes tumbled down the side of the force-field as the glow faded, and the blanket of clouds above formed a huge, lazy whirlpool over the dome's peak.

"Damn it," I whispered. The streets were buzzing - I could hear it from fifty stories up. A lockdown would shut the markets down early. They'd be a madhouse right up until the point they had to scatter.

I looked back through the balcony doorway. Should I really take him with me out there? Or would he be okay until I got back?

"Vamp, I gotta go."

I turned away from the crumbling bit of skyline and headed back in, canned air chilling the sweat on the back of my neck.

“Run the app.”

“I will. Bye.”

I hung up and stood there for a minute, not sure what to do first. It might be safer to leave Tānchi, but it was also against the law. I crossed back to the crib, and reached down to get him ready to go out.

When the bolt on the front door snapped, I almost jumped out of my skin. The door flew open and I heard someone stumble into my gear, knocking the bucket over as heavy footsteps moved through the entryway. I turned, heart pounding, but it was just Dragan, back early. He stepped into the living room as the door swung shut back behind him with a thud.

"Hey," I said, switching off the TV. He didn't answer. He was still dressed in his military uniform, his pistol still strapped to his hip. His eyes were wide.

"D?"

Something was wrong. His cropped, salt and pepper hair was spiky with sweat and grease, and the lines in his face looked deeper than usual. He was pale, making the wire-thin scar on his cheek stand out raw red, and the rims of his lower eyelids were the color of a bruise.

“Sam,” he said distantly. “Get your things.”

“What?”

He didn't answer. He just stepped further into the room, a kind of slow shuffle, and I noticed something, a stain of some kind, spattered on the front of his uniform.

"Is that blood?" I asked. He still wouldn't look at me. He was just staring straight ahead like he didn't know where he was, or who I was.

"What's the matter? You're freaking me out."

"Is there any food left?" he asked.

"One ration." He nodded.

“Get it.”

“Didn’t they pay you a new ration sheet?”

“It’s gone,” he said distantly.

“What?”

“It’s gone. Get the ration.”

I crossed over to him, and when I touched his arm he flinched.

"D, you're scaring the shit out of me."

"Sorry," he said, and for just a second whatever else it was that was on his mind shifted to the background. For just a second, he looked at me the way he had that day he found me, and still did whenever he stopped thinking about himself and there was only me.

"It’s okay." I said. "I'm okay."

My voice had turned hoarse all of a sudden, and my face began to get hot. Something was wrong. Really wrong.

I saw the security part of him tick off that I wasn't in any immediate trouble and then his eyes drifted over the apartment. For just a second, irritation flared up on his face but it died just as quick, even as he spoke.

“What the hell did you do to this place?” His voice sounded far off, though, his words forgotten as soon as he said them. He wiped his face with his hand and stared out the big window, off toward the force-field dome and the ship on the other side.

“Dragan...”

“She’s dead,” he whispered. There were tears in his eyes.

“Who?” I asked, but he just shook his head.

"We're leaving. Now."

"What?"

"Now," he said. "Take only what you need."

"We can't just leave, D, what’s wrong with you?"

"Listen," he said, raising his voice. "Take just what you need and -"

Tānchi squawked from the other side of the room and at the sound Dragan's eyes went wide. He stepped back, crashing into the wet bar and knocking glasses down to shatter on the floor. He turned to the crib, and I saw his hand move toward his gun.

"Dragan!" He eased his hand back down, still not taking his eyes off the kid.

"Now," he said. "We're leaving here in five minutes."

His boots crunched through the broken glass as he crossed to the doorway and down the hall to his bedroom. I went to Tānchi and stroked his cheek, humming softly until the mewling stopped. His slack limbs twitched as he metabolized, still warm to the touch, but when he looked up at me from the crib his flame orange eyes were alert. His growing fear seeped through the mites, like a spastic electric current that sent jolts through my forehead.

"It's okay," I told him. Dragan came tromping back into the living room and I saw he had a second gun in his hand which he slipped into his belt just behind the first.

"Leave it," he said.

"What...Tānchi?"

"Leave it."

"Dragan we can't just leave him here, if he doesn't get fed he could die -"

"Don't argue with me, Sam!"

The front door's knob turned, and the door thumped as the bolt kept it from opening. Dragan spun around and drew his pistol as something pounded against the other side, hard.

"Dragan..."

"They tracked me," he said to himself.

A loud boom shook the apartment and sent an avalanche of paper trash sliding off the kitchen counter. A second crash came as the front door's bolt tore loose from the jamb and it blew open in a shower of splinters and drywall powder. Tānchi screamed as the Dragan grabbed my wrist and pulled me close, hissing into my ear.

“When I say run, you run,” he said. I nodded. “If you don’t hear from me in an hour, I’ve arranged a transport out of the country to Duongroi. Go to Central Transport and-”

“Duongroi? D, why?”

“Please, Sam, just-”

He stopped short as several figures came tromping through the doorway.

“Nobody move,” a woman’s voice said from behind him.

Dragan put his hand on my cheek.

“You’re going to hear some things about me,” he said. “Don’t believe them. I love you like you were my own flesh and blood, Sam. Remember that.”

A lump rose in my throat as two men and a woman, all dressed in black body armor, came marching into the room with us through a haze of dust. Their scaly, form-fitting combat suits hummed, creating static that made my hair stand on end and their faces were shielded by light disruptors, giving their hooded heads the look of empty, black eggshells.

Dragan turned, standing between us and facing them. He aimed the pistol but before he could get a shot off the closest soldier lashed out in a blur and clamped down on his wrist. Dragan fired twice, the bullets thudding into the far wall before the suit whined and I heard the crack of bone. He grunted, and the gun clunked down onto the floor between them. The goon stomped on it, and kicked it back behind him with his boot.

Still pinned, Dragan reached back with his free hand and drew the second pistol he’d tucked in his belt. He plowed into the guy who had his wrist, and fired two shots into his side while the other soldiers piled on.

“Now!” he yelled. “Sam, Go!”

Across the room I could see the front door hanging from one twisted hinge, offering a clear path to the hallway outside.

“Go!”

The two men held Dragan while the woman stepped in. A round, red stamp stood out on her armor's right shoulder plate, marking her as the ranking soldier. She took two steps toward Dragan, and as he struggled against the men she fired the heel of her boot into his chest. His eyes bugged, and his face turned purple as blood coughed from his mouth and his legs dropped out from under him.

I looked to the open doorway again then back at Dragan, bouncing between decisions like an ignition that wouldn't quite catch. Fear cut deeper and deeper through the Zen fog until my heart hammered in my chest and my brain felt like a fuse inside was threatening to trip.

Do something.

Spotting Ling's bottle of shine on the floor in front of the wet bar snapped me out of it. I snatched it up and stormed toward the woman, wielding the bottle like a club. She looked over just as I swung the bottle into the blur that covered her face. The glass broke, splashing liquor, and several scaleflies buzzed away from her shoulder plates as she staggered back. I whipped the jagged neck around, spraying alcohol and blood as I slashed at her again.

Dragan spat and managed to suck in a breath. He ripped one arm free from the guy behind him then turned and delivered a vicious head butt. His forehead disappeared into the dispersion field and I heard a solid crunch. When the soldier fell back, blood squirted from out of the blur.

"Control them!" the woman barked.

One of the soldiers unclipped a graviton emitter from his belt and aimed it at Dragan. A low hum made the furniture vibrate as the field washed over him and he staggered, legs folding underneath him. The hum went up in pitch, and Dragan fell to his knees, struggling to keep his head lifted.

I dropped the bottle neck and took the knife out of my pocket, flicking the blade out as I made a beeline for the guy holding Dragan with no idea what I would do when I got there. I used the little blade to scrape stubborn residue off windows, it would never penetrate combat armor...

The guy used the emitter to drag Dragan toward him, ready to hit him once he was in range, and I stabbed the point of the knife through the seam at his knee. It didn't go all the way in, but enough to make the guy yell and spin around. When he did, the emitter's field moved off of Dragan and sucked the

end table next to him across the room. It crashed against the wall as he reached down and jerked the knife out.

“You little...”

Dragan was back on his feet and hammered the guy in the face with one fist. He reached back to hit him again when an armored fist closed around my arm and jerked me away.

“Stop,” the woman said.

Dragan stopped in mid-swing, his eyes going wide as she put her other hand over my throat and squeezed, just a little.

"She doesn't know anything," Dragan gasped. "Just let her go...please."

She stepped toward him and I followed desperately, toes barely touching the floor.

“Get his wet drive,” she ordered. Two of the soldiers held Dragan, one of them pushing his head down until his chin touched his chest while the other parted the spiky hair at the base of his skull.

“It's not there,” he said. “He ditched it.”

“Search him. Find the twistkey.”

One of the soldiers stood back and aimed a scanner, running it down the length of his body. I caught a glimpse of bones and soft-tissue moving across the screen, along with buttons and equipment standing out in sharp relief.

“He doesn't have it,” the soldier said. “Just the standard issue security override.” The hand squeezed my neck a little harder.

“Where did you take him?” she asked, her voice an electronically altered crackle. Dragan looked around the room at the soldiers.

“Is this how it is?” he asked them. “You're going to just turn on one of your own?”

“Watch your mouth, traitor,” one of them said.

“Don't talk to him,” she said. She turned back to Dragan. “I'm going to ask you one more time, where did you take Alexei Drugov?”

Dragan shook his head, a single bead of sweat dropping from his stubbly chin.

“That place was destroyed,” Dragan rasped. “How can it-”

She clamped her black, scaly glove down on my neck hard, then, and I gasped. I tried to squirm free, but the combat suit gave her incredible strength.

“Tell me where you took him,” she said, the armor making a low whine as she slowly tightened her grip.

“Don’t let her do this,” Dragan said to the other soldiers. My throat felt the size of a straw as I gasped air in. “You know me. This isn’t-”

She lifted me up until my toes brushed the floor and I choked. Grabbing at her wrist to hold myself up, I tried to pull in another breath but couldn’t. I struggled, trying to peel her fingers back, and felt a flood of emotion surge through the mites as suddenly as a shock of cold water to the face...anger, hatred, and disgust bled through my brain like chemical poison. Underneath it all hunger simmered, a desperate, driving hunger that made my stomach clench into a painful knot. It wasn’t coming from Tānchi, the signal was a million times stronger. It was coming from her.

She’s a haan, I thought, staring down into the empty hood created by the dispersion mask. The thought buzzed in my head. *...but they’re so delicate. How can she...*

The room seemed to get darker as I struggled to stay on my tiptoes. As dark clouds bloomed in front of me I saw a fat scalefly come crawling down the length of her arm, then out of sight below my chin. A sound like water rushed in my ears, as the world around me began to fade.

“Wait,” I heard Dragan say. Through the slits of my eyes I found his face, and when I did I barely recognized him. I’d seen what he could do the day he found me and in the days since, but now the fierceness and strength that I’d always associated with him were stripped away. There was only fear in his eyes, just raw fear. Not for himself, but for me. I’d broken him.

“I’ll tell you,” he said again. The room seemed to be tilting, and he sounded far away.

I glanced right, swiping the 3i icons away in a streak of hot pink hearts and neon that left trails across the blurry backdrop of our ruined apartment. My friend list scrolled up until I spotted Dragan’s

name and grabbed it. When I tapped him, he'd already begun to move, and I saw metal flash as the knife at his belt came free from its scabbard.

LOVE U 2

"I'm sorry, Sam," I heard him say.

The knife came down in an arc as he launched toward us, and the blade struck the soldier next to him. The soldier staggered back while groping for the blade's handle, now jammed into the meat between his shoulder and neck. He struck the wall and left a streak of blood as he slid to the floor.

Dragan seized on the 3i connection, his desperate reply stopping almost as soon as it started.

FORGIVE ME-

The other soldier crashed his plated fist down on the back of Dragan's head, and his 3i connection dropped as he went down like a stone. He wasn't moving, but the soldier knelt over him, and hit him again.

"Don't kill him, you idiot!" the woman shouted.

He hit Dragan again, casting dots of blood across the wall next to him and my feet came up off the floor as Red-stamp stormed across the room, colliding with the coffee table and shattering the glass top. Before I could even get my bearings she'd swung me around in a complete circle and then hurled me away. The room tilted, receding as I flew through the air.

My back hit something hard enough to force the air out of my mouth and nose in a spray of snot and spit. Then the surface behind me gave away with an ear-splitting crash.

Everything slowed down, and I saw a million sparkles fly away from me as I passed through the cloud of glass. Shards and chunks spun end over end through glittering powder as the living room curtains rushed out after me on a wave of cool, canned air. For just a second, it formed a faint, smoky fog as the hot, humid night breeze outside washed over me.

The balcony rail passed underneath me as the inside of the apartment fell away. Back through the broken window I could see Dragan lying crumpled, and still. My momentum slowed and I fell back, staring up through the sparkling glass bits as the stars wheeled by in the night sky above. Then I

plummeted away from the balcony, and the windows of hundreds of empty apartments whipped past in a blur while my clothes billowed and snapped around me.

Hot summer air roared in my ears as I narrowly missed the huge metal frame of a building sign and neon lights began to streak past in a stream of liquid color. A hundred stories below, past the crisscrossing streams of aircars, the lights of the street were quickly rushing up to meet me. I screamed over the racket of graviton engines and honking horns.

Something tugged at me from behind, and my skin suddenly began to tingle. The tug grew stronger, and the rushing wind let up until the traffic sounds swallowed it. I'd begun to fall more slowly somehow, like I was connected to an invisible elastic band that had stretched taut.

The graviton emitter, I thought. One of them...

Hanging face down I dangled in midair sixty stories above the street, the tingle from the field increased even as I felt it begin to lose its grip. I was too far away, and I was too heavy. Any second now, I'd fall again and this time nothing would be able to stop it.

Below, something flashed. A white point of light appeared, and then a second later the lanes of speeding air traffic directly below me were blotted out by a floating patch of empty space. A thin, bright white outline surrounded it in a perfect hexagon while the inside resolved into a view of an alley which appeared to float in midair.

What the fu-

The tether holding me snapped and I plunged, arms and legs peddling, into the opening. All at once the city around me disappeared and all sense of movement stopped. For a minute, there was no up or down, no frame of reference at all. I just hung in limbo, like I'd been frozen in time.

My ears popped and then just as quickly as I'd gone into the hole I'd come out again, still screaming as I tumbled out the mouth of an alley and skidded a few feet before crashing into the side of a parked car. When I looked up, I saw a crowd of people who were standing under a streetlight look over in surprise.

What the hell?

I stood up, my heart pounding in my chest. Stinging scratches crisscrossed my face, shoulders and arms, and one palm burned with road rash but that was it. I was alive, back on the street just outside our apartment building.

Spinning around, I looked down the sidewalk behind me. A stream of people there had stopped to look back, wondering what was happening. I did a complete turn and saw nothing but staring faces looking down at the girl who'd just appeared out of thin air.

Across the street, a scrawny boy sat on the day-glow fiberglass bug-shell of an airbike he'd just started, gaping at me. I looked back up the sheer building face toward our apartment, too high above to pick out.

A gate, I thought. Someone gated me down safely. Was it one of the soldiers? The haan hadn't shared free-floating gate tech with us yet, but there was no way she had done it – it had to have been one of them.

Something tinkled onto the pavement, and then bits of glass began to rain down onto the sidewalk and street as the falling debris caught up with me. I shielded my head, ducking under an awning as someone hollered. A loud pop echoed down the street as a metal rod trailing one of our living room curtains speared through the windshield of a parked car in an explosion of glass dust.

"Shit!" someone yelled as the car's alarm began to whistle. The wind blew the torn curtain like a flag, and as the last of the glass skittered and spun away I snapped out of it.

Dragan.

I pushed away from the concrete wall and crossed the street to where the kid sat stunned on his airbike.

"Hey, are you okay?" he asked.

"I need your bike," I said.

"What? No way, kid-"

"I need your bike!"

I snatched a shard of broken glass from the smaller pieces littering the sidewalk and felt the edge bite into the crooks of my fingers. I slashed at him with it, spraying drops of blood across his shirt as he ducked back. He tried to slide off the bike and lost his balance, tumbling down onto his butt. Before he could get back up I threw the glass at him and straddled the still-warm seat.

"Hey!"

I cranked the throttle and then opened up the graviton emitters. The street beneath me lurched away on a rush of wind, and horns blared as I cut through the layers of traffic above. In seconds the cursing kid dwindled to the size of an ant, and then was lost all together beneath the rows of streaking headlights.

Shit...

I pulled back on the stick as our building's neon sign rushed back in reverse, spinning as I tried to steady the bike. I cut too quickly and the undercarriage swung up toward the sky. I clamped my thighs down against the sides as my stomach flipped in weightlessness.

"Shit, shit, shit..."

The building face sheared past as I completed the loop and wrestled the machine back under control. Wind rushed over me as I picked up speed. I spotted our balcony where a single curtain still fluttered, and closed in.

When I cleared the railing I leaned forward and crouched below the windshield. The bike accelerated and the nose went straight back through the hole in the glass where I'd gone out. The remains of the window exploded into the living room as the bottom of the bike tore through the carpet and ripped into the floor underneath. Through the racket, I could hear Tānchi screaming bloody murder.

The undercarriage caught on something and the bike jerked to a stop, throwing me off the seat and over the broken edge of the windshield. I tumbled through the air, then rolled across the carpet and slammed into the opposite wall.

Pain shot through one leg as I pushed myself back up onto my feet. The soldiers were gone. I didn't see anyone else except Tānchi.

“Dragan!” I yelled. No one answered.

Tānchi continued to scream as I looked frantically around the room.

“Dragan?” I lurched down the hall, but he wasn’t in any of the other rooms either.

Limping back, my shoes kicked through broken glass as I approached the spot where he’d struggled with the soldiers. There were boot scuffs left behind in the debris, heading back the way they’d come. I knelt down, my body shaking from the adrenaline and I realized I was alone. Amidst the wreckage, glittery specks of glass powder drifted slowly up from the floor in a stray graviton riptide. They twinkled, twirling in slow motion like the specks inside a snow globe. He was gone.

The only father I’d ever known was gone.