

This book is a work in progress.  
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Enjoy!

## Prologue: The Exposure Effect

"You see, attraction very rarely will only pertain to what a person looks like, or even what their personality is like. There are myriad factors that influence your attraction to somebody. Simply your presence can be enough to attract someone else. This effect has been tested and the subconscious feelings you have can be predicted very easily in a controlled environment." Dr. Delbert explained.

Meanwhile, my heart was beginning to beat just a bit faster. Social Psychology was just minutes from ending and I knew what I had to do. I had been waiting to do it for quite some time now. Today was the day. Justin and I had planned it out. All I had to do was ask.

Dr. Delbert continued, "Students in an experiment were asked to rate their levels of attraction to various photos of people. Sure enough, the students rated higher levels of attraction for those students who had come to class more often. It's as simple as that. Just the mere repeated presence of somebody made them more attracted to another."

"The exposure effect isn't the only phenomenon about attraction we have tested. From as early as 1974, psychologists have also tested the excitation transfer hypothesis. In essence, any time our physiology changes, we can attribute those feelings of arousal with feelings of attraction. For example, Donald Dutton and Arthur Aron conducted a field study in British Columbia, above the Capilano River. They had men walk across a small, rickety bridge a few hundred feet above the water. At the end of the bridge, they met a woman. Similarly, they had other men walk across a much lower, more sturdy, and wide bridge before meeting the same woman. This woman told each participant that she was a research assistant in the study and gave them her phone number. Which group of men was more likely to call her?"

A few people mumbled some answers.

The professor continued, "That's right! The men who crossed the river on the high bridge were more attracted to the research assistant. Their hearts were already racing, and they already felt many of the same physiological responses they would during attraction. So if you want somebody to be attracted to you, take them on an exciting date. Just make sure it's so exciting that somebody gets hurt!"

With a few chuckles, the class was dismissed.

"Ok, see you on Monday. We'll be going over chapter 9, Conformity. So read up. Have a good weekend!"

We all started to funnel out the main exit down in the front of the lecture hall. This was going to be tough. She had been sitting in the second row while I was in the back. Slipping through the streams of students like an Alaskan salmon, I had to reach her before she left the building. I quickened my pace.

Out the main door, I glanced down the hall to the right: no sign of her. To the left: no sign either – no wait, way down at the end of the hall.

*Dang, she's fast!*

Almost at a jog, I continued to pursue her. Little beads of sweat forming on the top of my forehead.

*Oh no, not now! Why do they always crank the heat in here?*

Only about ten feet between us. I would have called her name, but there were too many people around. I didn't want to make a scene. I needed to get closer to make a move.

As she strolled through the exit of Huestis Hall my hand caught the door just as it was closing. Filled with a number of butterflies I never knew I had, I opened to the door to my destiny.

"Hey Tamara," I said.

She stopped, turned around, her light brown hair blowing slightly in the cool afternoon breeze.

This was it. Now or never. I had gone past the point of no return. I had to go for it now.

*"You can call me Tammy, Mark. Nobody uses my full name."*

*Crap! Strike one. It's ok. I can recover.*

"Oh, sorry. I didn't know."

"That's ok... So...uh... what's up?"

*This is so awkward. I just gotta jump in and go for it. No getting around it.*

"Yeah, so I was wondering..."

"Yeah?" she encouraged.

*I'm losing her. Crap! Why do I always do this? Just ask her, you fool!*

"Ok, so my friend, Justin, and I were gonna hang out tonight. See, he's a really good photographer, and we were gonna go hike up Buck Mountain and watch the sunset tonight. He's gonna try to get some great pictures of the valley with the mountains silhouetted in front of the sunset. Heidi Alvarez is gonna come with us, too, if you know her."

"Uh, no, I don't think I've met her before."

*Strike Two!*

"Oh, well, neither have I actually. But, Justin says she's cool. Well, anyway, would you wanna come with us? We could leave at about 5. Get some dinner on the way and come back later tonight."

"Mark, I'd really like to go, but some of my friends and I are going to that party on 15<sup>th</sup> and Alder at Daren and Spud's place. Apparently a lot of people are planning on going tonight."

*Damn it! Strike Three! I'm screwed!*

"Oh, ok. Well, have a fun time, I guess."

"Come with us, Mark! It will be great. A lot of cool people'll be there."

"Nah. No thanks. I'm not a huge fan of big parties like that. Actually, I gotta get going. It was good talking to you, Tammy. Have a fun night!"

"Thanks. You too... Well, see ya."

Even though it was totally out of my way, I walked in the opposite direction from her. I needed to get some distance. If she were headed home, it would be a long walk, because so was I. We live in the same apartment complex. While walking, I grabbed my phone and commanded it to "call Justin mobile."

"Dude, Heidi said yes! It was great. She seemed totally excited about our

idea for the evening. Everything is going according to plan so far. I'm just on my way to my 3 o'clock class. Then I'll be done for the day. I can come home, get you, we'll pick up Heidi, then Tamara, and we'll be all set - oh yeah, you were supposed to ask her, right? How did it go? Did she seem as excited as Heidi?"

"Yeah, about that. She said no."

"What?!? Are you serious? Why? What was her excuse?"

"She said she and some of her friends are going to that party at Daren's."

"Are you serious? That's so lame! I mean, come on. How unoriginal? Who would go to some lame-ass party with a bunch of drunken idiots instead of climbing a mountain? Dude, if she's that dumb, then screw her."

"Yeah, I guess. She asked me if I wanted to go with her, but I said no. I didn't feel like going to a party tonight."

"Dude, are you messed in the head? If she wanted you to go to the party with her, she was at least slightly into you. You should have gone!"

"You just told me that parties are lame and unoriginal."

"Yeah, but when a hot girl asks you to come to one with her, that's a totally different story. You should go with her."

"Nah. I don't wanna go out of my way and seem too desperate. I think I'm just gonna go home and play video games tonight, or maybe see what Eric and Jason are doing."

"The two of them and Neil are all going up to that show in Portland tonight. If you stay at home, you'll be on your own, man."

"I guess that's how it'll be then. Ok, well, I'll see you when you come home from your class in an hour or so."

"I still think you should go with Tamara to the party."

"We'll see."

I hung up.

*Well this bites!*

The walk home took longer than usual because I didn't want to encounter Tamara. So after about 25 minutes I finally saw my apartment complex at the end of the block and was relieved to know that I made it home without running into Tamara again. Once inside, I sat myself on the couch and decided to take a nap.

I woke up at the sound of Justin slamming the door behind him as he came inside.

"Hey man, what's the scoop?" he asked.

"Wha? Oh, uh, I dunno... What time is it?"

I sat up, rubbing my tired eyes just as Justin sat down in the chair next to me.

"Dude, you been crying?"

"No! Of course not! I was asleep until you slammed the door as you came in. If my eyes look red it's cause I just woke up and I was rubbing them."

"Uh huh. Sure. Well, I just came home to pack for tonight really fast. Then I gotta bounce and go pick up Heidi. You sure you don't wanna come with us?"

"I'd be a third wheel if I went now."

"Naw, you'd be a wingman. Come on. It'll be a good time. You know all

you're gonna do is just play video games all night like a loser if you stay here."

"So."

"So then come with us. You can play video games whenever."

"Can we stop at a 7-11 on the way so I can at least get like a hot dog for dinner?"

"Course. Ok, I'll be back in three minutes and then we gotta go."

"Should I bring anything?"

"Nothing I can think of. I got it all under control. Just relax."

Three minutes passed by and we were out the door. We were walking down our porch and I looked across the yard to the adjacent apartment building. Tamara's light was on. She was probably getting ready for that stupid party. Oh well. The night wasn't all a loss. At least I was going to get a Big Gulp and hot dog on the way. Could be worse.

About ten minutes later we had crossed the river and we were waiting outside of Heidi's apartment. I had obligatorily moved to the back seat of the Subaru like a good wingman. I heard the door open and a gorgeous girl with long wavy brown hair walked toward the car. She was as close to a 10 as I'd seen in a while.

*How does he do it? He always gets these hotties and then he dates them for like a week. And I can't even get one girl to go out with me!*

She opened the front door of the car (Justin wasn't the type of gentleman to open it for her) and the car suddenly began to smell like a Bath and Body Works store. She introduced herself to me and I nervously said "Hey" in reply.

"I thought you'd said we were going to be alone tonight, Justin!"

"I did, but we had a change of plans. I'm sorry. It will still be great. Don't worry about it. Mark goes shooting with me all the time.

Heidi didn't look convinced.

A few minutes later, pulling into the 7-11 parking lot, and Heidi looked even less convinced that it would be an epic night. "It will be just a second. Mark needs some dinner," Justin explained.

*Man I feel lame right now.*

I hopped out of the car, picked out my go-to dinner: Cheetos, a Big Gulp, some gummy worms, and a hot dog that had been sitting on one of those greased rollers for longer than anybody cared to know.

Heidi's fresh, fruity smell in the car was quickly overpowered by a strong smell of grease as I brought my dinner back into the car with me. Heidi made no effort to hide her disgust, but Justin wasn't discouraged.

"Alright, you guys ready for an epic night, tonight?" he asked.

"Sure," I said. *Gotta be a good wingman.* Heidi shrugged.

"Good. We've got a little over an hour until sunset. We'll have just enough time to get to the mountain, and get set up for when the sun sets."

The 45-minute drive actually went better than I thought it would. Justin is a master at getting girls to warm up to him. By the time we were driving up Mt Tom Road, Heidi had told us all about her days in high school as a cheerleader

in El Camino High School, why she came all the way up to Eugene for school. I couldn't help but notice that she had been holding Justin's hand while he drove for the last twenty minutes. *Man! He's got her wrapped around his finger!*

We pulled off the side of the road, next to a slope. To our right, up the mountain higher, there was a radio tower and some kind of shack. Trees surrounded us, so we were probably going to have to walk up the side of the mountain to get to where Justin would have a better view for his shot.

Golden beams of light danced between the trees as the low sun tried to peak through between them. It was already gorgeous. *Justin's definitely gonna score tonight.*

"Hey, can you help me carry my stuff?" Justin asked me as got out.

"Sure." *The wingman's got your six, bro.*

Like a pack mule, I carried Justin's tripod and camera bag. Justin put on his backpack, and used his free hand to hold Heidi's as we began to walk. *You're welcome.*

"Ok, everybody ready to do some climbing? We've gotta get above these trees to a clearing, up by those antennas." Justin pointed up toward a clearing on the hill above them.

"How long do you think it will take?" Heidi asked, frowning as she looked at the climb in front of her.

Justin reassured her, "It won't take long. And if it gets too hard, I'll be here to help."

Heidi followed Justin as he began climbing up the hill. Stumbling a bit on some of the rocks, she tried to act like nothing happened.

*"I'll be here to help?" That's the corniest thing ever! But man, she must really be into him. She's willing to act interested in climbing a mountain for him. Damn. Why can't I get girls to do that for me?*

There wasn't much of a trail, so Justin walked along the hill, gradually climbing up it, causing miniature avalanches under his feet as he strafed the mountain. This just made it that much harder for us, because the dirt was already loose by the time we got to it. Fortunately, the climb wasn't very long, and not all that steep.

Heidi obviously hadn't dressed appropriately for the evening. "Ew! I'm getting dirt in my shoes, and the ground's slippery. Justin, can you give me a hand?:"

He stopped and turned around. "Sure. What do you need?"

In a less annoying voice, she asked, "Maybe you could carry me up this part? I don't want to ruin my shoes."

Justin looked at the remaining portion of the hill, tried to conceal a sigh, but then turned back toward Heidi, "Sure. Why don't you come here, and I'll grab you." He took off his backpack, and handed it over to me, as if I weren't already carrying enough of his crap. She gave a coy smile, walked toward him and jumped on his back.

*Ok, even though she's super hot, it's official, Heidi's super annoying. World of Warcraft would have been better than this.*

At the top of the mountain, we still couldn't get a good view of the Willamette Valley to our west because of all the trees on the slope we had just climbed. Justin told us there would be a clearing to the south. Now hand in hand, they walked in front of me as we came close to the radio tower. By the grace of God, the flirt-fest between him and Heidi appeared to be subsiding for the moment.

Justin stopped. Looking up at the tower he blurted, "Oh my God! I've got an epic idea!"

*Epic isn't always a good thing...*

"I can't believe I've never thought of this before," he continued.

"What?" Heidi asked.

"Why walk all the way down to the meadow for a good shot of the valley, when we can climb higher? Look! There's a ladder on the antenna. It looks like it goes all the way up to that platform up there," he explained.

"Are you serious, man? I mean, I know you're trying to impress Heidi, and all, but look at that thing! It's like a hundred feet high. Besides, would your tripod even fit up there, especially with the three of us?"

Glaring at me with a you're-supposed-to-be-my-wingman look, he said, "We'll just have to get cosy, then." He ran over to the chain-link fence. "I knew it! No barbed wire! Alright, give me a sec." And he scaled the fence.

"Now what?" *This is idiotic.*

"Just hand me your stuff over the fence and I'll grab it," he answered.

"I'm not climbing over that thing," Heidi stated. "I'm wearing a skirt. I don't want you guys looking up my skirt... well, maybe you could, Justin. Still. It's not happening."

*Am I even here any more? This girl is ridiculous.*

"Baby, you'll be ok. Mark can help you over on your side, he won't look anywhere he shouldn't. I promise. And then I'll be here to catch you. It's going to be worth it when we get to the top. I promise." He reached his hand to the fence and she held onto it.

"Ok. Since you say I'll be alright. But if my skirt gets ripped, I'll be pissed. It's from Banana Republic."

"By the way, man, did you tell her what we were doing tonight? She could have dressed differently if she had known."

Justin replied, "I know. I screwed up. I'm sorry, hon. I should have told you."

*Hon? Man, that climb up the hill must have been an eventful one.*

After a few minutes of struggling to get all the baggage over the fence, and then all of Justin's crap he had me carry (see what I did there?), I hopped over. Each of us carried some of Justin's stuff over our shoulders and we started up the ladder on the radio antenna.

With Justin leading, Heidi in the middle, and me at the end, I had a sudden realization about twenty feet up. (No, it wasn't that I could look up Heidi's skirt if I wanted to...) In fact, it was lot more grim than that: one wrong move from any of us, and we'd be dead.

I decided not to say anything. Justin wouldn't want to turn back at this point, and it would only make Heidi more nervous. I just prayed we didn't make any

wrong moves.

Focusing on the next rung in front of me, I finally reached the platform on the antenna. My toes tingled with adrenaline as I stood up on the platform. This was harder than I had imagined, as the tower swayed lightly in the wind.

As frustrated as I had been, this view was worth it. At over 3000 feet up, we could see past the city of Eugene, the low sun reflecting on the Fern Ridge Reservoir, even beyond the foothills past it, and maybe even the ocean.

"Dang, dude! You can even see the sunlight on the ocean! That must be fifty miles away. This is unbelievable. I never thought we'd be able to see past the reservoir, let alone the whole valley." I was stunned.

Ninety minutes and two hundred pictures later, Heidi was wearing Justin's jacket, and the sun had set a good half-hour earlier. The only light now was the soft amber sky fading into deep purple, the simmering lights of Eugene in the valley, and an annoying light down by the door of the shack at the foot of the radio tower. I could have stayed up there all night, but I think Justin had other plans for how the evening would unfold.

"Well, I'd call that a success," Justin pronounced. I asked him, "You think after some Photoshopping you'll be able to use those shots for some prints to sell?"

"Shit man, I'll hardly need Photoshop, the light was so perfect tonight." He responded. "Let's head back to the car and find some way to celebrate."

"I've got a few ideas," said Heidi.

"I can't wait to find out what they are," Justin replied.

*I can.*

All three of us on the original side of the fence, Banana Republic skirt in one piece, none of us had fallen from the ladder and it was hardly 8pm. *The night might still be salvageable. We might even be back in time for me to do a raid in Molten Core. I'll have to see if the other guys have logged on tonight.*

Just as we got settled with all of Justin's gear, a large man burst through the door of the shack near us. I couldn't see more than his form because of the bright light right next to him.

"What the hell are you doing here?"

"Huh?" Justin asked.

"I said, 'What the hell are you doing here?' Are you stupid and blind? Jesus!"

"What the hell are you talking about, asshole?" Justin retorted.

The man stepped out from the door, allowing the light to illuminate him... and the shotgun in his hand. "You climb over my fence, right past the no trespassing sign, then climb up my radio tower, do God knows what up there, come back down here, climb over my fence again, and call *me* an asshole?"

"Yeah man. Why do you have a gun?" Justin wasn't backing down.

"Because you're gonna give me the memory card in your camera before you leave, or I'm gonna have to put you down." He pumped the shotgun.

"Sorry man. I can't let you have it." He said, taking a step toward the man.

"Are you sure?" I asked. "He's got a friggin shotgun!"

"Yeah, and I have my intellectual property. It's not like he's gonna let us go back up there again for another shot."

"Damn right," the man said. "Now give me that card."

Almost with a bit of regret in his voice, Justin said, "I can't let that happen."

And then everything got crazy. In one motion, Justin reached for the man's gun with his left hand, deflecting it up toward the sky. Instinctively, the man shot into the air. As I saw Justin going for the gun, I tackled Heidi, getting her to the ground (*I'm getting more action with her than Justin is!*) to get her out of the way of any gunfire. While I did this maneuver, Justin pulled his hand out of his right pants pocket, revealing a pocket knife. The kick of the man's gun threw his arms up and back, revealing his belly. Justin thrust the blade into the man's left side. The man dropped his gun from the shock of the knife, but managed to bring his weight forward, toward Justin. Sort of falling on Justin, the larger man brought him to the ground. The force of the impact knocked the wind out of Justin while the man regained his senses. He allowed his bodyweight to slam right into Justin's chest. Justin dropped the knife as the man struck him.

I left Heidi lying on the ground a few yards away, and scrambled for the gun. It was our only chance. I could hear the man trying to strangle Justin, using his weight to bear down with both of his hands on Justin's neck. This meant the gun was totally free. I grabbed it off the ground right by the doorway, some of the man's blood pooling next to it. I retreated back from the doorway and also from the guys as they struggled. The shotgun looked like a standard pump action twelve gauge. Pulling the pump back, the empty shell flung out from the side as a new shell was loaded into the chamber.

Looking down the site of the gun, I knew I was stuck. There was no way to get a good shot. With the spread of the shell, I'd hit both the guy and Justin unless I were aiming straight down. And even then, I wasn't sure if it would blow through the guy and into Justin at that close of a range.

"Shoot him! Shoot him you idiot! What are you waiting for?" Heidi screamed from my right. *Doesn't she see?*

Justin's voice gurgled and his left arm and legs flailed, trying to get out of the grip of the large man. Paralyzed in my indecision, all I could do was watch as my friend was slowly being strangled to death. If only I could find his knife!

My sites still focused on the man, Heidi invaded my field of vision as he landed on top of the guy, stabbing him with Justin's knife. The man cried out, and let go of Justin's neck. Then his cry changed.

A blinding light flashed all around us, burning into our vision. As the flash faded, it retracted into a pin-point light right above the man's head, who's cry from when he got stabbed sounded like it was a digital recording paused, stretched out. Heidi clambered away from the body she had just stabbed in utter terror. I continued staring, motionless.

The sound of the man's cry sounded like it was being torn from his body toward the bright light. And then the sound was gone. Not long after, I swear it, the guy looked like he got sucked right into the light. Then the light vanished.

And he was gone. It was just the three of us. Justin wheezing on the ground, covered in blood, Heidi on the ground, kneeling a few feet back, clutching the

bloody pocket knife, and me on the opposite side, standing with a shotgun aiming at no one.

Justin's cough snapped us back to reality. "Dude, are you ok? Can you breathe? Can you talk?" I asked.

"Shut. Up. Gimme a min." He managed, between some coughs.

Heidi crawled over to him, tears starting to run down her face. She grabbed him, and pulled him into her arms. As she held him, she dropped the knife out of her bloody hand. It hit the ground next to a small puddle of blood. As I scanned the ground from the doorstep to where they were, blood was everywhere. The image of a crime scene flashed in my mind.

"Guys! I hate to break up whatever kind of moment you're having, but we gotta get out of here, and fast." I said.

Justin broke off the embrace. "You're right. What do we do with the gun and the knife?"

"We gotta take it with us. We can't leave it here. I can get all your stuff, too. You think you can walk, or even run? We gotta get to the car," I said.

"I think so. Just give me a sec to get up and get my breath back," he said.

We threw our stuff in the back of Justin's car, and I decided to drive. I think I was in the best shape of the three of us, which wasn't saying much. I was pretty shaken up. I have no memory of the roads I drove to get us back to Eugene.

Driving down the mountain, through the forest, we tried to piece together what had just happened. Justin was sitting in the back with Heidi. They were holding each other close. She was shaking.

"So did you guys see the same thing I did?" I asked?

"I don't know. I killed that man. I stabbed him and killed him," Heidi said.

Justin corrected her, "We don't know that. He wasn't dead when that, that thing made him disappear."

"So you guys saw that, too?" I asked.

"Yeah, man," Justin answered. "How could we not? That flash so bright at first I thought I was dying or something. He had been strangling me for a while because you couldn't shoot him."

"Thank you! Finally, somebody acknowledges why I was standing there. I didn't want to blow you away too!" I felt vindicated.

"Yeah, but you coulda done something other than stand there!" Heidi yelled at me.

"Fine. I get it. I screwed up. Let's just try to figure out what happened." I already felt bad enough.

Justin moved on. "So what do you think that was?"

"Man. I don't know. I've never heard of anything making somebody disappear before. I wonder how big that flash was? Like could people in the valley see it? Or other people on the road?" That was the most I could offer.

"Good question. We'll have to check the news and the internet tonight. And maybe ask around. Man. Scary as hell."

"Seriously, though. But dude, we can't ask anybody anything. I mean, first of all, look at us. We gotta lay low for a while, and I mean a while. I think Heidi

should come with us to our place. Once we get inside, we can get cleaned up and figure out what to do from there."

Justin agreed. "You okay with that?" he asked Heidi.

"Yeah. It makes sense. I can't let anybody see me like this."

"We'll have to wait until nobody is around our apartment, and sneak in for the night. If we can do that, I think we'll be ok. We can get cleaned up, you can borrow some of our clothes to get back to your place the next day. Justin, you'll probably have to lay low in our apartment for a while until your neck heals. It's probably gonna look terrible tomorrow."

Justin said, "Yeah. And then we'll have to figure something out for these clothes, the gun, and the knife. I guess a first start is doing what we can to clean it all."

I continued, "Maybe we can burn the clothes somewhere? Will that get rid of DNA and stuff? And I think if we just clean your knife, we could probably just throw that away somewhere. I don't know about the gun, though. It could be registered to that guy. So we have to make sure it doesn't get found."

"Yeah dude. I hear ya. But I'm whipped right now. I can't think about much more. Can we work on this tomorrow?" Justin asked.

"I guess. We gotta figure it out ASAP, though. You guys can chill. I'll do some more thinking while we drive to town."

"Ok. I might sleep a bit before we get back." Justin said.

Heidi asked, "Speaking of sleep, where will I sleep when we get to your place?"

"You can sleep anywhere, I guess," I offered.

"Why don't you sleep in my room with me?" Justin gave me a wink through the rear-view mirror.

*Still a wingman, after all this.*

## 1: End of the Shift

"Good news, sir."

"Yes?"

"I believe we have our candidates."

"This *is* good news. Take immediate action. These odds appear unbeatable."

"Yes sir."

"I want frequent updates on this."

"Understood."

- *From the office of the Secadoma*

Mark Heggenberger was especially excited about finishing work tonight. After rubbing his tired hazel eyes, he glanced over at the clock on the wood-paneled wall. The Star Wars clock read 11:55, almost straight up at the storm trooper.

*How could it only be 11:55? I've restocked almost all of the Drama section and dusted the shelves since the last time I looked at that horrid clock, and that was only seventeen minutes ago!*

Time was not moving quickly enough.

*Only five more minutes, then it will really be Friday night.*

Big plans were in store for him later this evening. He had been dreaming of this night for months. However, it would not appear to be this way. With the abundance of forethought he had put into this evening, he had neglected to inform his grouchy boss that he needed tonight off. He knew that even the thought of leaving Movie Zone early on a Friday would be enough to make Mitchell have a meltdown. Fridays were the best night for business, and the struggling movie rental store needed all the business it could get to stay afloat. Everything was under control, though. He was not going to let Movie Zone steal another good mood right before a Friday night. The night was still young. College students never go to bed before three am on Friday nights, anyway.

Finally, the moment had arrived – midnight. Movie Zone was officially closed. Now, just a few minutes to rapidly count his till and he would be off. Mark planned to hurry home after closing up the store and that's when he was gonna go for it. He was going to make his move with Tammy. Again.

To say that his last attempt ended disastrously would be an understatement. After totally botching the way he asked her out, he ended up being the third wheel on a first date with Justin and Heidi. As if the night couldn't have gone any worse, they were attacked by a man while they were coming down from Buck Mountain. In self defense, both Justin and Heidi stabbed the man repeatedly.

Mark shivered just thinking about it. There were still so many unanswered questions. Why was the man there? Why was he so angry? Why hadn't anybody noticed his absence yet? Were they really in the clear?

*I'll have to ask Justin again whether anybody has noticed where we hid the*

*knife. But not tonight. I've got to get over to Tammy's party before she meets some random drunk guy trying to get in her pants.*

With the register closed out, Mark turned off the TV's and went over to the radio to turn it off. As 94.5, the local top 40 station, was beginning their hourly news report, he stopped to listen. They always did a great job reporting local news. He could tell the news was a recording, though, because it was the voice of one of their morning DJ's, Liz.

"The Lane County Sheriff's Department is investigating leads concerning what appears to be a missing person case. Barry Stine, age 46, has been missing for almost six weeks now. Officials have found an empty shotgun shell with traces of blood nearby, outside the radio tower utility shed on Buck Mountain, off of Mt. Tom Road. They are considering the possibility of a homicide."

Mark went rigid. *We've got to get out of here, now! I've got to find Justin and Heidi!*

After fumbling with his keys, he finally found the correct one and locked the front door of Movie Zone. The brisk air felt good in his lungs as he drew a few breaths of it, not realizing how worked up he had already become after hearing the news. He could see his breath in the air as he exhaled. Autumn had swept over the town of Eugene, and evenings were starting to drastically cool off. Zipping up his coat and thrusting his already chilled hands into his pockets, he set out on his trip of thirteen blocks down Eleventh Avenue toward his apartment complex.

*I've got to act naturally. They could be out looking for us even right now.* He tried his best to walk in a way that wouldn't draw unwanted attention to himself. While walking, he pulled out his phone and called Justin.

Voicemail. Next, he tried Heidi, assuming Justin would be with her.

Voicemail after two rings.

*Shit. They better not be making out!*

Continuing to walk home, he texted both of them. "Call me ASAP."

Nineteen minutes later, Mark arrived at the front of his apartment complex. Scattered about the block were seven coffee colored buildings, the paint on the wood panels peeling off. Each had two stories with four units on every floor. He entered the complex through the closest opening of the loop that wound its way around the buildings. As he walked past the landlord, Thomas', apartment, he heard drunken laughter from the wild freshmen who lived in one of the units on the second floor of building seven. Almost every night Thomas told them to quiet down, but they never listened.

Nobody in the entire complex had any respect for Thomas. Why would they? The apartments were over thirty years old and greatly in need of many repairs, and everybody knew that he didn't really care about the place. Fortunately, Mark's apartment was on the other end of the complex. As a senior, he actually had work to do in college. He learned the hard way that partying all the time and graduation didn't mix. He failed his introductory English class during the first semester of his freshman year.

Most importantly, Mark didn't see any police cars anywhere in the complex. Quickening his pace toward his apartment, he hoped against hope

that those idiot freshmen wouldn't make Thomas call the cops tonight. *Man... How are we going to get out of this? If they know that guy was murdered, it's only a matter of time before they find us. I've got to figure something out with Justin!*

Past Thomas' house was the swimming pool that hadn't been used since August and the main parking lot. Once he crossed the parking lot, he arrived at the path that led to his apartment in building three. The path to his building split and led up to building four as well. His eyes longingly followed the pathway up to the second floor. Tammy's apartment looked like it was packed with people. That's where he was supposed to go tonight. She had actually invited him to her party, and she looked genuinely excited about it. But everything changed twenty minutes earlier.

His feet touched the first step in the stairwell, and then the second. Before he knew it, he was up the cement staircase, looking over to the run down porch. At the end of it, was their well-used propane barbeque majestically sitting next to a few plastic folding lawn chairs, all of it a birthday present from his parents from the year before. Aside from all of this was the door to apartment 321.

Walking past the peeling wood on the wall that enclosed the main room of his apartment, he came up to the black grated door. He didn't hear anything too loud coming from inside, he hoped a sign that nothing was terribly wrong. With his trembling hand clutching the doorknob, he turned around one last time and looked back at Tammy's apartment. It was his perfect chance, what he'd been waiting for since last spring when he met her in his Abnormal Psych class. He wondered what would happen to his chances with her now that he was certain the cops knew about the murder.

Mark rotated the knob. The door opened, he walked through, and closed it behind him. His chances with Tamara were gone forever.

## 2: Change of Plans

"Final preparations are complete."

"Perfect. This is what we've been waiting for. Inform me of the result."

"Certainly, sir."

*-From the office of the Secadoma*

The instant Mark opened the door to his apartment, he realized that something was definitely wrong. Without traveling more than half a foot or so, the swinging door collided with a cardboard box. This startled Mark. He knew that their apartment wasn't tidy by any means, but he never just left garbage sitting on the floor, especially in the entryway. Squeezing through the partially opened doorway, he bent down to pick up the cardboard. With bold white letters, the box was labeled "Miller Genuine Draft." It was a twelve pack, completely empty. *Not tonight, of all times!*

After discovering the empty case of beer, Mark's attention was next drawn to the heart-wrenching music that was blasting from their stereo at the other end of the room. He instantly recognized the song to be one of Justin's favorites for when he was feeling melodramatic. The band was notorious for writing songs about girls and failed relationships. As he walked over to the stereo, he heard the melancholy lyrics of the song "My Heart is On the Floor For You" blasting through the room in a harmonious conglomeration of screaming and singing.

*I gave my all to you, every ounce of me.*

*I was such a fool, so young and naïve.*

*You took that free gift, and you spat on it.*

*My heart was crushed, was turned to sh –*

Mark turned off the music. It had been on so loud that he couldn't think. With some peace and quiet, he turned around from the stereo system, hoping to find Justin lying on the couch, in one of his Emo moods. Instead, all he saw was the yellow couch – empty. Panic sparked in his mind. *We don't have time for this! Where could he be?* The music alone implied that he must have been in a foul mood, and the idea of Justin pounding twelve beers... Justin was going to be useless in coming up with a plan. Mark scanned the room, looking for some indicator of what Justin had been doing that night.

On the small, oak coffee table in front of their couch were four empty beer bottles. By one end of the couch were two more. *Six*, he tallied. Near the other side of the room, behind the couch and next to the kitchen, three more bottles were found. *Nine*. This scene was looking worse by the minute. He still couldn't hear anything happening anywhere in the apartment. So he walked around the couch, past the dinner table, and around the counter, into the kitchen. Sitting in the sink, he saw the last three empty bottles.

*Twelve beers! I know the guy can party, but twelve? And by himself? And*

*where the hell is he?*

Mark tried calling Justin's phone again. A second after hitting "send," he heard the all too familiar ring tone from down the hall in the apartment. *I guess he's not making out with Heidi after all?* After three rings and no response, Mark started to walk out of the kitchen and turned right, heading down the hallway.

Five rings and still no response.

He could hear the ring get louder as he reached the coat closet at the end of the hall. Following the sound, he turned the corner and walked past the pictures of Portland and Mount Hood on the wall that Justin had taken last winter, and on toward the bedrooms.

"Hey, you've reached Justin's cell phone. You know what to do."

Mark put the phone back in his pocket and thought for a moment. *Where is that fool? Did he leave the apartment, drunk, at midnight without his phone? He's practically asking the cops to find him!*

He continued down the hallway only to be taken aback by what he found in the bathroom. To his left, was Justin, shirtless, doubled over the toilet, hands tightly gripping the filthy seat that neither of them had cleaned since they had moved in. A foul odor wafted from the toilet bowl into in Mark's nose. Justin's moist, yet still distinctly green eyes centered on Mark. However, before any word could be said, Justin's chest started to heave again.

Cognizant of what was about to transpire, Mark plugged his nose and turned away. Even though he couldn't see what was happening, the sound of Justin's retching combined with the sound of his bile splashing against the toilet was enough for the Mark to feel sick himself. He had never been able to handle vomit very well.

He brusquely said, "I can't watch, but we gotta talk!" and hurriedly paced down the hallway back into the kitchen, covering his mouth with his hand. Looking into the kitchen sink, his face was surrounded by stacks of dirty dishes and greasy pizza trays. He realized that cleaning this sink would be a nightmare if he vomited in it. Lifting his head up, he closed his eyes and tried not to panic.

*Shit. Shit. Shit. What are we gonna do? He's drunk off his ass. I'm gonna puke, and the cops know that guy's gone or dead, or whatever the crap happened to him.*

"Dude, you gotta get out here. Like now!" Mark called down the hall, fighting the sick feeling.

"Hold on, man!" Justin flushed the toilet as he yelled back.

As Mark was pacing back and forth in the kitchen, Justin slowly emerged from the hallway, still shirtless, wiping snot, tears, and vomit from his face with toilet paper.

Mark eyed him up and down, "Dude, you look terrible. What happened to you? Wait, I don't even wanna know. We don't have time for this. We gotta talk"

"Nice to see you, too, ass. Heidi's been cheating on me."

"Are you kidding?" Mark said. "Great. This is all we friggin need tonight."

"Um. You're kinda being a dick right now," Justin point out.

"Man, I don't care. We've got bigger stuff to handle right now."

Incredulous, Justin asked, "Bigger stuff? I just found out the girl I loved has

been screwing some tool in her Econ class for the last three weeks. Excuse *me* for thinking that's a big deal!"

Mark stuttered as tried to piece it together. "Three weeks? That's half the time you guys were together. What a fricken - wait, what did you say? You *loved* her?"

"I think I did, yeah."

Reeling, Mark said, "Man, I knew she was too hot. But anyway, as much as this sucks, we've gotta talk about Buck Mountain."

"Buck Mountain? Why now? And wait a sec, what do you mean 'too hot?'" Justin took a step closer to Mark, and edge in his voice.

Back peddling, Mark explained, "I just meant, she looked like the type of girl who slept around a lot. But that's not important right now. I heard on the news that cops have found stuff up on Buck Mountain! They found an empty shotgun shell. Somebody reported the guy was missing. He has a name. It's like Barry or something. What are we gonna do?"

"Whoa. Slow down, man. I'm drunk as hell. Cops found the guy?"

"No. But he's been reported missing for weeks, I guess, and they found blood and an empty shell where we were. You realize what this means, right?" Mark tried to explain.

"Yeah. It means that you think I was dating a slut! You thought she looked like the kind of girl who'd sleep around?"

"Cripes, are you *still* stuck on that? Yeah, she was hot. But she was a total ditz, kinda even bitchy. Now can't we move on? We gotta make sure the cops aren't gonna find us, and if they do, what we're gonna say." Mark was getting exasperated.

"Bitchy? If she was so bad, why didn't you tell me?"

"Because I thought you just wanted some action. I was your wingman, remember?"

"Yeah, but a wingman tells his partner if he's flying into MIG territory, right?"

"What the crap are we talking about right now?" Mark asked. "Where did you hide the knife after that night?"

"Um. I gotta think. Gimme a sec. Man, my head hurts. Crap, I think it's still under my bed," Justin gave a sheepish look.

The sick feeling returned to Mark, this time for a different reason. "Under your bed? Are you serious right now?" He was yelling.

"Yeah man. Lay off it. Heidi and I were spending a lot of time together after that night. You remember how it was. We spent the next like two days just laying low. I couldn't go out anywhere." Justin was getting defensive.

*I knew I should have taken care of it myself!*

Mark's frustration turned to anger. "Lay off it? Dude, you realize what could happen with all this, right? If they find us, we're screwed. Like, years in jail screwed. And there won't be any conjugal visits with Heidi."

"Dude, keep Heidi outa this," Justin said, his voice raising now, too.

"If it weren't for her, we wouldn't be in this mess in the first place."

"So not true, man," Justin corrected. "We had planned to get those shots of the valley for a while. And besides, you were trying to hook up with Tammy, too."

"Man, I can't even believe we're having this conversation. The cops are probably after us, and you're still all broken up about this girl that you started dating only six weeks ago!"

"I already told you, I loved her," Justin said through clenched teeth.

"Yeah, you did tell me. And that's ridiculous. She must have made up for her personality with some other characteristics."

Justin shoved Mark squarely in the chest. "What are you implying?"

Mark stumbled back and as he regained his composure, said, "I'm not implying anything. I'm saying that I don't care about Heidi right now. I've gotta figure out what we're gonna do about the dead guy on the radio, named Barry!"

"Screw you. You're the worst friend. I'm not gonna deal with this. I'm leaving."

"Leaving? What about the knife? The cops?" Mark yelled, incredulous,

"Don't care," Justin said as he turned to walk away.

"Wait, you idiot!" Mark leapt toward him, trying to grab his shoulder.

Mid-reach, a brilliant light flashed in between them, illuminating the entire room. The pervasive light instantly shrunk down into a miniscule luminous dot that was hovering at eye level in front of Mark.

*Oh no! Not again!* Everything around him seemed to freeze. Time appeared to be creeping forward at an infinitely slow pace. His hand never made it to Justin.

Suddenly, the sound of Mark's own words were sucked away from Mark's ears with a piercing screech. The ear shattering pitch was drowning out all of his other senses. All he could concentrate on was this noise as it grew in intensity. It distorted and swallowed up everything around him, including his sanity.

Just when Mark thought the pain in his head couldn't get any worse, he experienced a searing pain in his abdomen. It felt like his insides were being pulled toward this blinding dot with a winch. This acute pain began to extend within him. It grew and grew so that his entire torso felt like it was being wrenched toward the light. After his torso, his legs began to rip away from him and they were followed by his arms. He wanted to scream in agony, but found that his voice was torn from him as well. Everything he knew was rushing toward that one infinitesimal, radiant speck.

And finally his head was pulled forward. Fear, confusion, and agony surged through his head as it intersected with that magnificent, terrible light. The next thing he knew was pure whiteness, nothing else.

### 3: The Argument Goes Unfinished

Darkness. Complete, utter darkness.

*I'm falling.*

Limbs flailed through the air. A moment later, his face slammed against a cold, smooth surface, bruising it. Totally disoriented, he pushed himself away from the plane, and raised his head, opening his eyes. Silence and darkness yet again. He still felt like he was falling even though he was sure that his hands and body were against the hard surface. To his bewilderment, he discovered that he was totally naked. The cold metallic feeling against his skin sent chills down his spine. He had no sense of where he was or in what manner his body was moving. His senses betrayed him.

A vile feeling within his stomach began to well up inside of him. The bile was churning. His stomach contracted and chest burned. With a groan, he vomited all over his hands and arms in front of him. The only sensations he experienced were the smell of his vomit and the warm feeling of it running down his arms, all over his hands. Still disoriented, his hands slipped from under him and his face fell into his own filth. He gave a gurgling cry of pain as his sore chin hit the hard surface. Overwhelmed, his eyes began to role into the back of their sockets and the darkness began to overtake him completely. The wretched smell of his own sickness and the pain in his face began to fade away as his mind slipped from consciousness.

Mark awoke with a start and realized he was lying on his side, in a fetal position, in his puddle of vomit. He thought he heard something like a scream, but he was not certain. At the moment, there was nothing but silence. He rolled over onto his back, and then leaned forward, sitting up.

"Where on earth am I?" he said aloud, "What is this place?"

*Ok, let me think this through. What can I conclude for sure? Pretty close to nothing. I can't see. I am on solid ground, even though I still feel like I'm falling. I think I was falling at some point in time. My chin seems to be pretty banged up. I have no idea how long I have been here. In fact, where is here? When is here? How on earth did I even get here? And what happened to my clothes? I need to figure stuff out.*

He tried to stand up, and by the time that he stood fully erect, it felt like the floor beneath him was falling from under him. Instinctively, he quickly changed his stance in order to remain balanced. This was a mistake. His left foot landed in the puddle of vomit and slid out from under him. Legs flying in air, he fell on his hip against the floor.

*I guess I better try crawling.*

Mark rolled over onto his stomach, and pushed his body away from the ground. On all fours, he timidly began to creep away from where he had been situated. As he reached forward with his arm, he thought he heard another scream, this time a lot lower in pitch and a little louder than the last one. He froze to listen better. Silence. If it were real, it had been extremely short. More

than likely, he was just hearing things, psyching himself out. So he continued to crawl. The length of time that he crept along that smooth, cold floor, he had no idea. There was nothing to orient him. It could have been thirty seconds, or it could have been half an hour. All he knew was empty darkness.

He heard another scream. This time he was sure of it. It was longer than the others and was very high-pitched. He concluded that it was the scream of a woman. Frozen in his tracks, he tried to decipher what he was hearing, but his efforts were of no avail. It seemed that he heard a sort of thud. This was followed by even more intense screams, gut wrenching screams, the sort that implied pure terror for one's life. However, after a short amount of time, the screams started to grow more and more faint. Their intensity remained the same, but they became increasingly soft until he was no longer able to hear them at all.

As Mark listened, a thought occurred to him. Each time he thought he heard a scream, it was louder and more definite than the time before. Whatever was making these people scream was somehow coming closer to him. It was only a matter of time before he found out what it was.

*I need to find a way out of here.* Adrenaline flowed through his limbs and he could feel it in his toes. It gave him a new drive, a drive to escape whatever was the source of those screams. With a new fervor, he began to crawl forward again. After roughly ten more strides of his arms, he reached forward with his right hand and it hit something – a plane that felt exactly the same as the ground, only perpendicular.

*A wall!*

He followed the wall down to the floor with his hand and sure enough, he could feel the vertex. Next, he cautiously stood up, keeping his hand on the wall at all times. As he stood up straight, he raised his hand over his head, as high as it would go – still more wall and no ceiling. Daring a jump, he still encountered only wall. One option for escape was out. He tried not to let this discourage him. At least he was finally able to walk and keep his balance. With his hands guiding him along the wall, he began to walk along the edge of the room, hoping to find something of note. About ten paces later, his left hand ran into another corner. He had reached the next wall. Scanning both up and down with his hands, he found nothing out of the ordinary.

*Well, at least I am finally starting to see the limits of this room. I know it doesn't go on forever.* With that thought, he began to walk down the second wall, searching for anything that he might be able to use. About fifteen paces, and he ran into the next wall.

*Two down, two to go.* He turned the corner and paced another fifteen strides. This corner was noticeably different. He could smell the acrid stench of his vomit from earlier. When he somehow came into this room, he must have entered it near this corner. Only one more wall to search. So far, every plane in this room was exactly the same – smooth, metallic, hard, and featureless. His hopes of escape rested in this one last wall. Passing by the puddle and stench of his sickness, he walked along the wall. Not much later, Mark's heart sank. He reached the last corner and he had found nothing.

Frustrated, he ran his hand up through his hair only find that there was none.

The bare feeling of his head startled him and he wrenched his hand away from his own skin. Tentatively, he brought both of his hands closer to his scalp to confirm his discovery. The skin was completely smooth. Not a single hair was on his head. In panic, he checked the rest of his body to see if the rest of his hair was still present. To his astonishment, none of it was. Every hair on his entire body had vanished. Upon realizing this, he felt very cold and he panicked.

Mark sat down and huddled himself in the corner, folding his arms over his knees. *What is this place?* Terror crept into his mind. All he could think about was the screams that he had heard earlier. He was trapped inside a featureless room, naked, bruised, cold, and alone. Mark began to despair.

*How did I get here? What's happened to me? If I'm trapped in this room, then how did I hear other people? What was it that made them scream?* He started shivering from the cold.

*I gotta get out of here before I go crazy!* He stood back up, and started jumping and reaching, desperately trying to find something that he might be able to use to escape. A feral sense of survival overtook him. He began to claw at the wall, hoping that it might reveal something, anything, any hint of weakness. His scratches grew more violent. There was no difference. His efforts were accomplishing nothing. However, he would not give up. He could not. In desperation, he cried out, and started pounding the wall.

After what seemed like hours of yelling, pounding, and kicking, Mark's energy started to wane. Tired and frustrated, he gave up. His hands still on the wall, he slumped back down to a squat and began to sob.

*It's hopeless. It's only a matter of time before that thing comes for me. This is the end.*

In exasperation, he leaned his forearms against the wall. As his arms touched the surface, he felt the entire wall shake. Startled, he leapt back from the wall in shock. The floor began to rumble. A vertical line of blinding crimson light burst forth in front of him. With a low hum, the line grew in thickness. Mark had to shut his eyes because the light seemed so bright to him at first. Instinctively, he scrambled backwards, away from the blinding light. As his eyes adjusted to the light, he was able to see that the light was not solid, after all. Actually, the very wall that he had been leaning against was opening. He was looking out from his room and into a corridor. The hall was unlit except for running red lights that lined the floor. They cast a sanguine hue across the room.

Mark clawed his way back until he could go no further. Against in the rear wall, he was finally able to examine the room which had confined him. Even with the ambient red light, his cell was still totally featureless. With that now dreadfully familiar thud, the wall ceased opening. All of it was gone. He was completely exposed to the corridor. The sound of multiple footsteps was approaching. They sounded heavy and deliberate. Mark shimmied his way across the back wall to the far corner. There was nowhere left for him to go. Huddled in the farthest corner of the room, Mark finally saw what had made the others scream in terror.

#### 4: Sterile

“Everything is under way”  
“Perfect. Nothing will stop us now.”  
-From the office of the Secadoma

Shaking and clutching himself, Mark had pressed his body against the back corner as much as he could. He could not get any further from these things than this. There was no way he would let them take him. He would do anything so long as he wasn't captured by these things.

Silhouetted by the scarlet glow, four humanoid figures began to close in on him. They appeared to be at least a solid six feet tall, but Mark had no real way of knowing. Broad and bulky, the four of them formed a rather impenetrable blockade. It looked as though Mark's cell had been designed to just perfectly fit four of these creatures, side by side. The wall of figures was steadily moving closer to Mark. Whatever he was going to do, he had about five seconds to do it.

“Who are you? What do you want from me?”

The guards didn't even flinch, change their pace, or in any other way acknowledge him. They were even closer now. With no other option, Mark pressed his legs against the back wall and dove down toward the gap between the third and fourth guard, hoping to dive right between them. With lightning reflexes, they lowered their stance and caught him. Each one grabbed a shoulder, their grip like a vice.

He yelled out in pain. While they grasped his shoulders, the other two guards came in behind him and each grabbed one of his legs. Mark began to kick as hard as he could, but it was no use. They hardly noticed as he tried flailing his legs with all of his strength. Trying to writhe himself free, the first two guards moved their grip from his shoulders down to his wrists. Now they had each of his limbs under control and his body hung right above the floor, like we has an animal on his way to be roasted.

With Mark kicking and screaming, the four guards began to march out of the cell in step. They exited and began to walk left, down the long corridor from which they came. Even though the door had been opened, once he was out in the hallway, the running lights were too bright for his eyes to see much else. In the midst of his world of red, he could make out that these figures appeared to be wearing some sort of protective suit. There was no way that the pain he was feeling on his wrists and ankles was caused by a person's skin. Their grips were so tight and rigid that they couldn't have been from human hands.

Craning his neck so that he could look up ahead, about fifty feet in front of him, he saw a hexagonally shaped door. Each corner of the hexagon had a red light at it. Looking to his left, he saw that they were passing other empty cells.

Now he was certain that there had been other people here who had seen these guards as well. Where had they all gone? What was on the other side of that door? Mark wasn't sure wanted to find out. He continued to shake his arms,

and kick his legs, but all of his efforts ended in futility. The guards marched on, undeterred. Not one of them had even looked in his direction.

They came to a brief halt about five feet away from the door. After a momentary pause, the door began to open from the middle, like an iris. Once the door was opened, Mark could see nothing terribly different inside the new room – that same deep scarlet glow from the edge of the floor, casting a dark red hue to the entire featureless room. Inside, he noticed that there was another set of four guards. They looked identical to the first set. He was passed off to the next group of guards and they carried him in the same manner as before. After parting with his first set of captors, he was escorted through a second hexagonal door that was right next to the first one that he had entered.

Another long, dimly lit corridor like the first, with a row of closed doors along the left side. This one seemed to be the symmetrical opposite of the first one, as long as his sense of direction was still working in his favor, which definitely could not have been the case.

But this room was grossly different than the first. The difference was immediately discernable. Mark's terrified screams were not the only sound to be heard, as it was in the first room. In this second hall, he could distinctly hear some of the most grotesque sounds he had ever heard. As he was carried past each room, he heard a unique voice, yelling out in its own way.

The sickening screams brought back memories Buck Mountain. He would never forget the sounds of that man as he fought for his life against Justin. But these cries sounded different. There was a terror and fear in these cries that gave them a sound he had never heard before. Not only did these people sound like they were in pain, but they sounded terrified. Fully grown men, women, children, it didn't matter. In the five or six rooms that he was carried past, each one wailed as if they were about to die.

Mark's instinctive reaction when he heard these noises was to try to somehow escape from the clutches of the four guards. With all his might, he tried to sprawl his legs and arms, hoping to break their grip on him. No matter how hard he tried to move his limbs, nothing changed. He could squirm with his body, but the guards constantly kept a firm grip at the end of each appendage.

*I can't let them take me into one of these rooms. Anything that happens out here can't be as bad as what will be on the other side of that door.* But whatever he was going to do, he had about fifteen, maybe twenty seconds to do it, assuming this corridor was equally as long as the first.

"Oh! My stomach!" he suddenly exclaimed. Meanwhile, he pulled with all his might away from the guard holding his right arm. Yelling and moaning, he started to force his body to convulse, acting like he was going to vomit again. Coughing, moaning, and squirming, he hoped to convince the guards that he was going to throw up on them. They continued to march, undeterred. Mark's efforts had no visible affect on the guards whatsoever.

He could see that they were approaching the door to a room that ought to be his. They came to a halt right in front of it. Mark quit his vomiting charade so that he could see what was happening. Accepting his fate, he would rather know

what to expect. Just like the very first door that he saw here, it appeared as though the walls were parting, slowly, smoothly, but never stopping. Out of the center came a blinding white light. With a gasp, he shut his eyes tight and jerked his head away, toward his body. With the door completely open, he felt a hot vapor flood out of the door and roll past his body, diffusing out into the corridor.

The guards carried Mark through the doorway and into a hot, humid room. Mark finally gathered the will power to open his eyes to see what he was about to encounter. The white, sterile light burned into his eyes. He had no idea how long it had been since he had seen this much light. Eyes watering and squinting, he quickly scanned the room while he was carried to the center of it.

Right in front of him was a flat, featureless metal table. All of the walls looked as though they were made of this metal as well, but one looked different than the others. It appeared to be more reflective than the others, almost like a giant mirror. Above the table was the source of that awful light. A round floodlight was shining straight down onto the table, and surrounding the floodlight there were various tubes that dangled like the tentacles of some twisted, mechanical squid. The horrid apparatus looked utterly foreign and malicious to Mark. He had a feeling that he would discover its purpose soon.

Each holding one of his limbs, the guards lifted Mark onto the table and turned him over so that he was lying on his back. For the first time, he caught an authentic glimpse of his captors. Unless they were robots, it looked like they were wearing some sort of black protective suits. Every inch of their skin was covered like they were astronauts. Their heads were underneath helmets that connected to the suits. Tinted glass shields obscured their faces. They continued their work in silence.

As he was laid on the table, the hot metal stung his bare skin and he was reminded of his distorted appearance. His eyes beginning to adjust to the bright light, he examined himself, trying to figure out what had happened to him. His hands and chest were covered in dry vomit. He had a bruise the size of a golf ball on his right arm and an even bigger one on his right thigh. However, the most perplexing thing was that he was completely bald. There was not a single hair that he could see anywhere on his body.

His self-examination was interrupted by one of the guards who grabbed his forehead, and thrust his head down onto the table. A searing, hot pain shot through the back of his head as it slammed against the hot metal. Each guard was holding one of his limbs to the table and the one by his right arm also had his head. One of the guards on his legs left and came up to hold his right arm. The one who had been there first let go of his arm with one hand and put both on his head.

During this interchange, Mark tried to utilize their momentary weakness, but the best he could do was get his arm off the table by a few inches. The new guard was already there and overpowering his arm, forcing it back onto the table.

The guard who was at his head let go with one hand and reached under the table. There was a quiet beep from somewhere in the room and a retracting metal bar started to extend from the table, right next to Mark's jaw. The bar

continued to grow and snaked its way over his neck to the other side of his head. With immediate panic, he yelled out in rage. Thrashing his limbs with all his might, he would not let this table strangle him. The guards did not seem to be startled by his reaction. Instead, they just stood forward, using more of their weight to hold his hands and feet on the table. They didn't appear too concerned if he moved the rest of his body; they just wanted to keep his hands and feet still.

The bar by his head attached itself to the table. It was completely wrapped around his neck from right to left and now connected to the table at both ends. The guard let go of him. Mark instantly drew his head away from the surface. Immediately, it was stopped by the solid and now stationary bar. He gasped for air and let his head fall back down on the table. Now he understood why the guards were only concerned with holding his hands and feet.

The one free guard next went to his left hand and reached under the table. Mark heard the same beep and another serpentine bar started growing out from the table, coiling around his wrist. With one last-ditch effort, he tried wrenching his arm from the guard, hoping that maybe his grip was less tight. His efforts did nothing for him. The free guard then went to his feet and did the same thing. Finally he came around to his right arm, and attached it to the table. There was nothing more that Mark could do. He was going to stay in that room as long as they wanted him to.

The guards had let go of him and appeared to be busy doing something else. While lying on the table, the only thing that Mark could see was the glaring light, beaming down on him from above, like he was in a twisted dental exam. Lying there in the silence, he noticed faint sounds from the room next to him. A shrill voice slipped through the walls like a ghost. It sounded like it was coming from a little girl. He thought of his younger sister, Sarah, who was only eleven. The idea of torturing a young girl outraged him. Unfortunately, there was nothing that he could do.

His thoughts were abruptly brought back to the present when he heard the door open. Though he tried craning his neck for a better look, he couldn't tell what was going on. A moment later, the door closed with the familiar thud, and he saw only one guard looking down over him. The silhouetted figure reached up toward the center of the ceiling, by the brightest part of the light. Mark couldn't even look at him. It hissed as he brought it down to the level of the table.

Mark had a feeling that whatever was going to happen to him was about to begin. The guard adjusted a knob at the end of the hose and it started to steam. Holding it away from the table, it started to vibrate and make a gurgling noise. Water started flowing out of the end of the tube.

*Oh this can't be too bad. It's just water.* The water pressure looked to be getting higher and higher while the guard was holding out the hose. Not only that, Mark noticed that the room was starting to feel even warmer than when he first had entered. Where the water was colliding with the wall, steam was billowing away, turning the room into a lifeless, tropical cell.

With the water now rushing out like a fire hose and as hot as a geyser, the

guard began to turn the hose toward Mark's table. Flinching from the miniscule droplets of near boiling water that were landing on his bare skin, he began to reevaluate how painful this experience could turn out to be. Without any change of stature or appearance, the guard lifted the hose and started to spray Mark's feet.

Mark shrieked as a wave of immense pain rolled through his legs. He tried to pull himself away from the scalding water with all his might, but he was completely trapped. The hose slowly began to move its way up his right leg, methodically dowsing every square inch of skin it passed over. Clenched fists, teeth gritted, Mark was arching his back. Every part of his body was tensing up because of the unfathomable pain.

After finishing his right leg, the water went back down to his left leg and repeated the procedure. *This guy was thorough!* As the hose was moving up his thigh, Mark realized that if this water were to cover his whole body, his legs would be the least of his worries. Sure enough, the beam of water left his leg and moved to the middle of his body. He found this was even more painful than before, though he didn't know such a pain existed.

All the while, the guard's austere posture was exactly the same. Mark's constant screams bounced right off of him. He continued to shower Mark's body just like it was another day in the office. The stream got to Mark's neck, which hurt excruciatingly. This unexpected increase of pain caused the intensity of his cries to reach a level he didn't know he was capable of. The water continued moving up, leaving his neck and hitting his chin.

Once the water started rushing into his mouth, his gurgling cries abruptly cut out. Mark felt the most acute pain of his life as the water was scalding his face, melting it, it felt like. Although he was squeezing his eyes as tightly as he could, there was nothing he could do to prevent his eyes from burning. The water pressure was just too high. It felt as if a steamroller were slowly pressing against his face. All he wanted to do was open his mouth and yell out because of the pain, but that would have made it even more painful.

Unable to hold his breath any longer, he had to take a breath, even though the water was still covering his face. When he inhaled, scorching water rushed into his lungs. Reflexively, he opened his mouth, gasping for air, which was instantly filled with water as well, sending another searing spike of pain down his throat and into his lungs. Coughing, he gasped for air again, sending yet another stream of scalding water down his windpipe. At this point, he had almost forgotten about the unbearable pain on his skin because he was drowning.

*I am going to die.*

And just when he thought he could endure nothing more, the hose stopped. Coughing, and wheezing, gasping for air, Mark began to cough up the water that was burning the insides of his lungs. The world around him was nothing more than a blurry, bright white. He wasn't even sure if his eyes were open or closed. It didn't make a difference. All he knew was that his entire body was in pain, inside and out.

While Mark was catching his breath, the guard was retracting the water hose

and reeling out a second hose, similar in appearance and size to the first one. He opened this hose and another clear liquid started to pour out. Mark had been oblivious to all that the guard was doing until he heard the liquid splashing against the metallic floor. This time, the guard did not wait for the fluid to get warm or for the pressure to increase. Once it was flowing, that was enough. He brought the hose toward the table. At once, Mark knew that it wasn't water. It smelled like rubbing alcohol.

The cool, soft flowing liquid stung immensely the moment it touched his scalded skin. Mark's muscles contracted again from the now-familiar pain. This wasn't as intense of a pain as the hot water, but it was a more subtle feeling. A constant sting, or burn, nothing more, not the feeling like before, the feeling that his skin was being torn off by a hot iron. Though subtle as it was, it was enough to make him want desperately to be anywhere else. The pain reached its worst when it got to his face, just as it did with the water. As the alcohol ran through his nasal cavity, it flushed out his already disrupted sinuses. At least this time around, the stream of liquid wasn't so intense that he was drowning in it. However the guard was purposely kept the stream over his nose long enough that he had to open his mouth for a breath, and as he did so, the guard shot it into his mouth. Once the fluid got to his eyes, he had almost completely forgotten about his mouth. He wondered if the experience would permanently blind him, the pain was so intense.

When the alcohol bath was done, Mark felt as though he couldn't move even if his life depended on it. Lying on the table, completely limp and eyes practically swollen shut, he heard the guard put the alcohol tube away and then step back from the table.

*Oh thank God this is finally over!*

The guard came back to the table and leaned even closer. One hand gripped Mark's arm and he yelled out. The other hand jabbed a syringe into his right shoulder. Normally, a shot would have felt like nothing, but with his bruised, scalded arm, any sort of contact, especially that of needles, was agonizing. This experience seemed to go on forever. Needle after needle until his arm started to feel like somebody had punched it repeatedly. And then it stopped.

"W. Wh. Why. Why you doing thi?" Mark managed.

No reply.

"Pla. Pleas. Please stop."

Nothing. The guard continued to go about his work, as if Mark had said nothing at all. While he was putting the used syringes away, Mark started to feel nauseous. Whatever he had been injected with was starting to take its effect. The onset of his nausea hit him like a semi truck. His forehead started aching profusely, and though he already had nothing in his stomach, he felt like vomiting again. He could feel his stomach churning like a stew, and with each passing moment, he came closer to throwing up. Finally, there was nothing more he could do to keep it in. Leaning his head over on his side, he began to violently heave up what bile was left in his stomach.

Lying on the table, he felt utterly defeated. All he wanted to do was close his eyes and let everything fade away. He heard the guard reach up for another hose

above him.

*Oh, God, I can't handle another round of this!*

As the guard was preparing his next method of torture, Mark distinctly heard the high-pitched cry from the next room. He remembered that the little girl had been enduring every pain that he had. A hatred that Mark had never known began to well up within him. The thought of somebody else, multiple other people, experiencing the pain he had felt filled him with rage. Whatever might happen to him, he would do all that he could to make these monsters pay for the pain that they were inflecting upon innocent people. He resolved to survive, if for no reason other than this, to avenge the pain of those who had suffered alongside him.

Tubing in hand, the guard opened the nozzle and more steaming water started to pour out again. Wincing from the sound of what he knew was to come, Mark received one more treatment of water, cleaning off the vomit that was all over his face.

The second round of water torture did not last nearly as long as the first. It was mainly on and around his face, which admittedly, was the most painful part. The guard retracted the hose and pulled down a thicker and more robust pipe near Mark's left shoulder.

It was much less flexible and bent at a right angle near the bottom, pointing straight at Mark's side. It slid to him until it was flush with the tormented skin of his shoulder. Out of the end of it, metal rods, like those around his neck and limbs extended from the top and bottom of the tube, clasp onto Mark's body. The grip was excruciatingly tight. With the metal pipe clutching his left shoulder, the tube started to shake violently. He heard a whirring noise from the console that was above him. Without any warning, the tube shook, and made a pop like a thunderclap. Unimaginable pain pierced through his arm as his entire body jolted from the powerful blow. Thinking the worst was over, Mark didn't expect the almost immediate burning feeling that followed.

The claws disengaged from his arm and the pipe retracted toward the ceiling. Mark could smell something vile. To his horror, he realized that it was the smell of his own burnt flesh. Very shortly after the pipe was all the way in the ceiling, the guard approached him and gave him yet another injection. It took instant effect. His white, blurred vision began to darken. The edges of what he would see started to close in on him. What he had wanted for so long was finally given to him. The incredible pain that had been wracking his body was fading away, as was all else. His eyes closed and that terrible room became nothing more than a memory.

## 5: A New Reality

"Sir, can I come in?"

"Certainly. Take a seat. What have you got for me?"

"Inoculation is complete."

"Any complications?"

"None. Initial reports indicate a probability of success at 97.3%."

"Excellent."

"Anything else, sir?"

"No. That is all."

"Thank you, sir. Good day."

"One last thing."

"Sir?"

"Remember, no one knows about this."

"Certainly, sir. Of course."

*-From the office of the Secadoma*

*Man! That was the strangest dream! It was so vivid. Where would I have even come up with something like that? I mean, big men in black suits? Torture? I must have been playing some strange video games before bed last night. What was I playing, anyway?*

*Wait, I wasn't playing anything last night! I worked til midnight and then came home. But then what?*

Mark sat up in the darkness. His torso burned with pain as he raised himself, gasping aloud from the feeling. To his bewilderment, his right arm found empty space where the lamp on his nightstand should have been.

*What the crap?!?*

Panicked, he began flailing his arm around, searching for something familiar. Just empty space. He flung the blanket off of his body and leapt from his bed. As his feet touched the floor, an overhead light switched on. The room did not warm to a soft glow. Rather, a hard and sterile white light illuminated a foreign room.

*No!* Still squinting from the brightness, Mark looked at his left shoulder. Under the shirt sleeve, it was bandaged. He clawed at the dressing until it revealed his skin. A fresh, blistering wound, just like the one from the dream.

*It can't be! That wasn't real. There's no way!* His head was swimming. *What is this place?*

He looked around and examined his surroundings. *Dang. I feel like Han Solo, from Jedi!* Everything was bright and blurry, no matter how hard he tried to focus. The mirror-like walls appeared to be identical to all of the other rooms he had seen – smooth and metallic. Underneath him was a shabby looking cot, small and uncomfortable, resting in the corner of the square room. In a corner next to the bed was something that resembled a bathroom. It appeared to be a shower stall, but there was no nozzle. On the wall was a touchpad with two

blurry blobs.

*Must be buttons.*

Half way down the wall, adjacent to the shower, was a second touchpad with one button. On the floor next to the touchpad was a cube about the length of his forearm. In the upper corner that was opposite of the shower stall, there was blinking blue light.

*They must be recording me or something.*

That was it. The rest of the room was empty. Mark's eyes fell upon himself. He was wearing a white form-fitting sort of jumpsuit. It covered his body from his feet up until his neck. To his surprise, he found that it provided the perfect amount of warmth.

*Ok, so if all of this is real, then what is it? The last thing I remember was arguing with Justin. He was being totally emo because Heidi dumped him and I was all panicked because the police found out about who disappeared.*

At that point, everything came together for him.

*Shit! He's probably here, too! I must have disappeared just like he did! Whatever happened to him also happened to me. That means that Justin could be here, too! And if either of them are here, they probably went through the same hell I did. I've got to find them!*

Mark began to examine the room more carefully. Getting up off his bed, he painfully walked to the button on the wall next to the cube. *My entire body is sore!* As he got closer to the button, it still remained blurry. As far as he could tell, there was no text or anything else that might inform him of the button's purpose. Using the large cube on the floor as a seat, he sat down to examine the button further. *Wow! This square actually it is a seat. It's padded and everything!*

Curious, he decided to press the button. A portion in the wall immediately slid open and a six inch square metal plank extended outward. On it was it a smaller, ivory colored cube. Puzzled, Mark reached out his hand and touched it. Shocked by the cold, slimy texture, he quickly withdrew his hand. A different approach was needed. This time he drew his head close to the strange cube and tried smelling it. The mysterious object reminded him vaguely of tofu. At this, Mark felt a sudden pang in his stomach. *How long has it been since I've eaten anything? Could this be some sort of food?* As hungry as he suddenly had become, he decided not to risk anything. Who knew what this thing was? Eating it could possibly be the dumbest decision of his life, no matter how hungry he felt.

So he left the chair and decided to check out what he thought was the shower. Just as he stepped inside, he heard a hissing noise from behind him. Turning around with a start, he saw the far wall begin to open up. As the line in the wall began to widen allowing that hideous crimson glow to flood inward, he could make out the dark outline of two more black figures.

His skin began to crawl. Bowels began to churn. The sudden pain in Mark's shoulder reminded him of what happened the last time he encountered these tormenters. Fight or flight mechanisms kicked into full gear.

*I have to fight these guys, whatever the outcome. I won't let them take me again.*

He scoured the room in search of something to aid him. Unfortunately, yet again, the room seemed perfectly designed to leave him defenseless in this type of a situation. There was one new advantage, though.

He finally had a good look at these guys. Though his vision was still a little blurry, the bright light in this room was totally different than his last encounter with these terrors. Their bodies appeared as a solid matte black everywhere, with the stature of a professional wrestler. However, no muscles were apparent. Appendages appeared uniform and perfectly proportioned. Large, glassy eight ball-sized orbs sat where eyeballs should be. There were no pupils, irises, or anything that helped Mark discern any sort of movement. Were they even eyes or were they a type of lens? It almost seemed like these figures weren't even living. Their movement and stature had a robotic air to it.

They paced toward him with such terrific grace and purpose. There was no avoiding them.

Mark swallowed as they approached.

"Alright. Come on you black bitches. Let's try this again."

Instead of cowering in the corner of the room like the last time he met these guys, Mark charged at them, hoping to catch them off guard. Having never really been in a fight, he had no clue what he was doing. As he was just about to tackle the guards, he realized how screwed he really was.

These guys hadn't flinched or moved one bit. They were so unconcerned about his abilities that they didn't even deign to parry his advance.

Mark crashed right into the waist of one of the guards with his uninjured shoulder and felt his right collar bone crash against the unyielding figure.

*What the hell are these guys?*

After no time at all, Mark found himself in a situation that felt all too familiar, being drug down an amber corridor. For the time being, there was nothing he could do, but try not cry from the pain in his chest. This time around, the guards walked him upright, gripping him under his arms.

In this orientation, he was able to see straight ahead. The carmine corridor stretched much longer than he thought it would. It was hard to tell for sure, but they looked to be approaching a junction. As it approached, they stopped before crossing it. Looking to his left, Mark saw two more guards approaching with a feeble looking figure in their grip. Its head, covered with dark hair, was sagging completely.

Could it be? Another prisoner, just like him? Feeling an ounce of hope, Mark considered whether he should try to communicate. Would his guards punish him? He had to take the risk. There was no hope in blind obedience.

As the two guards with their prisoner approached, Mark ventured a faint greeting. It came out almost as a whisper.

"Hey. Can you hear me?"

The head shot up and two white, wide-open eyes stared straight at Mark. As the prisoner realized Mark was looking back at him, he began to shout.

"Ayúdame! Ayuda! Por favor!" horrendous screams.

"What?" Mark replied in reflex.

"Ayúdame! Necesito ayuda!"

The guards continued to walk past him with their prisoner. Not one of the guards seemed to notice or care about the screams. *Is this some sort of trick?*

"What are you saying?"

"Ayúdame! Ayúdame. En el nombre de Cristo, ayúdame! Moriré! Por favor! Por favor!" The man began thrashing about, twisting, trying to make eye contact with Mark as he wailed inscrutable words."

He was still held tightly in place by his guards while this man was lead away in front of him. The man's hysterical screams began to fade away as he was carried away in front of Mark.

"I'm sorry! I don't know what to do. What are you saying?"

"Ayuda! Ayuda!"

"I don't understand. Who are you?"

The intensity of his screams never faded, but they gradually grew quiet until they were abruptly cut short by what sounded like the slamming of a door.

With the abrupt sound, Mark's captors began to drag him again... in the same direction of the man. With each step they took, his heart beat faster. The corridor began to feel hot. Combined with the deep red light, Mark had the distinct impression that he must be in Hell.

Onward the guards led him. Surely they must have been getting close to the room where that poor man met his fate. At last, the guards stopped him. They turned ninety degrees and faced a wall. Silent, motionless, they waited.

Seconds became minutes. Mark's entire body was tense. Muscles began to tremor. These were to be the final moments of his life. Waiting for God knows what in God knows where. Then something occurred to him.

*Am I already dead? Is this actually Hell?*

The disgusting silence finally came to end with a screeching yelp that was interrupted by a sharp rhythmic clicking sound.

*What in God's name was that?*

Before he could answer his own question the wall in front of him opened up and his guards threw his body into the abyssal unknown before him.

Slamming into the ground on his injured arm, he heard the door slam shut behind him.

*Of course. Well, this is it, I suppose. I might as well just lay here in the dark and die.*

Just then all the lights in the room suddenly came on. Through his squinting eyes he saw greenery all around him. It looked like a rain forest - plants with large leaves, big and bright flowers, and the roots of what had to have been a humungous tree.

*You can't be serious! One second I'm in Hell and now I'm in the Garden of Eden?!?*

Trying to shake off his disbelief, he clambered onto all fours, and then finally rose to his feet. His eyes were gradually adjusting to the brightness. Sure enough, he appeared to be in a rain forest of some type. The sky above was blue just like he remembered it. In his immediate vicinity there were three large mangrove trees with their gnarled roots interweaving through each other. On the other side of him he found numerous bamboo trees.

Mark's bewilderment was quickly lost on him when he heard a rhythmic clicking. Only this time it was much clearer than when he heard it on the other side of the door.

The space between the mangrove trees and bamboo where he was standing was actually a dirt path. Standing at the end of the path, about fifty feet away, was an insect resembling a praying mantis, only it was the size of a golden retriever. Pincers protruded from its mouth, opening and closing. Each movement produced the clicks he had heard previously. The jagged teeth in the pincers still had blood on them from the last victim, just like freshly used arrowheads. Mark wasn't sure if this monstrosity had seen him just yet.

*Think! There's got to be a way out of this!*

He looked around, hoping to find something he could use as a weapon or some place to where he could escape. Nothing. The insect closed its mouth and two bulbous eyes focused squarely upon Mark. *Fat chance he didn't see me!*

Frozen in dread, Mark watched as the thing dug its insectoid hind legs into the ground and leapt toward him with a bloodthirsty howl.

Closer it came.

*Maybe if I time this right, I can dodge its attack.*

Mark crouched down, ready to spring to the side as it got close.

It came closer still.

When it was just a body length away Mark discovered that it might not jump toward him at all.

"Screw this," he literally said aloud as he darted to his right, preparing to juke the creature. For a fraction of a second Mark thought his maneuver actually avoided the grip of those pincers that had lashed out for him. But as he was running from the insect he felt a snag on his left ankle. Looking down, the animal had grabbed a hold of his left leg and was pulling it straight toward its open mouth.

Mark was amazed and how quickly it moved for its size. In no time at all he was about to lose his leg to this disgusting thing. With his foot close enough that he could feel the heat of its breath, he bent himself around so that he was facing the animal. With all the strength he could muster, he swung his free fist straight into one of those bulging eyes that had been so intently focused its coming snack.

Like breaking through the top layer of congealed pudding, Mark's fist smashed into the eye. It popped while cold emerald jelly coated his hand.

The animal roared and withdrew its grip to defend its vulnerable eye socket. That was Mark's cue. He got up and sprinted toward the mangrove trees, hoping to find one with low branches for climbing. The first tree had nothing even remotely close that he could grab so he kept running. The next tree was the same, but even bigger than the first. Beyond the second tree was a long opening, without any trees for a while, with the bamboo continuing to be on his left. Behind him, he heard the frustrated sounds of a predator realizing it had lost its prey.

*I've got to find a tree!*

He kept running through the clearing and could hear the animal approaching

from behind him. Apparently, it could still run quickly with only one eye.

An approaching group of mangroves looked promising. There was a cluster of multiple trees huddled together with gnarled roots intermingling in every direction. Mark ran straight up the roots toward the trunk of the first tree and saw a sagging branch from the adjacent tree that he hoped to grab. With the extra height from the roots, he jumped toward the branch with all his might. His arms crashed into it, but he held on, hanging from the branch.

*The last time I had to do a pull-up was for the Presidential physical fitness test in middle school!*

He tried to pull his body closer to the branch and he looked over his shoulder to see where his predator was. It was sprinting straight toward him down the trail with incredible determination, hellbent on eating the person who had smashed its eye. To his surprise, Mark effortlessly got his body up onto the branch.

*I guess I'm in better shape than I thought!*

He held himself up on the branch in a similar position to a gymnast on parallel bars, with his feet dangling below. It wasn't a moment too soon. The creature was right beneath him, face looking straight up at him with one good eye. It snarled as it tried to jump up and grab Mark's feet. Lucky for him, it was a terrible jumper. In addition, it didn't appear to know how to climb trees either, or it must have been too stupid to know it could. Then growing impatient, the animal began to pace back and forth, keeping its mouth open and pincers snapping.

*Maybe I'll get lucky and it will just give up.*

As if it could read Mark's mind, it made a snorting sound and scampered off.

With a bit of respite, Mark situated himself on the branch so that he was straddling it, with one leg dangling on each side. From this position he was able to get his bearings.

*How on earth did I get here? And where is here, by the way?*

He was able to see in all directions. What he saw perplexed him. Somehow he had come into this jungle through a door in a dimly lit corridor. Yet, this room didn't look like a room at all. There were no walls, no ceilings, and nothing looked artificial.

He was sitting about seven feet up in a small group of trees that was across a dirt trail enclosed by a sea of bamboo shoots. To his left, where there should have been the door he entered through, was just another group of mangrove trees and bamboo. The trail continued for a little way past that until it descended into a stream. Excluding that direction, he was completely surrounded by more trees so it was difficult to see very far.

In the few minutes he was able to look around, he saw no signs of civilization, humanity, or any other animals for that matter.

*I won't be able to stay here forever, I suppose.*

About the same time that Mark decided to check out the stream, he heard the clicking sound made by the pincers of his one-eyed friend again.

*Crap.*

Jumping from the tree and running for the river didn't feel right. If he did that,

he could only hope that the wretched beast didn't like water or couldn't swim. He wasn't willing to make that gamble.

Sure enough, in the time it took for Mark to mull this over, the creature emerged from the bamboo shoots across the path and ran right back underneath Mark's branch.

Seeing that Mark was sitting higher in the branch than before, it didn't try to jump at him very long. Getting more creative, it tried running into the trunk of the tree to shake him out. To Mark's relief, the tree didn't budge. However, the unrelenting creature tried ramming the tree again. Still nothing happened. Unwilling to give up, the animal returned to the path by the bamboo and ran full-bore into the tree trunk.

Mark heard a crunch and the poor creature fell back away from the tree, stunned. He couldn't help but laugh aloud. While it was writhing on the ground, he decided that this was his chance to take the offensive. He lifted his right leg over the branch and flung himself onto the creature.

Both feet made perfect contact on the bug's head. One foot burst its other eye open and while the other foot cracked the skull. The head sort of sighed as it was compressed and the pincers shot out of its mouth. The head became a chunky green mess all over Mark's feet.

He stepped off the twitching carcass and turned around to take a better look at his adversary.

To his disbelief, it really did look like an oversized preying mantis. There was a type of shell that contained its flesh underneath. The lime green shell had a mottled pattern and felt hard and brittle, but smooth. Its limbs were lean and taut, and its front claws looked painfully sharp. There was also dried blood all over them. An image of the hysterical man Mark met before this encounter flashed before him.

Mark then examined what was left of the head. From his estimate, it couldn't have a very big brain, but the head was still big enough to have a very large mouth with teeth that resembled those of a shark.

The idea that Mark was able to kill this thing was completely baffling.

*I need to wash this crap off.*

Mark found the stream in no time. The water was the perfect temperature. In fact, it felt so good that he climbed all the way in. After washing and relaxing, he sat down at the edge of the stream and was suddenly overwhelmed with exhaustion. Just moments ago he had believed he would die and now he was sitting in some random stream in who knew where. The exhaustion overcame him. He stopped fighting it, and laid down in the dirt. Then everything went black.

*Not again!*

## 6: An Unexpected Reunion

"Do you have a minute, sir?"

"Make it quick. Is it serious?"

"The probability quotient is has slipped to 89.1% in the past hour."

"Damn. We'll need to move faster than planned. Proceed to the next phase."

"Already? Are you sure that's prudent? Sir?"

"Proceed."

"Immediately, sir. Forgive me, sir."

*-From the office of the Secadoma*

Mark woke up in his plain metallic cell, on his cot, in darkness, just like the last time. Only now he was getting accustomed to his new normal. He was expecting the lights to come on as he placed his feet upon the floor like the last time. He finally felt like he could clearly see his room in detail - not that there was much to see.

Not only could he see more clearly, but his stomach hurt like never before. He needed food.

He made his way over to the cube chair and sat down. The tofu cube from before had somehow disappeared, so he pressed the button on the wall again. The hunger was so intense that Mark didn't care about risk. He instantly snatched the little squishy cube and inhaled it. He waited for his body to have a negative reaction.

None came.

So he pressed the button on the wall again. Another cube was deposited. A little more slowly this time, Mark took a bite of the cube. As he chewed the mystery cube, it reminded him of a hard boiled egg. He finished the second cube and decided to wait a while before eating another.

Time passed and Mark still felt ok after eating the cubes. Believe it or not, he almost felt full. Since his body still ached all over, he decided to give the shower (he hoped it was a shower) a try.

He found the controls to be intuitive, and he was surprised to discover that the shower actually had warm water. It felt heavenly on his bare skin. Almost too good. As he thought about it, he couldn't think of a shower that had ever felt like this.

His improved vision reminded him why. There was no hair anywhere on his body. Not on his head, his eyebrows, his legs. Nowhere. There was a bit of stubble everywhere, though. It all appeared to be growing back. A quick rub on his scalp and he guessed it had been about a day or so since he lost his hair. If nothing else, this could help him keep track of time. And then a thought struck him.

*That crazy guy who'd been screaming in the hallways had a full head of hair! If he experienced what I did, he must have been here for months!*

This was not an encouraging thought. The pain on his left arm wasn't

encouraging either. He had removed the bandage before getting in the shower and the wound looked like somebody had carved part of his skin out and burned it back on. On the plus side, it didn't look infected.

After the shower and the meal, Mark didn't feel quite as hopeless as before. Although, he still had no idea where he was and why.

There wasn't too much time to consider these questions because the side of his wall burst open again. The same hellish red glow poured in the room like before and the the same black figures stood at the door, silent and indifferent. There was no point in putting up a fight this time. He might as well save his energy for whatever peril he was about to face.

*I've got to check out that wall where the door is the next time I'm in here... If I ever come back.*

The guards took him down the same corridor as last time. His pulse quickened with each step they took. They didn't stop at the fateful junction where he saw the screaming man last time. Rather, they turned to the left and walked in the direction from where the man had come. Maybe they were taking him to see other people.

After what felt like an eternity of walking, the trio stopped and turned to the right. Wall doors slid open and he was led into another crimson room. As they entered, he looked to his left and saw four people dressed in white jumpsuits just like him, sitting stiffly in chairs. Each had a steel cable connected to their left arm, near the shoulder.

Thousands of questions ran through his mind. *Why isn't anybody saying anything? Who are these people? How did they get here? What's going to happen to them?*

The guards led him past all four of them. No one said a word to him. Nobody moved. But their eyes followed his every movement.

"Hey guys. What's going on?" Mark asked.

No response. Just penetrating stares.

*Are these people mutes? Have they been tortured into silence?*

"Guys, seriously. What is this place?"

Nothing.

"Can you guys hear me? Nod or something if you can."

No response.

Fear swelled within him as the guards reached the end of the room and an empty chair. They sat Mark in it, and before he could squirm, steel bars extended around his neck, arms, torso, and legs, holding him in place. The guards released their grip. Mark glared at them while they walked away. Out of nowhere, a severe pain flared in his left arm. A steel cable had descended from the ceiling and somehow jammed itself into his arm.

The guards left the room. For a brief moment it was silent.

"Don't spea - aaaaaarrghh!"

A man with a grey scraggly beard to Mark's right yelled out, writhing in pain.

"Why -"

In mid sentence Mark's arm felt like it had acid flowing through his veins and immediately he understood why they couldn't speak. As he looked, nobody else

in the room was bald. They all had hair. These people had been here a while and they had learned to survive.

An intense feeling of gratitude came over Mark as he realized what the man next to him endured so that he might not have to.

*I'm such a fool! I spoke even when he told me not to. I made him get shocked for nothing, like an idiot.*

The man gave him a sympathetic look, making Mark wonder how many new people were at this facility.

The pain in his arm gradually faded but it also spread to his heart and then the rest of his body. It must be something in his bloodstream.

Right about the time the pain became imperceptible, the wall in front of the group lowered. Revealing a bright horizontal bar of light that steadily thickened downward. After his eyes adjusted, Mark registered what he was seeing. Directly in front of him in the distance was a group of mangrove trees. To their right was open space, then another cluster of mangroves, followed by a stream. Somehow he was sitting right above where the bamboo shoots were, looking down on the jungle where he fought the giant bug earlier.

*Holy crap! Did this mean that people could see me yesterday when I was in here? Why couldn't I see this place yesterday? Can whatever's out there see us, or come to us?*

Mark turned over to the man next to him, looking for any form of reassurance. The man stared ahead with a blank expression.

In the jungle, right next to the bank of the stream, Mark saw a crimson vertical line materialize out of thin air and steadily grow.

*Oh no. No. It can't be. Please tell me they aren't gonna bring more people in here to face another one of those things.*

The door was completely open and two guards entered with a young woman. She looked almost as bald as Mark, but a little blonde hair was coming in. She hadn't been here long. Long enough to know she should be terrified, though. Once she and the guards were completely in the jungle, they threw her to the ground and promptly left through the closing door behind them. The girl was left alone, with only the sound of the stream water running near her.

Fully upright, she began running toward the group of trees that Mark had climbed so recently. She ran right up the same roots and leapt for the same branch. Mark was so intently watching her climb the tree that he hadn't noticed the large mantis creature approaching the tree from behind her. The residual pain in his arm was the only thing that stopped him from crying out when he saw it.

This bug was the size of an adult horse. Its features were the same as what he had faced, but it was significantly bigger, and this girl was significantly more screwed.

The creature casually sauntered toward the tree, confident in its ability to catch a meal. The hapless girl hadn't yet noticed the creature approaching because she was still trying to maintain her balance on the tree branch.

*Look up! It's coming right for you! You've got to climb higher!*

She finally looked around after getting situated, but by then it was too late.

The oversized insect was already upon her. It effortlessly plucked her from the tree branch with one of its front claws. She shrieked while the swordlike claw impaled her thigh. With a flick of its wrist, it retracted the claw and flung her body toward itself. As she fell toward it, the other claw pierced her shoulder. Her shrieks gave way to deeper, more guttural screams. Holding her body right in front of its open mouth, the inner pincers jutted forward. Her screams hiccuped as her airflow was cut off by the pincers that split her chest open, claspings for her vital organs. Her eyes bulged and her limbs spasmed. The pincers abruptly pulled back inside the creature's mouth, taking a sizable chunk of the girl with them. Her body went limp as the bug made that awful clicking sound, contentedly chewing on its meal.

Mark felt like he could throw up the cubes he had eaten earlier.

*What kind of people would do this? This is so sick! I can't watch.*

He closed his eyes while the insect finished its meal. Even with his eyes closed, the sounds of the animal slowly ripping the girl's carcass to pieces made him ill. His system couldn't take much more of this.

Time crept by and eventually the bug wandered away. To his dismay, Mark soon discovered that this was only the beginning. Before long there were two more guards with an older looking man with long red hair. He looked as prepared as anybody might be in this situation, though. After the guards released him, instead of running for the trees, he went straight toward the bamboo, straight toward the group sitting in the room.

*Can he see us?*

Mark wanted to say something, but thought better of it. The man stopped when he was near the bamboo. He found a smaller shoot and wrestled it free from the ground. It made a perfect blunt object. Wielding it like a baseball bat, he confidently walked toward the clearing between the two groups of trees. A lone bug came out, smaller than the first, about the size of the one that had faced Mark. It saw the man, screeched, and started to charge. The man took his stance, waiting for the perfect moment to swing. Mark was filled with anxiety as he watched the impending collision. Which one would win the joust? Would the creature dodge the swing?

The mantis turned out to be dumber than the one Mark faced earlier, because this one ran straight into the man's strike zone. He swung at the perfect time and immediately bashed its head in.

"Is that all you bastards got?" the man cried. He spit on the body and turned back toward the creak. Nothing happened. The whole room was silent. So the man sat on a rock near the water and let the bamboo rest on the ground next to him. A few more minutes passed.

Still nothing happened.

*It's too quiet. Why aren't they taking him out like they did for me?*

The man began to sing a country song while he waited.

*I'd always had my eye on her.*

*But she never noticed me.*

*I plotted and I planned.*

*What would make her see?*

Mark thought he had maybe heard the song before, but he couldn't remember who played it. At any rate, the man was so carried away in his song, that he didn't hear the rumble of multiple footsteps down the path. At first, nobody did. But then Mark saw a herd of the smaller bugs running toward the man. He couldn't tell how many there were in the fray - enough that it didn't look good.

*I turned to my friend, maybe she'd help me out.  
She tried to tell me I was wrong.  
I'd been looking in all the worst places.  
True love was by my side all along.*

The man never had time to grab his bamboo. Before he could finish his second verse, the creatures swarmed over him, driving his body to the ground. The stream turned as red as the corridors outside while the man was torn limb from limb.

Mark was boiling with anger by this point.

*This is such a waste! What purpose does any of this serve?*

But when he thought he could never be more angry in his life, the doors opened another time.

Two more guards stepped through the doorway and Mark was in complete shock. Though there was none of her distinctive dark hair any more, he was absolutely positive it was her.

Heidi Alvarez had just been thrown into the jungle.

## 7: We're in this Together

Heidi's once gorgeous face contorted with fear as she struggled to get up off the ground. Behind her by the river was the group of bugs still feasting on the remains of the read headed man.

*Oh God, please don't let those things see her. Get up, Heidi! Get out of there before they see you!*

Mark pulled against his chair restraints as hard as he could, but it was no use. Clenched fists, eyes closed, his whole body trembling, he writhed around until he couldn't take the pain on his wrists and ankles any more. The restraints wouldn't buckle. There was nothing he could do.

He tried yelling, "Heidi! Ugh! Hei.. di!! Aah! Cannnn aaagh you ooow hearrrr?"

The jolts of pain sparking through his nerves were too much to bear. His muscles contracted and jerked as his neurons sent pain signals throughout his body.

Heidi didn't even look toward him. She hadn't heard a thing from Mark's room. Mainly because she heard the swarm of creatures from behind her. Without hesitation she started to run away from the group of bugs towards the open area.

Her rapid movements alerted the group of creatures to her presence. A few were still too interested in cleaning off the bones of their current meal to care about a new visitor. But there were enough that started to give chase Heidi's outlook wasn't good.

Mark watched all of this unfold with such a deep sense of rage that he could barely notice the pain from his arm anymore.

Before the insects got moving too quickly, the door slid open again and four black guards threw two more people into the fray. They both looked like they could have been teenage boys, one looked Asian while the other looked Caucasian.

Though they both had some hair, indicating that they potentially had more experience against these creatures, the timing of their entry was horribly perfect. The guards had cast them on the ground when the charging mantises were only a few feet away. Both boys never made it to their feet.

The Caucasian boy was instantly overpowered by two of the creatures. They made quick work of him, with well placed strikes from their pincers.

While he was thrashing about, the Asian guy appeared to have a fighting chance. Only two of the bugs engaged him. One had latched on to his shin while the other was wrestling with his arms. He managed to kick that one with his free leg while he maintained control of its arms with his own. But right as he was about to throw it off of him, the other bug bit extra hard on his shin, shattering the bone. The boy lost his grip on the other creature because of the intense pain. That moment of weakness was also his last moment of consciousness as the bug by his upper body capitalized on it, extending its pincers, and cracking his skull.

Heidi saw none of this occur because she was busy running for her own life. But she heard it all, and it only made her run faster. Nothing was going to stop her from running away from this nightmare.

She also didn't see that one of the bugs never stopped to attack either boy, but kept going after her.

So far, Heidi had maybe been in the room for a total for thirty seconds, and Mark had already seen two more people get killed. That was four in total. He hoped he wouldn't see a fifth, but he couldn't think of any other alternatives. He just continued to watch as Heidi made her way toward the same group of mangrove trees he had run to not long ago.

Heidi made it through the clearing and was by the group of trees. However, she didn't stop like Mark did. She just kept running even further down the trail.

*Why didn't I think of that?*

The creature continued to follow Heidi down the trail, past the mangrove trees.

As predator and prey kept running, Mark realized that if they ran much further, he'd no longer be able to see them from his vantage point in the room. He had no idea what waited for Heidi around the bend in the trail.

Before long, she vanished from his sight. About a second later the sprinting creature did too. It was closing the gap. Heidi's only hope was to find a tree to climb, or some kind of weapon. Then again, Heidi had never been the smartest of Justin's girlfriends. She might just keep running and running.

*Come on, Heidi! Get out of there. Find some cover. Somewhere. Anywhere!*

Not very long after the two disappeared, Mark heard it.

It was exactly what he had prayed he wouldn't hear. It was more distant than he had imagined, but it was definitely her voice. A protracted scream was cut short by a rhythmic clicking.

*Damn it, Heidi! Why didn't you climb the tree? Damn it, God! Why didn't you protect her? What is going on?*

Immediately after the scream Mark heard the doors in his own room open. Eight guards filed in, two for each person, presumably. Nobody said a word. The other people in the chairs sat patiently, waiting for their jailers.

*Don't they care about what happened? They look like they didn't even notice!*

Mark's guards approached him and the one to his left pulled the steel cable from his arm with a yank.

"You sick bastards! You killed her! They were all torn to pieces! Why? What the hell do you want with us?" he raged.

A hard, black fist to his face was the only reply he received. The room went black.

~

Mark was getting sick of this routine. He wasn't sure how many more times he could wake up in a dark room, totally disoriented after a traumatic event.

*I can't believe she was there! And they killed her. Like it was nothing. They*

*killed all five of those people.*

He sat up on the bed, still feeling stiff, with a splitting headache. Words couldn't describe how he felt. It was beyond rage, a feeling completely foreign to him. Never in his life had he felt such a singular driving passion to kill somebody or a group of people. The intense feeling frightened him.

The lights came on when his feet touched the ground. Maybe some food and another shower would help him to feel better, or at least take his mind off of the terrors he had just experienced.

It didn't. All he could think about was finding those men in black suits or robots or whatever they were, and beating his anger into them.

The condition of his arm didn't help. During his shower he got a good look at the wound again. Varicose veins forked out in multiple directions from the lesion. None of his hair was growing back in around it, either. Whatever that steel cable pumped into him was seriously messing with his circulatory system. It must have been potent stuff.

While reaffixing his bandage and getting dressed he tried to sort out of his thoughts. He knew there had to be some way that he could get back at these people or do something to complicate their heinous plans. But before he could figure any of that out he would need to figure out how to survive in the jungle arena.

Every scenario he had seen so far was different. Some people just faced one small bug while others found themselves against larger ones or big groups. The odds didn't always seem even. It almost appeared that they were trying to kill off certain people. Like the two teenage guys. They didn't stand a chance. The guards had to have known precisely when and where they were throwing in the guys. Or the redheaded guy, for example. That whole situation seemed too unfortunate to be real. It was as if they had tricked him. He killed off the first wave and then when he least suspected, they stuck a whole pack on him. And the more he thought about it, the more he kept thinking that the red headed guy seemed familiar, but he couldn't place it.

*So what worked well for people? Weapons certainly helped. The bamboo bat was a great idea. I'll have to see if it's still by the stream where that guy left it. Altitude was also a big help, at least for the little ones. But even for the taller ones, I bet I could have climbed higher into those trees. But what would I do then? Just wait until it dies of boredom?*

Mark never got to answer his own questions because the door opened, and two guards entered to collect him. His throbbing head reminded him not to resist them, at least not yet.

They led him down the dark red corridor again. At the junction they continued straight ahead.

*I'm going back in to fight, it seems.*

Although, this time around they walked down the hallway for quite a while. He was certain they had passed the door he entered last time, but they kept leading him onward.

Finally they stopped him and turned to their left. The wall slid open and a jungle scene gradually appeared before his eyes. Instantly he heard yells, clicks,

and shrieks.

*Am I the last one entering this fight?*

The guards tossed him in and the door shut behind.

Luckily, his landing was more graceful than last time. He landed on all fours, in a feral crouching stance. He was in a wide open area with little dark green shrubs all around him. A quick surveying glance revealed no immanent threats, but his ears told a different story.

"Barry, on your left! Get outta there!"

"Thanks, Chris."

*Real voices! And in English! They sound in trouble.*

Mark looked for the source of the words but couldn't see anybody. He was in one of the places around. He crept up the mound to his right, keeping his body low to the ground. As he crested the ridge, his jaw dropped. He counted six people engaged with two elephant sized mantis creatures.

*These guys don't stand a chance!*

Two men were unarmed and essentially bald. They looked pretty clueless. A blonde woman had a rough piece of bamboo reassembling a short sword. Two larger men wielded a bamboo shoot in each hand. A man stuck in between both bugs had a long bamboo stick he was swinging like a staff.

"Barry, watch out again! The first one's coming back to you."

"Got it."

"Barry, now! Barry!"

"Barry, swing!"

The man with the staff spun around to parry an incoming attack with his staff.

*Barry? No way! It can't be.*

The man between the two oversized bugs looked like he could be large enough. But Mark had no memory of what the Barry of Buck Mountain actually looked like. He had never gotten a good look.

Barry's staff connected with both of the front limbs of the bug. Amazingly, he held his ground against the giant bug as they both wrestled for control of the bow staff. The others had the remaining creature occupied while Barry attempted to break his opponent's defenses. With a loud grunt, he rammed the bow toward the bug's body, hoping to knock it back.

As Mark heard Barry's voice though, he knew. It was the same guy who had attacked them on the mountain. He had been here for over a month, fighting who knew how many of these things. As some of the questions that had haunted Mark for the last month were answered, many more flooded into his mind.

Mark's musings were interrupted as he watched Barry struggle against the monster. Barry brought the bow staff down to bear upon the face of the bug. However, the giant bug held its ground, leaned into the attack, and thrust its pincer straight out, right into the middle of the staff, between Barry's hands. The bow staff snapped in two.

Still pushing forward, Barry fell toward his enemy because the broken bow no longer held them apart. The creature's wide-open mouth enveloped Barry's whole upper body as it closed.

Barry was gone.

“Oh shit! Barry’s dead! We’re screwed!”

“Chris! No, don’t say that!”

Meanwhile, the woman shrieked and ran away. Pandemonium ensued. The five survivors gave up any sense of organization they had. There was yelling, running, swinging weapons, and roaring bugs.

One of the unarmed bald guys started running in Mark’s general direction, away from the bloodbath. He was approaching the top the hill and stopped dead in his tracks.

Lying on his perch, Mark saw that the bald guy stopped in front of him was Justin.

## 8: You've Got to Trust Me

"Holy crap, Justin! How did you get here?"

"I dunno. But we gotta move if we wanna get out of this. Let's go."

Justin hoisted Mark up from the ground and they ran down the hill in the opposite direction from all the fighting.

"I still can't believe it's you! I hardly recognized you, your bald head is so ugly," Mark said while following Justin's sprint.

"Shut up. Not now. We don't have much time."

"Time til what?"

"Shhh! Follow me. Stay low and stay quiet."

They ended their sprint behind a cluster of hydrangeas, about fifty away from the opening space where Barry died. One of the large creatures was still there, battling with the other bald guy and one of the men with two bamboo shoots. The other creature had the woman and Chris cornered, steadily advancing with confidence.

"We've got to help them! What are we doing back here?"

Justin's answer was short and flat, "All four of them will be dead within a few minutes."

"But you don't know that!"

"Mark, you've got to trust me. I can get us out of here, but we have a short window, so short in fact, that we can't escape and save them. I dunno about you, but I wanna get the hell out of this rathole. So do you trust me?"

"Ya. Of course, but--"

"Then we've got to wait here just another minute or so, and then you'll need to sprint as fast as possible, exactly where I go. Got it?"

"Ya."

"Ok. On my mark."

While Mark crouched in waiting for Justin's signal, he continued to watch the others as they strove to survive. The same sense of anger and frustration began to overtake him just like the day before.

*I can't just sit here and watch these people get slaughtered! Today I can actually do something about it.*

He looked over at Justin. Still no signal.

*What is he waiting for? And where are we going?*

The further of the two creatures grabbed ahold of Chris' waist with its arms. Yelling profanities and wildly swinging his two bamboo swords as a last ditch effort, he kept fighting until the end when the bug had pulled him close enough to puncture his chest with its pincers.

*Screw this. I can't watch any longer.*

Mark sprung out from behind his cover.

"Mark! You idiot!"

As he accelerated, Mark discovered that he wasn't the only one running toward the melee. Like an approaching storm, he heard a multitude of smaller bugs approaching at his right flank. There really was no chance of survival.

*Still, I have to try.*

Strong arms gripped him from behind and brought his sprint to a crawl.

"Over here! This is our only chance," Justin hissed.

Justin darted straight toward where the bugs were appearing and Mark followed right behind. Mark had never seen so many of the smaller creatures. A steady stream kept pouring out from behind a dense collection of orchid plants. They all kept charging for the large group of people, where there was the most commotion.

Finally when the guys were just about ten feet away from the cluster of plants, the stream of bugs quit. Justin didn't quit running, though. He disappeared into the orchids. So Mark followed.

"Dive in!" Justin commanded when Mark was close. Without any knowledge of his target, Mark closed his eyes and leapt into the bushes, expecting to hit the dirt and get stuck in the plants. He slammed the front of his body onto what felt like cold metal and opened his eyes to a dim metallic cage, lit only by several air holes, letting crimson light bleed inside.

One of the last bugs had heard Justin's yell and turned around to find its source. It returned to the orchids just in time to grab one of Mark's legs as he dove away. Mark could feel his left leg caught on something so he began to kick and thrash about, but the bug was latched on like a bear trap.

A deep groan reverberated from under the cage and shook it violently.

"Shit! The door's closing! Mark, get in."

Mark forced his body closer into the cage and crept in a few more inches. The door kept sliding closed. Both of them heard the gruesome crunch as it relentlessly compressed the body of the bug that was still gripping Mark's leg.

The door slowed but still continued to close like a vice, ever increasing the pressure on Mark's ankle. Justin gripped Mark from under the arms and pulled with all his might trying to get him free of the bug's grip and out from under the door, but it was still to no avail.

"Push, damn it!"

Finally, with a painful crack in his ankle, his foot twisted unnaturally and it slipped out of the dead bug's grip. Mark made it into the cage right as the door closed completely, leaving the front halves of the creature's arms and claws in the cage with them. They both laid there for a moment in the dark metal cage, totally exhausted.

"Nice move, ass! I told you to wait for my signal," Justin blurted out.

"I'm sorry for actually having a heart. How could you just watch those people get jacked like that?" Mark defended.

"You're welcome for saving your life, by the way. Whatever, it doesn't matter right now. You're not going to like what I'm about to say. Roll up your left sleeve."

"What?"

"Just do it. We don't have much time before they'll get suspicious."

"Ok. Now what?"

"Give me your arm. This is going to hurt like a bitch. But we have to do it."

Justin pulled out a sharp sliver of bamboo and brought it close to Mark's

wound on his arm.

"Ow! Crap! Dude, what gives?"

"Don't look down at your arm. Look straight at me. There's a tracker, almost like a little GPS device they've planted in your arm. Any hope of escape we have will be thwarted until we get this thing out. On three."

"No."

"Three."

"Wait."

"Two."

"What about you?"

"One."

"Aaaagh! Effff! You didn't wait until after one, you jerk!"

"I know, but I knew the sooner the better," Justin responded. He grabbed the bandage and retied it on Mark's arm, pulling it painfully tight to slow the bleeding. "I already cut mine out. It hurt like crazy, but my arm didn't look as messed up as yours. Now watch this." He held up a bloody metallic ball, the size of a BB. "That sucker's been in your arm, giving these bastards all your vitals, your current location, the last time you took a dump, and just about anything else they want to know." Then he placed the tracker on the floor of the cage, took his makeshift wooden dagger, and slammed the blunt side of it down, smashing the tracker. "Let's see those creeps try to find us and jack with us now."

Mark just had to ask, "Dude, how did you find all this stuff out? I haven't learned a damn thing here. I've been through a ton of crap, but I haven't heard a complete word from a single person."

"I don't know a lot, but I was in a large battle like this one once before with other people who had been here a while. One of them was convinced that they had something in our arms but he just didn't have the guts to cut himself open and find out. Another guy who had been in a ton of fights with these bugs they call antlions told me that he noticed the little ones always came from the place, no matter which room he was in."

"These places are rooms?" Mark interrupted.

"Yeah, how else do you think you could enter and exit them through doors? Well, at any rate, this guy told me that he kept watching the antlions when they'd enter the rooms and there was always a finite amount of them, even if sometimes it was a ton. He had a theory that if you could get to the place where they came out quickly enough, maybe you could get in it during the short time between when the bugs leave and the door closes," Justin continued.

"Then what?"

"I dunno. Barry didn't have time to tell me much more. We were talking about it a bit, but then stuff got crazy with those two giant antlions. None of us had seen any that big before. Barry looked like he was whoopin ass like normal, but then something happened, and one of those things friggin bit him in two. So we're on our own now."

"Dude, you know who that Barry guy is, right?," Mark asked.

"What do you mean?"

Mark explained, "You might not remember, but the night we got sent here, I

was telling you the cops found out the name of the guy we fought back up on Buck Mountain. His name was Barry."

"No," Justin was incredulous. "There's no way. He was like half dead when he disappeared. And why would he help me?"

"I don't know. Maybe he didn't recognize you because you've got no hair? But think about it. He disappeared the same way we did. He would have to be in the same place. And what are the odds that we'd meet some other guy named Barry?" Mark pointed out.

"Man, that's heavy. He saved my life. Like multiple times. And I had tried to kill him, back home." Justin reflected.

Trying to be optimistic, Mark pointed out, "Yeah, but, dude, what are the odds that we'd see each other right when all this crap went down?"

"I know, right?" Justin agreed. "The whole time I was learning all this I was so torn because I knew you had to be somewhere in this place and I didn't want to leave you behind. But I also didn't want to sit around and die, waiting for you when you could already be dead too. But we should probably try to get moving. I don't know how long it will be until they fill this thing up with more antlions or do how knows what else with it. How's your foot feeling?"

Mark tried to rotate his left foot, the one that had been caught in door, but the pain was unbearable. It still felt like it was being crushed.

"I think it's swelling a ton," Mark diagnosed, "Probably broken somewhere too. I heard and felt a crunch or a pop when that crazy bug got smashed."

Justin frowned, "That's not good. Well, do you think for now you can at least crawl? We've gotta keep moving if we want to get out of here in piece."

Mark slid over to the remains of the antlion and began manipulating one of the severed arms.

Perplexed, Justin asked, "Dude, what are you doing?"

"Almost got it. Aha! Here. Catch." Mark lightly tossed one of the claws from the antlion's arm to Justin and he kept the other. "At least now we're a little better armed."

"Good idea. Who knows when these will come in handy?"

## 9: What Have We Done?

Mark and Justin's eyes had adjusted to the scant light in the cage. They had been talking for longer than they realized.

"Why does the only bright place in this whole complex have to be the place where aliens are trying to eat you?" Justin bemoaned. He began to run his hands along the wall, feeling for a break or a seam. The light still left significant shadows in most parts of the cage.

Mark added, "Seriously. And everywhere else has to be some type of cage. What do you think this place is, anyway?"

Cocking his head to the side, Justin shrugged, "Beats me. More than anything, I want to find out where we are. You think this place is way out in the middle of a desert somewhere?"

That gave Mark an idea, "Hey! You think this place is Area 51?"

"Whoa. I never thought of that. It totally could be. That would explain where those crazy antlions came from," Justin proffered.

"Really? You think those things are aliens? Like actually from outer space? I call BS," Mark maintained.

"Are you kidding me? Of course they're aliens. Have you ever seen anything like them before? What's more troubling though, is why the hell our government would let them eat people on a regular basis," Justin said as he completed his search of the walls with his fingers. "Nothing. Not a damn thing anywhere."

"Maybe it isn't our government. Anyway, I bet the walls in here are just like the walls in our cells--"

"Cells? You were in multiple rooms?" Justin looked pretty confused.

Mark responded, "Yeah. The dark room I first appeared in, and then another one that had like a mini futuristic bathroom, a crappy bed, and some weird food cube dispenser. And in both rooms there wasn't a seam in the whole room, but then every once in a while it would be like the wall was just opening up. Then those guys in black suits would come in whenever they felt like violating me or trying to kill me. It was pretty terrible. Wasn't it that way for you, too?"

"Yeah. I guess I just forgot about that first room, the really dark one," Justin said as he crawled near to one of the breath holes.

"Do you see anything?" Mark wondered.

"I don't...know," Justin pressed his face flat against the wall, with his eye as close as possible to the hole. "It's hard to get my eye real close. All I can see is just pure red light."

Mark suggested to try one of the other breathing holes, "Try one of the dimmer ones. Maybe that one is looking right into a light."

"Good idea," Justin found one on the opposite of the cage and pressed his face against it. "Hm. It's still hard to tell, but it looks like we might be high up. I think I see a row of those red runner lights like we've seen in the hall ways. And it looks kinda far away. I can only see like three, no," straining, he leaned his head a bit further to see a different angle, "four. Ya, four of those running lights in a row."

"So you can see about 16 to 20 feet, then?" Mark estimated. "The lights in all the hallways I went through seemed like they were maybe four or five feet apart."

"Ya. That looks about right. Whoa!" The whole compartment lurched and Justin fell back from the wall. "Dude! Stop shaking this thing!"

"It wasn't me," Mark whispered. "And shut up. Who knows who might hear us? See if you can look out again."

Even though Mark couldn't really see it, Justin scowled at him as he silently approached the hole in the wall again. This was easier said than done, because the cage certainly felt like it was moving somewhere.

Justin pressed his eye socket against the wall again, peering out. The row of lights was gone. At the moment he just saw a dark void with a faint hue of red light on one side that was gradually fading out like a dying ember. After maybe half a minute of this, the red light was completely gone and to his right he thought he could make out a more yellow light that was gradually taking over the darkness. Mark could notice it too, as he laid in the cage. None of the other breath holes had red light any more. Most still were dark, but through a few on the side where he had been resting his injured leg, there was a growing yellow light.

The light grew in strength. Mark wasn't sure whether this was encouraging or mortifying. He would find out soon enough.

After what felt like a trip of about sixty seconds, there was a bright yellow light coming in through all the holes. Justin had leaned away from the hole because the light was too bright for his eye to take after it had spent so long in the dim red light.

The cage came to an abrupt halt. Justin, who had been crouching, fell onto Mark, who had been sitting with his back against a wall with his injured leg sprawled out. More specifically, Justin fell onto Mark's leg. The pain was so excruciating Mark had to ram his hand in his mouth and bite hard to keep from yelling out. As Justin got off Mark's leg, he shot an apologetic look Mark's way.

But they both had bigger worries than Mark's ankle at the moment. What was going to happen now that the cage had been moved?

Right where Justin was looking, a blinding yellow horizontal line appeared and steadily expanded. Mark was right. This cage was just like the other rooms where walls just seemed to split and become doors. The light was so bright that neither Justin nor Mark were able to see anything outside their cell.

"Ackt! Qut ek? Qit uk tsider izvan!"

Without waiting to see where the voice came from, Justin burst out from the cage ready to tackle. As he emerged from the cage, he could see more clearly that he was on a trajectory to smash into a ten year old boy, but he had already committed to his movements.

They made contact and the boy went down effortlessly. Slamming into the ground, Justin heard what sound like cracking knuckles. The boy yelled out in agony as his entire rib cage was crushed inward. Lungs punctured by ribs that had become knives, he gasped for air and tried to yell out. But something was off.

Everything he said, though it was gibberish, sounded like it was being spoken by a 35 year old man. Confused, Justin backed away from the body as it continued its death throws.

The boy's face had a full beard.

*What am I looking at?*

"Who are you?" Justin demanded.

"Zg.. Tsi.. Gurk," was all they were able to hear as he fruitlessly gasped for air.

Feeling guilty for watching the boy/man suffocate in front of him, Justin stood up, closed his eyes, lifted a foot, and stomped hard. Astounded by his strength, Justin squashed the head as if it were a piece of fruit.

"Holy crap, man! What was that for? You just murdered that guy!" Mark demanded.

"Are you serious? It was either him or us. You know that," Justin answered in defense.

"I don't know that. And neither did you. I couldn't even see him when the door opened. Was he armed? I dunno. How old is he? He looks like he's like fourteen and you just bashed his face in," Mark was livid.

Justin retorted flatly, "Fine. The next time you're helplessly sitting on your ass and somebody approaches us, I'll let them shoot you."

A part of Mark hoped Justin was being sarcastic.

As Justin scanned the room, making sure it was safe, Mark painfully got up off the floor of the cage. It took much longer than it should have, but his left leg was extremely stiff due to the pain in his ankle.

"Is walking with that thing going to be a problem?" Justin worried.

Mark lied a little, "I think it will be ok just once I get going. Keep looking around while I get used to how it feels."

Standing right outside the antlion cage, Mark examined his ankle in the ample light. It didn't look good. His ankle was already swelling significantly, bulging through the jumpsuit. He knew it was broken, but he he had to keep going. He took a tentative step and yelled out from the pain, crumpling back to the ground.

"What is it?" Justin turned back toward him in concern.

Mark looked up with a strained expression, "This thing is pretty jacked. I think I'm either going to have to hop on one foot or you are going to need to help me."

"Crap. We're not going to make it very far," Justin lamented, "Here, let me help you back up."

Arm in arm, they hobbled away from their prison, freedom hopefully ahead of them. After a few paces, Mark stopped Justin. They were right next to the body of Justin's victim. It held Mark's attention. The bearded face certainly looked like that of an adult, at least the part that wasn't totally disfigured from Justin's foot. However, the body was no bigger than that of a fourteen year old boy's. The proportions were more akin to an adult male, though - broad shoulders and chest, muscular looking arms, and a square jaw. He was wearing a type of work suit, like a mechanic would wear.

"We should search him," Mark suggested, "See if he has any keys or communication devices. Maybe he has a phone."

"Good point," replied Justin. "Can you stand by yourself for a bit while I check?"

Mark said, "Sure. I'm good. Check and see if he has pockets."

Justin bent toward the body to see what he could find. The man had no external accessories like a watch or earrings. He did have one breast pocket. It felt like there was a credit card inside. Maybe they could identify him. What Justin pulled out was nothing resembling a credit card, even though it was about the same size.

The device responded to Justin's touch and lit up. It startled him enough that he almost dropped it which wouldn't have been good. It looked expensive. The pocket-sized screen displayed a red design or character that flashed.

"Huh. It almost looks like a Japanese iPhone or something. What do you think that design is?" Justin reached up and handed the device to Mark.

The screen was remarkably light in his hand. It might as well have been a credit card it was so small and light, but there was an animated character flashing on and off in red. It wasn't anything Mark had seen before.

"I don't think it's Japanese. Or Chinese, for that matter. It really does look like a letter or some type of language, but it's kinda creeping me out because I've never seen anything like it. Does he have anything else on him anywhere?" Mark asked, slipping the screen card into his pocket for safe keeping.

"Hm. Let me see... doesn't look like it. Oh wait, I think he has a type of hearing aid in one ear. It's really tiny, like one of those miracle ear things." Justin observed.

Flippantly, Mark decided, "Nah. That's useless. Let's get out of here before somebody else comes."

"Yep. Who knows how long it will take until somebody notices he's gone?" Justin stood back up and joined arms with Mark. Together, they continued to walk away from the antlion cage and the dead body, approaching the edge of the room. Around the corner they found a little hallway with a door at the end and a flat screen on the wall by the door. The screen was black, but it looked backlit.

"Maybe it's a touchscreen," Mark wondered.

Justin touched it with his free hand. The screen came to life and a menu appeared. The menu contained eight boxes. Within each box there were more foreign characters. They all appeared different from each other, but it was clear that they were the same language. It just happened to be one that neither Mark nor Justin recognized.

"Should we touch one?" Justin was about to press the screen again.

"No. Of course not. What if one of the buttons is an alarm of some kind? Or what if we accidentally press a button that calls for help? We'll be screwed," Mark cautioned, "Let's just leave. We've already been in here too long."

Mark looked for the handle on the door to open it. There was no handle. The door didn't budge when he tried pushing it and pulling it in various directions.

He lamented, "Crap. Maybe it's only opened by one of those buttons. What

do you think?"

Without answering Justin complied. The top right button looked good so he pressed it. From around the corner they both heard a hiss. Justin left Mark leaning against wall to peak around the corner. There was steam coming from inside the antlion cage and the front door had been closed. As he walked closer it became clear that the cage was somehow cleaning itself. Nothing to worry about. He walked back to Mark and the screen, ready to try a second time.

"What was it?" Mark wanted to know.

Justin casually responded, " Nothing to worry about. The cage is doing some kind of self-cleaning thing. Maybe that's what the guy was coming in here to do. Ok. Let's try the top left one this time. Here goes nothing."

The door slid open.

Through the door was a small room that resembled a break room. Two more teenagers were sitting at a table, relaxed. One was eating and the other held a screen card in his hand that held his attention.

With the sound of the opening door, the one staring at the screen card spoke in a deep voice, " Zaz, ek nu?"

Justin and Mark exchanged a glance which they both understand to mean, "What the crap do we do?"

"Zazil?" the guy repeated after he had heard no response. He looked up from his screen card. The other looked over from his plate of food. When they realized that instead of Zazil they were looking at two strangers, they both jumped out of their chairs.

Incredulous, the other one asked, "Qua ek Zazil?"

Mark enunciated his response very slowly, "I don't understand you."

The color in their faces fell out of them. The one with the screen card looked down and quickly started twirling his fingers and tapping on it while the other one started to approach Justin and Mark.

"Whoa. Don't come any closer, man!" Justin subconsciously stepped in front Mark.

The man kept approaching.

"I mean it. I'll beat the shit outa you if you come here," Justin clenched his fists.

He stepped closer.

As soon as he was within reach, Justin delivered one swift, direct blow to the guy's face, right against the nose.

"Afk! Ziest!" The man yelled through hands clutching his nose as he fell back. It quickly became obvious that Justin had completely obliterated his nose as blood was running down all over his fingers and face. He tried to stand up straight, but found that he wasn't able to regain his composure.

Ziest dropped his screen card at the sound of the commotion and ran to aid his friend. It was the last mistake he ever made. Justin's knee connected on his stomach with such force that he instantly bent over to wretch. He never had time because Justin took ahold of his head with both hands and violently twisted. Ziest dropped to the ground. The one with the broken nose looked down at his friend with terror and then looked back at Justin right as another fist

filled his vision. Then he saw nothing.

Mark cried out, "What the hell was that?"

"Me saving your ungrateful ass again," Justin smarted. He raced to the screen card that lay abandoned on the table. There was a video of a face speaking something unintelligible. The face reacted when Justin peered down at it. As Justin picked it up, the video vanished and the screen started flashing the same red character that the other screen card had displayed.

"Must be some kind of stupid lock. Can you move enough to search these guys while I'll check around this room? If these people aren't onto us yet, they will be now. And if we don't get out of here or find some way to change our clothes. We might as well go feed ourselves to those bugs." Justin put down the screen card, left the table, and searched the closets on the back wall.

"We don't fit any of the clothes of these weird teenager people, though. And our freakish hairless bodies don't help," Mark noted as he bent down to examine the guy who'd been called Ziest. Even simple tasks like crouching were terribly painful because of his ankle.

"We're also going to have figure something out with that ankle. We won't get anywhere otherwise," Justin added. So far, none of the closets yielded anything that would be of assistance to them. But there were a few long closets at the end of the wall. They looked like they could have been utility closets. They turned out to be a coat closet, but the garments in this closet were more useful than just about anything else he could have imagined.

"Dude, You've got to come check this out. Whatever you're looking at, this is better." Justin motioned for Mark.

Reluctantly, Mark got up from examining Ziest's head, which also happened to have a tiny hearing aid in its left ear. After standing up, he hobbled over to the closet and could not believe this incredible stroke of luck.

Mark touched them to make sure he really knew what he was seeing. Yep. Just as hard and rough as those he had seen not too long ago. Hanging in front of Mark and Justin were three full-sized black suits of armor.

## 10: Corti

*So it wasn't robots after all! It was people, and little people at that! No wonder they needed big tough suits.*

Justin took one suit out of the closet. Hanging on a hook, it was fully enclosed on the front while the back split open. The suit looked easily big enough to fit him and was pleasantly lightweight.

"These are our ticket out of here. Hold this up while I step into mine. I think they're both about the same size." Justin handed the suit to Mark to hold so he could get in it.

As Justin stepped in, the suit felt too big to be useful. He didn't let that deter him; he inserted his arms into the sleeves. As his hands made contact with the gloves, the lenses on the helmet lit up on the inside like a Heads Up Display. He slid his head up into the helmet. With his head inside, he felt the back side of the suit automatically pull in toward him, sealing the slit. There was a small sigh as the suit sealed and pressurized. The baggy feeling in various parts of the suit shrunk to create a perfectly snug fit around all parts of Justin's body. It felt like the suit had been made just for him.

An alluring female voice sounded within the helmet, "Welcome. User not identified. Please calibrate. Initializing calibration programs."

"Dang, dude! This is sweet! We gotta get you in your suit--"

"'Dang dude.' Is this how you wish to be identified?" the voice interrupted.

"Oh, no. Call me Justin."

"As you wish, Justin. Now take a deep breath and hold it."

He obeyed. The suit felt tight around the chest, but then expanded slightly. The suit asked him to take three more breaths, and with each one it calibrated how much it expanded more precisely so that by the end, breathing felt completely natural.

"Thank you. Now, if--"

"Wait. Hold on. Pause. What's your name?"

"You can call me Corti."

"Thanks, Corti. Can you always hear me, even after this calibration?"

"Yes. I'm always listening."

"Ok, then hold on a minute while I get my friend into his suit."

Justin reached in the closet and took out the other suit for Mark. Getting into the suit would be painful, but once in, the suit would end up doing most of the walking for him. Maybe he would be able to walk on his own and they'd actually have a chance to get free.

Mark stepped in the suit with his right foot. He looked down at the left leg of the suit, hesitant.

"You've gotta do it, man. Just do it all at once." Justin urged with a nasally voice through the speaker on his helmet.

Mark braced himself against the door of the closet and shut his eyes. Before he thought about it any longer, he stepped into suit. It felt as if he just broke it again.

"I don't know how we're gonna do this. I'm just going to slow us down," he said as he slipped his arms into the sleeves.

"And what's our alternative? You think I'd leave you to fight against these weird little men and their giant insects? Just shut up and finish putting your suit on," Justin encouraged.

Placing his head fully in the helmet engaged the locking mechanism on the back of the suit. Mark was sealed inside. The HUD glowed green in his visor as he was greeted by a female voice. She asked him the same gamut of questions that Justin answered. His suit introduced herself as Corti as well.

With the suit fully calibrated, the boot fit securely around his ankle, and clamped it in place. The constant pressure felt like his ankle was constantly being crushed. The suit wasn't going to make moving any easier. In fact, so far he was feeling worse.

Justin left the closets and headed toward the door on the opposite side from where they had entered, "Ok. Ready to go?"

"As ready as I'll ever be," Mark grumbled as he took a step. A red light flashed on the bottom left portion of his visor. "Corti, what's that light?"

"I've detected that your left leg is not functioning at peak capacity. Would you like me to initiate the medical sequence?" she suggested.

"Of course! Don't wait for me to ask. Any time I'm injured, do whatever you can," Mark eagerly explained.

"Very well, Mark," she complied.

Mark felt a tiny needle prick in two places on his leg, near the ankle. Immediately, the pain washed away. He could feel the anesthetic flowing through his blood, doing its work as it traveled. The ankle joint in the suit stiffened, effectively turning it into a cast.

"Justin! This thing is amazing! It detected I was injured, and gave me some morphine or something. I feel great!" Mark almost effortlessly walked right up to Justin who was across the room, staring at the screen on the wall.

"You think that's cool?" Justin retorted. "Look at the screen and tell me what you notice."

Mark looked at the wall screen that looked similar to the last one he had seen, only there were two differences. This screen menu only had six buttons, but they were all in english. The buttons read, "Open. Lock. Map. Help, Call Int. Call Ext."

Mark walked back to the screen card sitting on the table. It was still flashing red, but the character on its screen read, "Locked."

"I don't believe it! These things actually translate text into english in real time as we look at them!" he exclaimed. "Corti, do you always actively translate words?"

She answered, "Of course. That is a standard feature."

Justin examined the map on the screen, "Ok, according to this, we're on the first level of something called the 'ECF.' The exit is on the floor above us. It doesn't look that close. We have to go through like four more rooms until we get to an elevator. Once we are on the second floor, we'll be near a bunch of larger rooms. I think they are the rooms with all the antlions. If we go past those rooms

and near some control rooms I think there's an exit."

"Dang. That's a lot of space to cover. I'm sure we'll run into people. Do you think they'll know who we are? Especially if I walk like a gimp?" Even with these new suits, escape seemed impossible to Mark.

"We'll have to hope they won't. Either way, let's go. We've been here way too long." Justin opened the door and left.

The next room didn't feel like much more than a glorified closet. It was a bare room with a door on each side. The wall screen had a "purge" command among some of the other more expected options. They opened the door and entered a larger room.

"Uh, did you read that map right?" Mark said as the door closed behind him and Justin in the large room. Everywhere he looked he saw tons of antlions - the small ones, many of the horse-sized ones, and even a few giant ones. All of them were shrieking in a frenzy when Justin and Mark entered the room, but none would even come close to them. Rather, they went the opposite direction. They were avoiding Mark and Justin.

"Ya, this is the right way to go. It's the only way to go," Justin reasoned as he advanced further into the room. "Maybe these suits scare the things. It's gotta be safe to walk through here. How else do you think those other guys got to that back room?"

Like magnets with the same polarity, the antlions naturally drew away as Justin and Mark approached. They never stopped screaming, though, bone-chilling screams. The insects were obviously upset by their presence, but for some reason, they weren't doing anything about it. *What do those creeps do to keep these creatures in line like this?*

About mid way into the room the pitch of the screeching suddenly dropped to a lower howl. Mark and Justin dropped to the ground and froze. With the change in mood, the crowd of antlions still came nowhere near them, but there was a mass exodus from one side of the room. Every single one of the little ones ran from one side of the room to the other while managing to completely avoid Mark and Justin. The two of them stood in the middle of the room like two rocks in a stream, forcing the current to gush around them.

They both looked to their left, in the direction all the antlions were running from. Near the back wall it looked like the whole wall was moving. Then they saw it. There had been a cage resting in that part of the room and it had begun to move, trapping antlions that had been in it.

"This must be how they get all these things into those rainforest rooms. They farm them all in here and just trap them for transport. I was kinda hoping it would have been something more high tech than that." Justin whispered to Mark.

Mark pointed out, "Ya, but think about how screwed we would have been if our cage had been taken right back in here?"

"I'd rather not." Justin replied dryly.

By the time most of the antlions had ended up on their right, the cage had been moved out of the room. The wall behind it looked just the same as the exterior of the cage. Neither one of them saw anybody else in room. Fairly

confident that they hadn't been seen, they got back up and continued walking.

They crossed through the room with much less effort than Mark had thought it'd take, and came into another small room. It seemed identical to the previous closet-room. As he saw the "Purge" button on the screen by the door, it all came together. These must have been a type of decontamination room. If for some reason an antlion followed somebody in the room, this is where they would exterminate it so they could safely go on. So it was something about the suits they were wearing that had caused the bugs to be afraid of them.

"This should be the last room before we find the elevator. So we're making progress." Justin informed, opening the door.

"Good. I hope that was the last time I'll have to see those bugs." Mark followed him through the door.

## 11: Faster Than Light Units

Fortunately, Mark and Justin were alone in this new room, which by the look of it, was not all that common an occurrence. A rough estimate totaled about fifteen chairs in the room. Along one whole wall was a long row of closets that looked like they could have contained another suit like their own. The wall that all the chairs were facing appeared to be one giant, inactive screen. Near one end of it was a podium that faced toward the chairs.

"This must be where they all talk about who they're gonna murder next, or who get to clean up alien poop," Justin observed.

"Hey, check out the lockers over there!" Mark approached one and pointed to a word on the center of it. Each locker had a word. "I think these are the names of all the people who work here and this is their stuff."

He tried opening the locker and it wasn't locked. Inside there some personal objects like little trinkets and a screen card that was affixed to the back wall, playing a loop of a young family. There was no suit in the locker, but it was easily big enough to fit one. Maybe this guy was out working somewhere?

He tried the next locker over, and it, too opened. There was a suit inside this locker. "So if each worker has a locker and if each locker holds a suit like ours, do you think that every suit is matched to an individual person?" Mark postulated.

Justin continued the thought, "That would mean that they'd be able to tell who's suits we're wearing. And probably that we aren't those same guys."

"Corti, do our suits have location tracking services? And is there any way you can talk so Justin can hear too?" Mark asked.

"Of course. I will push my coding over to Corti. Justin will hear everything I say unless he chooses to block it out. The Tielsuit's coordinates are wirelessly streamed back to the central database in real time. Coordinates are stored for one year." Corti explained.

"Can I stop my suit from broadcasting its coordinates?" he continued.

"Certainly. Would you like me to cease location broadcasting?"

"Yeah. And if Justin can hear my conversation with you, can other people hear it too?"

"Certainly. A simple search of the identification number of this Tielsuit will yield a spreadsheet of all usage statistics and data."

"So anybody can see or hear the conversation we are having right now?" Mark anxiously deduced.

"Yes, if they were to search for it," Corti responded.

Curious, Mark asked, "Can this searchable information be blocked, and is there any other way we can be identified in these suits?"

Corti elaborated, "Of course. Simply request to quit submission of usage statistics and statistics from that point on will not be searchable until the submission is resumed. There are multiple methods of identification. Every Tielsuit has an identification number. This number is linked to the operator. Anybody who sees this Tielsuit will link it to its registered operator. At any given

time this identification number can be referenced, and the name of the registered operator will appear. Also, other Tielsuit operators can use a function on their visor to superimpose identification numbers or registered user names by people in Tielsuits in their field of view."

"So Corti, if somebody saw me in this suit what would they see?" Mark wondered.

Corti answered, " They could see that the registered user is named Mark, has a fractured left ankle at a current osteography level of 73%, has been operating the Tielsuit for 7 minutes, and has a heart rate of 143 bpm. That is the preliminary information. They could see more upon request."

"Osteography?" Mark repeated.

Corti explained, "Bone reconstruction. The current level in your ankle is now 74%."

"Wait! So you are actually healing my bone?" Mark was incredulous.

"Of course. That's what you asked me to do. At this rate, your ankle will be at full capacity in four minutes." Corti answered.

Mark was dumbfounded while Justin realized something else.

"Wow," Justin exclaimed. "So right now everything we say, whoever we go, and whatever the condition of our health is, anybody else can see it and see our name? We have to stop this! Can we block all data transmission to users other than us?"

Corti answered, "Yes. I will do that for both of you. As of now, you two are the only ones who have access to current usage statistics until you request otherwise, but take note that when others search for data on these suit numbers they will receive a message that statistical submission has been suspended."

Justin said to Mark, "Then they already must know we are here and that we have these suits. It's only a matter of time before somebody comes down here."

Mark wasn't quite as discouraged. "Corti, can you show us where the closest active Tielsuits, as you call them, are?"

Corti complied. "Certainly. There are three Tielsuits, registered to Zona, Nita, and Zuel, approaching the elevator on the second floor. They are 56 feet away."

Mark pressed further. " Can you notify us when they are right outside the door to this room? And do these suits have any vulnerable points or design flaws?"

"The manual release lever has been widely considered to be a design flaw, although its purpose is invaluable. Though highly unlikely, in the event of a software failure, designers have included a way to remove the Tielsuit manually so the operator will not be trapped. However, this feature is believed to be a detriment to the defensive capabilities of the Tielsuit because an enemy can capitalize upon it. The release lever is situated at the base of the helmet. As the lever is pulled out, the helmet will eject, allowing the user to breathe. With the helmet off the Tielsuit, the back splits open and the user can get out of the suit from that point."

Justin saw what Mark was getting at in this line of questioning. "We might be able to pull this off, even with your gimp leg. If we wait here next to the door when these guys come in, we can at least take out two of them, if not all three.

They won't know where we are any more. They won't even be sure that we're still in this room. We'll wait long enough for them to come fully into the room and go for the manual release lever on the back of their suits. They'll be so disoriented with their suits opening up that we can either run past them or totally own them."

"Well, I hadn't totally thought that far ahead, but that works. I was just seeing if there was any chance to stand up against these guys even though we'll be outnumbered. But what if they try to go for our manual release levers?" Mark reflected.

In reply, Justin said, "We'll just have to hope they don't! Let's get in position, to the side of this door. They oughta be here any second."

Mark was amazed at how good his ankle felt as they ran past all the chairs in the middle of the room and scrambled toward to the door on the opposite side. That osteography really was totally healing his bone! Near the door they dropped to a crouch, flanking it on each side, and not a moment too soon.

The door slid open.

They didn't hear or see anything at first. Then they saw an outstretched Tielsuit hand, clutching some type of gun.

*Justin didn't mention anything about guns in his plan!*

Panning back and forth, the arm was followed by a full body. As the armed guard fully entered the room, two more weapon-wielding arms came through the door. So far, none of the guards had thought to extend their scan completely to either side of the room.

*They must be checking among all those chairs. Whoa! There's the release lever!*

Since the first guard was completely inside the room, his back was visible, as was the manual release lever. Mark glanced at Justin. He shook his head "No." After another second that felt like eons, the second and third guards were completely in the room as well. The triad continued to walk toward the middle of the room. Justin and Mark made eye contact.

*This is it.*

In unison, they both jumped for the release levers on the two rear guards. Both of their hands connected. Justin's hand pulled the lever so hard that it jerked the guard back as his helmet flew off. Panicked, the guard pulled the trigger on his firearm as his body convulsed backwards. The firearm didn't make any noise. It had no kick. Nothing blasted out from it. But it definitely fired.

The silent killer had instantly blown a whole the size of a dinner plate in the front guard's abdomen. It was a perfect circle in the middle of the body, no gore at all. The guard doubled over, gurgling cries of pain.

Mark's adversary fared a bit better than Justin's, but the odds weren't in his favor. Similar to Justin, Mark successfully yanked the release lever on his Tielsuit. He, too, fell back, but he turned into the pulling force. Using the momentum gained by Mark's pull, the guard swept his leg around with full force, bringing Mark's legs up in the air. However, Mark never let go of the release lever. As Mark fell to the ground, he brought the guard with him, pulling his upper body down fast. They both hit the ground hard because of the weight of their Tielsuits.

Luckily, Mark realized that his suit took most of the impact.

The guard didn't have the same luck. He hit the ground just as hard as Mark, but without his helmet, his head bore the brunt of the impact. He lay next to Mark, with a blank expression. He was dead.

*I just killed this guy.*

Justin didn't have time to contemplate the consequences of his actions. He was busy interrogating the final guard. Justin was easily able to subdue him and bring him to the ground after his helmet had come off. The guard had instantly dropped his weapon when he saw he had just killed his comrade. He turned around to confront whoever had attacked him. The moment he saw Justin, a hard, black fist crushed his face. It dropped him instantly.

"Who are you people?" Justin demanded.

The guard was barely able to respond with more than a murmur, "Eee."

"What the hell does that mean?" Justin pressed.

"See."

"See? Answer me you stupid shit." Justin grabbed his head by the hair and got ready to throw another punch.

"Eh...Ehhh. Ef." His body went limp.

Justin dropped his body. "What a waste. Come on Mark. Let's grab some of these weapons and get out of here before anybody else comes."

*I'm a killer, now too. No different than them.* Still on the ground, Mark surveyed the carnage in the room - two men with heads that were destroyed and one with a gaping hole in his stomach.

He slowly rose to his feet and walked to the remains of the front guard. The guard lay on the ground, face down, hands poking through the empty hole in his stomach. All his guts were gone. There was a fine, grey dust all around the wound and on the ground, but other than that, nothing at all.

Justin walked up next to Mark to examine the body. "Holy crap! That gun was powerful! Let's grab it. And see if you can find the one your guy had, too."

"Just a minute." Mark was feeling sick.

*What could possibly just blow a hole in a guy like that? And where did his insides go? There was no mess at all?*

"Fine, wus. Just sit there a minute, and I'll get your gun too. But we gotta get out of here before more of these goons come. Corti, are any more Tielsuits coming our way?"

"Not at the moment," she replied.

Justin picked up the second firearm. "Great. Ok, Mark, here's your gun. I've got mine. Let's go. How's your leg doing?"

Mark asked Corti about his ankle. "It's at 98% and it feels just about fine. These suits rule!" Mark affirmed.

They left the devastation behind as they went out the door to the room with the elevator. It turned out to be a junction of two red corridors like the one Mark had been led through so many times.

"Dude, I don't see any elevators here." Mark observed.

"I swear. It was right here," he shot back. "Corti, how do I get this elevator to work?"

"I will call it for you. Make sure not to move. It should be here in 7 seconds."

Mark looked up and down. He didn't see anything anywhere that remotely resembled an elevator.

Before long he saw a bright flash of light the shrunk into a speck. It sat in midair, right between Justin and Mark.

"Not this thing agaaai-" and everything went white as they were pulled into the speck.

The next thing they knew, they were standing in a crimson junction, just like the one they had been in.

Mark was relieved, "That wasn't nearly as bad as the last time I went through one of those things. Corti, what was that thing? I thought we were taking an elevator?"

"That was a Faster Than Light Unit. They can be used to transport people anywhere, but that one is primarily used within this facility, to go from different floors."

"Wait, so this thing can take us anywhere? Like back to our apartment?" Mark asked, hopeful?

"No," Corti explained, "for two reasons. One, I don't have the coordinates for 'your apartment' and this particular FTLU has very limited power. It can only transport people very short distances."

"Hey Mark, we better stop talking and start moving. We've got four more guards coming down that corridor. Follow me. I think the exit I saw on the map was this way." Justin grabbed Mark's arm and started running.

They ran about ten feet down the corridor until they saw a whole mob of guards approaching way down at the other end of the room.

Justin drew his firearm and pulled the trigger. Nothing happened. He pulled the trigger again. Still nothing. A little red light flashed on the top of the barrel.

"Try your gun" Justin suggested.

The same red light flashed on his Mark's gun too.

"Damn. We'll have to find another way out." Justin turned around and Mark followed suit. They were back at the junction, cut off from the only way out.

"You got any ideas?" Justin asked?

"Corti, can this FTLU take us anywhere outside this facility?"

"Yes. There are 4 locations that would fit your criteria." She said,

"Then take us to one now!"

"Which one?"

"I don't care. Any one. The farthest one from here."

The guards started to sprint toward them as they realized what was about to happen.

"Certainly. It will take approximately 3.8 seconds while I power up the unit."

"That might not be fast enough." Mark said.

"It will have to be!" Justin countered.

They both crouched low to the ground, hoping that would make them harder to hit in case the guards started to fire. But for some reason none of them had their weapons drawn. As the guards were closing in, a bright flash washed them all out. The flash shrunk to a dot in the center of the room, and everything

seemed to freeze as Justin and Mark were sucked into the tiny, bright dot.

## 12: The Tip of the Iceberg

After spending days trapped inside dark, dank quarters or white, sterile rooms, the slivers of blue sky were overwhelming. Mark found himself still squatting right next to Justin, on a large roof top. He couldn't believe his eyes.

"Dude! We actually made it out of that hell hole alive!"

Justin agreed. "I know! I totally thought we were screwed there at the end. And look where we are now! Where are we?"

"I don't know, but I don't care!" Mark exclaimed.

They both sat down and burst out laughing at the absurdity of the whole thing. Just seconds ago they were cornered by countless guards, certain they wouldn't survive the encounter. Now here they were, surrounded by tall buildings, looking up at the clear blue sky. In fact, it was a deeper blue than they had ever seen, and the buildings looked taller than any they had ever seen before.

They eventually stopped laughing and began to take in their surroundings. Mark asked, "Dude. Where do you think we actually are?"

"I dunno." Justin said while he scanned the skyline. "I've never seen anywhere like this."

There was a soft, steady sound of wind in the background, like they were a few miles away from a highway with moderate traffic. There were so many buildings, that Mark couldn't see the horizon anywhere. No matter where he looked he saw more buildings. Some went hundreds of feet higher than where they were. He stood up and walked near the edge of the roof, hoping to get a better view. There was a railing at the edge. He leaned over it to look down and instantly staggered back from the rail.

"What is it?" Justin said.

"Go see for yourself!" Mark's head was swimming.

Justin cautiously walked to the railing and peered over the edge. Just a few inches of metal were the only thing separating him from a drop that was so long it might as well have been bottomless. Whatever building they were on must have been miles high. Beneath them were hundreds of other buildings, lit up by bright neon lights and the traffic patterns of numerous aircraft. He looked up and saw how much higher many of the buildings went and then looked side to side again, seeing buildings surrounding him.

"This place must be huge! Think of all the people in these buildings and those airplanes. Airplanes! In a city!" he blurted out.

"Millions," Mark guessed, "like Tokyo times ten. Maybe even a hundred if you really think about it. Dude, where are we?"

"I have no idea, man." Jacob shrugged.

"Maybe our suits know." Mark suggested. "Corti, where are we? Where did you take us to?"

Corti answered, "You are near the main entrance to the Imperial Plaza."

"Imperial Plaza for whom?" Mark asked.

"Why, the Empire of Tiellandra, of course."

"Where is Tiellandra?" Corti's answers only made Mark more confused.

"It is the northernmost continent of Zearyth."

"You mean we aren't on Earth?" Justin interrupted.

In a matter of fact way, Corti simply said, "No."

That one-word answer had a drastic and immediate effect on both Mark and Justin. They suddenly felt alone and helpless. Whatever sense of hope or joy they had from escaping their prison had vanished like a vapor. Everything around them seemed bigger, more foreboding. This was a completely foreign world. They were two B-average college students from suburban America in a foreign city that was bigger than anything they had ever imagined, in a foreign continent with a foreign culture, on a foreign planet.

Mark and Justin were terrified.

Justin was the first one to speak, "We need to leave. Who knows how long it will take for those freaks to find out where we went? But I don't want to be here long enough to find out."

"Ok, but where do you suggest we go? I wouldn't even know where to begin looking for a way out of this place. And what would we do once we leave?" Mark was skeptical.

"All good points. I don't know where we'll go, but I *do* know that staying here won't end well. My guess is that we need to find a way to go down. These buildings have to have a base somewhere. Maybe then we can find a way out of this place." Justin didn't look confident as he explained his plan, but at least it was a plan. It was more than Mark could claim.

They stood up, ready to make their decent into the unknown. As they searched for a way off the rooftop platform, they found no doors leading down into the building. However, they noticed that the platform was adjacent to another building that rose even higher. The more they studied it, they realized that maybe they weren't even on a rooftop, but were on a platform that was connected to many buildings. The platform continued around the corner and out of sight past the building wall. They approached the corner and peaked around it.

It was amazing that they hadn't been able to hear what they were looking at. Peeking their heads around the corner, they saw a bustling city square. The platform on which they were standing continued a ways until it flanged out into an open area the size of the Washington Mall. Little people were walking everywhere. Some were taller than others, but they all generally looked smaller than normal humans. There were some family units, some in the black Tielsuits, and others who walked with a sense of purpose.

About half way down the plaza was a giant statue. It looked like a stainless steel version of the Statue of Liberty, only it was of a man standing proud in a type of jumper or unitard.

"Dude, look! You can see his giant bulge! It must be like 50 feet long!" Justin pointed out.

"I wonder if there was any artistic embellishment." Mark gaffed.

"I don't get it. How do they all act like they're on the ground when we're so high up? It's like this place has layer upon layer." Justin was baffled.

Mark replied, "Beats me. It's amazing that things don't cave in on themselves. But seriously, how are we going to make it through all of this without getting caught?"

"As long as we don't do anything obviously stupid, we should probably be ok. We look like the rest of them." Justin tried to assuage his doubts.

"Yeah, but what if people talk to us? What language do they speak? How will we be able to answer?" Mark was getting overwhelmed.

"I think they will understand us, right Corti?" Justin asked.

"Of course, Justin. Everybody has a unicom so they will understand words spoken in any language. The unicom law was implemented at the formation of Tielmetra," Corti explained.

"Wait, seriously? So everybody can understand each other even if they speak different languages? How does that work? How do children learn languages?" Mark doubted.

Corti responded, "In the home, children learn to speak from families without using a unicom, but it is against the law to leave the house without one."

"That's handy, I suppose. So you're saying that we can say whatever we want through these suits and anybody outdoors will be able to understand us in their own language?"

Corti reassured, "Of course, Mark."

"Ok. So they won't catch us by our speech, but won't those other guards see that we aren't broadcasting our position and report us? Mark still wasn't convinced.

"There is a chance that others will notice that you aren't broadcasting location and usage statistics, but you won't necessarily be the only ones to do so. People will often cease broadcasting vital information when they are off duty, traveling to their domiciles." Corti elaborated.

"I guess that makes sense. Corti, do you have any map data that can help us find our way out of here?" Mark questioned.

"I do not have that kind of Tielmetra map data. I can tell you the coordinates of specific locations or buildings, but I cannot give you directions out of Tielmetra because there is no official way to walk out of the city. However, you would be able to find the information you need at the Imperial Hall of Records. There you would be able to find infrastructure maps and discern if there is a way to get into the pit or out of the Tielmetra completely. The Imperial Hall of Records is located in the Imperial Plaza, near the Statue of Tiel Emperor Zoan."

"The pit?" repeated Justin.

Corti responded, "Lower Tielmetra, colloquially referred to as 'the pit,' is the lower third of Tielmetra where the support citizens live and work. There is no known official way to enter it from Upper Tielmetra."

Feeling properly convinced that this was their best course of action, Mark and Justin left the cover of the corner, and walked toward the edge of the Imperial Plaza, approaching a sea of foreign people who might or might not be hostile. The commotion around them made Times Square on New Year's feel tame. People were walking and talking into thin air while flying vehicles zoomed in all directions. It was total pandemonium.

There was one thing they didn't hear in the midst of the commotion: after a bright, screeching flash, two guards in black suits appeared on the same platform where Justin and Mark had just been.

### 13: Long Way Down

"Sir, they've escaped."

*-From the office of the Secadoma*

For a brief moment Mark felt like he could have been walking by his own nation's capital. The long, grassy expanse littered with people from all backgrounds, and monuments commemorating past experiences might as well have been in Washington DC. But the hovering taxi that was landing nearby reminded him that the statue he was approaching was of an unknown king.

As they ventured further into the plaza, they felt like they were in the bottom of the Grand Canyon, looking up. They were surrounded by mountainous buildings on all directions. Only directly above the plaza was open sky. In the time it had taken them to walk toward the middle of the grass, some nacreous clouds had lazily slipped into view. Their silky iridescence made the sky look like molten lava flowing across the sky. It was like nothing Mark nor Jacob had ever seen.

It was an eerie scene; between the unfamiliar clouds above, the buildings soaring to unbelievable heights, the oddly familiar layout of the plaza, hundreds of flying vehicles, and the oversized statue of an unfamiliar king. And yet, nobody seemed taken aback by their surroundings. Though a bit small or gaunt, most people had reasonable hair styles or plain-colored jumpsuits, and looked to be going about business as usual.

Mark tried to hear what people were talking about, but they were only able to glean bits and pieces of conversation because there were so many people walking everywhere. He didn't dare approach any of them for fear of drawing unwanted attention. One young lady said to a friend that Tielseca was uncivilized. A child asked their father if they would be able to go inside the Zoan today. One man walking by himself discussed his plans for a romantic encounter. Was he talking into some kind of invisible phone? Nobody was mentioning anything too extraordinary, but it was jarring to hear English speech and watch mouths formulate non-English words, like playing a bad video game.

Finally in the middle of the plaza, they stood before the gargantuan statue. A thin man stood proud, chin up, staring off into some undetermined future. The metallic surface reflected the fiery colors of the sky, giving the statue an appearance of gold. At the base of the statue was a three-line inscription that read, "TIEL EMPEROR ZOAN. FATHER OF TIELMETRA. SAVIOR OF TIELLANDRA. 8746-8904." Each letter was the height of a telephone pole.

"Dude! He was like 150 when he died!" Justin observed.

"Yeah. I guess you're right." Mark conceded, "But who knows what those numbers mean? Obviously their years aren't the same as ours. I mean, heck, do they even use years?"

"Either way, we're getting close that Hall of Records place. It should be just beyond this statue of Emperor Giant Dong... or Zoan... Or whatever his name is... Let's keep going. I don't like being out in the open like this."

It took longer than they had estimated to make their way past the statue. It must have easily been over 1700 feet tall and 1500 feet wide at its base. Eventually they rounded the corner of the statue's base and discovered the Imperial Hall of Records to their right. The building was one of the larger buildings of the Imperial Plaza. Rather plain, it looked like a giant metal cube, probably the height, width, and depth of five football fields. Its surfaces were all smooth. There were no outcroppings for windows, porches, or doors, yet they could see the white glow of interior lights shining through the metallic surface peppered around its sides. At the entrance stood four guards in Tielsuits.

"Will those guards let us inside?" Mark asked Corti.

"Of course. All citizens of Upper Tielmetra are free to enter all Imperial buildings, but the Tieldoma, the Secadoma, the Extraterrestrial Containment Facility, the Zanbarian Guard house, the assignment chambers, and the prison. The guards are only present to make sure foreigners or citizens from Lower Tiellandra do not enter. Your Tielsuit grants you immediate access to all Upper Tiellandran areas other than what I just mentioned."

"Wow. Ok. Well, let's see what we can find once we get inside. Corti what will we be looking for inside this Hall of Records that will help us find a way out of this place?"

"Connect to a data port and look for structural maps of Upper Tielmetra and Lower Tielmetra." Corti explained.

The two of them had arrived at the front entrance to the building. The guards gave them a cursory nod, and motioned for them to enter.

*Enter what?*

There weren't any doors in the wall, but as they walked closer, the wall slid open to reveal the atrium inside. They both entered.

In the main entryway they stood in a cavernous room. In actuality, they were looking at the whole building. There was a ground level with numerous metal cubicles in a grid. They could see all the way to the top of the building. Along the perimeter there were maybe fifty levels that went up the height of the building. Each level was open, though, almost like a porch that ran along the whole inner perimeter of the building. On each floor was even more cubicles. Suspended in the middle of the building was a giant three dimensional hologram of Emperor Zoan's face, slowly rotating. Cubicles that were in use had all four walls enclosed. Near the far corner of the grid on the ground level, they saw a grossly overweight man walk out of a cubicle.

"I'm surprised he could even fit inside one of those things," Justin murmured, "Looks like that's our ticket."

Squished inside the cubicle, it's fourth wall automatically closed behind them. All that was inside was a chair.

"What do we do now?" Justin asked.

"I dunno. Try sitting down in the chair." Mark suggested.

As Justin sat in the chair, the wall in front of him transformed into an interactive screen. The home screen looked like a blank internet browser.

"Corti, how do I use this thing?"

"There are multiple methods to access information. You can manually input

search queries by using your hand to write on the wall or you can speak commands to the database and it will search for what you request."

Mark asked, "Does this thing log what each person searches for and who searches for it?"

"Of course," Corti replied, "All searches are logged into the Imperial Database of Tiellandra."

Mark investigated further, "Are there any particular search topics that will send an alert to the authorities?"

"Not to my knowledge." Corti answered.

That answer did not ease Mark's anxiety. "Ok, well, let's be quick with this. Once we find what we need, let's get out and keep moving."

"What should I look up?" Justin asked.

"Let's start with the basics. Try searching for a map of the city," Mark conjectured.

"I would like to see a map of Tielmetra," Justin spoke to the wall.

The screen showed three options and replied to Justin's request, "Would you like to view a map of Upper Tielmetra, Lower Tielmetra, or the entire city?"

"Let's try the entire city." Justin prompted.

The wall displayed a side view of a giant cylinder that grew wider at the base. It almost looked like a giant cone with a cylinder placed at the top of it. The image started to rotate and eventually moved up, giving a bird's eye view. From the various vantage points, it became clear that the city had a perimeter wall like a giant hollow coffee mug that flanged outward at the base, with hundreds of interconnected buildings climbing to various heights in the middle. Over the top of the whole city was a type of clear enclosure so that all of Tielmetra was one cohesive unit.

"Is there a way to see a scale on this image?" Mark asked.

Instantly a line with tick marks appeared on the bottom corner. Each notch indicated a unit of length called a Zic. Mark estimated the height of Tielmetra to be something like 70 or 80 zics.

"Corti, can you convert zics to miles for us?" Mark asked.

"Certainly. 1 mile is approximately 6.2 zics."

"No shit!" Justin blurted out. "That means Tielmetra is like is over 10 miles high!"

"12.097 miles, to be exact," Corti corrected.

Mark told Justin to ask the database where the hall of records was on the map. A flashing dot appeared in roughly the middle of the cylinder, almost 85% of the way to the top.

"That's a long way down to the bottom if we want to leave this place." Mark was getting more discouraged by the second. "How are we going to find our way through all this?"

Justin kept the search going. "Show me the base of Upper Tielmetra."

The image enlarged so that they were looking at the part of Tielmetra where the conical shape met the cylinder. It was a profile view again.

"Take me in past the outer wall of the city." Justin asked.

The wall became transparent. Through it they could see a solid line dividing

presumably Upper and Lower Tielmetra. There were no gaps in it.

"Is there a way to get to Lower Tielmetra from Upper Tielmetra?" Justin asked. The screen spoke a response, "No."

"Why not?"

"They are divided by the Upper Tielmetra foundation."

"Why is there a separation between the two regions?"

"They have always been divided."

Justin was starting to get a little frustrated by the database's simple answers. "Why does Lower Tielmetra exist?"

"It has always existed since Tielmetra was created."

"Ugh! Stupid piece of trash." Justin swore.

Mark suggested not asking it "why" questions. "Try asking qualitative questions like what is different between Upper and Lower Tielmetra. Stuff like that."

Justin followed Mark's advice.

The database replied, "Upper Tielmetra houses the elite classes of Tielmetra. All of the governmental and principle commercial districts are in Upper Tielmetra."

"What do most of the people do for work in Lower Tielmetra?" Justin asked.

"The two largest career categories are energy and sanitation. 24% of the population works in energy production. 18% are registered as working in the sanitation department."

"How about for Upper Tielmetra? What are the two largest job categories?"

The databased answered, "49% work in general commerce positions while 25% have civic responsibilities."

Mark inquired if anybody in Upper Tielmetra worked in energy production or sanitation.

"No," the database said.

"So they have everybody in the Pit do all the dirty work for everybody up top," Mark realized. "So there must be a way they are connected. When you dump trash in Upper Tielmetra, it somehow has to make its way down into Lower Tielmetra, right? How is Tielmetra powered?" Mark asked the computer.

"Through the program called Internal Tielmetran Energy Resource. ITER uses a series of four tokamaks to create fusion energy." Four rings spanning the circumference of the entire city were highlighted in the image of Tielmetra on the screen.

Mark put the pieces together. "So the whole barrier is a giant fusion reactor! That's why nobody gets through it! It's constantly filled with hot gases. Do any of the reactors ever go offline?"

"Yes. The four tokamaks are timed so that only three are going at a given time. This allows for them to cool down and for parts of the magnetic insulation to be periodically replaced."

"Is the schedule predictable and open to anybody who wants to know?" Mark continued, sprouting the beginning of a plan in his mind.

"Every 3 hours a different tokamak shuts down. The temperatures get so hot that they cannot stay active for more than 10 hours. So in a 12-hour cycle each

tokamak is on for 9 and off for 3. Out of that 3 hour time, the inside is only at a safe temperature for 85 minutes. Once shut down, the metal cools naturally for 33 minutes, and then heat exhaust vents open, allowing outside air to cool the metal faster. The natural cooling period is needed so that the metal insulators don't warp and crack due to the extreme temperature difference from the outside air. The exhaust vents remain open until 10 minutes before the hydrogen gets heated again. The top tokamak cools first. It is followed by the tokamak beneath it."

"Is there any way to access the top tokamak from Upper Tielmetra?" Justin asked.

"No."

"Does anything or anybody leave Upper Tielmetra at all?" Mark ventured.

"Yes. People can leave Upper Tielmetra through aircraft in the airport."

"That's it? There's no other way that anybody or anything leaves Upper Tielmetra?" Mark pressed.

"Sewage is periodically dumped out of exhaust pipes into the air."

"Show us the lowest place where it's dumped on the map of the city."

The screen zoomed in to a point right above the border between Upper and Lower Tielmetra. It showed a large pipe in the outer wall that emptied into the open air. It didn't look too far above the topmost tokamak.

Thinking aloud, Mark asked the database, "How big is that pipe? And how high is it above the highest tokamak exhaust vent?"

"The sewage pipe is .01 zics in diameter and it is located .05 zics above the highest tokamak exhaust port."

Corti converted the distances, "8.5 feet and 42.5 feet."

"Damn. Over 40 feet is too high to jump." Mark noted.

Justin disagreed, "Maybe for us normally, but think about these suits. They would probably absorb the shock."

"You could be right," Mark agreed. "There's gotta be a way to access those sewage pipes from Upper Tielmetra. I mean, what would they do if one got clogged?"

"You've got a point about -" Justin was interrupted by a rapping on the door behind them in the cubicle.

They froze, their heart rate skyrocketing. Mark told the database to clear its screen. Another knock came at the door.

"What do we do?" whispered Mark?

"Hell if I know!" Justin shot back.

"We're coming in." The door slid open, revealing two guards in Tielsuits.

## 14: Anatomy of a Metropolis

Mark and Justin stared at the two guards, unsure of how to respond.

"Your time is up," one guard stated.

"What are you going to do about it?" Justin asked, preparing for a fight.

"You need to leave. The Imperial Hall of Records is at full capacity and you've used your allotted time for the day. Unless you have special clearance you must leave now," the guard outlined.

*That's it? Oh Thank God!*

"Certainly. We apologize for the inconvenience. Time got away from us. It won't happen again." Mark tried to be as deferential as possible.

"That is alright," the second guard said. Just gather your things and please exit."

Outside the Imperial Hall of Records, they surveyed the plaza. It had gotten darker since they last saw it. There was very little light coming from the sky above them. The plaza took on a white hue as the artificial lights became the main source of light. Though evening was near, there was still a large amount of activity everywhere they looked.

"That was a close call back in there," Justin commented.

Mark agreed, "Too close if you ask me. So what now? I could have spent hours in that place. There's still so much we don't know."

"Yeah, but it sounds like there might be a way to get out of here through Lower Tielmetra, but the chances of survival seem less than trying to sneak on a plane and fly out of here."

"Yeah. I know. It seems like suicide. Going in through a functioning fusion reactor?"

"But then again, what other choice do we have? We obviously just can't hang out here forever. Besides, I'm getting really hungry. I could even go for some of those nasty cubes we had back in our cells. They've got to have public facilities like restrooms and water fountains."

Mark wasn't so sure. "Do they, though? I mean, we still don't know crap about this place. For all we know, everybody might be able to get back to their house within minutes so they don't need public places. If we don't find a way to survive in this city, we won't last long."

"You're right about that." Justin said. "Let's figure out how to get out of this plaza. Maybe as we make our way down to the base of Upper Tielmetra we'll find more answers. Besides, I can't think of anything else to do."

They walked down the steps from the entryway of the Imperial Hall of Records back toward the middle of the Plaza. Zoan's statue was illuminated by pulsating lights that faded between various colors. It was an impressive effect in the twilight. Facing the opposite direction from earlier, they noticed that across from the statue was a large open-air structure. Though there were people all around them, this area looked to be extra congested. They made their way across the grassy plaza toward the crowd.

"Corti, what am I looking at?" Mark asked.

"Straight ahead of you is the Imperial Plaza routing station for the TMT, the Tielmetra Mass Transit. This routing station is the largest in the city, so it's also the largest in the Empire."

"Who can ride in it?"

"Anybody who wants to. It's the Tielmetra Mass Transit."

"How much does it cost?"

"It doesn't 'cost' anything to ride it."

"So Corti, you're saying that we can just ride it anywhere for free?"

"Certainly."

"Where does it go?"

"This is one of the four major routing stations within Upper Tielmetra. The Imperial Plaza, Domicile Square, the Commercial Loop, and Industry Park. Each major routing station connects to multiple smaller stations within that particular sector. The TMT runs a continual circle through all four major routing stations."

Justin made up his mind, "That sounds like our ticket out of here. Let's go for it."

Currently at the end of the lawn, they let the natural flow of the growing crowd to push them under the large overhang of the routing station. Under the metal enclosure, they were bombarded with sights and sounds. The curved ceiling displayed a myriad of video advertisements and they could hear the corresponding audio as they walked directly beneath that portion of video. The crowd reminded Mark of going to a rock concert. He was surrounded by random bodies. Only those who were traveling in groups said much. Most people walked silently. The noise of the advertisement barrage made conversation difficult.

*This is madness. I don't even know what I'm walking into.*

Even though he was almost a head taller than everybody else who wasn't in a Tielsuit, he still found it difficult to see very far ahead. The awning was a good quarter mile long. There was no way to really see what waited for him at the end of it, but everybody around him continued walking forward without any sense of anxiety. So Mark just continued with the flow, watching some of the advertisements.

There was the same general diversity of ads Mark would have expected to see during a prime time TV show. The ads were mostly for modern conveniences, food, and entertainment. One advertised a restaurant where you could eat while flying through the air, another described a new Unicom that emitted pheromones guaranteed to attract a mate. The next one discussed the manifold features of their new screencard. Even though they were of products he had never seen before, they very quickly started to blend together. Most were pretty bland, but some most definitely caught his eye. Just as casual as the ads for various restaurants, these ads had fully pornographic scenes. Sex shops were being advertised right next to clothing stores in a totally public place where families were present, and nobody batted an eye. In fact, most people hardly even noticed the advertisements at all.

The crowd continued through the routing station, passing dozens of advertisements, gradually getting closer to the boarding platform. They were

funneled into a smaller line to accommodate the traffic of those who were just arriving at the routing station. The ceiling of advertisements never tapered away. Before long, Mark could see a wall up ahead with windows and doors that met the ceiling. People were entering through the doors and finding places to sit. He was looking at the TMT vehicle. After an indeterminate amount of time, a red light flashed above the doors and they eventually slid closed after people cleared the area. Once closed, it was near impossible to tell that a door had ever been there. Before long the wall started to move as the vehicle quietly glided away. Mark was impressed at its length. It went on for quite a while before it was gone. In the blank space it left, Mark saw that they were somehow in midair. The station must have been an outcropping into an open space. About a quarter of a mile away more buildings shot upward, speckled with hundreds of tiny lights from windows. The vehicle that had been waiting at the station just seconds ago was hovering in mid air, perfectly stable, without effort.

In less than half a minute another TMT vehicle filled the void the previous one had left. The front of the vehicle looked like the front of a bullet train, only it wasn't riding any track. It quietly came to a stop and the doors slid open to let out its passengers. Once the tram was adequately emptied a white light flashed above the doors and the crowd started pouring into the doors again. Mark was relieved to see that people just walked into the vehicle. There weren't any security scans or guards waiting at the entrance.

Without difficulty, Mark and Justin entered the TMT tram. The vehicle extended outward in both directions for a significant stretch of length. Walking down the center aisle toward the back of the vehicle, they noticed that it was wider than they had expected. This train could have easily held over a thousand passengers.

"I call a window seat." Justin said, pointing to an empty bench about twenty feet away.

"If we sit over there, we can be across from each other and we'll both have one. I want to look out, too. I'm cool going backwards." Mark offered.

Settled in their seats, they looked out the window, ready for their free tour to begin. Mark still couldn't get over the idea that they were simply hovering in midair. He craned his neck as much as possible in the TMT to see what was directly beneath them. The chasm was monstrous.

"We must be a good tern or fifteen *thousand* feet above the nearest ground!" Justin marveled.

Mark added, "If that's even the ground... This place is huge." He turned his head in the opposite direction, trying to discover how high up he could see.

The buildings that were across the chasm from them continued upward for at least a few thousand more feet. Some went further than others. There were a couple that looked like they went right into some type of ceiling. Still others appeared to be separate but then were connected at multiple places by types of bridges. Actually, the more he looked, almost all of the buildings looked to connect at one place or another.

Through all of the open areas Mark could see countless traffic patterns of flying vehicles. The farther lines of traffic looked like straight lines of glowing

ants, while the closer lanes allowed him to make out specific features of individual aircraft. It was strange to not only see lines of traffic going left and right, but also up and down. He also saw a pattern that resembled a coiled spring, winding its way down into the bowels of the city. In parallel was another coil that was winding its way back up. The coil patterns grew more apparent as he saw them further down in the city, probably because there was less light. The sheer volume of vehicles put a Manhattan rush hour to shame. As the vehicles would leave the traffic patterns, many were parking on platforms that scattered all over the sides of buildings at multiple levels. The overall level of activity was astounding. Even more unbelievable was how the entire city did not feel frantic. Mark had been in large cities before and they often had a palpable sense of anxiety, like everybody was running late for some important engagement. That was not the case here.

And without any fanfare, the Tielmetra Mass Transit tram pulled away from the Imperial Plaza routing station.

~

The ride on the TMT was extremely smooth. There was no hum or vibration from an engine. It accelerated and turned at such gentle rates that it was sometimes hard to even notice the change in speed. As the TMT was fully detached from the Imperial Plaza station, it began a slow dive to the left, banking into the large opening Mark had seen from above while they were waiting to depart. Now he understood what the coil traffic pattern was. They were a part of it. It was the steady stream of TMT trams making their way down the city or back up it.

"Now that we have to time to sit, I've realized that I can't remember the last time I've peed." Justin pointed out. "I haven't seen any public bathrooms or anything. Besides, I don't even want to imagine going into a stall with these suits on. What are we going to do? I've really gotta go soon."

"I don't think we should ask anybody. People would expect us to know our way around since we are in these suits," Mark noted. He was glued to the window. The city was getting darker by the minute, probably due to the combined effect of their descent and the diminishing daylight. "I can hardly imagine how dark it must be at the bottom of this place."

"Apparently not too dark. Look down there. It looks even brighter than here if you look way down there." Justin was correct. In the lowest recesses between the buildings he could see a multicolored glow. It took on different hues in different areas and some spots almost had a strobe effect. Regardless of the specifics, everywhere beneath them was brighter than where they were.

The swirling effect that the building lights made as the TMT spiraled down was mesmerizing. Combining with the lights of other flying craft that were moving independently from the buildings, the TMT's movement gave Mark the feeling of being flushed down a giant digital toilet.

Justin's agitation was almost at the point of making a scene in the crowded room of the TMT. "Corti, what do I do if I need to go to the bathroom in this

thing?"

"If it is liquid waste then just relieve yourself." Corti replied.

"What? Are you serious?"

"Of course. There is a receptacle that funnels your waste into storage compartments within the Tielsuit. You can store up to 2 gallons of liquid waste. Just make sure not to defecate inside your Tielsuit."

"Why not?" Justin pressed.

"Trust me. It won't be in your best interest," Corti replied.

"Ok. So I'm just gonna go for it. You're ready?"

"Of course."

"Ah. Sweet relief." Justin couldn't help but tell Mark about his discovery.

"Dude, that's nasty." Mark rebuffed.

"Say what you want, but you'll have to soon enough and you'll thank me for what you know now."

"Maybe so, but I won't announce it to you when it happens."

"I dunno. You might. It's a pretty odd sensation to pee your pants and not feel anything!"

"I'll have to take your word for it." Mark turned his attention back outside the TMT. "Corti, where are we right now? What is all this stuff?"

"We have just descended out of the governmental section of Tielmetra and we are now entering into the primary living quarters of the city. This is the largest section as it houses 99.94% of Upper Tielmetra's total 50 million inhabitants, while Lower Tielmetra house 100 million people. The Routing Station for this section is still another 11 miles away. The TMT is not the most direct form of transportation from one section of the city to another, but it is the cheapest and the easiest. However, the TMT must take a spiraling trip down and up the city in order to have enough space for the descents and climbs. The TMT is not able to maneuver as effectively as other vehicles within Tielmetra. What you are seeing out the window right now is the upper section of the living quarters."

"So is it all apartments? Do people move very much?" Mark asked.

"The average adult in Tielmetra moves 5.3 times. If they have children, the children move with them."

"Why would you want to move from one building to the other? That seems like a lot of work for not much benefit. These buildings look the same everywhere. Are some nicer than others?"

"Of course. Some domiciles are significantly larger than others, but those are already occupied by people in the higher classes of Tielmetran society. Usually adult Tielmetrans move because they are switching partners. One is considered to be very lucky if they pair with a higher class partner. Not only will this yield a larger domicile, but it will also enhance reproductive status in the lottery."

"What's the lottery? Mark asked, fascinated.

"Due to the limited size of Tielmetra, the population density is at roughly 97% of full capacity. In order to maintain this number, only certain families are able to reproduce. Families must win the lottery to be eligible for one reproduction. There is a popular belief that the higher one's social status, the more likely they are to win a reproduction, but that correlation has not been

tested to prove causality."

"So how many Tielmetrans actually get to have children?"

"1 in every 4.6. However, couples don't have a choice when they can reproduce. If they are selected in the lottery, they must begin the process within 30 days or they forfeit their privilege. These numbers are all based on keeping the birth/death ratio balanced."

Mark continued his gaze out the window at the sea of buildings all filled with homes. What he would have given to know what it was like inside some of those homes.

"Do most Tielmetrans work?" Mark thought of a new line of questions to ask Corti.

"Of course. All Tielmetrans work from age 20 until death."

"Until death? That sucks. How often do they work? Do they ever get vacations?"

"Tielmetrans are required to spend 1/3 of their time at work. They can work more if they wish. Most don't."

"But no vacations?" Mark found that hard to believe.

"I do not have a Tielmetran equivalent for your word 'vacation.'"

"Wow. Ok. So if everybody works the same amount of hours, why would some people choose harder jobs than others?"

"Some jobs have a higher potential for tips. Everything is technically free in Tielmetra, but currency does exist. Everybody is expected to work and they all receive the same compensation for their work. But Tielmetrans are free to give money to whomever they please. Naturally, some jobs and industries have a higher potential to please people than others. Over time, people have created expectations about certain goods and services that they will yield tips from clients."

"Wait, so Corti, let me get this straight. You're saying I could walk right into a store and just take whatever I want?"

"Technically, yes. But that merchant would expect gratuity since they provided you with a quality product or service and if you didn't give them anything they would probably be very angry."

"Could they do anything to me for not giving any gratuity?"

"Legally, no. But they might be tempted to harm you. It's considered very rude to leave no gratuity at all."

"I still don't get why anybody would do crappy jobs, though? If they could choose anything, I would think nobody would choose those jobs that don't tip well or are a lot of work."

"Generally speaking, the more risk or effort a job requires, the higher the expectation of gratuity. Additionally, many of the tasks you are probably considering are actually only performed by the citizens of Lower Tielmetra."

Still looking out the window, Mark noticed that the swirling effect began to subside. As the TMT leveled out, he saw that they were coming down onto a large flat structure about nine square miles if he had to guess. At each corner of the square was a large, well lit, glamorous entryway. In the center of the square, where they were approaching, he saw what must have been the top of the

routing station because it looked similar to pattern of the overhang in the station at the Imperial Plaza. He also saw many smaller looking vehicles leaving the station, headed in every direction.

*Domicile Square.*

The TMT pulled into the routing station and the doors slid open. Most of the people stood up and exited the vehicle.

"Do you want to get out here?" Justin asked Mark.

"I don't really see much point," Mark responded. "Let's get out at the commercial loop and see what what we can find to eat."

"Sounds like a plan," Justin agreed.

Outside the window they could see the TMT that was going up the city as it was unloading and loading passengers. The station was significantly brighter than the one in the Imperial Plaza. The very ground underneath them was aglow. They soon discovered why.

With the TMT almost emptied out, passengers started to board. These people looked very different than those who had previously been on board. Most of the people coming from the Imperial Plaza were modestly dressed. Apart from periodic Tielsuit guards, most wore simple jumpsuits of one or maybe two colors, typically plain solids like white, black, or khaki. Their hair was neatly styled and most people carried themselves professionally. The families were a bit of an exception, but they still mostly dressed conservatively.

The passengers who were currently boarding came in all varieties. Practically none of them wore plain jumpsuits. Colored hair, piercings, body art, revealing clothing, and even lights on garments were the norm.

Justin discreetly pointed to one lady you looked to be about seventeen, "Dude, she looks like a hooker. And a really hot one."

"If she is, she probably doesn't make much. You can see just about all you need for free." Mark happily observed.

"That's cool with me."

"Yeah, but it's crazy. She looks so young. What would her parents think?"

"By the way this culture looks, they're probably proud!" Justin said.

Still other people came onto the TMT looking like they were headed to the Oscars. The sheer diversity of characters on the tram looked surreal.

"How can all these people be going to the same place?" Mark wondered.

"Maybe it's a big place with a lot going on." Justin suggested.

"I suppose we'll find out pretty quick here." The doors slid closed and the TMT began to move.

Instead of gliding out of the station, the TMT slowly descended like an elevator. Once the main floor of the station was out of view, Mark and Justin were overcome with a spectacle of lights outside their window. The same buildings that held plain apartments and homes just a little above them were now covered in flashing lights, giant screens displaying movies and text, and holograms that were being displayed in midair. Traffic was moving in a much more sporadic fashion in this district of the city. The typical chaotic movements of people and vehicles in large cities was in full effect here.

"Talk about sin city, man!" Justin motioned out the window to one part of

town that was displaying a constellation of erotic images, movies, and holograms. "That couple must be like 200 feet tall! Right there! Just floating in midair!"

Mark was amazed when he realized that there were many children in the TMT with them.

*These people certainly aren't reserved!*

Another area displayed giant images of various foods. To their dismay, none of it looked familiar or appetizing. All around them they saw displays for anything they could imagine. There were places selling clothes, food, sex, drugs, appearance modifications, home appliances, entertainment devices, and even things that Justin and Mark couldn't figure out.

While they were spiraling their way down to the routing station, Mark explained everything Corti had told him about Tielmetra's economy and how they could find food if they really needed it.

"We should definitely check this place out." Justin stated with confidence.

"Yeah. I'm pretty hungry." Mark concurred.

"Shit, dude. Screw the food. Look at everything else they have. That food looked terrible. Think of all that tech stuff down there. Think about how much money we could make if we brought just one of those things back to Earth with us!"

"And how would we do that? Whatever brought us here burned up everything we had on us, let alone every hair on our bodies. Whatever gets us back will probably do the same thing... if we even get back," said Mark, being his skeptical self.

"Bull. We'll find a way back. And it can't hurt to take some of this crap with us," Justin countered.

"Keep in mind, just because this stuff is technically free, that doesn't mean we can just take whatever we want. People will get pissed if we just start taking a whole bunch of stuff. The last thing we need to do is make a scene. You do remember that just a few hours ago we were running for our lives, right?"

"Of course, but they wouldn't expect us to do this. They probably think we don't even know what we're doing at all. They probably can't even fathom that we've already made it this far from where we started. We're like ten miles away already and this place is huge."

Mark still thought it best to be prudent, "Still, I think we should start with what's essential. If we're gonna steal stuff--"

"Take what's free, you mean..."

"Take, then. Whatever. If we're gonna take stuff, we should start with the stuff that would help us the most. That way if we can only take a few things we'll have everything we need."

"Ok. What do you purpose we get first, then?" Justin asked in mock sincerity.

"Well, it would probably be good to get some food because we don't know how often we'll be able to eat, and plus, I'm starving."

"Ok. That makes enough sense. What else?"

"Seeing all these crazy looking people has made me think that if we are ever out of our suits we'll stick out like a sore thumb. And even as we wear them,

we're not too inconspicuous. We should find some way to change how we look so that if we ever get caught, we'll at least blend in a bit more."

"Sounds good, but I want blue hair."

"Fine. That would be perfect. For now, that's all I can think of. You got any ideas?" Mark asked.

"We should check out some of the gadgets they have. We might find something useful there. We might also be able to find out why our guns didn't work when we needed them to."

"Great idea. I think our first priority should be changing the way we look. Because if we try to take our helmets off to eat a meal, and we're totally bald, we might as well wear a sign around our necks that says we shouldn't be here."

Justin agreed. "I'm also going to get a blue beard. That would be pretty sweet."

The TMT slowed its descent as it neared the routing station. This station looked like the others, but there were even more advertisements and even some eager vendors who were posted right on the exit platform.

The doors slid open and Mark and Justin got ready to leave.

## 15: A Day in the Life

Through the open doors of the Tielmetran Mass Transit, they could already hear loud music and commotion. A myriad of smells swirled through the door as they neared it. A familiar grease smell wafted through the vents in Mark's suit and reminded him of some of his favorite hole-in-the-wall joints in Eugene.

"Something smells amazingly fried," Mark commented.

"Yeah. You're right." Justin said. "It reminds me of Papa's."

"Dude! It does! Man, what I'd give for some barbecue right now! Let's hurry and find a place to change our look so we can eat soon."

Walking out of the routing station, past the first wave of eager vendors, Mark started to think about his home again. Justin's comment about Papa's made him wonder if he'd ever be home to enjoy the comforts of his previous life. Would he ever see his family again? His friends? How long had they been missing? Was time passing the same here as it was back home or had it been years just in the journey to this place? Would Tammy have noticed that he was gone yet?

*Heidi! I can't believe I forgot about her! I wonder if Justin knows. Should I tell him about what I saw? It might make him lose it. But I can't keep it from him! Maybe he already knows?*

Mark decided to keep Heidi's fate to himself for the moment.

Outside the routing station, they found themselves at one end of a giant loop on an open platform. The loop had cars driving around it on the ground as well as flying vehicles following the loop pattern above it in the air. Around the loop there seemed to be different sections that represented different types of commerce. They appeared to go both above and beneath the loop for thousands of feet. If they were standing at the six o'clock position of the loop, the cosmetic and clothing area was at eight o'clock.

"Do you think we should walk or take a cab?" Mark asked.

"I'm not sure. It looks pretty far. It'd be a hike, but the less interaction we have, the better off we'll be. Maybe we should just walk. It can't be more than a twenty to thirty minute trip."

The sheer volume and variety of people was hard to take in. Some were walking in large groups, making a ton of noise while others were casually meandering along the loop with a significant other. There were hundreds of cars driving on the loop, honking and screeching tires while even more vehicles flew overhead. The rush of lights and sounds was almost too much to take. With everything vying for their attention, they found it to be desensitizing. They could look in any direction and see graphic images of anything imaginable for thousands of feet. There was no natural light down this far and yet it felt just as bright as day.

Between the routing station and the cosmetics sector was what appeared to be the sex sector. Even just continuing on their path in the loop, Mark could smell many sweet alluring aromas. They were smells he had never smelled before and they gave him a sense of deep relaxation. It was inexplicable, almost like a warm, sweet vanilla, but it had more spice to it, somehow managing to

make him excited and relaxed at the same time. The smell was potent, yet unobtrusive. Whatever it was, it was exuding from the store fronts they passed, and it was all over the people who worked in that area.

Mark was totally flabbergasted by the nature of the videos, sounds, and holograms that were being freely offered without having to enter any of the stores. He wondered what more they could possibly offer inside. His curiosity mixed with the intense smell almost lured him into some of the buildings, but his sense of decency encouraged him to continue toward the cosmetic stores. While walking, Mark wondered how there could be such rampant sex in a culture that strictly prohibited reproduction. Surely there would be pregnancies all over the place.

Having resisted the temptation to indulge in the pleasures of the flesh, Mark and Justin made their way into the cosmetics and clothing section. By this time, their breathing was a little faster, as the walk had proven to be a workout. As they neared the main plaza of the fashion sector the appearances of people became increasingly eccentric and varied. They found themselves standing in an outdoor courtyard of sorts, surrounded by maybe ten building entrances. Each building was filled with stores that went for at least a few thousand feet up and down. As they gazed at the immensity of the fashion buildings they noticed multiple entryways lining each of the ten buildings. About every 500 feet, there was another set of entry platforms. The number of people coming just to buy clothing and alter their appearances was staggering, and this was just one tiny portion of the entire city.

Standing in the middle of the plaza, they were at the feet of two large impressionist sculptures of a man and a woman. Holographic images of different clothes, hair, makeup, piercings, and body art continuously cycled on their bodies. The building directly behind the statues had a large, bold sign that said "Confident Male" on the front of it.

"Looks like the place we want to check out." Mark stated.

"Sure. Let's go for it." Justin followed.

Clarifying, Mark said, "Now, we are just going to alter our physical appearance on our faces so we don't look ridiculous outside of these suits, right?"

"Yep," Justin agreed. "As long as I can dye my hair blue."

"Fine by me. Let's just try not to piss off too many people by not leaving a tip. So if we can find somebody to do all the work, then we'll only make one person mad."

They entered the building and found an interactive display that said they were on the 447th floor of "Confident Male," one of the 96 floors dedicated to undergarments.

"Dang. That's a lot of boxers," Mark noted. He asked the display where the nearest hair salon was located. It was on the 482nd floor.

"Geez. I hope we don't have to take the stairs..." Justin griped. The database told them that there were lifts located at the center of each floor.

They made their way through the underwear floor to the middle where people stood in a circular area, some disappearing and others appearing all with

a white flash. On their way, they passed more types of underwear than they could have ever imagined. Some of the most memorable kinds they saw included water-cooled briefs and deodorizing jock straps.

There was an attendant by the circular lift who asked people which floor they wanted to go to. Mark told her their destination and they stepped onto the platform. After three seconds, they were squeezed into that familiar white flash and then found themselves standing on a similar lift thirty-five floors higher.

Stepping off, Mark asked Corti, "How can I just take off the helmet of my suit? And is it easy to put back on by myself?"

"Of course. Just ask and I'll release the helmet. All you need to do to replace it is just bring it into contact with the neck portion of the Tielsuit and I will reseal them together. Just beware that without your helmet on, you will not have 87% of the major functions of the Tielsuit. I will still be active, but you won't have direct control over my functions and you will not have active translating capabilities or any of the heads up display functions."

"But people will still be able to understand me, right?" Mark was getting uneasy realizing that he wouldn't have a clue what was around him without the helmet.

"Yes, as long as they are wearing a unicom, which they should be, because it's illegal to be in public without one," Corti replied.

"So will somebody report me if they realize I can't understand them once my helmet is off?"

"It's possible," Corti said. "It just depends on the person."

Mark had a bad feeling about this whole endeavor.

All around Justin and Mark were people sitting in chairs, having work done on their bodies. This was no ordinary hair salon. Some people were getting body art, others were having hair colored, while still others were having more invasive cosmetic surgery. All of it was in the open, yet another reminder of how little these people cared about modesty.

The room was a large circle, with aisles extending out from the central lift like spokes. Each aisle had people standing in a line with a guide directing people to open stylists. Mark told Justin that it would probably be best to keep their helmets on as long as possible and to request to be next to each other, even if it meant waiting longer for two adjacent stylists to become available.

Their line moved quickly enough. Of the eight people in front of them, one simply dyed her hair color and changed her eye color. The next person wanted a large tattoo of what must have been an ex lover's face removed from his back. The next lady wanted breast implants while the man afterwards did too. Each stylist had the same set of tools at their station and no request was too complex or difficult. But as they got closer to the front of the line, Mark started to wonder if these procedures would hurt at all. Most people didn't sound as if they were in pain, but they also didn't appear to particularly enjoy the process. Each procedure lasted about ten minutes if Mark had to guess. The complexity of the request didn't seem to make a difference.

The guide pointed Mark to the stylist near the outer wall of the room. She had a perfectly crafted face, almost like a digital composite of hundreds of

models. Her hair was long and straight, striped like a zebra. Her flawless face looked to be about twenty-five, but she couldn't have weighed more than ninety pounds.

"Take of your helmet, hunk." She said in an alto voice that sounded entirely too low for her body size.

Mark stared at her in amazement.

"What do you want to do today? We don't have all day, you know."

At her question, Mark realized that he had no clue what he wanted her to do. He had been thinking about so many other things, that what he would get done never occurred to him. Surely he wouldn't do anything garish like what Justin planned. He decided to restore his normal look.

Taking off his helmet, he said, "I'd like some dark blond eyelashes, some bushy blonde eyebrows, and sandy blonde hair that's kinda long and shaggy."

"Zi xul," she said as he set his helmet on the ground and sat in the chair. She gasped as she saw his bare head. "Qit ete ot ceb talnu?"

Mark's palms started to clam up. This situation could get really awkward really fast if she kept talking to him. Sitting in the chair, he shrugged his shoulders as she began working on his scalp.

"Ek bon. Can ek das talnu?" she changed subjects in a pleasant tone.

Again Mark just shrugged his shoulders and he frowned.

*Just shut up and do my hair, stupid girl! I don't want to talk!*

The stylist made a disgruntled sound as she punched in some information on a touch screen that was affixed to her left wrist. In her right hand she held a device that was the size and shape of an enormous pen. Almost like she was drawing hair on his scalp, wherever she ran the pen on his head, hair sprouted up. Mark felt a light itching sensation but nothing more intense than that. The hair grew to a few inches and slowed to a stop. In less than thirty seconds she had his whole head sparsely covered. She continued to go over his head, filling in the gaps, giving the hair more volume. The color was a little lighter than his natural color, but it would do. Once she felt like he had enough hair on his head, she ran the pen through his hair, putting some natural waves in the hair, giving it a more disheveled look.

After a few minutes she had Mark's hair looking like it had never been gone. She moved on to his eyebrows, using the pen to draw hair on his brow. He could feel the same itch here, too. Before long, she just had to work on his eyelashes.

She requested, "Apuk oken talnu."

*What the crap is she saying?*

After no response, she tapped his shoulder. He turned to look at her and she pantomimed closing her eyes and Mark finally understood. She wanted him to close his eyes. He complied.

She ran the pen along his eyelids and with the itching feeling he had grown accustomed to, hair grew back. He opened his eyes and ran his hands through his hair. It felt perfectly natural. He was impressed. She had done a great job at making him look less like a freak.

The stylist looked at him and drew her pointer finger and thumb across her

lips. Mark interpreted that to mean that she wouldn't tell anybody he couldn't understand her. At least, that's what he hoped she meant. So he leaned forward, grabbed his helmet, and placed it back on his suit.

She patiently waited for him to get situated with the helmet and then said, "The standard tip for those services runs at forty tix. Will you be transferring funds through your ziggat account tonight?"

"Um. I don't think you're gonna like this, but I uh, I don't have any money to pay tonight."

"No," she said, sure he was kidding. "You think I did that bad of a job? I know I'm still a little new, but I know I wrote in about 125 thousand hairs. Did it hurt? I haven't hurt somebody in eighty-four jobs. This is gonna kill my streak and then Vero will hear about it. Pollux!"

"No. It's not that. You did great work!" Mark said, trying to make her feel better.

"Then what was it? Why can't you pay?" she asked.

"Well, I don't have any money to pay you."

"Wait, so you came here, and received my services, fully aware that you couldn't pay me?" her voice slightly raised.

"Uh, yeah?" he said tentatively.

"You pitscum! Get out of here. Pollux me! Get out of here you filthy piece of pitscum trash. I don't ever want to see you again!" She tried to kick him off the chair, but her ninety-pound frame was no match for him, especially as he was wearing his Tielsuit. Other people in the room were looking at them, trying to figure out why there was such a commotion.

About the same time, Mark heard a scuffle erupt next to him as Justin's stylist found out the same unfortunate truth Mark's had just learned. His stylist was screaming obscenities at him. Some of the words were translatable, but others just came through in their original language.

They hurried to the lift so they could leave the scene before too many people asked questions about what was going on. They asked the lift attendant to take them back to the 447th floor. In the few seconds they waited for the lift they could see an increasing amount of people murmuring about what they had done. Apparently, people are not very rude in Confident Male very often.

"That wasn't so bad," Justin observed as they returned to the main floor of Confident Male. "If that's all that will happen, then I want to do a whole bunch of shopping."

"Are you kidding? All it takes is for people to start talking about us and there'd be those guys in suits after us in no time. They probably still are looking for us. All it takes is just one mistake and we're screwed. I want to get out here alive, don't you?"

"Crap, dude. Yes, I want to go home alive, but think of how rich we'd be if we brought some of this stuff back! Think about it. An alien piece of technology! It would be proof that we actually went here so that people don't think we're crazy when we tell them about what happened to us."

"We won't get to tell anybody about what happened if we're not careful. We need to find a way out of this place and shopping for random crap isn't the way

to do that. You said yourself that we need to find the bottom of this place if we want any chance to escape. So let's get some food and leave."

"Why do you always have to be so right and so lame?" Justin whined.

In the cosmetics plaza they found another directory that listed where everything was. It showed the main restaurant area to be directly opposite from them, across the whole loop.

Justin said, "Well that sucks. I ain't walking that. It's like a good three miles if we walk straight through the loop, more like five or six if we actually follow the loop."

"What else can we do?" Mark asked.

"We can take one of those cab things."

"Yeah, but don't those cost money or require tips? either way, we can't give the driver anything. And then we'll be stuck in a car with a pissed off driver. That doesn't sound like a good idea at all."

"So you're fine with walking like five miles? Do you realize how long that would take? Especially because then we'd have to walk back to the main routing station after that? We're talking like three hours of walking. By the time we eat and do all the walking it will be like the middle of the night. We'll be exhausted." Justin did not want to compromise about this.

"Fine, we'll take a taxi thing. But you're doing all the talking." Mark gave in. "How do we even find one?"

"Relax. I can talk. We'll be fine. I have no idea how to find one. Let's see what other people do."

~

They walked to the edge of the fashion plaza and stood near the loop as people passed them on their way in and out. There were cars parking, driving up from the loop, and also many landing from all directions. A couple exited a midrange looking vehicle ten feet away from Mark and Justin. Before the door of the vehicle closed all the way, Justin was right up at the aircraft, with his hand in the door, asking the driver if he could take two people to the restaurant district. The driver said his customary fare was ten tix per mile. Justin told him that would be fine. Mark hoped the driver would also be fine with zero tix per mile because that was all he would get. After agreeing to the price, Justin climbed into the vehicle and motioned for Mark to come along too.

Sitting in the middle bench seat of what felt like a flying minivan without wings, the large side door closed from above. The transport gently lifted off the ground and floated toward the other side of the loop. As they put more distance between the vehicle and the platform, Mark had an increasing sense of foreboding. If they made this driver angry right now, they'd be completely at his mercy. There'd be nowhere to go. They'd be trapped in mid air, inside his flying minivan. Mark just had to hope that he wouldn't ask for his money until they landed at their destination.

The vehicle gained speed as they entered the hectic traffic pattern. They were surrounded by other flying cars. There were lanes above and beneath them as

well as to either side. Mark wondered how the driver would know if a car were under him or not. Changing lanes up and down seemed a lot more difficult than left or right yet the driver navigated through the traffic with confidence and ease.

As he got into a cruising speed in a lane without many drivers changing into or out of it, he became more social.

"So, uh, what sector do you guys serve in?"

Even though Justin wouldn't be able to see it through the helmet, Mark glared at him.

Justin nonchalantly responded, "The Imperial Plaza."

"Nice. So you guys must be pretty good, eh?"

"I suppose you could say that."

"I'll say! It's what, only the top 2% in the force who work up there?"

"Yeah, that sounds about right," Justin confirmed.

"Do you guys work in the same building or division, at least?"

"We...we both work in the Imperial Hall of Records."

Mark was getting more uneasy by the second. He was convinced that this guy would ask Justin a question that he couldn't answer, and his lies would become totally obvious. But so far it hadn't happened. Justin was holding his own.

"Get out! My uncle has served in the IHR for the last fourteen years!" The driver exclaimed.

"Oh... That's cool." Justin faltered a bit.

"Yeah. I'm sure you guys know him. After all, there are only six Tielguards assigned up there."

*We're screwed! I knew this was a bad idea.*

"His name is Zoelle. This is wild! I can't believe I actually just randomly ran into you guys like this. What are the odds?" he asked.

"Pretty slim, I'd have to guess." Justin answered as he exchanged a nervous glance with Mark.

"What did you guys say your names were? I'm sure Zo's told me about you guys before."

"He probably hasn't," Mark interjected. "We're pretty new there actually."

"That's odd. He's never mentioned any new additions to the team."

"How often do you talk to your uncle Zoelle?"

"Probably once a month or so. We usually meet up for drinks down at the Midbar Tap. I still didn't catch your names."

"Oh yeah, sorry. I'm...uh, Zazil and this is Zeist," Justin recalled the names of the two guards they had assaulted earlier.

The driver turned back at them. "Funny. I've never heard him talk about a Zaz or a Zeist."

"As I said," Justin's voice was firm. "We're new to the team."

"Even still, I'm going to call Zo because he'll want to know that he's got new partners."

Mark stepped in again, "That's not necessary. He'll get to know us soon enough. Besides, I think he could be working right now."

Instantly the driver turned his head around. "Alright. Cut the Poll. If you

pitdwelling bastards don't tell me who really are I'm going to call the Tielguard and have *them* sort this out."

Justin spoke up, "No no no no no. It's cool. Just relax. You're right. We don't work in the IHR."

Still staring at them, the driver said, "You bet your ass you don't. In fact, I think I *will* call the Tielguard right now. I don't like where this is going."

He turned back around, reaching his hand for a control panel on the dashboard. Although he didn't see it, both Mark and Justin saw the rear of the slowing car in front of them crash into the front of their vehicle. All three bodies lurched forward as metal ground against metal, and the front windshield shattered. The driver's head slammed against the control stick since he had been leaning forward at the moment of impact.

With the stick lodged into the driver's left eye socket, the weight of his head forced the stick forward, propelling the aircraft into a dive.

## 16: Express Descent

The next few minutes somehow both flew by and felt like slow motion all at the same time. Justin and Mark weren't harmed from the impact, but a flurry of alert lights and sounds were activated as the front end of the vehicle was smashed. Mark's stomach lurched up into his chest as the vehicle started its dive.

Instinct guided his behaviors. He unbuckled his seat restraint, reached forward, clenched the front passenger seat, and climbed into the front area. Just like any aircraft on earth, this vehicle had two sets of controls.

Sitting in the copilot's chair, he had a complete view out the front windshield. There was a thick stream of cars moving perpendicular to them. They were heading straight into it. If they didn't hit another vehicle, they were maybe 1500 feet from the commercial loop platform. There were mere seconds to figure something out. Gripping the controls, he pulled the stick inward to break the drive. There was no response.

*Please tell me we didn't jack up the controls in the crash!*

He jerked the controls to the left and the vehicle rotated to the left. Moving the stick to the right rotated them in the opposite direction.

*So I can add to his controls, but I can't counteract them.*

Mark yelled back at Justin, "See if you can separate the pilot from his controls. We have seconds or we're dead!"

They were pointing almost straight down toward the platform. Mark scanned the platform, looking for a gap somewhere. Far to the right, down by the routing station, it looked like there was a gap in the platform. If they could make it through there it would buy them some time. He pulled the stick far to the right, hopefully getting closer to the gap. Their sudden change in direction brought them dangerously close to other vehicles that had tried to change their course to avoid them. Narrowly avoiding the rear of another aircraft, their car cut through the other car's jet wash. The whole vehicle shuttered from traversing the hot, turbulent air.

With the extra movement, Justin was able to reach his arms fully around the pilot's head. His arms met resistance as they tugged at the pilot's head. Like pulling out a tooth, there was a sudden release of pressure as the head was separated from the control stick.

"It's all yours!" Justin yelled over to Mark.

He rotated the car so that it was no longer inverted, and he pulled the stick back to level the car out. To his relief, they were no longer aiming straight down, but they continued to lose altitude.

"What's wrong?" Justin cried out.

"I don't know. We don't have full power any more, though." Mark replied as he tried to keep the vehicle steady, keeping the gap in the platform directly in front of them. It was no more than 500 hundred feet away and they were quickly approaching, falling more than flying. Fortunately, they were lower than almost all of the air traffic they had been in just seconds before.

The gap increased in size as they approached it. Compared to all the bright lights and flashy effects around them in the loop, the space they could see through the gap was plain and dark. It made a good target to aim for.

"Shit! Look out!" Justin pointed to their right. Mark hadn't been able to see it just yet, but there was a TMT departing from the routing station to their right. At its speed they were sure to collide with it. Mark was tempted to adjust his approach, but he didn't have enough power to maneuver their car too drastically.

The TMT continued on its course. Before long, its front end had come between them and the gap in the platform. Mark furiously scanned the control panel looking for a particular button or lever. It was nowhere on the dashboard. He looked to his left on the center console, hoping it would be where it often is on normal aircraft.

He could see that the TMT was still in front of them in the periphery of his vision. He was zeroed in on a lever, looking for an identifying label. There was none that he could recognize.

*Screw it! Do or die.*

He yanked on the lever. The entire aircraft slowed so much that it felt like they had hit something again. The instant change in velocity was so intense that Mark almost flew out the front windshield. Instead the control stick jammed into him, right between his legs. Other than a thud, he didn't feel much of anything. Surprised, he remembered that he was in his suit.

*Thanks, Corti! I owe ya one.*

Their drastic deceleration gave them just enough time for the TMT to pass completely by. They continued forward and down, barely making it through the platform gap.

The instantaneous change in aesthetic was jarring. No longer were there flashy lights or 3D images and videos. Instead, the buildings were dark in color and light was scarce. There was a fraction of the traffic they encountered above, and what traffic they *did* see was organized and much less frantic.

Buildings grew wider than their higher sections from above, and there were less interconnecting bridges and platforms. Everything appeared more functional, less garish than the commercial district above. With less obstructions and traffic, it was easier to avoid crashing into buildings, too.

In the wide, open expanse they had a little more time to think as they continued to plummet. Mark stole a few glances at the dashboard displays, hoping to get a better idea of their situation. He found a gauge that said "ionization." It only registered at 11%. In the middle of the gauge a red message flashed, "Plasma Leak." The percentage fell another point.

"I can't say for sure, but I think it looks like we're losing power," Mark told Justin.

"I coulda told you that by looking out the window, genius. Is there anything we can do?"

"I already tried the only tricks I knew. I extended our air break which should slow our airspeed, and I took us through the platform to get us more time to figure this out. At this rate, we have maybe 2 minutes, 3 at best, before we reach

the bottom of Upper Tielmetra. This thing doesn't glide for crap and once we lose all our power we'll essentially be a falling rock," Mark wasn't hopeful.

"Then let's find somewhere to land this thing before we lose all our power," Justin suggested.

"'Crash this thing,' is more like it. There's no chance to land it at all. We should brace for impact. Do something with that pilot and strap yourself in. Then you can help me look for a slanted surface to ease our impact."

They were still in a large open area, falling just about straight down. Mark had the aircraft pointed down at a steep angle so that he could see where they were headed. Since the aircraft had nubs for wings, staying level had little impact. It was an odd sensation. They seemed to be floating in the air. It didn't feel like they were falling fast enough. Mark searched the gauges for an altimeter. It didn't take him long to find a gauge with a rapidly decreasing number. But it was impossible to read. Losing 1 Zic every 15 seconds meant nothing to him.

Mark kept searching for a suitable surface to slow their descent. Many of the buildings gradually grew wider as they came closer to the base of the sector. Mark brought the car in close to the side of one building that grew in thickness more quickly than some of the others. He slammed the vehicle into the wall. Sparks flew as the contact made an awful screeching, grinding sound.

The altimeter slowed its decrease in Zics.

There were no immediate obstructions so Mark checked around the center console for the throttle control. Near the air break handle he found a lever that resembled the throttle of an airplane. He pulled it back until he felt a natural resting point. The vehicle slowed a bit more.

*That must be zero throttle.*

His eyes darted to the "ionization" gauge. It registered 6 %. There still might be enough juice to reverse the throttle before impact to slow them down even more.

The car continued to slide down the side of the building, pieces of it breaking off along the way. At its current rate, there wouldn't be much of a vehicle left by the time they hit the base of the building. Straining his eyes, Mark thought he could make out the street at the bottom of the building. Like the rest of the industrial sector, the lighting was scant. The building had become wider than most small cities. There weren't many buildings down this low because each one was so large. By the look of it, they had a few thousand more feet until they would hit the bottom. There still wasn't anything within sight that might help to break their fall, their speed still dangerously high.

Suddenly, out of nowhere, a connecting bridge or a platform, Mark wasn't sure, emerged from the darkness. In the half second that Mark had to react, he steered the vehicle mostly away from the protrusion. The hull of the craft made it through unscathed, but Mark heard the sound of tearing metal to his right, and then silence.

With the silence also came sudden violent movements. As if caught on a line, the aircraft pulled hard to the left, away from the building's surface. Their angular velocity increased as they spun away from the building. Mark's efforts

with the control stick yielded no result. It was impossible to know where they were or where they would end up. The aircraft entered a spin.

Limbs felt like lead as the centrifugal forces acted upon them. Mark struggled to force out, "It's... been... real... man! This...is... it!" Justin was doing everything in his power not to get sick inside his suit.

Mark stole a glance at the altimeter. The negative vertical speed was higher than he had ever seen it.

*Speed... That's it! Half of the air break musta broken off!*

As their last hope, he mustered all his strength to counteract the G's, gripped the air break lever, and pulled it back to its original position. Their tailspin continued, albeit a bit slower, but not enough for Justin or Mark to noticed. They had too much momentum.

But the controls actually felt more responsive.

*If I could just stop this spin, dammit!*

It was no use. There was no way to distinguish which way they were spinning and what he would need to do to stop it. The altimeter flashed red, probably indicating immanent crash, but Mark couldn't read it. He was struggling to move his hand from the air brake to the throttle lever. With his hand firmly gripping the lever, he pulled back as hard as he could, hoping to engage the thrust reverser.

*This could either save us or kill us faster.*

They both felt a quick surge of thrust that instantly changed the direction of the forces they felt on their bodies but maintained the same intensity. Mark's body was flung through the front window like a rag doll. All he could see was darkness and within an instant his body slammed into a hard flat surface. He heard an explosion from somewhere behind him and then he lost consciousness.

## 17: Heating Up

"Sir?"

"Yes?"

"We, uh, we may have an issue."

"There's no need to hide anything from me, Zidaine. I can read it on your face."

"Alright, sir. It's the probability quotient. It's registering at its lowest value since we've begun."

"How low?"

"58.6 percent. Sir."

"Intervene immediately."

"Yes sir."

- *From the office of the Secadoma*

Mark's eyes opened to a craggy amber flicker in front of him, dancing across his field of view. Blinking a few times, he regained clarity in his vision and recognized the dancing shapes in front of him. He was staring at flames burning on the ground while his face must have been laying on the ground on its side.

He rolled forward onto his stomach and noticed that there was considerably more light to his left. His body in a push-up position on the ground, he craned his neck to his left. There were the remains of their taxi, ablaze. Pieces of flaming shrapnel lay strewn about. There were no signs of movement anywhere.

*Justin's dead.*

He leaned back so that he was no longer laying down, but kneeling before the firey grave of his best friend.

*I never thought it would be like this.*

Mark couldn't believe that he had been mad at Justin during their last conversation in the taxi. He thought he could still hear some of those last words Justin had said. They sounded so real. It was haunting. Like Justin was still talking to him.

"Maarrk. Mark. Where are you?"

Justin's words almost sounded like they were coming from a physical location, not just inside Mark's head, almost like the fire was calling out to him.

"Mark? Are you out there?" The fire was calling to him.

And then it dawned on him. Justin was still in the wreckage! Mark rose to his feet and sprinted straight toward the fire. It was a giant blaze and just standing a few feet from its edge, Mark felt nothing. "Justin! Are you still in there?"

"Mark? Dude, is that you outside? I'm stuck in here," Justin answered.

"I'm coming in there to get you out."

"How? everything's covered in flames."

"I'll be fine. I think our suits protect us from the heat. I'm coming in." Mark approached the fire. Multiple new warning lights started flashing in the bottom left corner of his visor. He ignored them. "Where are you?" Mark asked.

"I think I'm still in the cabin, but my arm's stuck between the seat and the roof."

As Mark examined the hunk of burning metal, he couldn't recognize any distinguishing features of the vehicle. However, there was one accumulation of wreckage that looked more substantial than the rest. He hoped Justin was inside there. Nothing else looked possible to have a human inside.

"Keep talking. I need to hear your voice so I can find you faster," Mark commanded.

Justin called out, "I'm over here."

To his relief, the sound came from the pile Mark was headed toward. He walked up to the edge of the pile, flames encompassing him. It was surreal to be so deep inside the fire without being harmed. "Ok. I'm right outside, but I don't see any way in yet. Do you see anything from your view that could help?"

"Try going around to the over side. I think you'll find an opening where the windshield was."

Mark climbed through the wreckage and eventually got around to the other side. Justin had been right. He had made it to the front of the vehicle and could see in through the shell of a windshield. Everything glowed red hot like embers; the air wrinkled due to the heat waves. Peering in through the front window, Mark could see the front seat from where he had been ejected, right beside the pilot's seat still with the glowing skeletal remains of the pilot. All the flesh and clothes had been burned away. *Just like that atomic bomb scene from Terminator 2!* Right behind the pilot's skull, Mark could see Justin's left arm, wedged between the top of the seat and the ceiling. Justin's once black suit had taken on a dull reddish glow from the extreme heat. The situation did not look promising.

"Mark! I can see you! How bad does it look?"

"Hang on. I'm coming in to get you out. Don't try to move until I get in there."

Mark got down on all fours and carefully crawled through the windshield. He went between the two front seats and found himself crouching next to Justin who was sitting with his back against the driver-side wall of the car, with his left hand held in place above him.

"Any suggestions?" Mark asked?

"I'm thinking that the pilot's seat is probably the most likely thing to move. I just can't get any good leverage with my legs." Justin said.

"I can see that. Well maybe if I kick with both of my feet you can get your wrist free. Sound like a plan?" Mark asked.

"Yep. Go for it."

Mark situated his body so that he was doing a crab walk, ready to kick forward with both of his legs. "Ok. On three. One, two." He cocked his legs back, "three." He delivered one swift blow to the seat back. Due to the intense heat, his feet actually kicked straight through the weakened seat. The outcome wasn't what Mark had intended, but its effect was the same. The seat caved in and freed Justin's arm.

"Thanks. I thought I was screwed. My suit's been yelling at me with warnings

for too long."

"I bet!" The ceiling right above the seat cracked and started to cave in. "We better split. I think your arm and that chair were holding this whole thing together.

They dove forward, and grabbed onto the dashboard to pull themselves from the falling wreckage. Mark got out first, and right as Justin pulled his leg past the pilot and out the windshield, the whole cabin caved in.

With the hull of the aircraft smashing behind them, they managed to stand up back on their feet. Arm in arm, they supported each other as they climbed out of the burning wreckage. Standing safely to the side of the crash, both of their suits held a dull red glow.

"I hate to say this, but I think we need to get far away from here fast. I'm surprised nobody's here yet. Can you run or walk?" Mark checked with Justin.

"Yeah. I think I'm fine. A little shaken up, but I think I'll survive. I don't think anything broke," he said, out of breath from the whole experience. "How about you? One second I saw you in the car with me, and then you were just gone. I thought you were toast!"

With a slight heir of pride in his voice, Mark simply said, "I'll survive.

"Great. Then, I let's follow your advice," Justin suggested.

They left the crash scene at the pace of a brisk walk, hoping not to be too conspicuous. As they rounded the nearest corner, they noticed how truly dark this place was. Away from the warm glow of the burning vehicle, the glowing Tielsuits stood out against their almost black surroundings. They found themselves in a narrow alleyway between two immense buildings with very few windows allowing light to pour out. There wasn't any air traffic immediately above them. The closest vehicles softly whirred past them, at least a good mile overhead. Nobody was out walking around, either on the ground where they were or on any platforms further above them.

"Corti, where exactly are we?" Mark asked.

"You are currently walking east, adjacent to the Tielshot main production facility, near the second floor entrance."

"You mean we are only one floor above the base of Upper Tielmetra?"

"You're walking on the base, but you are near the second floor entrance of the Tielshot main production facility."

Justin asked, "How close are we to the eastern edge of the city?"

"3.3 miles on foot, but technically you are only 2.6 miles away from the inner edge of the wall."

"That's so doable!" Justin said.

"It will have to be," Mark added, "So do we just keep heading straight down this alley?"

"Certainly."

The dark, deserted pathway stretched ahead of them for at least a quarter mile. The two friends walked in silence. However, it didn't take long for both of them to notice the squeak in Justin's suit as he walked.

"Your suit didn't always sound like that, did it?"

"I dunno. I don't remember hearing it before, but then again, weren't we

always in noisy environments?" Justin noted.

"Yeah, but still, I think we would have noticed that. It's impossible to ignore. Ask your suit if anything is wrong."

"Oh yeah. I forgot I could do that. Yeah, now that you mention it, there is a flashing red light in the right corner of my visor."

"How long has it been there?"

"This is the first time I noticed it."

Mark rolled his eyes.

"Dude, lay off! *Everything* was red inside that crash!" Justin asked Corti for a status report.

"The outer titanium layer withstood temperatures maxing at 2257 degrees Celsius. Though the Tielsuit is designed to maintain structural integrity for significantly higher temperatures than 2000 degrees, it was only designed to hold up for very short amounts of time, no more than 30 seconds. Your suit was subjected to 2000+ degree temperatures for 6 minutes and 41 seconds. Some structures directly underneath the outer layer expanded beyond their capacity due to the excessive heat. These expanded components rub against each other when you walk. That is the sound you hear when you bend your right knee."

"That blows. So what does that mean? Is there anything I can't do because of it?"

"Absolutely avoid all high temperature zones until you are able to return this Tielsuit to the Imperial Guard Repair Center," Corti concluded.

Justin whistled. "Fat chance at that. How's your suit holding up?"

"I'll find out. Corti, what's my suit status?"

"All functions are nominal. However the Tielsuit received substantial impact forces on the left shoulder pad, torso cover, and ankle brace. I cannot guarantee that your body will be protected from physical injury if you sustain additional impacts in these areas. In order to ensure maximal Tielsuit performance, you should have it inspected by a professional."

"So basically, we can't do any more crazy shit in these things." Justin summarized.

"Let's hope we don't have to..." Mark shrugged.

They continued walking down the corridor, Justin's suit squeaking with each step. Not too many steps later, they both heard something ominous. Faint siren sounds from above and behind emerged from the silence. Panic set in and they both ran for the end of the alley. If they were spotted in the alley, they'd be like fish in a barrel, nowhere to go.

"Corti, where do we turn at the end of this straightaway?" Mark hollered while running full-bore.

"Turn left and continue in that direction for two hundred feet."

As they reached the end of alleyway, they found the T junction and turned to their left. After just a few paces, Mark noticed that they were under an overhang. They had just run to a building that jutted out over the alleyway. Mark was thankful for the extra cover. Looking ahead, pacing out about two hundred feet, he grabbed Justin and froze.

"We can't run out in that! We'll be totally exposed!" he whispered.

"Yeah, but where else can we go? We obviously can't go back," Justin countered.

"I suppose so. I think we are relatively covered here. Let's hang tight and see what unfolds.

The space where Corti had directed them was a giant courtyard. If anybody were looking for them, they would completely stand out. The sirens were no longer faint. They had to be coming from vehicles that were no more than a city block away. It sounded like they had discovered the crash. All the noise seemed to be coming from one place, like they weren't searching for anything any more.

"Dude, we've gotta get out of here while we still can!" Justin said.

"Are you crazy? Can't you hear how close they are? Who knows how high those things are out there? If they have the right vantage point, we'll be running out right in front of them. We might as well put a target on our backs."

"Well we can't just sit here and wait for them to come get us, either. What do you think they're doing over there? It's not like they'll just go put out the fire and leave. They'll be here before we know it."

"Shut up! Look!" Mark pointed out at the courtyard. A bright spotlight appeared in the middle of the open space. It started a sweep around the entire area.

Meanwhile, the sirens off in the distance to their left changed in pitch. One remained the same while another rose higher as it came closer to Mark and Justin, like a doppler effect. Before long, the source of the searchlight crested the wall of the courtyard. What amounted to a flying black tank came into view, hovering above the courtyard, scouring the area with its mounted light. The whole area was washed in red lights as they strobed from the top and bottom of the aircraft. It hovered noiselessly. The only sound marking its presence was the piercing noise of the siren.

It hovered in the air, both sides of the hull folded up, exposing a squad of twelve guards in Tielsuits. The aircraft descended into a position so that the Tielguards could exit more easily. Each guard was armed with some type of weapon they had never seen.

"Dude, we gotta book it... Now." Justin turned around and sprinted in the opposite direction, under the cover of the overhang.

*Will this crap ever end?*

Mark got up from his crouch and followed after Justin without any type of plan.

*How did they find us so fast? It was like they knew exactly which direction to search!*

While running after Justin, Mark asked Corti about heat detection and whether or not Tielsuits could see infrared.

"Of course," she answered. "Every Tielsuit comes equipped with multiple visor filters for detection of the full electromagnetic spectrum. You can detect X-rays, gamma rays, ultraviolet waves, and infrared in addition to the normal visual range."

"Add the infrared filter to my visor," Mark directed.

*Of course! Why didn't I think of this earlier?*

Everything became clear to him immediately. Even though they were wearing black suits, running through dark alleys at the bottom of Upper Tielmetra, Justin's figure shone like a white ghost in the night before his eyes. In addition, every step they took left a dim, but obvious footprint on the ground. Their suits still must have been hot enough to leave a trace of heat on whatever they touched. All the guards had to do was follow their footprints. It would only be a matter of time.

"Are there any active factories with accessible entrances close by?" Mark asked Corti as he met up with Justin at the end of the long alley. They could only turn to the left and continue down another similar stretch.

"There are 8 manufacturing plants that meet your criteria within a square mile."

"Do any of them use high temperatures in their manufacturing process?"

"Of course. 3 of them do."

"Great. Tell me how to get to the closest one without directing me back the way I came."

"Certainly. Turn right at your next opportunity, in 100 feet."

Mark sprinted to catch up to Justin at the corner where they were supposed to turn. "Over here! I have a plan."

They turned to their right and headed down a more open pathway, between two more large buildings.

"As you run to the end of this building on your left, you will find Tieladium Smelting Company right across the alley. Its main entrance will be directly in front of you," Corti directed.

Running straight down the overlong corridor (*why are these building so damn big?*), they could hear the siren from the Tielguard aircraft approaching from behind. Its red lights illuminated their way. Getting inside the smelting plant would be their only chance of loosing the authorities. Their chances would still be slim even if they did make it inside.

The siren grew louder at their backs. The guards had to be right up on their back, but Mark wasn't about to turn around and check.

*Why aren't they shooting at us?*

Justin could tell they were getting close, too. "Where we headed, man?"

"Just follow me." Mark assured.

The searchlight zeroed in on the two of them just as they found the junction in front of the Tieladium Smelting entrance. Mark didn't quit. They were too close. Without slowing down, he ran straight into the door while opening it all in the same motion.

~

A wicked, sulfuric smell affronted them as they stood at the entrance of Tieladium Smelting Company's main refinery. Booming sounds reverberated throughout the enormous building, as thick slabs of metal were pounded and purified. These were accompanied by a myriad of other sounds like the hiss of cooling metal and the grind of cutters shaping the metal.

"I'm way too outa shape," Justin gasped, doubling over.

"Me too. But we can't stay here. Come on. We gotta blend in."

All Mark could see was a giant orange-white haze because he still had his infrared sensor running. He and Justin were in a gigantic metal refinery. Wide enough to fit a few jumbo jets in area, the building went up as far as the eye could see. Hundreds of workers clad in variants of their own Tielsuits to protect them from the heat were scattered throughout the main floor where they had entered. If they could get far enough into this place, it would be the perfect place to lose their tails, but they had precious little time to get very far, maybe sixty seconds at best.

"Ok, whatever we do, we can't run. We have to act like we work here," Mark said. He led Justin up a nearby staircase that led to a catwalk over the first vat of molten metal.

Walking up the stairs Justin had to ask, "How did you know this place was here? And why did we need to get here?"

"Think about it. There was no way those guards could have randomly found us so quickly. I asked Corti if our suit had heat detection. Turns out all Tielsuits have it. Our suits were still super hot from being in that crash. Everything we touched left traces of our heat on it. We led them straight to us," Mark explained.

"That's genius, man!"

Mark continued, "I knew we couldn't outrun them forever, but in here we'll blend in with everybody else. I had Corti find the closest hot manufacturing plant. They won't be able to track us, and hopefully that'll buy us some time to figure out how to get to the city perimeter."

At the top of the stairs they turned onto the catwalk, heading out over the giant pool of metal. A few workers stood a station of controls, examining the condition of the metal as it churned in the huge holding tank.

"You'd think they'd make a more sturdy walkway for people who have to constantly be around this stuff," Justin said.

"Who knows? Maybe they don't care if people fall in?" Mark guessed.

As they passed by the group of workers, the main entrance door opened again. Twelve Tielguards systematically entered the room, and stood by for orders from a superior. Neither Mark nor Justin heard or saw their entrance, but they kept their pace, almost above the second molten pool.

There were four large smelting pools on the bottom floor. At the end of the second pool the catwalk met up with a larger control center than the first. It was more heavily populated, and Mark thought he saw a stairwell leading up from it.

"If we can find out where all these workers leave from, we might have a shot of walking right out with them unnoticed," Mark hoped aloud.

They finished crossing over the second pool and entered into the central control room for the first level. Walking into the doorway, Mark glanced back toward the entrance in order to see if their pursuers had followed them. In the midst of all the activity in the room, he didn't see them heading up the staircase they had ascended only moments earlier.

Inside the control room, Mark estimated forty workers were tending to various tasks and another five or so were en route to somewhere. A pair of

workers entered the room at the back through the staircase. Mark and Justin made way for it, unsure of where it would lead, but sure that it was their only current option.

Walking up the first flight of stairs out of the control room, they had a better view of the lower level. Doing the best they could to carry themselves like everybody else, Mark finally saw the Tielguards near the control console above the first pool. It looked like they were questioning a few of the workers. Every ounce of Mark wanted to spring up the stairs, but he knew that running would only give their position away.

Instead, he looked up to see where they were headed. For the most part, all he could see was a lot of stairs. He guessed at least ten stories of stairs with nothing around them.

*These people have all this technology and they still use stairs for places this big? Come on!*

The stairs looked like they eventually disappeared into a ceiling that covered the entire room. They would just have to wait and see what was above. The distance between the first and second molten pool was larger than what they had to cover in the remaining stairs. So unless the guards started running, Mark and Justin would get to next level before the guards entered the staircase. Mark still wondered why they weren't running, though.

*Maybe they are trying not to alert us to their presence?*

While climbing the staircase, they could see the other half of the main bottom floor. The four molten pools only occupied the front half of the ground floor. In the back half were thousands of shaped molds. Mark supposed that the molten metal would somehow drain into particular molds where it would solidify and be ready for shipping. *But shipping to where? The city's enclosed.*

Seeing that these two steps were not the whole process, Mark assumed that above them must be where other things are done to the ore.

As they neared the top of the staircase, they saw four large tubes that came from the ceiling above and fed into each of the molten vats beneath them. Periodically they could hear an avalanche of metallic chunks falling through them, presumably contributing to the large pools beneath.

Nearly exhausted by the climbing, they finished the last case of stairs and entered the second floor control room. This one was even larger than the first, almost like a central hub to the entire process. The bustling room consisted of four main quadrants with supervisors overlooking statistics and giving orders to subordinates. Mark could clearly see monitors that displayed the two locations they had just left. There were two other areas of supervision as well. One looked like a sorting station and the other seemed to be percussive line. There was an exit across the room. They walked straight to it.

Outside the control room they found deafening noises from countless massive hammers smashing an endless supply of charcoal colored rocks that came in various sizes. Further down the conveyor belts, a crowd of workers stood by, sorting the more pure metal from the chaff. They left the chaff on the conveyor belt while throwing the metal into funnels that all fed into the tubes which eventually ended up in the molten vats downstairs.

Above and along the conveyor belts was a series of more catwalks with managers ensuring productivity on the line. Spaced throughout the catwalks were robotic arm operators who used the mechanical appendages to lift the larger chunks of ore off the lines. In the center of the matrix of walkways was another staircase that ascended up to the ceiling above. Mark intuitively walked toward it and Justin followed.

"Are we just going to keep going up these stairs forever?" Justin complained more than questioned.

Mark's reply wasn't all that confident. "They have to have an end somewhere. These people have to come in and out from somewhere. They can't just live in this furnace. Besides, I don't know what else to do. Let's hope there's something different in the next room. From the looks of that main control room, I think there are only four main sections, and these two are the last ones. So let's hope that there's some kind of exit above us."

They were dismayed to discover that this staircase looked taller than the last one. That was bad for two reasons. The first, more obvious one being that they would have to climb even more stairs, with the second being that if both them and the guards kept their same pace, the guards would be able to see them at the top of the stairs.

While climbing above the chaotic clamor below, Mark thought of something. "What if they've locked this place down because they know we're in here?"

"I dunno. But you're probably right. I don't see why they wouldn't. It wouldn't be too hard. It would just be a matter of time before they'd find us, I guess."

"But then again, if they had the place locked down, then why would they be following us? Wouldn't they just tell everybody to leave through a certain exit where they could screen for us?" said Mark.

Justin disagreed, "Nah. Think about how giant this operation is. They wouldn't shut the whole thing down just to find us. They probably can't without some crazy authority. And I haven't heard anybody talking about any lockdowns or anything, not that I've been listening too much."

"Now that you mention it, not many people have been talking at all. Maybe because it's so loud in here. We're probably yelling right now and we don't even realize it."

"Holy crap, this is a ton of stairs!" Justin pointed out as they were about three quarters of the way up.

Almost in agreement, Mark stopped to catch his breath for a moment. They surveyed the room beneath them. The workers on the lines resembled ants compared to the large robotic arms and the compressors that crushed down the metal. Amidst the crowd of tiny workers a formation of twelve figures emerged from the main control room.

"That's our queue! Come on." Justin said, spurring Mark even further up the stairs.

Continuing on their upward journey, Mark looked down below again. Sure enough, the formation was following their lead, walking along the catwalks toward the staircase. Mark was convinced they had sped up a bit. Or were they

just slowing down?

"How do they know where we're headed? We could have been any one of those workers down there on one of those lines." Mark said, exasperated.

"Beats me. But I don't wanna have the chance to ask them."

The stairs that seemed to never end finally did come to an end. Relieved, Mark and Justin entered a floor that appeared completely different than the previous two. It didn't look like any work was happening on this floor. The stairs ended in a central lobby area, where people were hanging out, some looking like they had just finished work while others looked like they had yet to begin.

The circular lobby had six different paths leading out from it like spokes, similar to the design of the cosmetics floor in the Confident Male they had visited so recently.

Several of the paths led to mundane places like a cafeteria, or an ironically titled "human resources" area until Mark remembered that his suit was translating everything for him which continued to inspire awe.

After circling around, Justin finally found the words they had hoped to find: Exit.

Walking as fast as possible without making a scene, they both headed down the large hallway that lead to their hopeful freedom. Fate looked to be on their side because there were so many people who were walking out the door. It either must have been the end of a shift, or this place must have always been busy. Above the thirty-foot tall exit doors was the Tieladium Smelting Company logo with a slogan that read "Crafting tomorrow's resources today."

Outside the building, they saw a large platform crawling with people and hordes of transportation picking people up and dropping others off. The only way off the platform appeared to be through boarding an aircraft.

Among the swarming cars and shuttles was a Tielguard flyer, just like the one they had seen earlier.

"Just keep walking toward one of the transports. I think we blend in better than we realize." Justin cautioned.

Mark was adamant. "I'm not taking another taxi. That's what got us in this mess in the first place."

"Fine. Then what do you suggest? We jump back down to the bottom street?"

They were amazed to see how far they had climbed inside the building.

Among the multitude of aircraft, Mark saw what looked like a small version of a TMT. The sign on it read "Industrial Park Routing Station."

"Over there." Mark point to the transport. That's our only way out of here. Let's hurry before we miss it.

*Of course it's all the way on the other end of the platform!*

They pressed though the immense crowd as quickly as possible. Crossing through the stream of people, they struggled to get near the transport before it closed its doors. The stationary Tielguard vehicle activated its searchlight and began a sweep of the crowd.

*No! Not now! We're so close!*

They continued their same pace for fear of aiding their pursuers in their search. Mark prayed that the TMT doors would remain open just a while longer.

He had no idea how long it had been waiting already.

*Just a few more seconds.*

The searchlight was on a collision course with them.

They stepped into the TMT just before the door slid closed while the light continued onward with its sweep. Overcome with relief, Mark and Justin let their bodies fall into their seats, feeling safe... at least for the moment.

## 18: Feeling Insignificant

"I'm not sure how much more of this I can take," Mark confessed to Justin as they sat in the small TMT. "I thought they were gonna catch us for sure back there."

"Yeah. I know what you mean. I'm super hungry and we've been running throughout the entire city." Justin agreed.

"I mean, just like twenty minutes ago we were crawling out of a flaming car, and now we're using public transit like nothing happened at all. We've got to figure out how to find a way to Lower Tielmetra. We can't stay out here forever," Mark lamented.

They had no sense of how far the Routing Station for Industrial Park was from where they had entered. The smaller TMT they had entered was more like a local bus making frequent stops along a route than the larger one they had ridden earlier. It filled up quickly as it meandered through the various districts, stopping at major production plants like the Tieladium plant they had left.

By and large, the Industrial Park was the underbelly of Upper Tielmetra. Since they weren't stuck in a falling car this time, they were actually able to look out the window more freely. There was none of the glitz and glamor of the Commercial Loop, or even the subtle elegance of various sectors in the Domicile Square, and certainly none of the pomp and circumstance of the Imperial Plaza. From the sheer size of the countless buildings, Mark estimated that most of the population of Upper Tielmetra actually worked down here in the Industrial Park.

The TMT came into a clearing while descending to the bottom of the area. Mark and Justin could see the routing station and its resemblance to the others. To Mark's surprise, the Routing Station was actually located in the middle of a large park. It had to be bigger than Central Park, by the look of it. As they drew closer to the Routing Station, it became clear that Industrial Park was indeed, much bigger than Central Park. In fact, even the trees were significantly larger than what Mark had expected. All the proportions appeared normal, but there were oak trees that loomed at least one hundred feet above the roof of the routing station. This was a park beyond anything Mark or Justin had ever seen. They were eager to get out of the TMT and see it.

Inside the Routing Station Terminal, the smaller TMT had unloaded them in a place that was different from what they were used to. While people went about their business all around them, Mark asked Corti a few questions.

"Are we actually on the ground level of Upper Tielmetra?"

"Yes. Of course."

*Jeez The computer doesn't have to make me feel dumb...*

"Ok. How far are we from the perimeter of the city now?"

"You are 4.2 miles from the inner side of the wall."

"What's the fastest way there? Can we take a TMT to closer point?"

"There are TMT's that will take you closer to the edge of the city, but none of them stop anywhere on the ground floor like the Routing Station. The most

direct way to the edge of the city is through Industrial Park."

Justin had made up his mind. "Let's just do it and get it over with."

"Corti, are there any Tielguards that patrol the area or any checkpoints that we'd have to go through?"

"Other than the standard public property deployment of 2 Tielguards per cubic Zic, no."

Mark had one last question. "What would draw more attention to us? Walking along the main pathways or blazing a trail through the trees?"

Corti said, "Generally speaking, the Industrial Park is one of the least crowded sectors in all of Upper Tielmetra. Tielguards don't pay much attention what occurs here unless it is reported by somebody else."

Mark finally felt sure enough to concur with Justin. "Alright. We'll go through the park. Corti, lead the way."

They exited the routing station, walking down a path to their right, toward the eastern end of the city. Many people were near the vicinity of the routing station, but for Tielmetran standards it felt deserted. Most of the groups of people faded away as Mark and Justin walked further into the park.

Strolling down one of the larger trails, it was difficult to not feel insignificant in the presence of such large trees. Growing up in Washington, Mark had seen many tall trees. He remembered a trip his family took to see the Redwoods. He had also seen the Great Sequoias in Eastern California. But these trees were entirely different. None of them were conifers, but they were all taller than the largest coniferous trees he had ever seen. These had the same proportions of most deciduous trees of the Mid West, but they were simply massive. Some had leaves that he could have hidden his body behind. Trees with a 200 foot circumference were commonplace.

Yet, even as he marveled at the enormity of the flora, Mark found that he cared more about the thoughts of his family. While walking through the park, he had the first opportunity to slow his thoughts down. He imagined what his mom was doing. If it were during the day, she might be in a counseling appointment with a client, or maybe she would be gardening with his dad if it were still warm enough on a Saturday afternoon. His older sister, Mary, was probably studying no matter what time it was. She never really did anything because she had to take the BAR soon. His thoughts shifted to Tamara. They hadn't spoken more than a few words to each other over the past few weeks.

*Would she even notice that I'm gone?*

Mark got anxious as he thought that maybe his family wasn't doing anything he had imagined because they were all so worried about what had happened to him.

"Do you think anybody knows we're missing?" he blurted out.

"Huh?" Justin had been walking silently, deep in thought himself.

"Back home," Mark clarified, "Do you think anybody there knows we aren't there?"

"I dunno. I think part of that depends on how long we've been gone. I mean, it's been pretty tough to keep track of time out here. It felt like we spent a few days trapped in that prison place, but other than that, it's hard to tell. It's been

dark above us ever since we left Imperial Plaza."

"Yeah. A lot of crazy stuff has happened, but it couldn't have been that long ago, could it?" Mark asked.

"Beats me. On top of that, I'm still trying to sort out what happened when we were brought here." Justin continued.

Mark picked it up, "One minute we were fighting about Heidi dumping you and then I saw white flash that pretty much sucked me into it, just like the ones we've used here a few times, only that first one was way more painful and disorienting. And we lost all our stuff."

"Oh God, Heidi. I hadn't even thought about her," Justin realized.

A knot twisted inside Mark's gut.

*I really need to tell him. I've let it go on for long enough. There won't be a better time.*

Justin went on, "I still can't believe that she cheated on me for that asshole. I could see us together for a long time. I... I think I loved her."

*I've just gotta say it.*

"Heidi's dead."

*There. I said it. No going back now.*

"What the crap?" Justin stopped walking and faced Mark.

"I'm sorry man. I saw it happen. They killed her. I couldn't do anything, I swear. I tried everything imaginable to save her. You have no idea how mad it made me. I swear it."

"What in God's name are you talking about? How the Hell could she be here and why didn't you say anything sooner?"

"She's dead, man. I was trying to survive, just like you. I was waiting for the right time to tell you because I knew it would make you upset."

Justin grabbed Mark by the shoulders and shoved him down onto the ground. "Damn right I'm upset, you bastard! Maybe if you told me earlier I could have done something to help her."

Still lying on the ground, Mark looked up at Justin. "No. You couldn't have. They killed her right before my eyes. They brought me into some kind of twisted observation room and like locked me in a chair. Any time I struggled they shot some poison up my arm through that thing you took out. While I sat in that chair, they made me watch one of the those jungle scenes with those giant bugs. They threw her in there with them and those assholes made me watch their pet insects tear her to pieces."

"Shut up. Just shut up."

"It's true, man! Why would I make this up?"

"I don't know," Justin said, repeatedly shaking his head. "How could it have been her? We were the only two people in our apartment. We were the only ones they took."

"We don't know that. They had a crapload of people in that place. After all, that took that guy, Barry, too. And she was with us then. Maybe when they took him, they had to take all of us, too? I dunno, man. It's all messed up. I just know that I totally saw her. I'll never forget it. She didn't have any hair like us, but it was her. With her same hot eyes that she always had. I could recognize her

voice as she screamed."

"Shut. The. Hell. Up. Now. I mean it." Justin said in a flat voice, trying very hard to keep it together.

"Ok. I'll stop talking. Just know that it wasn't my fault!" Mark pleaded.

"What part of 'shut up' don't you understand?" With that he turned and stormed off.

Terrified of being left at the bottom of the metropolis, Mark quickly got to his feet and scurried after Justin, but decided it might be best to give him some space.

*That could have gone better.*

For the remainder of the trip through the park, Justin didn't say a word to Mark. Mark was glad for it to some extent. He didn't particularly enjoy being chewed out for things he couldn't prevent. While they walked, Mark kept mulling over the conversation, wondering if he really should have told Justin about Heidi. But he would've had to eventually. And it never would have been easy. Sooner or later, Justin would have found out and if he discovered that Mark had known, it would have been far worse than it had just been.

From time to time Corti, gave Mark various directions through the forest, and Mark assumed that Corti was telling Justin the same directions because they continued onward in silence. During the silence, Mark mulled over what Justin had said. Aside from the storm of swearwords, he couldn't answer Justin's main question: "How would they have gotten Heidi too?" She wasn't with them that night. Even more troubling, why would they take Heidi? What was the connection they had with her and with Barry? And how was Barry not dead? Justin had stabbed him on that terrible night, but there he was, fighting those bugs as if nothing had ever happened. And *Justin* was in the same group? How had they not killed each other?

Their altercation aside, Justin and Mark had an uneventful walk through the eastern half of Industrial Park. It would have been a gorgeous place if they had been there under different circumstances. Mark daydreamed about what it might be like to take Tamara on a date through the forest, assuming that he'd ever muster the courage to actually have a conversation with her. They could have a picnic in one of the grassy meadows and walk between the trees during the twilight hours of the day, watching the sun rays flicker in between the large leaves. *Wait, there's no sun down here!* Even still, it would have been perfect, but Mark doubted he'd ever be able to go on a date with Tamara, or anybody else for that matter. Assuming he ever made it back home, how would he explain what he'd seen? Would he tell people about it and accept the risk of having people think he was weird, or would he just try to keep it all inside? A large part of that decision rested on what Justin would want to do, as well. They'd have to decide what to tell and to whom. That also seemed like a distant possibility at the current moment.

After what must have been two hours of walking outside the Routing Station, Mark could barely see a dark grey, matted surface beyond the brush in the distance. He became more sure that it was the wall with each step they took. It amazed him that he hadn't been able to see it any earlier. It was massive and it

rose far above him. The low light conditions had made it difficult to see very far.

They walked up to the wall, a few minutes later. It was jarring to see a giant metal wall in the middle of such beautiful scenery. The wall was so big that Mark couldn't perceive any curvature when he looked to the left or to the right. This city truly was huge.

"Looks like we finally made it. Now we just have to figure out where to go from here." Mark said.

Justin didn't respond.

The silence made Mark uncomfortable, but he didn't know what else to say or do, and he certainly wasn't going to apologize for something that wasn't his fault. That much he had decided during their walk in silence.

Mark examined the surface up close for any clues about how to proceed. As far as he could tell, it was one seamless surface that extended for thousands of feet in all directions. But he knew that just because a wall had no seams that didn't mean that there was no way through it. He had already see far too many doors that seemed to just appear from a wall.

Mark switched his visor to its infrared filter while Justin just sat against a tree, in his own world of angst. Most of what he saw around him registered as a navy blue, some things were black, and some were a bit lighter blue. Over all, mostly everything was cold. He panned over to Justin who registered more as a reddish orange. Directly in front of Mark the wall appeared as a solid black.

*Nothing of interest there.*

He looked in various directions on the wall and some spots showed up as a dark blue, but he couldn't find any discernible pattern. He asked Corti how thick the outer wall was. She told him that she had downloaded the schematic information they had requested while in the Imperial Hall of Records.

"In order to maintain structural integrity, the perimeter wall of Tielmetra is at least 200 feet thick, using your standard units of measurement. However, it is not solid in all places. For example, power, which is supplied in Lower Tielmetra, needs to run to all of the city. Some of it is carried through large wires in the wall. Also, as you noted earlier, since Lower Tielmetra processes all waste within the city, there are waste management lines that down into the base of the city," Corti explained further.

"Great. So how do we find those places and get inside them?"

"I'm afraid I can't completely answer your questions. According to the data you retrieved, most of the wall has periodic hollow spaces for the aforementioned utilities. These utility spaces are big enough for people to fit inside them, though people are almost never inside them. They are located all over the city wall without any external identifying marks, in no apparent organization. I believe they were placed in their particular locations in order to best meet the particular needs they were intended to serve."

"Ok. A few more questions: How thick is the interior wall in these hollowed out spaces?"

"0.1 feet."

"So you're saying that in some parts of this giant wall there's empty space only 1.2 inches away?"

"Certainly."

"Oh, Corti! I love you! One more question. "Would there be any reason for these utility rooms to be warmer than the rest of the wall?"

"That would depend. If there were sewage traveling through pipes, it's possible that the sewage could be warmer than the wall. The overall temperature of the wall is generally cooler than the rest of Tielmetra due to the extremely cold temperatures and constant wind outside the wall."

Mark scanned the wall again using his infrared filter. Just like before, most of the wall was black but there were some occasional patches of blue.

Could those be utility rooms?

The closest blue patch was up to his left, about forty feet away. He switched to his regular vision and looked around.

*Yes! You've got to be kidding me!*

Right in front of the thinner part of the wall there was a huge poplar tree. It couldn't have been a more perfect ladder. Walking over to it, he surveyed the general area, making sure that nobody else was close by. He began to climb up its straight, oversized trunk, using the branches like rungs on a ladder. After climbing roughly twenty feet up he turned on his infrared filter again. Looking through the black branches and leaves he could see patches of dark blue on the wall.

He switched off the infrared and yelled down to Justin. "Dude! Come on up here. I think we might be close to finding a way out."

Without speaking, Justin perfunctorily approached the tree and climbed in, joining Mark twenty feet up.

Justin said one thing. "Let me be clear. If we get out of this slimy shithole, we will find a way to come back so I can slaughter those people who killed her."

Shocked, all Mark could do was say, "Uh. Ok?"

Justin was silent again.

*He's flipped out!*

Mark shimmied around the trunk so that he was standing right in front of the wall, supported by branches above and beneath him. "So this wall right here is only a tenth of a foot thick. On the other side of it is a utility room of sorts. It think it might have some of those pipes that connect part of the sewage system, which must drain out somewhere. We just have to figure out a way to get through this wall."

His plan didn't sound as hopeless in his head. How would they break through over an inch of metal while twenty feet up in a tree?

"Corti, what's the wall made out of?"

"Most objects are made of Tieladium."

"Is that a strong metal?"

"It's the strongest metal we have, especially since we started mining it from the Monten Tal Tiel in the last 200 years. We use Tieladium for just about everything."

"How old is this wall?"

"Construction of Tielmetra began 397 years ago."

"So this isn't the strongest type of the metal?"

"Presumably no-"

With one arm holding himself in the tree, Justin swung his arm as hard as possible straight the wall. His fist went clear through, like it was tin foil. As he retracted his hand he peeled the metal back. The the hole was big enough to fit both sets of fingers in it, he peeled it wide open. After a few minutes of manipulating the metal, Mark and Justin stood in front of a hole in the wall of Tielmetra that they could fit through. Without looking back, they climbed through.

## 19: Flushed

"Dude! I can't believe you just punched through that wall! That was so sweet! How did you know you could do that?" Mark was blown away.

Justin's answer was short. "I figured the metal in our suits was better than the metal in the wall."

The utility room was pitch black with just a portion of the dim light from outside pouring in through the hole. What they couldn't see, they certainly could smell. Their Tielsuits must have been equipped with an air filter because after a few breaths the smell instantly vanished.

Justin swore. "I can't see a thing in here."

"These suits must have flashlights." Mark noted. Above both of their visors a solid white beam emerged, following their line of sight.

The room took shape before their eyes. It didn't fill the entire width of the wall. In fact, it was no more than a forty foot cube. The room was filled with sixteen pipes that came down from the ceiling and continued down through the floor. Each pipe looked to be four feet in diameter.

Mark walked up to the closest pipe and touched it. He could feel a strong vibration in the pipe. The pipe to his right was also vibrating the same way, but the pipe to his left was still. Right before he removed his hand from the left pipe it was flooded with an intense vibration and the first pipe he touched went still.

Perplexed, Mark walked among all sixteen of the pipes and found that most were active, but some would cease for a short time before resuming. The back of the room was just the same as every other side. In all, the room was featureless save for the pipes in the middle.

"Well, what now? You were the one who wanted to come down here in the first place." Mark said, exasperated. It wasn't quite the surefire escape route they had hoped to find, but then again, they had no idea what they would encounter.

"I'm thinking," was the only response Justin gave.

Their hopes of immanent escape were vanishing before Mark's eyes while Justin was just standing there, silent.

After waiting until it was awkward, Justin finally spoke up.

"So here's the plan. These sewage lines all go inactive at times to ensure that they don't get clogged. Whenever there's a steady load coming, I think somewhere above us the sewage gets steadily dispersed to many different pipes. I think these sixteen pipes here are one room in hundreds of thousands like this all around the city. As I've been timing the pipes, looking for a pattern, I've noticed the back left pipe hasn't had any activity at all. I think it's clogged already. I also think that there are so many of these pipes everywhere that once one gets clogged they just don't use it for a while until everything inside decays. So I think we can open that pipe and crawl into it to find a way out of here."

"What?" Mark was dumbfounded. "How do you know all this?"

"I figured it all out with my suit right now."

"How? I didn't hear you talking to it?"

"You don't have to talk out loud to your suit. There's a whole operating

system that you can access in your own visor. Ask Corti if you don't believe me."

"Forget about that for a second. You're telling me that we are about to rip open a pipe that's probably clogged with rotting crap, jump inside, and just go along for the ride?"

"Unless you know of another way out of here."

~

Justin had him at that. So far, it was sewer surfing or sticking around Upper Tielmetra, trying not to die, which had already proven to be difficult.

"What if the clog is right here and we open a pipe filled with shit?" Mark didn't buy it.

"Our suits have an internal air supply that lasts up to ten minutes. That should be enough that we can get through any blockage." Justin said.

Mark had to point out, "You realize by 'blockage,' you mean the poop of hundreds of people that's just been sitting in a rotten pipe for days, right?"

"Unfortunately, yes."

"I can't believe I'm saying yes to this..."

"Good. This is our only way out. Over here. This is our pipeline to freedom. And for the record, just because I'm talking to you does not mean that I've gotten over what happened earlier."

*Wonderful. I'm about to swim in crap and he's still mad at me...*

"These pipes feel weaker than the wall we came through to get in here, so I think we can punch into this and rip it open." Justin explained.

"So should we just go for it?" Mark asked, not wanting to know the answer.

"Sure." Justin slammed his fist into the pipe. It went straight in. There was an awful suction noise as Justin's slimy arm came back out. A putrid, black ooze trickled down the side of the pipe from the hole.

Mark almost got sick inside his suit even with the air filter turned on. Simply the thought of what he was about to do was revolting.

"Dig in," Justin said, half kidding, as he punched another fist into the pipe. "We need to make holes big enough for us to crawl into."

Reluctantly, Mark followed suit and punched a hole into the pipe. He was surprised how easy it was to pierce a thick metal pipe like this. His Tielsuit never ceased to amaze him.

After a few minutes of ripping away the piping, there finally was a hole that could fit them one at a time. The inside of the pipe was clearly clogged. The sludge retained most of its shape even with the side of the pipe removed.

"Ready?" Justin asked Mark.

"As ready as I'll ever be..."

Justin hoisted Mark into the tube of sludge, face-first.

*This is completely insane.*

Mark wriggled his body so he could slide downward, further into the pipe in order to make room for Justin. He couldn't see a thing, but he trusted that he couldn't go too far due to the size of the pipe.

With Mark completely in the pipe, Justin climbed in after him. Between

Mark's wriggling and Justin's squirming to get fully in the pipe, they created enough movement to loosen up some of the blockage. Mark felt a churning behind his feet. He laid as still as possible in the pipe, waiting for Justin to get all the way in.

As he lay vertically in the pipe, his own weight started to pull him down, further through the sludge. His movement created a vacuum where he had been waiting. The extra pressure pulled Justin all the way in the pipe along with more sewage. The onslaught of Justin's added weight and the moving sewage with him was enough to get the whole plug moving.

Mark tried to grab the sides of the pipe before the surge of sewage was going to build up, but he couldn't gain any traction. There was simply nothing to grab. He kept sliding down further which continued the chain reaction above.

Before they knew it, both Mark and Justin were flowing down the pipe with the unclogged blockage. They were at the mercy of plumbing, flowing wherever the pipe would lead.

Mark felt almost like he was riding a water slide, only, he didn't know where it would lead and he wished he was actually sliding in water. His visor light shone down the pipe into a black abyss that revealed nothing. The sewage broke up as they gained speed so that it changed in consistency from sludge to more liquid.

"You still back there?" Mark managed to cry out through his suit. He wasn't sure if the sound was able to travel through all the muck. Justin's lack of response answered the question. He could only hope Justin hadn't gotten stuck somehow above him. Otherwise he'd be in this mess alone.

Before long, Mark felt a thud as he slammed his side against the pipe. It was turning, and his body didn't handle the turn well. The impact knocked him 180 degrees around. The sensation of falling headfirst and upside down disoriented him, and he struggled to right himself, but the surge of sewage combined with his momentum was too strong to fight.

Washed in the new direction, he thought he could see a hint of light reflecting on the wall of the pipe above his head, but he wrote it off, thinking it was his visor light. The light brightened as the flush kept carrying him. Though he couldn't see its source, the light became exceedingly bright, engulfing the darkness in pink, yellow, and orange hues. Mark could see the foul color of the sewage in the new light as it raged around him. A growing fear mounted within him as the light increased. What would he find at this source of light? What might find him?

His fear was beat out of him when his head rapped on a hard surface. His body instantly stopped flowing down the pipe while all the fluid gushed past him. The pressure brought his body in close to him and pressed him against the wall. His body in a backward somersault position, pressed against the wall, he strained to roll over and gain control of himself. His efforts came to no avail because he felt another body collide with him, contorting his body further.

Justin wasn't alone, though. He was riding on the full pressure of the pipe as it was completely unblocked. The wave of pressure kept them pinned against the barrier and completely submerged.

*Is there another clog?*

The liquid kept flowing after the pipe was totally filled. The flowing sewage did not relent. It created a magnificent force that neither Mark nor Justin could counteract. Feeling powerless and claustrophobic, it was easy to get in a panic.

*What if this pressure never stops? Am I going to drown in liquid shit?*

A minute of this passed by and finally they could feel the pressure relent. After it had sufficiently diminished, Mark and Justin fell away from the barrier and onto the bottom of the pipe. They got resituated to see what was going on around them.

The pipe was just wide enough for them to crouch inside of it. On their feet, they could finally see what the source of light had been. What they saw was the absolute last thing they would have imagined.

Mark and Justin crouched in the pipe with their arms holding steel bars that formed a grid, preventing them from exiting the sewage pipe and plummeting a few miles into a snow field far below. They looked straight out ahead and saw a gorgeous, although unfamiliar, mountain range silhouetted by a sunrise. It was a sunrise unlike anything they had ever experienced.

"Dude! There's two suns!" Justin burst out, "Like, two, real, independent suns, rising above the mountains at the same time, right next to each other! It's like *Star Wars*, but real!"

Mark was speechless. It was such a simple thing, but he just couldn't wrap his mind around it. After one yellow disc had risen in the sky, another shortly followed it. Both looked just like the sun he knew, but each was smaller than the star he had always called the sun. They both appeared to be about the same size, although the lower one had a slight reddish tint to it. That could have been just because it was closer to the horizon, still.

*Twin suns.*

Most of the mountains were at their level or shorter, but some rose even higher. Directly beneath them, as best they could tell, the outer wall of the city flanged out like a giant cone. There were no entrances or exits so far as they could tell. It was a flat, featureless wall, except that it was peppered with dark dots that had long, dark streaks that ran down from them. Beyond the base of the city there was a massive snowfield. The snowfield fed into a tiny river that cut into the snow and ice.

"What do we do now?" Mark asked, high winds howling past them, obscuring his voice. The enormity of this foreign world had already been difficult to grasp inside Tielmetra, but this was a whole new perspective. There was an entire uncharted world outside this city: craggy mountains looking so untamed and harsh, fierce wind howling around them, while the ground looked impossibly far away. Tielmetra, as behemoth as it was, was the only piece of civilization for as far as they could see.

*What are we doing here? What can we possibly hope to accomplish?*

The gaps in the bars were just enough to squeeze a head through. Mark felt his stomach tense and his hands clam up inside his suit as he looked directly down, with the only thing separating him from death being a few metal bars. With the increased visibility, he was able to glance up and see how high up

Tielmetra went. In the dawn light, it was impossible to tell exactly how high up the city reached. But Mark could tell that the top was *miles* above them. Nothing stood out against the sheer face of the city wall. It just looked like a flat surface that stretched to the limits of the troposphere.

"I can't see anything of note out there," Mark said as he brought his head back in through the grating. "You take a look."

Justin complied. At first he didn't notice anything out of the ordinary either.

"Dude, watch out!" was all that Mark was able to say before the next wave of sewage met them at full force. Justin didn't have time to pull his head out so the liquid pressed his body against the pipes. Mark didn't fare any better even with the extra warning. There simply was no traction so he was pressed against the grating too. They waited helplessly for another few minutes until the pressure finally subsided again.

"That's it! Look!" Justin yelled out.

"What? Let me see!"

"I think its those heat vents for that ITOR thing," Justin said. "I think they just opened up. And they don't look too far down there."

He came out and let Mark take a look.

"It's kinda hard to see if you look at it straight down, but if you look down and to the side, where you can start to see the wall curve a bit, you'll see a little out cropping. Once you catch that, follow it with your eye until you get directly beneath us. Then you'll notice it." Justin explained.

"Ok. Um. I think I... Oh! There it is! Ok. I'm following it around. Dang! That's small down there. How far down do you think it is?"

"I've got no clue. We don't know how big it is so it's hard to tell. Could be small and close or big and far. Either option sucks."

Mark agreed. "Yeah. I can't really make out any detail on it. I wonder why I didn't see it when I was looking a minute ago."

"Don't know," Justin said, "Maybe it just opened up?"

"But shouldn't another one have been out before this one, then?"

"Ya. I think that's what that computer told us. I don't know then. Aw shit. Here comes another wave." The liquid rushed in and pushed Justin into Mark who was just able to pull his head out before the wave hit. Similar to the last wave, they waited, unable to fight against the excessive pressure. Once it died down, Mark stuck his head back out through the grating to watch where the liquid fell. It really threw him off. The liquid went out much further from the wall than he would have expected.

"Dude, come look at this. That crap really flies far out into the air." Mark moved to allow Justin to look.

"Humph. Maybe it's just going really fast?"

"I dunno, man. Even still, that crap is way out there, and it didn't look like it was falling that slowly. In fact, some of it got caught up in the wind and just blew away, almost like a cloud of crap or something. It's really weird."

His mind began to race. "Holy shit! I think this place has low gravity!"

"What?" Justin didn't follow.

"Think about it! Everybody around here has the body of like a teenager."

"Ya? So. What does that have to do with gravity?"

"When you are in space a long time, your muscles start to get smaller if you don't exercise them right. These people have never had to move in as much gravity as us, so their muscles aren't as big as ours. Maybe after a ton of time, their bones never develop like ours either. Or think about those crazy bugs! They looked just like bigger versions of preying mantises we have back home. Maybe that's because they can actually grow that large here because of the lower gravity."

"How does that make sense? You just said the people were smaller because of the low gravity. How could bugs be bigger?" Justin was really confused.

"I think it could probably go both ways. I've always heard that Godzilla movies are fake because Godzilla would crush himself. His body would weigh too much to be supported by his bones and muscles. But maybe here, creatures that were limited in size in Earth can be much larger and still support themselves."

Justin still wasn't buying it. "I dunno. That seems a little far fetched."

"Is it, though? Why else would we be so much stronger than everybody? Do you really think you're such a badass that you could beat up those guards so effortlessly? I mean, you *destroyed* those guys. You like, bashed their faces in. That's gotta be because we're used to moving in Earth's gravity. Why does this place have to have the same gravity as Earth?"

"I guess I just assumed it did because there was air like earth and everything else looked similar."

"Man, I could go on and on. How else could they build a city so tall? Most of these buildings are like miles tall. That sort of thing is impossible on Earth. Or think about that forest we just went through and how giant those trees were. They looked just like trees we have, but some were enormous."

Before Justin had a chance to offer a response, another wave of liquid hit them.

*Dammit! I'm getting sick of this crap.*

Right before the pressure let up, Mark noticed a flashing light in the bottom of his visor. Corti told him that there were only 2 minutes left of his internal air supply. It would need at least 20 minutes to refill.

"Is your air running out too?" he asked Justin as the sewage was gone.

"Yeah. So what if your theory is right. How does that help us now? If we don't get out of this shithole soon we'll drown in it."

Mark thought for a moment. "Well, if there really is lower gravity, I guess we might be able to try jumping down to those vents beneath us."

"Are you serious? That's practically suicide." Justin was incredulous.

"So is staying here. I'd rather die out there than in a sewer pipe, surrounded in other people's pee and crap. I think we could probably break through these steel rods and hang down from them like a ladder, and then just let go. If that vent really does go around the whole city, we should just fall right into the opening."

"You got balls. That's for sure. It sounds like an idea I'd have, not you," Justin said.

"Ya, well, I suppose we don't have much of a choice. Let's start working on these rods before more crap comes. If we can kick out the bottom of the vertical bars then we should be able to slip out the bottom while still holding onto the higher vertical ones. We don't have much time, though." Mark sat on the bottom of the pipe, held the bars in the mid section, and started kicking the vertical bars where they joined with the pipe.

After the first few kicks Marks plan didn't seem promising. Justin got down next to him and kicked the same bars. With their kicks in unison, they felt the first bar give a little. The sign of progress was enough to keep them from abandoning their efforts. Working together, they timed their kicks so they might deliver the most possible force with each blow, hoping to break the first rod free from the base of the tube.

Thirty seconds passed until it finally broke free. Mark counted the vertical rods. They had six more. At their pace, the next wave of sewage would probably come back before they finished. They wouldn't have enough oxygen.

"We've gotta go faster! We only have one shot at this or we're dead!" Mark yelled.

Justin continued to time his kicks with Mark, and they got into a better routine. The next rod took maybe twenty seconds. Another minute passed; they had done five of the seven rods. While they were working on the fifth rod, the next wave of sewage collided with them. Their grip on the rods helped keep them from getting too knocked around, but they found it near impossible to effectively kick while under the pressure of the fluid.

Mark's visor indicator flashed again. One minute of air remained. They still hadn't gotten the sixth rod free. It was much harder to coordinate their kicks with the chaos of the sewage around them. They finally broke the sixth rod. Just one more to go, but Mark didn't think they'd break it before they ran out of air. He kept kicking. The flashing indicator on his visor flashed faster and faster until it was almost constant. The harder Mark tried to break free, the more air he used. Before he knew it, the indicator ceased flashing and he heard a beep, but he kept kicking while suffocating on his own carbon dioxide.

The rod was coming loose, but still not fast enough. Mark wasn't sure how long it would take before he'd start to notice the lack of oxygen. With one final blow of desperation, Justin kicked through the last vertical rod. Hope sparked inside Mark as he tried to pull the free rods apart, but his hope quickly flagged when he realized that the vertical rods were connected the horizontal ones. They would have to break free some of the lower horizontal ones before the whole grating would be flexible enough to let them through it.

But then the pressure of the liquid began to subside. Soon they were breathing air instead of their own carbon dioxide.

Justin spoke with determination, "If we break off these bottom two rungs on each side, this whole bottom half of the grid will be free and we should be able to push it out enough to slip through. But this is our last chance. We won't have any air once that sewage comes through."

"Then let's get to it," Mark said.

They went at each of the four joints with a renewed fervor as the end was in

site. It seemed that luck was with them because they broke through the last joint and the next wave still hadn't come yet. With the entire bottom half broken free, they were able to kick at the grating and it gradually bent out from the wall. The rods bent much easier than they had separated, so it only took a few kicks.

Mark was the first to climb out of the pipe. He got on his stomach and lowered his feet out the hole. It was an odd feeling, his feet lowering into absolute nothingness, with the ground thousands of feet below. He couldn't believe he was actually doing this, but he had already done many things he never imagined he'd ever do. As his torso neared the edge to the pipe, he reached up and behind to grab a hold of the grating. He kept going, so that this whole body was outside of the pipe, dangling from the pipes he was holding.

Fully outside of the city wall, Mark found that the wind was much stronger than he had anticipated. Justin was getting in position to lower himself out, too, but Mark wasn't really paying attention to him. He was looking up at an unending wall. He didn't dare look down or even from side to side because he was afraid to know how high they really were. Buffeted by the strong winds, he struggled to keep his grip as he also struggled to find the logic in his escape plan.

Justin had completely lowered himself so that he was dangling next to Mark.

"Are you sure about this? We can just let go?" Justin yelled, barely loud enough to be heard in the heavy winds.

"Of course I'm not sure. I couldn't think of anything else to do, though." Mark replied.

"Shit, man! What now then?"

Mark looked straight ahead and saw the next incoming wave of sewage. "Let go!"

"What?"

"Just let go! Now!" Just before the wall of fluid flushed him into oblivion, Mark let go of the rod. His stomach floated into his chest and air whirred around him as the pipe ascended away from him. The once empty hole vomited a jet of dark sewage that splashed into a misty cloud of filth beyond.

## 20: The Belly of the Beast

In the two and a half seconds that followed, Mark had just enough time to see that there was indeed an outcropping of metal that below him. His only hope was the the metal would be stronger than the inner wall of the city or his fall would be much longer than desired.

To his relief (and pain), he found the metal of the open heat exhaust vent to be adequately sturdy. It funneled both of them into a dark corridor where they crashed against an interior wall.

Shaken up by the experience, they both took a few minutes to get up from the floor of the room. Mark's visor illuminated more warning lights. His suit informed him that he received external forces on his boots that were two times the exposure limit. He was to return his suit for maintenance at his earliest convenience.

They couldn't see much detail in the room because it was darker than the outside, but outside light was pouring in through the openings. Sitting on the ground, still winding down from exhilarating experience of skydiving without a parachute and surviving, Mark looked down the corridor. They were in a long, narrow room with circular walls, like they were inside a donut, looking down a tangent line along its edge. The opening formed an outline of the entire room.

As they gazed down the solid white line of light from the outside, they could see the general shape of the room. They were in one of the ITER fusion reactors. Mark was sure of it. Although it was bigger than Mark had envisioned it. The curvature of the tokamak was barely perceptible as he looked down the long room. He walked to an edge of the corridor, turned on his visor light and examined the material of the wall. It was a convex curved wall that eventually wrapped into the floor and ceiling, coated with curved sheets of some type of metal. The metal looked like it was smooth and flawless at some point in time, but it wasn't that way anymore. Some of the pieces almost looked warped or rough while others looked like they didn't fit in place like they should have. It seemed odd that the walls of something so important would look so shabby.

Mark heard a grunt as Justin sat up from the floor of the room. He must have been shaken up more than Mark had been.

Justin stood up. "We've gotta find a way out of this place before it goes online."

"Yeah, but look at these walls. They're made to withstand crazy temperatures. I don't think we'll be able to just punch through this stuff," Mark said.

Justin replied, "Yeah, but I think they work on these things while they are cooling. There's gotta be somebody along the way we can find and just follow them out. You up for some running?"

"I guess I have to be," Mark said as he began a jog down the unending corridor.

While they were running, Mark checked the status of his suit after their fall. Everything was still in working order, but it definitely looked banged up. He was amazed at how durable the suit was. He must have fallen close to a sixty feet

and he landed on a hard metallic surface. But his Tielsuit continued on in the same way it had when they found it. As they ran in the silence, scouring the walls for any signs of recent work or weakness, Mark thought about the different times he would have died if he didn't have his suit. He was sure that they wouldn't have had any chance of escape without their suits. They were unimaginably lucky that they found those suits on their way out.

Neither Justin nor Mark were in the best shape for long distance running so their pace slowed as the minutes passed by. Everything looked the same. It was disorienting to continue running in a room that had absolutely no distinguishing features. Mark tried to figure out how long the room was to kill some of the time. He thought he remembered from the Hall of Records that the whole city was something like like ten or twelve miles wide. Even with the small number, that would mean they were running in a thirty one mile circular corridor around the city. There could be people working on the tokamak on the opposite side from them and it would be impossible for them to meet before the reactor came back online. Mark only hoped that luck continued to be with them.

After an indeterminate amount of time, a series of red flashing lights dropped down from the ceiling. Somehow they heard a recording inform them that the tokamak would resume fusion in fifteen minutes, and all workers should finish their current tasks and leave immediately. The lights continued to flash as their run became a sprint.

The walls felt closer than they had been only minutes earlier. No matter how far they ran, everything looked the same. The corridor continued its gradual curve and the lights flashed red, like they were trapped in a horror movie. The monotonous running only fed Mark's sense of despair. His efforts felt completely futile.

Another announcement sounded, "Fusion will begin in ten minutes. Please note the closest exit and finish your current task."

*Come on! There's got to be somebody working close to us.*

Five more minutes passed as they were given another warning of the impending danger. Around the same time as the warning, Mark thought he noticed something. He wasn't sure how long it had been this way, but the metallic wall was reflecting the flashing red lights in a way it hadn't just minutes earlier. He kept his running down the corridor, but changed his course so he'd run closer to the wall. Though he was moving quickly, every metal sheet looked much newer than the first ones he had seen. They all had a shine that definitely wasn't there the last time he had checked. None of them looked misshapen or like they didn't quite fit.

Mark wasn't sure if he should find hope in this or not. It could mean that they were even further from the workers because this portion was newer or it could mean that they were really close to the workers because this part of the wall had been replaced more recently. Either way, he pressed on, already out of breath.

"One minute until fusion begins. Hydrogen heating will begin shortly." And alarm began to sound in unison with the lights. The loud noise added to the sense of impending doom. The heat exhaust vents closed back into the wall, preparing the tokamak for use again. The corridor became pitch black between

each flashing red light.

"Shortly?" Justin cried out, "I thought we had a minute?"

They kept running, more out of desperation than anything else, unsure of what they were even looking for.

And then Justin saw it. Up and around the corner to their right they saw a faint white light. It was dim enough that they might not have seen it with the vents still open. As they crested the curve, the dim glow became a work light in the hand of a man walking toward the interior wall.

Both Mark and Justin yelled at the top of their lungs, hoping the man would hear them and stop everything, but he continued for the exit. They were still probably three hundred feet away.

*He must not have heard our yells over the noise of the alarm!*

The worker disappeared into the wall, but they could still see a light pouring into the corridor from where he had left. They continued onward, only one hundred fifty feet away.

Fifty more feet to run, and the white light pouring into the corridor cut out. The red lights ceased flashing, and they heard a hiss as pumps sucked out the oxygen in the room, replacing it with pure hydrogen. The only light in the room was their visor lights, bouncing through the corridor as they ran aimlessly.

The hissing stopped and they saw a red band appear in the middle of the corridor, following the direction of the circumference of the reactor.

"Shit! They're heating the hydrogen already!" Justin cried.

"Shut up and look at the wall!" Mark demanded. The glow of the hot hydrogen cast the entire corridor in a reddish orange hue. The metal on the walls looked as shiny as a bathroom mirror. This part was brand new. It must have been the part they just replaced.

*It must mean that the old wall must be close by!*

Mark ran forward another ten feet. An alarm sounded in his Tielsuit. "External suit temperature is 500 degrees from the maximum level before damage is sustained."

*Just as I thought!*

Ignoring the warning from his suit, he looked at the wall, and the metal looked even worse than the stuff he had seen when they first came in. There were bubbles and ripples in it, there was no reflective shine to any of it.

"Justin, get over here!" Mark yelled. The whole room was turning from an orange to a yellow as the hydrogen heated up. Mark heard another warning from his suit telling him that the suit was no longer guaranteed to withstand the heat around them. He started kicking against the wall as hard as he could. Justin came up next to him and followed suit.

The yellow light all around them became so bright it was turning to white. They had no more than ten seconds left before they'd be vaporized. They both kicked at the wall repeatedly not even sure that success would stop the reaction. With each kick, Mark noticed that it was getting harder to move. In fact, his body felt a tug toward the inner wall he was attacking.

Cracks in Mark's visor inched across his field of view from the edges. Intense heat was radiating through the glass against Mark's face. And without warning,

his entire body was pulled into the wall, like it had become a giant magnet. The impact of his suit against the wall provided the needed force; his foot pierced the plate of metal he been kicking, and air rushed in through the opening into the lower pressure area where they were.

An alarm sounded inside the reactor and everything began to shut down. The white hot gas turned to yellow, then red, and then disappeared in a matter of seconds. The magnetic force faded and Mark dropped to the ground. A nearby panel in the wall was pulled inward, and four men in suits similar to Mark's and Justin's entered the corridor. They headed straight for Mark and Justin.

## 21: Into the Pit

Mark wasn't sure whether they would fight or run. The only thing about running was that they had nowhere to go, but they hadn't challenged four people wearing Tielsuits before. A third option came to him as everything on his suit was shutting down, and all the flashing lights displayed in his visor disappeared.

*Maybe we should surrender?*

He looked to Justin for some indication. Justin was still on the ground by the panel they had kicked in. He wasn't moving. His Tielsuit had lost all its finish and some parts looked like the metal had lost its original shape.

The four guards surrounded them. Standing a few feet away, the guards spoke with unintelligible words. "Qut uk nu? Qit nu uk ut then?"

*My suit is toast!*

Paralyzed with indecision, Mark stared back at the guards.

"Ozukna. Hor."

"I'm sorry. I don't understand you."

The guards looked at each other. One on the end gave a nod, and they closed in on Mark. One took hold of each of his arms. The one that seemed in charge made a motion with his arm for Mark to follow him. The fourth grabbed Justin by his legs. Justin didn't respond.

Seeing the futility of fighting, Mark went along with the guards. Their suits looked slightly different from his own Tielsuit. Maybe these people were different from those who had tortured and detained them higher up in the city? Mark could only hope.

The group led them through the opening in the side of the reactor, and they came onto a type of runway that led perpendicularly away from the ring, toward the middle of the city. In the dim lighting, Mark could see they were walking on one of many runways that lead to the center of the ring-shaped reactor like spokes on a wheel. It was an impressive sight to see, as the ring spanned the entire circumference of the city. There must have been over thirty runways pointing toward the center of the reactor, each spaced about a mile apart from each other. The spokes were interconnected by other catwalks that formed a series of concentric circles. This web of walkways gave access to scores of large, square, unidentifiable shapes.

There were other workers in suits dotted all throughout the reactor. The head guard spoke into a radio on his suit. Before long, another squad of four guards was accompanying them. Three of them assisted the last guard as he was carrying Justin.

Throughout the entire interior of the ring, there were flashing red lights accompanied by an awful sounding alarm. A multitude of people in suits came to the hatch they had just entered with various pieces of equipment. They rapidly exited through the opening back into the ring of the reactor. Mark guessed that they were going to fix the damage he had just created.

While he was being escorted, Mark's mind raced.

*Are these people from The Pit, or are they a different type of Tielguard from Upper Tiellandra? If they're from The Pit, what are they going to do with us? Will we just get sent right back to that horrible place we left?*

Mark had more than enough time to ponder his fate, but he didn't receive any answers. After walking until the outer wall looked distant behind them, they stopped. They were all standing in a junction of two catwalks and the lead guard said something aloud again. Within seconds, there was the familiar white flash that Mark had grown to recognize.

At the next instant the group was standing in a simple, featureless room. A voice spoke more gibberish. While the voice continued to drone, high pressure jets sprayed them all. The room quickly filled with steam as the hot water doused their suits. Mark thought he could tell that the monotonous voice had begun to repeat. It must have been some description or warning about what they were all doing. Maybe this was a type of decontamination?

It didn't take long before the spray stopped and hot air blew on them, drying everybody off and blowing all the water into a drain at the edge of the room. After this procedure finished, there was another flash of white and they were gone again.

They appeared at the end of a large control room filled with people sitting in front of consoles while others walked around. Nobody wore a suit but the group as they arrived. A short fat man with a terrible complexion and thinning hair approached the group, his face in a snarl. He walked straight for the head guard and started to yell in his face, even though he had to look up to do so. His arms gesticulated wildly as he spoke, often pointing toward Mark and Justin while his voice would get more shrill. The man was in such a rage that minuscule drops of saliva splashed against the guard's helmet while he spoke. Meanwhile, the guard stood motionless, and took the verbal abuse.

After the tirade, the guard calmly (as well as Mark could tell without understanding a word) spoke in defense or explanation, Mark assumed.

The fat man scratched his bulbous chin for a moment while he thought. He growled something that Mark was sure was a swear word. Then he looked up at the guard and spewed out another few sentences of orders while the guard nodded his head in agreement. Mark marveled at how ugly their language sounded. Most of the words seemed more like grunts than anything else.

The guard pointed to Justin and said something else to the fat man. With a dismissive wave of his hand, the boss said a few more words and walked away. Mark heard the guard mutter the same word the boss had sworn just moments ago.

The group of guards grumbled amongst themselves at their current state of affairs while the head guard brought up another flash of white light.

The shock was intense. The group was standing in a grungy, muggy, smelly room. It smelled as if somebody had microwaved a bunch of dirty diapers. The smell assaulted Mark through his suit. It was still completely powered down so the filtration system must not have been working either. The smelly room was large, open, and loud. There were multiple transport vehicles coming and going. They were much louder and looked more shoddy than the simple elegance of

the TMT from Upper Tielmetra. The group led Mark and Justin to the nearest transport vehicle. While boarding the vehicle, the whir of the engines was almost deafening. Inside, there was standing room only, save for Justin, who was laid on a bench seat, the pilot, and the head guard. Once everybody was settled in the dingy vehicle, the door slammed closed, and the vehicle dropped out of the transport hub.

Their descent was not graceful like the vehicles Mark had been used to. It seemed as though the ground beneath had instantly been removed. Not ready for the sudden drop, Mark felt like he could vomit. Everybody else seemed totally unaffected by the movements of the vehicle. They continued to hold him steady, ensuring that he wouldn't be able to do anything unexpected. Then without any warning or indication, the pilot switched on some thrusters and the descent slowed as they began to move laterally.

Mark felt so sick from the smell of the atmosphere and the erratic motion that he was barely able to look out the front windshield at Lower Tielmetra, or The Pit, as the Upper Tielmetrans had called it.

As the flight became slightly less turbulent, Mark gained a little more composure and snuck a glance out the front windshield. If he thought the depths of Upper Tielmetra looked dreary, then this could have been outer darkness. Though he remembered its size from the picture in the Hall of Records, The Pit did not look expansive in any way; the visibility was terrible. There obviously was no natural light since the top of the city was the base of Upper Tielmetra. The darkness was augmented by a dense smog that sat everywhere. Mark wasn't sure if he even wanted to know what chemicals were comprising the cloud of smog.

Buildings appeared out of nowhere, frequently close enough that one improper movement would certainly have meant death for the whole group. Mark was surprised to see that the pilot was barely looking out the windshield. Instead he had his gaze fixed upon an instrument in the dashboard that looked like a type of navigation tool. Maybe that was how he was able to dodge the buildings and traffic in spite of the poor visibility.

There was a substantial amount of air traffic like in the city above, but Mark couldn't see the full extent of it because of the poor visibility. He could only see that they were in a lane of traffic with cars above, in front, and to the side of them. However, he was only able to see two or three cars away.

Mark wasn't going to find any clues of their destination by looking out the window. He spent the rest of the trip holding in his bile and guessing what was in store for them. He couldn't make up his mind if being in The Pit was a positive or negative development. Only time would tell.

After a short flight, the pilot left the traffic pattern and began to slow their vehicle. Through the smog ahead, Mark thought he could make out some stationary bright lights. The aircraft looked as if it were on a collision course with them. Mark also noticed that they weren't the only vehicle going to or leaving the lit area. There was a steady flow of cars entering and leaving the area.

With each passing moment, the lights became more clear and other lights became visible as the amount of smog impairing their view decreased. With the

newfound detail, Mark decided he was looking at something that resembled a large casino. The bright lights he had originally seen looked like words in a language he couldn't decipher. He was really beginning to miss the functionality of his Tielsuit. Along with the words, there were searchlights swaying through the smog and hundreds of multicolored lasers. The smog gave the lights a much more dramatic effect.

Their car descended into a queue of vehicles steadily approaching the entrance as they picked up or dropped off their passengers. It wasn't very long until they reached the entry plaza and they exited onto the platform. The smell was just as putrid as it was in the hangar bay where they had left. Standing at the foot of the casino, it looked much larger than it had when they were in their vehicle. The car door slid closed behind them and flew off with the other cars. Mark noticed that as bad as their aircraft had looked, many others in the vicinity looked even worse. Everything seemed like a cheaper, grimmer emulation of the glamour of Upper Tielmetra.

The guards lead Mark and carried Justin to the entrance of the building, which was at the other end of the landing platform. Mark also noticed that the people looked much more subdued in their fashion than those he had seen in Upper Tielmetra. He didn't see any weird hair colors or styles. People wore plain clothes, many of which were filthy.

To the anger of those who had been waiting in line, the guards walked right to the front and spoke with the doormen. The head guard spoke with the door guard. Although Mark couldn't understand a word they were saying, it was clear that the man at the door held much more authority than any of the guards who had come with him.

A short dialogue ensued where they frequently looked back at the rest of the group, patiently waiting for the verdict of the door guard. Gradually the look of skepticism faded on the doorman. The guard finally decided to let the group in, but he called another security guard to escort them.

Once inside the main entrance, the group stood in front of a large staircase. To his relief, the smell of The Pit was muted - not dissipated, but muted. It was as if everybody were wearing perfume to cover up their intense body odor. There were enough stairs that Mark couldn't see what awaited them at the top, but he saw a kaleidoscope of colors flashing to the beat of loud music that sounded synthesized. People were scattered around the staircase, hanging out while others were coming and going.

The building guard led the group up the stairs without saying much. Once they crested the top of the stairs, a cavernous room came into view. With easily a few thousand people dancing, eating, drinking, gambling, and enjoying more carnal pleasures; the room was filled with activity. Mark wasn't sure why a place like this would be so heavily guarded. It didn't appear that *anything* was being regulated. Mark noted that the guards who had brought them here did not look any more relaxed after coming inside, at least from what their body language suggested. Something about this place filled them with anxiety.

The group broke through the riot of debauchery like a steady steam roller, unhindered by the crowd. People spilled their drinks and collided with one

another as the group walked through the enormous room, but everybody was having such a good time or was so drugged up that nobody cared too much. Nobody found it odd that a group of men in suits was carrying an unconscious person in a Tielsuit and escorting another person through the crowd of pleasure seekers.

Mark could even feel the beat of the music through his Tielsuit. Every once in a while, the music had words, but he couldn't understand any of them. It sounded just like all the grating words he had heard. None of it fit with the ethereal mood of the music, but nobody else in the room shared his opinion.

The group eventually made its way through the bulk of the crowd and near a stage, then walked to their right up another stair case. Half way up the stairs two more guards halted them. Their escort spoke to the guards and they were allowed to proceed up the rest of the stairs. At the other end of the balcony, Mark saw a man so obese that Mark actually noticed the *man* before he noticed the two scantily clad female attendants dancing around him.

The large man reclined in a chase lounge, adorned in hardly more than a sheet which did not conceal as much of his body as Mark would have liked. There were two armed guards who stood idly behind the scene while the women tried their best to entertain a bored man. As the group neared the man, his grey eyes looked up through greasy brown bangs at the visitors. The rest of his body remained stationary while the women continued dancing around him. Mark noticed one of the guards in his group trembling while they stood before this enormous man.

One of the man's guards stepped forward and spoke in words Mark couldn't understand. The escort responded and motioned to the head guard of their group to explain their presence.

*What on earth are they saying, and who is this guy?*

The head guard of the original group spoke nervously and pointed to Mark and Justin. At first the man barely seemed awake, let alone attentive to the conversation, but suddenly his expression changed. Life came into his face and he actually appeared engaged in the conversation. He still didn't move his massive body, but he interrupted the head guard in mid sentence. This man obviously held significant authority. As he spoke, one of his armed guards left through a curtain on the side wall, the dancing girls departed, and the guards who had carried Justin propped him up.

Mark's heart pounded in his chest as he tried to figure out what was happening around him. Two of the other guards came to Mark and each took a hold of one of Mark's arms. With their remaining hands they reached around behind his helmet and pulled on the release lever behind Mark's helmet.

The booming sounds of the room blasted into his ears as the helmet disconnected from the rest of his Tielsuit. Mark felt defenseless without the protection of the suit he had become so accustomed to.

The guards didn't stop with releasing his helmet. They continued to take the rest of his suit off, revealing his white jumpsuit he still wore from when he was in captivity.

"Let go of me, you shitheads!" Justin yelled from behind Mark. The guards

must have taken his suit off as well. Despite the circumstances, Mark was relieved to hear Justin's voice. Ever since the reactor incident, he hadn't seen or heard Justin at all. With all the commotion, Mark wasn't sure where to place his attention.

Though it took a massive amount of effort, the massive man sat up the second he saw Mark and Justin under their suits. He barked an order at the group of guards that had escorted them from the fusion reactor. The guards stopped what they were doing, and with a stunned look, they released their grip on Mark and Justin. They glanced at each other, confused.

The fat man shouted something to the guards. They scrambled away from Mark and Justin and walked toward the staircase. As they left, the leader kept looking over his shoulder, back at the large man, hoping to see or hear something else, but the large man just stared back, resolute.

Before long, Mark sat on the carpeted floor of the balcony alone with Justin, the large man, his female dancers, and his one remaining bodyguard.

## 22: Too Good to be True?

Mark toyed with the idea of taking out the solitary guard, but he resisted the thought. This man obviously trusted the strength of his one guard to dismiss all the rest... or he trusted Mark and Justin.

Justin sat up next to Mark and yelled over the loud music, "I'm fine. Thanks for asking, by the way."

"Sorry I didn't stop to see how you were. In case you didn't notice, we were being groped by a bunch of guards when they took off your helmet."

The large man interrupted their bickering with a bellowing shout. Although they couldn't understand what he said, he garnered their attention anyway. Then his second guard had returned. The man motioned from the guard to Mark and Justin, and the guard approached. He held a tiny device that looked like a hearing aid in each of his hands. He gave one to both Mark and Justin.

Without hesitation, Justin lifted his hand, as if he was going to throw the device away.

Mark reached over. "Stop! What are you doing, you idiot?"

"What are you talking about? Who knows what this thing is? I'm not gonna obey this fatass."

"You'll get us killed or something! This dude's obviously powerful. Besides, I think these things go in our ears so we can understand what they say. Some of those guards we beat up when we got our suits had things like this in their ears."

Justin wasn't sure if he totally bought Mark's argument, but the guard stood nearby with his weapon pointed straight at his face. That helped him decide. So he brought his hand down, and looked to the guard for further instructions.

The guard pantomimed putting the device up near his ear. Just as Mark had thought. Mark studied the device, and it didn't appear to have any particular sides so he brought it up to his right ear and pushed it in, just like an earplug. Nothing dramatic happened as he looked over at Justin who followed suit. With their compliance the guard stepped back and lowered his weapon, slightly.

"Good. Now we can speak like civilized people, you off-world imbeciles."

Mark and Justin exchanged looks.

*How does he know we aren't from here?*

"My name is Hauzel. I'm the Imperial appointed magistrate of Lower Tielmetra, or as most people in the Empire lovingly put it - The Pit. I prefer to call it Old Tiellandra, myself, as it better represents our heritage than the egotistical bastards above us do, but that's not important. Now tell me, where are you from?"

They hesitated. Where would they even begin? Would they talk about Earth or their exploits in Upper Tielmetra?

"You might find it helpful to know that I can have you killed at any moment if I think you're feeding me a load of shit."

Mark began, "My name is Mark. And this is Justin."

Hauzel interjected, "Thank you, Mark, for convincing your friend, Justin not to destroy my unicom. Those are extremely rare down here and I would have

been more than angry if he had cost me that amount of money just to try to prove to me how strong he is. Please continue."

"Uh yeah, sorry about that," Mark elaborated. "So Justin and I live together in a place called Eugene, Oregon. We were in our apartment, when we suddenly saw a bright white light flash in front of us. The next thing I knew I was in a dark place where lots of terrible things happened. While there, I was held against my will by many people who wore dark suits similar to the ones your guards wear. They were too strong for me to fight, and they placed me in large environments with these creatures that looked like giant versions of insects from where we live. The bugs killed a whole bunch of people, and the guards made me watch as they were murdered. During one of the times when I was fighting against these bugs, I met up with Justin and we escaped from the area."

Hauzel visibly reacted to Mark's comment about escaping. "How did you escape?"

"Eh. Um. We found the place where the insects came out, and when the last one came out, we jumped in. It turned out to be like a cage or something, and then when they went to open it up, we got past the guy who was waiting for the cage to open."

Hauzel pressed further, "But how did you know where the antlions were coming in, and how did you get past the cage attendant?"

Mark had difficulty providing a coherent answer.

Justin stepped in. "I had heard from some of the other people who were fighting with us that there was a chance to escape if you timed it right and dove through the bushes where the antlions entered. A few of us were going to try it that day, but I wanted to wait until I met up with Mark again. When I saw him that same day, I knew it was our time to leave. I decided to take a chance, and it paid off."

"Now what about the attendants? How did you get past them?"

"Oh, that wasn't too hard. I just kicked their asses."

Mark spoke up, "Wait. How did you know there were multiple attendants? I had only mentioned one."

Hauzel looked surprised, but amused. "I've heard parts of your story multiple times before, but more on that later. Continue with your story."

Mark picked up where Justin had left off. "After getting out of the cage and finding our way past the attendants, we stumbled upon an amazing find. We found these suits and put them on. I don't think we would have made it out alive without them. In fact, I know we wouldn't have. I was already in pretty bad shape. My ankle was pretty jacked up and the suit like healed my ankle while we walked. There were a ton of other times where the suits saved us too."

"How did you get out of the ECF?" Hauzel asked.

"ECF?" Mark was confused.

"The place where you had been held in captivity. It's called the Extraterrestrial Containment Facility. But more on that later, too."

*How does this guy know so much?*

"Well, our suits helped us a ton," Mark continued. "We had to get past a few more guards as we wandered around, looking for a way out. Eventually, we

were cornered, but we stumbled upon these transporters called... uh, what were they again?"

"Faster Than Light Transporters or something like that?" Justin suggested.

"Yeah. That was it. Faster Than Light Units. So anyway, our suits sort of talked to the unit and it teleported us outside by the Imperial Plaza. Through the navigation of our suits, we found some hall of records building to figure out where we were and where we could go. After seeing the layout of Tielmetra, we decided that our best chances of escaping the city would be getting to the bottom. So we've been trying to make our way down here."

"Hah! Escape!" Hauzel chided. "Nobody has escaped from Tielmetra in the last twenty years."

"You know of people escaping?" Justin blurted out.

"Of course. I helped them."

Mark's heart leapt at the thought. *This is too good to be true.* "Who did you help escape?"

"Hold on. I'm the one asking the questions here. But, if you must know, it was other people from Earth."

"Bullshit." Justin gave his unsolicited opinion.

"If you want to stay in the Pit, cleaning it for the rest of your life, then go ahead and think that. Or you can shut up and listen to me."

Mark was quick to appease. "Sorry sir. Ignore my friend. But, I'm confused. You're telling us that there have been people coming here from Earth for at least the last twenty years?"

"That, I'm not entirely sure about. I *do* know that twenty years ago, they were studying Earth. I figured they had either given up and moved on, or that maybe security had gotten tighter. Either way, we haven't seen anybody like you in quite a while."

"How many people like us have you seen?" Mark had to ask.

"Hm. If I had to guess, I would say... close to a hundred, through the years."

Mark's eyes grew wide. *One hundred people who've escaped.* "That must mean -"

"That must mean that I'm getting tired of asking you fools to shut up. I don't have the patience I once did. If you want my help, which I'm feeling less and less inclined to offer, then let me figure things out."

"Sorry," Justin and Mark murmured.

"Don't be sorry, be quiet! Answer my questions. So I'm curious, how did you get from the Imperial Plaza to here?"

"Do you want the whole story? Justin asked.

"Yes, or I wouldn't have asked you." Hauzel replied, visibly frustrated.

In the following minutes, Mark and Justin told him about the help they got from their suits, their trips on the TMT, how they tried to change their appearance, the taxi accident, narrowly escaping the Tielmetran guards in the industrial district, finding the base of Upper Tielmetra, getting flushed out of the city with sewage, and finally landing in the fusion reactor.

Throughout the story, Hauzel interrupted them, asking for clarification. He took a surprising interest in certain parts of their story and was engaged

throughout the whole time. Particularly, he marveled at their plan to jump into the deactivated tokamak, and their deduction that Zearythian gravity was lower than Earth's.

After they finished the story, Hauzel, appeared to be deep in thought. Not sure what to do, Mark and Justin awkwardly waited for Hauzel to respond. When the response finally did come, his demeanor had completely changed from when they first met him.

"I'm going to assist you two. We have a lot to discuss still, but I am sure you are exhausted and starving..."

He whistled, and immediately one of the two ladies from earlier emerged from the curtain to his right.

"This is Deena," Hauzel introduced them. She smiled. "She will see to it that your every need is provided for over the next few days. After you've slept, eaten, relaxed, and gained some of your strength, we will talk about what lies ahead for you. Until then, enjoy all that Old Tiellandra has to offer. It's not much compared to what you probably saw up top, admittedly, but the girls here are real, and the drinks are strong enough to take you higher than the top of Tielmonta."

Justin and Mark exchanged a look as the hot girl approached them. She could have been a supermodel, and she looked thrilled to meet the guys. She took their hands and led them away from Hauzel.

Mark tentatively glanced back at Hauzel for approval. He couldn't believe what he had just been told. Hauzel dismissively waved them away. Mark turned around and followed the lead of the girl. He realized there was one girl and two of them, but he didn't really care. It was nice, albeit odd, to actually have a female notice him and be excited about it.

~

Deena led them back down the stairs from the balcony and through a door to their right. The loud music sounded muffled behind them as the door closed and they made their way down a dimly lit corridor. It was eery how similar it was to the ECF where they had been so recently, yet the feelings Mark had were completely different.

As they entered into a small room that turned out to be a type of elevator, Mark noticed that Deena was walking barefooted. It struck him in a way he couldn't describe. She appeared extremely comfortable in their environment. Comfort was a feeling Mark hadn't experienced since the moment he arrived in Tielmetra.

While waiting in the lift, the girl introduced herself to them. The three of them exchanged introductions while they waited. It was an awkward experience. Mark was never good with small talk.

After a short while, they arrived on their floor. The door opened to a room with a glass wall opposing them. Like a hotel sweet, they saw a room with a common area, a dining area, a sort of kitchen, and then doors to other rooms. Outside the glass wall was an epic view of the Pit, or what would have been The

Pit if it hadn't been enshrouded with smog. They could see the whole complex they were in and the entry plaza that they had come through earlier, but nothing more. Still, what they could see was impressive.

"Welcome to Hauzel's Lodge," Deena said, proud. Mark wondered if the name sounded better in their language, because it didn't have a great ring to it in English.

She continued, "Come in and enjoy yourselves. Let me take care of you while you are here. Tell me how I can be of service to you. You both look tired. Maybe you should rest. show you to your rooms."

Deena told Mark to wait in the common area for a moment as she would show Justin inside the suite to his left. After a brief pause, she returned, ready to lead Mark to a room off to their right and closed the door behind her. It was a bedroom.

Mark had a feeling that he knew where the situation was going. He wasn't sure how he felt about it. There was a part of him that couldn't believe what he was experiencing. It seemed too easy. In an instant, his fate completely reversed.

"Let me help you undress and get into bed. You must be so anxious to get out of that dreadful jumpsuit." Deena said as she approached him.

"Thanks, but I can actually manage myself." He sat on the edge of the bed, amazed by it's comfort and by how tired he was feeling.

Deena looked offended.

*She must not be used to being rejected. Man! What am I doing? Why am I turning this down?*

She tried a different tactic, "Your poor muscles must be sore. You've been through a lot. Let me help you feel better." She stood near hear him, close enough to touch him.

As a matter of fact, Mark did feel sore all over.

She took his silence as permission to continue, softly placing her hands on his shoulders. Her touch shot waves of feeling down his back. He drew in a deep breath. She began to gently massage his shoulders. Mark closed his eyes, savoring the moment.

Without him realizing, she had sat down on the bed behind him, and had been giving him the best back rub he'd ever had. He was practically leaning in her lap, completely relaxed. She leaned down and kissed him on the lips.

The electrifying sensation snapped him out of his quasi trance.

*Why does she want me so much?*

He pulled his head away from hers, although he really didn't want to. She looked down at him in surprise, her soft sandy brown hair dangling around her sleek face.

"Look, don't take this the wrong way, but I am really tired. Can I just get some sleep?"

*Hopefully that won't make her suspicious.*

"Of course. I'm sorry for presuming anything. I will leave you alone. If you need anything, use this to let me know."

She slid away from him over to the edge of the bed where she grabbed a device that looked like a futuristic wristwatch. She wrapped it around Mark's

wrist.

"If you need anything, just speak into that communicator and I will hear it on mine. Anything, ok?"

"Ok. Thanks. I will," Mark replied, lying on the bed, feeling exhaustion overtake him.

Deena slipped off the bed, leaned over Mark, kissed him on the forehead and said, "Have a great sleep. I will be here when you wake up and we can eat."

With that, she walked to the door of the room, turned off the lights, and left.

The room was partially illuminated by the dim yellow glow of the city-lit smog coming in through the wall-sized window to his right.

Mark looked out the window and couldn't believe his eyes. He was falling asleep on a bed in a hotel sweet of some kind of slum lord in a foreign city on another planet, and a cute girl just tried to score with him.

*Is this really happening? It seems too good to be true. How long has it been since I've slept, anyway?*

His eyes grew heavy as he tried to study the communication device on his left wrist. Wondering if it was really some kind of secret security or tracking device, his eyes closed before he could give it considerable thought.

For the first time in over thirty hours, Mark fell asleep.

### 23: Tielmetra's Origin

"Dude! Wake up!"

Mark awoke to Justin's voice in the same dim yellow light he remembered the night before. It was an eery feeling. He had no idea what time of day it was. The Pit's lack of sunlight was already messing with his internal clock after sleeping just one time.

"How long was I out?" Mark asked, sitting up in the bed.

"No idea. But I do know that last night was great, wasn't it?"

Mark replied, "Yeah. I slept like a rock."

"Really? I didn't get much sleep at all... if you catch my drift."

*Weird. She went straight from my room into his!*

"I'm not an idiot. But you might be." Mark lowered his voice, "We don't know if we can trust these people. Even if we can, you have no idea where this girl's from."

"Ask her yourself. She's hanging out in the other room, ready to make us anything we want to eat."

"Ok. Gimmie a sec. I'll be out in a minute."

Mark heard Justin say something to the girl in the other room as he left Mark alone. Still sitting in bed, Mark studied his room. The bed was surprisingly firm, but he didn't remember feeling uncomfortable during his sleep. To the left of the bed he saw a bathroom that resembled one he might see in a hotel. Overall, the nondescript room didn't look too opulent, but it looked much nicer than what he saw outside the glass wall to his right.

He climbed out of his bed and approached the transparent wall. A wide swath of the Pit spanned before him. The room was a few hundred feet above the plaza he had entered through earlier. There was still a buzz of activity near the entrance like there had been before. The colored lights from higher up on this building illuminated the plaza and some of the surrounding buildings.

Beyond the closest group of buildings, though, the air maintained a dark amber color. The combination of smog, building lights, and darkness formed a murky brownish yellow. Overall, the scene was expansive, yet drab. Everything had an industrial, crowded, and dirty feel about it.

Hauzel's building (if indeed it was his) looked to be the nicest building around. Something nicer could have been elsewhere, but Mark had no way of knowing because of the smog.

After a failed attempt at freshening himself up in the bathroom, Mark decided to see what awaited him in the main room. To his surprise, he smelled a sweet aroma coming from the kitchen area where the girl appeared to be hard at work, and wearing more clothes than before. She wore dark, form-fitting clothes, almost like spandex. Justin couldn't have looked more comfortable, wearing a flowing plain-colored robe, lounging on a couch in the adjoining living room.

"Why don't you change your clothes, man?" Justin asked when he noticed Mark.

Deena looked up from her work. "Hi! Happy third!" she said, "We are

almost done with breakfast." It was if their awkward interaction last night had never even taken place.

Mark gave her a confused look. "Happy third?"

"Yeah," she added. "The third shift began just twenty minutes ago." She pointed across the room to a screen that was on the transparent wall. It looked like a news program was on. There wasn't any sound coming from it, though.

Mark must have still looked confused so she continued. "The daily reports always come on at the beginning of the third shift."

Deena could tell that Mark had no idea what she was talking about. "Come sit down and eat some food while I help you understand. Justin leapt up and led Mark over to a metal table. They sat down while Deena came over and brought two plates of food.

Mark tried to be polite, but couldn't contain his bewilderment at what she had placed in front of him. She sat down across the table from them. Mark had to ask, "What is this?" as he motioned to the three inch cube on his plate.

"I made you my favorite food," Deena said. "I've only had that twice in my life, but it was the best nadelle I've ever had."

"Nadelle?" Mark looked skeptical.

"Yeah. Try it. I promise you'll love it.

Mark didn't share her confidence. "How do I eat it?"

She laughed. "What do you mean 'how do you eat it?' You pick it up and put it in your mouth, silly."

Mark looked over at Justin, who already had his nadelle in his hands, and was about to bite into it. Mark touched his and it felt warm, and soft, yet it kept its cubic form. He grabbed it with both hands and brought it toward his face, Deena watching all the while. Mark couldn't quite describe how it smelled, but it was enjoyable, almost like the floral scent of a perfume.

Going for it, Mark bit into a big chunk of the nadelle. The texture was like a spongecake. And it was delicious. It flooded his whole palate with a soft, mildly sweet, wild, flavor that he had never tasted anything like. He took another bite. Deena smiled.

With good food in his body, Mark felt more relaxed. "So what's the deal with these shifts?" he asked.

Deena was glad to answer. She seemed happy that Mark was engaging her. "We have three equal shifts every day. Shift one is for work, shift two is for sleep, and three is for relaxing and free time. It's how we divide up our days. But not everybody completely follows the shift schedules."

"What do you mean?" Justin asked while chewing on nadelle.

She said, "Well, take me, for example. I work whenever Hauzel needs me to. So I don't have strict working hours. Sometimes my busiest time is during the second and third shifts."

"What exactly is your job?" Mark asked.

Deena answered, "I do whatever Hauzel asks me to do."

"Anything?" Justin asked.

"Of course. He's my boss."

"Really?" Mark was incredulous. "That sounds awful. It's like you're are a

slave."

"What's a slave?" Deena asked.

"Kind of like what you are. A slave has to do whatever their master wants. They are a person who's owned by somebody else," Mark explained.

"Oh, I'm not like that," she said.

"So you choose to have a boss who can do anything he wants to you?" Mark couldn't figure it out.

"Why wouldn't I? I get to eat real food, live in the nicest living quarters of all Old Tiellandra, and meet the most interesting people around, like you. If I quit, not that I ever would, there would be a thousand girls waiting to take my place."

"This is the nicest place in all of the Pit?" Justin gasped.

Mark looked around the room and noticed how plain everything looked. The floor was covered with a dark type of carpet, the furniture appeared plain and didn't feel overly comfortable. There wasn't any art or other type of decorations. Nothing looked dirty or in disrepair, but it certainly wasn't a posh living space.

*And this is the absolute best among everybody in all of the Pit? No wonder they call it that...*

"It's Old Tiellandra. Only those prissy topsiders call it the Pit. You'll offend anybody you meet down here if you call our home that." Deena tried to conceal her frustration, but Mark still noticed.

He gained a new respect for this girl. "So how long have you worked for Hauzel?"

"Four years. Since I was fourteen," Deena answered, nonchalant.

Mark nearly choked on his nadelle.

*Hauzel hires fourteen year olds to be his personal slaves? What a pervert!*

"So how did Hauzel get so powerful? What does he do?" Mark asked, hoping to figure out if he could trust the man.

"I don't know. He's been the regent of Old Tiellandra for as long as I've been alive."

That made Mark curious, "Is Hauzel a good boss to you? Does he treat you well?"

Deena dropped her gaze for a moment. "He has the authority to do anything he wants. He provides for me and doesn't hurt me... unless I'm disobedient. He doesn't speak to me all that much, really."

*Sounds more and more like a winner...*

Deena suddenly jumped, and developed a blank stare, as if she were in a daydream. A few seconds later, her attention returned.

"Hauzel wants to meet with you two in an hour. I need to get you cleaned up before you meet him. I'll show you how to use your cleaning units."

"How did you find that out?" Justin asked.

"My unicom. Hauzel can speak to me at any time, wherever I am, through it. You both are wearing one, too. They're the reason we can talk to each other. It translates any language into your language in real time. They can also be programmed to be a radio communication device, too."

She continued, "Come on. We have to hurry. I need to get you ready for your meeting with Hauzel. But be sure to finish your nadelle, though. Can't let it go

to waste."

~

After an awkward experience with Deena showing Mark how to use the alien shower and insisting upon dressing him in Hauzel-approved clothing, he was waiting in the common area as Deena repeated the procedure with Justin. *He's probably inviting her in the shower with him.*

*What's been happening to him lately? It's like all he thinks about is getting another piece of ass. Didn't Heidi mean anything to him?*

*Man, that already feels like a different life.*

"Ok, we're ready!" Deena announced as she and Justin came out of his room. He was wearing a dark jumpsuit just like Mark's. The clothes looked utilitarian and felt it, too. Deena had also changed out her jumpsuit, back into something more revealing. *Must also be part of Hauzel's dress code. I wonder if Justin helped her change.*

Deena led them out of their suite, back to the elevator. The wait while traveling wasn't quite as awkward as before. They had something to discuss as Deena gave them instructions about how to address Hauzel.

Apparently, Hauzel was very particular in the way he wanted people to speak with him. Speak only when spoken to. That sort of thing. Mark struggled to figure out how Deena could feel so comfortable living and working for such a scoundrel.

Their elevator opened to a room that looked very different from the last place Hauzel had met them. There was no loud music. The room was blandly lit, functionally furnished, and had a general feeling of austerity.

Hauzel must have known what his guests were thinking. Rising from his chair at the other end of the room, he greeted them, "I know, I know, this is nothing like our grand room. In fact, there is nothing in all the rest of Old Tiellandra like our grand room. That place is the pinnacle of our city. You won't find anywhere else down here that comes close. This room, as plain as it might look, is still one of the finest around. So please try to make yourself comfortable as we talk."

Mark, and Justin were baffled at the way Hauzel spoke with such candor and warmth. It was almost as if he were a different person. His large body didn't look quite as large when it was stuffed inside an official uniform. His hair looked freshly manicured, and his demeanor was much more congenial. Even Deena seemed shocked by his transformation.

"Deena, don't be worried. Everything's alright. In fact, it's great. You don't have to leave us. I want you to hear what we discuss. These boys will need your help."

She looked at him, dumfounded.

"Come on. All of you. Come sit at my table."

The three of them approached a large table in the center of the room. As they drew near, Mark noticed a large map sprawled across the table. The map showed a foreign land, supplemented with unreadable characters.

"This is Zearyth. As you know, you're in the lower portion of a city called

Tielmetra. You're in the capitol city of Tiellandra."

Hauzel pointed to a dot in roughly the center of the third biggest land mass on the map.

"To my knowledge, there's only one other functioning city in Tiellandra, and it's called Tielseca, over to the West."

He pointed to another dot on Tiellandra, near the northern coast of a western peninsula, by a river delta.

"I have no idea what that place is like, though. Since Zoan finished construction of Tielmetra and sealed the Upper and Lower cities, we've had no real contact with the outside world."

"How long ago was that?" Mark asked.

"338 years. Back in 8862."

Justin blurted out, "So you've never seen anything other than the Pit?"

"Correct. And neither has anybody else down here. And stop calling Old Tiellandra the Pit. Topsiders are the only ones who say that. And topsiders don't survive down here." Hauzel gave a sharp look to both the boys.

"However, Tiellandra used to look very different."

"How do you know if you've never left here before?" Justin seemed to have forgotten he was talking to the same man who could have killed him just hours earlier.

"My descendants lived in the Old Tiellandran capital city, before Tielmetra was finished. Back then, Tiellandra was like the rest of the world. We had cities spread all over our country. However, as you can see, Tiellandra isn't the only nation on Zearyth. There's Midulm to the South, and Prathis to the East. They've been at war with one another for centuries and they would occasionally draw us into their skirmishes."

"At first, Tiellandra was able to remain outside of the conflict, especially when both Midulm and Prathis had primitive weaponry compared to us. They had been fighting for so long that neither society prospered. But we should have known that it was only a matter of time before their war would envelope the entire planet. Their technology finally caught up with their hatred. The situation became so volatile that massive destruction was a constant threat. We needed to protect ourselves."

"So Emperor Zoan managed to unify our nation and devote all of our resources to the construction of the supreme city, the capitol of the supreme nation - Tielmetra."

"This city was to have impregnable defenses, and it, combined with Tielseca, would be large enough to house our entire nation. The two cities would keep us safe from the ever-growing harsh realities of war on the outside."

"And nobody from Tielmetra has been outside to this day," he paused, seeing if anyone had any questions.

Mark asked, "I'm still confused, though. What does all this have to do with the other people you mentioned?"

"That's where I was eventually going. As I said the other day, you two are not the first people from Earth to come through here."

Deena's eyes grew wide when she heard this. "How come I haven't seen any

other boys like this?"

"You were not alive the last time somebody came through," Hauzel continued. "And they have not always been boys like this. Some have looked very different from you two. Some with different colored skin, or with different facial features. I have seen people of all ages, even a small child with her mother and father. They were some of the last people who came here."

"I was amazed, that even after close to twenty years, the way both of you ended up here was so similar to how people escaped in the past. But when they stopped coming, I figured that the dumb topsiders either finally realized they had people escaping and fixed the breach, or that they were finished studying your race."

"So other people came in through the fusion reactors?" Mark ventured.

"That's the only way to cross the barrier between Upper and Lower Tielmetra to my knowledge. About twenty-five years ago, we had to stop one of our Tokamaks due to contamination almost once a month. Granted, not every person made it out alive. They didn't all have suits like you did. Some people had some more primitive versions of your suits, which must have been what ECF guards used back then. Only about fifty percent of those who came without suits made it here alive, and even the survivors invariably sustained significant injuries."

"As more and more of them came, I was able to construct an idea of what the Containment Facility was trying to accomplish. One survivor who had stolen a Tielsuit would hear something from a guard they snuck past, or another escapist might have done some research in Upper Tielmetra before making their way down here."

"It sounds like people were coming through here for quite a long time, then?" Mark estimated.

Which led Justin to ask, "How old are you, anyway?"

"That's none of your damn business," Hauzel snapped. "But I'm old enough to have worked with numerous people from your planet."

"Back to what I was explaining. As your people kept coming through, it became clear that the topsiders have been studying you. I think they have been planning to attack you. From what they have been doing to you, they appear to be studying your race to discover how you fight, how you defend yourself, what weaknesses you might have, and whether you could be subjugated effectively."

"Where are their armies?" Mark asked, and Justin added, "Yeah! We didn't see any invasion forces anywhere."

"And how much of Tielmetra did you see in your journey here? I'll save you breath. Less than one percent. There's a lot of volume in this city, and I would not be surprised if those topsiders had enough military firepower to destroy both Prathis and Midulm together. And if that's the case, you two and your planet would not stand a chance."

"But why would they want to invade Earth?" Justin was incredulous.

"That is what I've been trying to solve for the last thirty years. Well, not quite. During the last ten years or so..." Hauzel trailed off.

"What do you mean?" Mark inquired.

Hauzel stared down toward the ground. "I had a bit of a, uh, lapse in judgment. When your people had been dropping down here with such frequency, I had hopes that we could work together to end our bondage to the topsiders. Naturally, the humans wanted to fight against those who had captured them. So I used to help each of them. But then they just stopped coming."

"At first I thought it was just a slower time, which we sometimes would have. But then a year passed by without anybody showing up. And then five years. And by around the tenth year or so, I just gave up hope, I suppose. I stopped plotting for ways we could fight back."

"That was over ten years ago, now. In the meantime, I think I simply tried to enjoy life as much as possible down here, which, admittedly, is easier for me than everybody else."

"Your presence has changed things, though," he said with an air of proclamation.

"How so?" Justin was confused.

"Your presence can either mean one of two things," Hauzel elaborated. "Either the security is once again lighter than it has been, and more people will be able to escape, or -"

Interrupting, Justin said, "I can tell you right now, the security wasn't light. We barely made it out alive."

"Or the other option is that there's something special about both of you."

Mark looked over at Justin and then at himself. "I don't think that's it either. Got any other ideas?"

"Only time will tell. But for now, I'm going to assume it's the second option."

"Well, uh, thanks?" Mark said.

Hauzel didn't skip a beat. "You can show me your gratitude by helping me find the rest of your people."

## 24: Plans and Rooftops

"Wait. What?" Mark couldn't believe what he had heard.

"I think your people are still alive. I don't know how many by now, or if they've stayed in the same place. But I want you to find out." Hauzel explained.

Justin sputtered, "But we wouldn't even know where to look."

"I do." Hauzel said, directing their attention to the map. "Look here. Tielmetra is seated in the heart of the Monten Tal Tiel where the Tielrina runs down from Tielmonta over here."

"In the heart of the what? By the what? Down from the what?" Justin asked.

Trying to conceal his frustration, Hauzel explained, "Tielmetra sits in a valley where the Zella River forks off from the Tielrina, the biggest river in Tiellandra. Fortunately, it's not as big all the way up here, in the Monten Tal Tiel, Tiellandra's largest mountain range. We're also about 1800 zics south of Tielmonta, the tallest mountain in the world."

He pointed all of these features out on the map before them. "As I was saying, Tielmetra is in this valley where the rivers split. If you follow the Tielrina to the South, you'll descend the mountains alongside the river. It's the safest bet to navigating your way out of the mountains into a more hospitable environment where you'll be more likely to survive. It's also the direction that all the others of your kind followed."

"What else is that direction?" Mark asked.

"I'm not certain. Roughly 500 zics down the Tielrina is the Kouzner Waterfall. My father had always told me about a military research station that was there in the free days. I am not sure how he knew of it. But we've sent people in that direction as it's their best chance of discovering something helpful."

"What do you mean? Helpful in what way?" Justin wondered aloud.

"Helpful in that it might provide some tool to resist or even fight against the bastard topsiders." Hauzel remarked.

"If they found something, wouldn't you know about it by now? Wouldn't they have tried to use it?" Mark questioned.

"That's been my fear as well," he confirmed. "As I had said, I'd given up all hope until I saw you two. But unless you want to spend the rest of your lives here in Old Tiellandra, doing the shit work that the topsiders don't want to do, never feeling the warmth of Castor and Pollux shining on your skin, never seeing the snow on the Monten Tal Tiel reflect their light, getting to that waterfall is your best hope.

"How can you be certain?" Mark asked.

"I'm not," Hauzel replied. "It is simply the direction I told everybody else to go. However, once people leave the perimeter of Tielmetra, we lose all communication. So I have no idea if anybody has actually followed through with my directions."

"We'll find out, I guess." Justin shrugged.

"I hope so. For your sake."

Mark asked Hauzel, "So how soon can we leave Old Tiellandra and begin

our search?"

"It isn't that simple. People don't just leave Old Tiellandra. There's no official way in or out of the city. If you're born in Old Tiellandra, you die here."

"Then how did everybody else leave?" Justin asked.

"The only thing that leaves Old Tiellandra is the trash. Everything else is recycled. Those who've gone before you went out with the trash. I would be dishonest if I told you the process were without risk."

"Has anybody died trying to escape this way?" said Mark.

"I do not know, as we lose contact with everybody once they reach a certain range from our communication receivers. After that point, I am not certain of anybody's success. But I do know that the potential for death remains significant."

Mark was confused, "So you mean to tell me that you have flying cars, giant buildings that tower miles high, can recycle everything you use, but you can't communicate with people outside the walls of this place?"

"That is correct. Think about it. All of Tielmetra was built with the sole purpose of keeping the rest of the world out. The entire city is covered by a shield. It reflects all waves on the electromagnetic spectrum. No sound waves, no radio waves, or light can penetrate it. Additionally, the shield blocks all forms of radiation. Not even the latest types of weapons cannot damage the exterior. So once you are outside of that shield, there's no way to communicate with anybody on the inside."

"How do people cross through the shield, then?" Mark asked.

"I'm not sure, but I do have some theories. Which is why the two of you will need to prepare for your journey. You have a little more than five remaining shifts until you should leave. The sooner you can leave, the better your odds of survival will be. Days are getting shorter and the air is getting colder each day. You should be prepared to leave in the middle of the second shift so that by the time you get out of the city wall, the first sun will be rising. This will give you the maximum amount of time to find shelter in the daylight."

"Until then, you both need to regain your strength. You need to sleep, eat well, and learn the most you can about Tiellandran geography and Zearythian physics. Meanwhile, I will work to make sure that you have all the supplies you need."

Hauzel glanced at the display on the wall. "It's almost half past third. Come back here at half past first and I should have gathered some of your supplies by then. Until then, I'll have Deena take your measurements so we can tailor some winter clothes for you both."

Deena shifted in her seat, excited about her new assignment.

"After that, you are both free to do as you like until we meet again. Just don't do anything stupid." Hauzel stood up. Clearly, the conversation was over.

"Understood," Mark said. "And thanks for your help. I want to get home."

"During our free time, where would you suggest we go?" Justin asked.

"I usually go to the roof when I need to get a good perspective. But it has been quite some time since I've gone up there," Hauzel answered, looking past Justin, focused on something intangible. "Deena will see you both back to your

quarters.”

~

After an awkward time of Deena taking (in Mark’s opinion, but not Justin’s) way too detailed measurements for their clothes, their dinner of Nadelle felt even more awkward, and finally the third shift was over. Three more hours and it would be half past the first shift, time to meet with Hauzel again. Apparently, the Teillandrans lived on an eighteen hour cycle. That would take some getting used to. It was also strange that sleep was considered the middle of the day.

*Zearyth must be smaller than Earth.*

When Deena was finished cleaning up their meal (lunch?), Justin asked her if she could show them the rooftop. Her eyes grew wide, “Of course! Are you both ready now?”

“Sure,” Justin said.

She led them back to the elevator. Mark could feel her nervous energy as she pressed the buttons. “You know, I’ve never been up to the roof. He must really think you guys are special.”

“Really?” Justin asked.

“He’s never let anybody on the roof as long as I’ve worked for him. He’s never gone up there himself, either. It will be so great to get outside!”

Mark asked, “How often do you get to go outside?”

*If only this girl knew what being outside were really like...*

“It’s been seventeen days.”

Justin stole a glance at Mark.

“Seventeen days?” Mark repeated.

“Yes. I’ve been lucky recently. He sent me on an errand that took me outside of the compound.”

Mark glared at Justin, this time.

*In what world is being stuck inside this place for seventeen days lucky?*

Mark’s ears popped as the elevator door opened. Thick, rancid air rushed toward them. Distant sounds of urban activity come from some unseen place. The roof of Hauzel’s casino looked surprisingly similar to what Mark had imagined.

Deena was enraptured as they walked closer to the edge of the rooftop, and rightly so. Although the roof itself was ordinary, the view was like nothing Mark had ever seen. Hauzel’s casino was so tall that it rose above the thickest layers of smog. The skyline below him looked like the refinery scene of Terminator 2, but it extended for miles all around. Complex looking buildings, manufacturing who knew what, flames burning waste, raising to the sky. Only, there was no sky. Mark thought he could barely see the ceiling of the Pit, maybe a few thousand feet above them. The metallic surface, though covered in soot, reflected the city light from below.

Through what open space there was, three-dimensional grids of moving lights connected every building. Mark could only imagine how many people were traveling through all that traffic.

"Holy crap, dude! Come here!" Justin was standing against a railing on the edge of the roof, peering down. "You've got to see this."

Reluctantly, Mark crept toward the edge of the massive building, feeling his toes tingle with nerves. The view looking over the edge of rail was staggering. "Dude, that must be close to a mile, straight down." The illuminated letters on the front of the building must have been a thousand feet below them and close to a thousand feet tall themselves.

"Seriously, man," Justin agreed.

Mark wondered aloud, "I wonder what Hauzel uses this whole building for. Surely it's not all a casino. This place is massive."

"I don't know," Deena confessed. "Isn't this place incredible?"

"Yeah. Hey, do you know what those words on the front of the building say?" Mark asked.

"Yep. Everybody in Old Teillanda knows. They say, 'Hauzel's Haven.'"

"At least he's modest," Justin said.

Deena caught the sarcasm in Justin's voice. "He's a good man! And it's true. People from all over Old Tiellandra come here. It's the one place people can have a good time. People save all they have to come and experience a little joy."

"And he conveniently gets rich providing his *haven* for people," Mark quipped.

"He can't just do it all for free!" she was getting defensive.

"Look, forget about it. I don't wanna start an argument over it. This view is pretty incredible." he tried to be placating.

"Oh Pollux! Why now?" Deena yelled out. "I'm sorry guys. I have to go. Hauzel just messaged me. He needs me for a bit. You can either stay up here until I come back or come down with me back to your quarters."

"This sure beats our rooms," Justin answered.

"Ok. I'll be back as soon as I can," she said.

"Take your time," Mark said as she began to walk back toward the door. She looked hurt by his comment.

After it was clear that she had gone back inside, Mark looked over at Justin, the two of them leaning against the rail, looking out at the city. Breaking the silence, Mark asked, "So, you trust him?"

"What other choice do we have?" Justin replied.

"I suppose you're right. I mean, he's the best chance we have of getting home."

"Yeah."

"I just get a bad feeling about him, though. Like, are we his captives right now, or are we free to leave?"

"Does it matter?" Justin asked. "I mean look at this place. Can you believe it? We are standing on the rooftop of some guy's casino, on a foreign planet. Who knows what's waiting to be explored on the other side of these walls?"

"Yeah, but don't you want to get home?"

"I guess. But, come on, this is amazing! Who knew that stuff like this actually existed? I mean, warring nations, secret human hideouts! This is like all of our favorite movies, but in real life!"

"Yeah, but," Mark reflected, "It's also like all of my nightmares, but in real life. Those people on the top side are terrible! I mean, they murdered Heidi! Not to mention tons of other people. And all so they can study us? I kind of just want to find some way to get the hell out of here and leave a bomb on the way out or something. I mean, look around us. There are like millions of people here, who've never seen the light of day. They've just living in their own filth. Breathing their own crap in one massive gas cloud. It looks like prison."

"That's just it! Imagine if how cool it would be if we found this human hideout, and helped Hauzel fight the people up top! We could change history here!"

"Or die. I mean, hasn't Heidi's death had any impact on you?"

"Of course it has, ass. And wouldn't it be cool to make those bastards pay?"

Trying to make up his mind, Mark asked, "So we just do whatever this Hauzel guy asks us to do?"

"Why not?"

"Well, for starters, just yesterday he was like a 400 pound pimp casino owner, wearing a loincloth thing and had naked women all around him--"

"Your point?"

"My point is that today he's like a totally different kind of guy. And he shared all that stuff with us. He doesn't even know us. Why the sudden change?"

"You heard him. He said we're the first to come through here in like ten years. Maybe we're so badass that we've helping him clean up his act."

"Or maybe he's got some other plan," Mark offered. "Maybe he's working with the people up top and that's why he's so rich."

"He's rich because every guy who wants a piece of ass comes here and pays for it, not to mention all the other ways he makes money. It makes good sense."

"Speaking of, you screwed Deena yet?"

"Are you just asking so you can judge me again?"

"That means 'yes.' Dude, didn't Heidi mean anything to you?"

"Alright, three things we need to get straight: One, of course I cared about Heidi. But my feelings for her died when I found out she was givin' it to that assface Frank, or whatever his name was. Two, yes, I banged Deena. I hardly had any choice in the matter. She was all over me. And three, the way I cope with my crap is my business. I don't need your self-righteous judgments about everything I do."

Mark softened his demeanor, "Look, I get it. It's just that, I've been concerned. You haven't been acting liking yourself lately."

"Acting like myself?!?" Justin retorted. "We've been somehow taken to a foreign planet with all sorts of crazy shit going on, and you're concerned that I haven't been myself? Man, if screwing a hot alien chick is the only thing I'm doing, I think I'll be ok."

"Ok. I'll drop it. By the way, though, how long do you think it's been?"

"What do you mean?"

"How long do you think we've been here? You think time is the same here as back home?"

"I dunno," Justin offered.

“Like, if we ever make it home, will it be at the same time? We must have gone faster than light speed to get here. What if it’s like 200 years in the future when we get back?”

“You’re assuming we’ll ever get back...”

“Yeah.” Mark shivered at the thought of spending the rest of his life in the Pit, never seeing his family again.

## 25: Preparation

Deena returned after what felt like a short time, announcing that it was already half way through the first shift, time to meet Hauzel again. Mark couldn't look at her the same way, knowing what Justin had described to him earlier in their conversation.

Hauzel greeted the three of them in the same meeting room as before. Only, this time, he had a few assistants with him. Along with his additional assistants, there was a meager pile of supplies spread out on tables in the middle of the room.

"This is all you're giving us to survive out in the wilderness?" Justin was incredulous.

"You both will face significant challenges in leaving Tielmetra," Hauzel stated. He went on, "Old Teillandra is responsible for managing and disposing of all the waste of the entire city. We dispose of our own biological waste and the material waste of the entire city. The city was built with a pipeline drawing water from the Tielrina. The river feed helps make up for the water lost in the city's recirculation process, but it also provides a way to expel the city's waste. Our garbage disposal plants incinerate and break down material waste. The broken down trash goes into outgoing water along with all of the biological waste of Old Tiellandra."

"So, let me guess, we are going out with the rest of the trash?" Mark asked, remembering a similar line from *The Empire Strikes Back*.

"Precisely," Hauzel responded, oblivious to Mark's cheesy pun. "My workers are still fabricating the cases you'll be transported in. They are designed to be light enough to float in a river of garbage, but durable enough to withstand the pressures of our waste disposal system - while keeping you alive. This will mean several things. First, your space inside the transport unit will be very limited. Second, you will have to exit the transport while still floating in the river. So all of your gear will get wet in the process of your escape."

"And by 'wet' you mean, covered in liquid shit," Justin added.

Hauzel glared. "Yes, that is one way to describe it. Lastly, your clothing will need to protect you from cold weather and the harsh elements of high elevation. And admittedly, I have no firsthand experience in those kinds of conditions. Have either of you experienced anything like this back on your home planet?"

Justin replied, "Well, I've never gone swimming in a river of flowing poop... But we did just recently go down a waterslide with a lot of it. Does that count?"

"But we have done some amateur climbing and hiking in the mountains and hills around our school," Mark offered. "We've got basic navigation skills and some rough survival skills."

"Good, because we'll need to discuss with you which items will be the most important to pack. As I said, none of us have any experience outside of our home here, where the temperature is always regulated," Hauzel explained.

Justin muttered, "Yeah, regulated to be hot, sweaty, and nasty."

Mark spoke up quickly, trying to cover Justin's comment, "So let's look at

these supplies. I think we'll need to make sure we have a source of fire or heat, food, water, a portable form of shelter would be awesome, navigational tools would be great, and some kind of weapon would be great if there's room.

"Alright. I will have my assistants work on procuring the necessary equipment, and in our third shift today we can examine what they've brought. While you are here now, try on these clothes I've had tailored for you. By our estimates, they should be able to keep your body warm in temperatures below freezing. But they aren't waterproof. We have waterproof suites, but they won't be warm enough. So you can either wear the waterproof suites and change into the cold-weather clothes on the shore, or you can wear the cold-weather clothes under the waterproof suites. We fabricated two different sizes for the suites for each of you, depending on your choice."

Mark thought for a while and then made up his mind. "I think it would make the most sense to wear the cold-weather clothes and try to get the wet suits on over the other layers."

"Just be aware that with all the layers you'll have on to keep you warm, the waterproof suits will not fit perfectly, so their effectiveness might be compromised," Hauzel warned.

They both changed into the first layer of clothes, which felt like an adult-sized onesie, covering their bodies from neck to toes, including the hands. Since the fabric was stretchable and all one piece, they stepped into the cloth suits from the neck hole and wore them like a giant body-shaped glove. Their next two layers were essentially the same thing.

"It never gets cold enough for us to need any material warmer than what you have on. So the only solution we have for surviving in the mountains is to give you as many layers as possible," Hauzel explained, apologetic for the cumbersome outfit they were wearing.

With their three-layered unitards in place, Mark and Justin put on a set of sturdy boots that looked like they were used for construction or factory work. With their boots firmly secured, they were ready for the hardest part of suiting up: getting their waterproof suits on over their clothes.

The wet suits fortunately had zippers in the front, but even still, they were made of a form-fitting rubber material which made it close to impossible to fit their boots down into the pant legs. By the time they were fully dressed, everything on their bodies was covered except for a circle around their noses and eyes. They had spent a solid fifteen minutes trying to get dressed.

Justin waddled around the room. "This thing feels like a spacesuit. I can hardly move."

"How many times have you been in a spacesuit?" Mark retorted.

"Never. But you know what I mean, ass."

"I do. Hauzel, are you sure you don't have anything waterproof that's lighter than these rubber suits? Like a hazmat suit or something?" Mark said.

He replied, "We do have other options, but none of them are as durable as these rubber suits. And seeing as you'll be climbing through garbage to get out of the flowing water, you'll need suits that won't leak."

"That makes sense, but I still don't like it," Justin said.

Hauzel understood their frustration. "After you both get some sleep during the second shift, you'll have all of third to practice maneuvering in those suits. It will be tiring work. So you should head back to your quarters to get good quality rest. You only have third shift tonight and first tomorrow to finish your preparations. You should head back now and I'll see you at two hours after third. Deena, help them take their clothes off and lead them back to their rooms."

Deena was more than happy to follow orders.

Even though they had gone to sleep before the end of the first shift, Mark still felt exhausted waking up at the end of the second shift.

*Barely eight hours of sleep is not enough when you're on a foreign planet!*

Another breakfast (*was it breakfast even though it was in the middle of the day?*) of nadelle, a shower, and then Mark, Justin, and Deena headed out. This time to a different room than earlier. Deena led them into a large room easily the size of three football fields.

Justin leaned close to Mark. "I guess we're seeing some of what's hidden inside this place."

As they walked deeper into the plain room, they saw that it looked like it could have been on the set of the 90's TV show, *American Gladiators*. The space was filled with a variety of obstacle courses and even had a large swimming pool.

Hauzel was standing at the end closest to the entrance, with a few of his assistants. In front of him was the pile of clothes they had worn earlier and also a collection of what looked like survival gear. "Alright, gentlemen. You have one shift to master these supplies. And your life depends on it."

"I wonder if he rehearsed that." Justin said.

Hauzel responded, "You may laugh now, but you won't be laughing when it's freezing cold and you forgot how to start a fire. Now put your clothes on and grab your gear."

The simple command was not so simple to carry out. After wearing all the layers of clothes, there was still a daunting pile of gear to pack in a backpack.

*How am I going to carry all this?*

To his surprise, the bag full of supplies was much lighter than Mark had expected. Clumsily slinging the pack around his shoulders, he remembered the lower gravity on Zearyth. They'd be able to carry more supplies for longer distances before getting tired. However, that still didn't change how awkward it was to maneuver with so many layers of clothes.

"Good. Now that you have all your gear, you need to get accustomed to walking, moving, and performing basic tasks with it all. We will spend the next few hours working on this - walking, climbing, running, and eventually swimming," Hauzel explained.

In the time that ensued, Hauzel and his assistants were amazed at what Mark and Justin were able to do, wearing so many layers clothes, and wearing such large packs of supplies. They clamored over rock walls, they ran, lifted one another over boulders, and eventually even swam in water with relative ease. Granted, their agility did not match their strength. They had a limited range of

motion and were forced to be deliberate with their movements. But even after two hours of exercises, they did not feel overly tired from what appeared to everybody else as strenuous work.

After Hauzel was adequately convinced that Mark and Justin were more than physically capable to face the elements, he gathered them together and had them empty the packs so they could see what tools they would have at their disposal.

"We understand that both of you have more experience in traversing wilderness environments than we do. So tell us if you think there is anything else you need," Hauzel explained. "Our biggest constraints were fitting you and your supplies inside of our transport units and also making sure that you have enough food to sustain you until you can hunt."

"Hunt?" Justin asked?

"Of course. We do not presume to know how long your journey will take. You will really only have enough space for eight days of food, assuming you do not need to store large amounts of water. Naturally, the lower you travel in elevation, the more water you will need to store since you will not have access to water in the form of snow," Hauzel continued.

"In addition to eight days of rations, you will have water in insulated containers. You will have rope and carabiners for climbing or pulling objects. Also, you will both have climbing picks, knives, a minor first-aid kit, and waterproof fabric for constructing a shelter."

"I have no reason to believe that you both will need training with any of those tools. However, there is one device that you will need to acquaint yourselves with. It's called a spherogun."

Hauzel gave Mark and Justin a tool that might as well have been a wireless blowdryer.

"This tool is powered by the smallest spheromaks ever built. I've had a team of scientists working on it for years. This is the only working prototype we have. And you will need it. To be honest, I had forgotten my scientists had researched it. I had quit thinking it would be used a long time ago."

"The circular portion of the gun is a fusion reactor, similar to the large tokamaks that power all of Tielmetra. This tiny spheromak is self-contained and will keep plasma burning hot for years. As it creates fusion, the gun will have a continual power source strong enough to create an electrically-conducted laser induced plasma channel," Hauzel explained.

"So what does it do?" Justin asked.

Hauzel aimed the spherogun at an object thirty feet away in the obstacle course and pulled the trigger. With the sound of a prolonged thunderclap, a bright spark arced from the gun to the target. As Hauzel held the trigger down, the target blackened at the point of impact and quickly lit ablaze. Before long, the entire target caught on fire.

"Holy shit!" Justin exclaimed. "It's a real laser gun!"

"Now you have to be careful with this. It is not a laser gun in the sense that you might think. The arc of light you saw connecting to my target was electrically charged. So don't use this gun if you aren't insulated from what you

are aiming at or you could get electrocuted. Also bear in mind that every time you use it, you will hear that sonic boom because of the intense heating of the air around the laser beam. Essentially, the spherogun shoots a straight, steady, and concentrated lightning bolt."

Mark asked, "How often can we use it? Does it ever run out of energy?"

"The fusion reaction inside is constantly active and calibrated to put out just enough wattage to power the laser. So you would be able to use it as long as you need, but the heat from the plasma channel is so strong that it will damage the barrel of the gun if you leave it on for too long. A good rule of thumb is that you should wait about ten times as long as you used it before using it again so the barrel doesn't overheat. I wouldn't advise using it for more than five seconds consecutively. Also know that as long as the plasma channel is being created, you'll hear the sonic boom. And beware of the power of the arc. It can easily destroy more than you intended. Are you ready to give it a try?"

Hauzel placed the gun into Mark's hand. Holding it in both of his open palms in reverence, Mark noted that it felt cool to the touch.

He asked, "Is there a safety switch or anything?"

"No," Hauzel answered. "This is a prototype. My engineers assumed it would be used in a controlled environment."

## 26: Bring Out Your Dead

"It's time to leave for your journey; I'm going to miss you," Deena's sorrowful voice woke Mark from his sleep. Opening his eyes, he saw that she was sitting at the foot of his bed. She rested her hand on his leg, and added, "You should take one more shower while you're here. I'm more than willing to help you get ready."

Still half asleep, he was sufficiently awake to feel creeped out by her continual advances. "No thanks. I think I can clean myself."

"You don't have to stay here," Mark eventually added, hoping she'd give him some privacy.

"I don't mind."

*Ugh!*

The shower didn't help him wake up. He wasn't sure if it was the only six hours of sleep he had been getting, the fact that he was probably going to die in his second escape attempt through sewage, or the fact that it always looked like night in the Pit, but he felt miserable.

All cleaned up and clothed, Mark came out to the common area, where he found Justin already eating his third shift portion of nadelle. "How you feeling, man?" Mark asked.

"Like trash," Justin answered.

"So no different than most of your Saturday mornings, eh?" Mark responded.

"Hah. Hah." Justin said sarcastically. "Eat your nadelle and shut up."

After showers and breakfast, Deena led them from their living quarters back down to the main floor of Hauzel's place. Once their elevator doors opened, they were blasted with the loud music and flashing lights of the dance hall.

"Jeez, man. Does this party ever stop here?" Mark asked.

"This is Hauzel's main source of revenue," Deena explain. "There are always people who want an escape from life in Old Tiellandra. Hauzel is happy to provide it, eighteen hours a day. Follow me down the stairs, out to the front. Hauzel has a transport ready for us."

Their second time at the pull-up ramp was completely different than the first. Just a few short days ago, Justin was unconscious, and Mark feared for his life. Now he was leaving, no longer in his Tielsuit, accompanied by a pretty, yet creepy girl. Granted, he still feared for his life.

Deena led them to a transport that looked nicer than the one they had taken to Hauzel's place, but it still didn't compare to anything they had seen topside.

"When we get to the Tielrina, we'll be at the very bottom of all Tielmetra. Most people don't ever see it," Deena shuddered, as the three of them sat down in the transport. All strapped in and surrounded by the gear which had already been loaded, the driver steered the transport away from the ramp.

Fortunately, the transport handled more gracefully than the transport of their previous Pit excursion. Similar to the last trip, though, Mark wasn't able to very far out the front window because of the smog and lack of ambient light.

After a few minutes of descending further into the Pit, Mark discovered that Hauzel's place had been the brightest, most opulent place around. "What do most people do down there? There are so many featureless buildings? Is this where people live or work? Or both?" he asked Deena.

"Most of us work in sanitation, energy production, recycling, or fabrication," she began, but then interrupted herself. "Hey, look! I think I can see the Tielrina below us!"

Considering how bad the visibility was, Mark was doubtful Deena could see all the way to the bottom of the Pit from where they were. However, before he finished his thought, the aircraft began to slow its descent.

Looking straight out the window, there was no indication of the enormous size of all Tielmetra. The buildings were so large that only a few were visible. Between each were featureless dark brown corridors of fog. The city lights reflecting upon the pollutants in the air kept the empty space from looking pure black.

"When we get out, it will be just a short walk to where we'll meet Hauzel. Everything should be ready," the copilot told them.

The passenger door opened to a jarring juxtaposition: in the same field of view was the filthiest poverty Mark had ever seen along with flying cars and gargantuan buildings. And however well he thought he had adjusted to the pungent smell of the Pit while staying with Hauzel, he realized there was a whole other depth of knowledge he had been yet to experience.

They all exited the transport.

*We made it. We are standing at the bottom of The Pit, the bottom of Tielmetra!*

Mark looked up into the coffee colored haze above him, letting the enormity of all twelve miles of city above settle on him. They had actually managed to find a way to the bottom of this technological Hell hole. And here they were, in the bottom of the Pit.

Indeed, what he saw around him looked like he was in the pit of hell. The Tielrina, the "great river" was much less great than he had envisioned. It was a small river, maybe a couple hundred feet wide, its squalid water hardly flowing. Mark guessed the reason the river flowed so slowly was because of how polluted it was. Here was a thousand cubic miles of people's trash, flowing continuously in a river out of the city, with the poorest of the poor, sifting through it, looking for something of value. Worst of all, floating along with the trash were countless bodies, all at various levels of decomposition.

*Don't these people value human life at all?*

And this was their ticket out of Tielmetra, the supreme city. In a river of trash.

"Well, we've already swam through shit to get here. It's only fitting that we float out with the trash to leave, eh?" Justin comment.

"Very insightful," Mark added.

The copilot motioned for them to follow him, "This way. Let's not keep Hauzel waiting."

They rounded a corner from where they had landed and walked along the shore of the Tielrina. They were between the base of a massive building and the

edge of the river, along with maybe fifty others who were either near the river's edge, or on the shore, examining their loot. Mark did all he could to not vomit as he took everything in, trying to follow Hauzel's men. Even the ever-enthusiastic Deena walked with a somber gait. Instinctively, Justin held her close; she didn't resist.

*I'm not sure which we make me vomit first...*

After two minutes of walking in silence, Hauzel, a few of his attendants (the clothed kind), and two over-sized coffins emerged into view ahead of them, near the edge of the river. Another two minutes, and they were reunited.

"I wasn't expecting you come all the way here just to see us off," Mark commented to Hauzel.

He replied, "I've never done it any other way. You all are our best hope."

"Well, thanks. I hope we can live up to your expectations," Mark replied.

"Don't worry. Of course we won't," Justin stated with confidence. When nobody laughed, he added, "But we'll try."

Hauzel didn't let the awkward comment hang in dead air. "You'll find that everything is prepared as we discussed yesterday. Remember, once we load you with your supplies and seal the transports, they will be locked for the duration of your trip, until you open them."

"We know," Justin pointed out, "I took a dump right before we left."

Not amused, Hauzel asked, "So you're ready to leave Tielmetra, then?"

Feeling like he was about to enter the lair of a final boss in a video game, Mark said, "Yes."

"Well, get your suits on. Once you are fully clothed, we'll load you into the transports."

Mark was glad for the practice they had from the day before, but it was still a cumbersome process to place himself in the water-tight suit, while wearing his clothes underneath. Eventually, though, he managed to get dressed and he found Justin had already been done. Their supply packs had already been loaded into their transports, which were nothing more than durable, air-tight coffins.

Hauzel glanced toward the river and the transports. "Mark, you'll find the spherogun in your transport. Do not use it unless you are ready." Bringing his gaze back upon Mark and Justin, he held his chin higher and began his final remarks. "I cannot say what lies beyond the inner walls of our city. Unknown dangers most certainly lie ahead. However, the fate of Old Tiellandra and your people lies in your hands. May the Twins guide you." He paused a moment, his emotions preventing him from continuing.

"Alright. As you both enter your transports, my men will seal them and push you out into the river. Don't open them until you see the light above. Don't forget, we have designed your transports so they should float right-side-up. Should you get capsized, just wait; eventually you'll right yourself. And when you get out, assuming it is still the second shift, the suns should still be to the Southeast. Follow the Tielrina out this valley, hopefully toward your people. I am sorry that I cannot do more for you."

Choking back some tears, he continued, "If you find Leonard, please ask him what has taken him so long. Also, please tell him I'm sorry that I could not do

more for Eleanor. I pray every day that Elizabeth is safe."

"We'll look for him, I promise," Mark said, as he shook Hauzel's hand. "And thank you for your help."

"I can't take it!" Deena said as she burst into tears. "I know I'm not supposed to make a scene, but I'm going to miss you both so much! Please come back. I'll be waiting... especially for you." She reached up and kissed Justin on the lips, lingering long enough that Mark felt awkward watching.

Afterward, Justin said, "I won't ever forget you, my dear."

*Oh Please. What's he gonna do, take her back to Earth with him?*

The door clasped shut over him as Mark heard his transport splash against the waters of the Tielrina.

*This is it. We're leaving Tielmetra, whether I want to or not, at this point.*

Their journey out of the city began as a slow and uneventful one. Mark's transport lazily drifted down the river, among so much trash that nothing flowed with significant movement. His transport had a four-inch diameter window right in front of his face so he had a tiny element of situational awareness. Inside his transport, Mark had the distinct feeling of being buried alive. There was barely room for him to roll over onto to his stomach, and the steel case was thinly padded while he laid in it. His legs, torso, and arms had seat belts that he could fasten for when it would get bumpy, while his backpack with supplies was secured near his feet. So the four-inch window was maybe ten inches in front of his face. This all amounted to him laying still, and seeing darkness out of his window, with the occasional hint of dark brown as he gazed up from the river.

However, after an indeterminate amount of time, the sound of water lightly splashing against his coffin sounded more like water rushing past him. Still only darkness out of his window.

With the sound of rushing water came the feeling of abrupt changes in velocity as Mark felt shoved about, like the transport was colliding with other objects. In addition, he occasionally felt the sensation of spinning around. Without any visual references, it was impossible to guess what direction he was headed. Even more, he began to feel queasy.

The sounds of rushing water grew louder. While Mark sensed he was moving faster, he noticed that the spinning and collisions were diminishing - as if everything were gaining speed and separating. Trying to distract himself from the nausea, and trying to anticipate his next move, he began to think.

*The only things that could be causing me to speed up would be gravity, higher water pressure, or some kind of motor. I'd rule out the motor or engine. Supposedly, nobody's ever been here before. A motor can't run for a few hundred years without maintenance.*

*So it's either increased pressure or gravity. Pressure would come from having the same amount of water flowing through a smaller area, or more water through the same sized area. The river (maybe now in some kind of pipe) can't be shrinking. There was too much junk earlier. It would get clogged. And where would the extra water be coming from?*

The rushing water sound was definitely growing louder. Although the change

had been gradual, Mark had the sense that he was moving much faster now than when he had begun.

*Gravity. I must be going faster due to gravity. And if I'm going faster and faster, the slope is getting steeper and steeper.*

At this realization, his heart sank.

*There's a waterfall.*

He quickly reviewed everything he could remember about people surviving waterfalls.

*Should I strap in? That will keep me from getting battered around, but will I just get crushed? Will the gravity here make a difference? Shit! I wonder if Justin's figured this out?*

Before he could think any more, the sound of rushing water vanished, and he was weightless, as the coffin dropped beneath him.

*I've gotta protect my head!*

He wrapped his arms around his head, preferring to injure his arms rather than his head. In midair, he felt as if his feet dipped below him, like he was standing straight up in air. And just as quickly as he was launched into the air, the bottom of his coffin jammed into his feet. His body crumpled as much as physically possible in the confines of his transport. Mark's knees slammed into the top of the enclosure while it plunged into the water.

The next few minutes were a blur. Water surged around the capsule while Mark was tossed around inside. With still no light coming in the porthole, he had no way to orient himself. The sound of rushing water was deafening, while his sense of gravity continually changed directions. Struggling through the constant variable forces, he managed to strap his torso into what was originally the bottom of the transport box. With his torso strapped in, he was better able to get his arms through the shoulder restraints.

*I thought these things were supposed to level themselves?!?*

Eventually, the tumbling began to subside. The coffin still moved and bobbed about, but it no longer felt like he was tumbling through the water. In the newfound quiet, Mark realized that he felt right-side-up once again. But the window was still dark.

*Well now what? Was that just the first of many waterfalls to come? Or something worse? How will I know? Should I get out now? But how will Justin know I'm out? Crap. We shoulda thought about this more before we left...*

As the minutes passed by, the water continued to flow at a steady pace so Mark unstrapped himself. It was as good a time as any to take inventory of any injuries. His right knee was sore to the touch, but he could bend his leg without significant pain. His elbows felt similar. The place where Justin had removed that device in his shoulder still felt tender, too. Nothing felt debilitating, though. All of it made sense, but his right ear throbbed also.

*Man, that Tielsuit would have come in handy about now.*

Doing a reverse pushup, he brought his face as close to the porthole as possible, hoping to increase his field of view.

Still darkness. He craned his neck, peering to the side as much as possible.

Still darkness. His eyes scanned the full 360 degrees, desperate for some orienting object. About 270 degrees through the scan, he saw it. A white blurry light, in the lower left portion of his vision.

Not sure what the light was, he moved his head while still looking at it through the window; it didn't look like it moved anywhere. Continuing to keep his head close to the window, he swayed his body, hoping to move the capsule. It rocked back and forth while the light remained stationary. Whatever it was, it seemed far away from Mark.

*Maybe I'll wait a bit and see if it's still there.*

He decided to count to five hundred, just to be sure he had drifted and adequate distance. Looking up again, the light looked exactly the same.

*Either I'm not moving, or that light's really far away. And if I can see something far away, I must not be inside the wall of the city anymore! I've made it out!*

In his excitement, he opened the release clamps for his capsule. And then he remembered Justin. How would he find him? Or communicate with him?

"Mark?"

*What the hell?*

"Mark, you there? It's Justin."

*Shit! Oh yeah! Our unicom!*

The pain in Mark's right ear suddenly made sense. He must have banged his ear in the waterfall and the unicom made it feel worse.

"Dude, you there?" Justin repeated.

"Uh, yeah, can you hear me?" Mark replied.

"Yeah, man. Of course! You ready to get out?"

"Wait, what? You're already out? And how did you know how to use the incomes?"

"Dude, Hauzel didn't explain it to you? And yeah, I'm out and on the side of the river. I can see you floating along in the middle of a bunch of dead bodies. You're gonna have a pretty nasty time getting out."

"Thanks for the assessment, you ass."

"Ok, grab your stuff, and pop open the top of your transport. You're about as close to the shore as you're gonna get. And I don't want to run much further to keep up."

"Like now?"

"Yes, now. Go for it," Justin encouraged.

Mark pulled on the two levers at his sides. The front sprung off toward the sky and fresh, frigid air rushed against his face. So cold, in fact, he had to close his eyes at the shock of it. But after he adjusted, he dared to open them.

And he opened his eyes to the most majestic night sky he'd ever seen. A mottled haze rent the night sky in a way he'd never seen the Milky Way do. Was he even looking at the Milky Way? To his left, he finally saw what the white light had been: Zearyth's moon looked about half the size of Earth's. Even though it was a full moon, one half was brighter than the other. If the stars were this visible with a full moon, Mark couldn't imagine what he could have seen

without it.

"Dude, are you gonna get out?" Mark was snapped back to reality by Justin's question. He crept his torso up to look around his capsule without capsizing it. A snowscape glistened in the moonlight to his left. And Justin stood maybe 500 feet down the river at the bank, waving his arms. As Mark looked down the river, the river held a layer of moisture right above it, just like a lake at dawn. Surrounding his transport, he indeed was floating alongside a mass of decaying bodies. Maybe the air wasn't as fresh as he'd thought.

*How did he see me all the way down here?*

"Once you have your backpack, just jump out and swim to the shore."

"Are you crazy? I'm not swimming through this shit!"

"I think you have to. Around the bend, I think there's another waterfall. I don't think you have time to do anything else."

"I'll press my luck," Mark said as he leaned over the edge of his coffin and tried to paddle with his hands. It was gross enough to jam his arms that were even in a drysuit between the bodies to paddle. He didn't want to think about what it would be like jumping in.

But he couldn't paddle effectively with all the bodies around him. Even worse, in order to move the entire capsule, he'd have to move it through all the bodies. He looked back at Justin. 400 feet away.

*I don't care what it takes, I'm not jumping in this crap.*

He tried to shove the closest bodies away, giving his arms room to paddle. While pushing one away, its decomposing head broke off in Mark's hand. He started to dry heave while leaning over the edge. But the detached head left room for Mark to paddle with his arm. He paddled with all his might, not stopping to steal a look at how much time he had.

Just focused on paddling and pulling as hard as possible in the putrid water, he was surprised at how close Justin's voice sounded when he said, "Dude, it's not working!" The voice was no longer just coming through the unicom. Mark looked up and Justin was right in front of him.

"I'm telling ya, man, get the crap outta your capsule and swim to the edge or you're not gonna make it."

Still about fifteen feet from the bank of the river, Mark crested the bend in the river. On the other side, his transport picked up speed as he began to approach what he hoped were only rapids.

Panic set in and Mark yelled out, "You were right! Screw it," as Justin came running over the river bank to keep Mark in view.

Back back slung on his back, Mark jumped over the edge of capsule, right into the floating pile of nastiness. His only hope was to stay underwater and swim past all the refuse. Searing cold struck his face as he completely submerged.

The current was stronger than he had imagined. Swimming as long as possible underwater, he had to come up for air. Bodies still on top of him, he gasped for what air he could and continued again. Two more times of this and he had only gone about half the way. Only seven feet from the edge, and he was getting exhausted while he fought the current and tried to free himself from the

bodies.

*I'm not gonna make it! "Dude! Help!"* He gasped, but saw no response.

Another stint underwater and he was in desperate need for air. Trying to come back up, the bodies were piled on top of him; he couldn't get a good breath. In panic, he began flailing about.

Amidst all the chaos, his flailing arms brushed against something firm. With all his might, he paddled in that direction. His fingertips felt it again but slipped away. And finally, they connected.

Justin's hand grasped Mark's and pulled him out from under the bodies. Dripping sewage, Mark collapsed onto the ice at the bank of the river.

Exhausted, smelling like shit, looking up at the foreign sky, Mark thought to himself:

*We finally made it out of Tiel-fucking-metra.*