2146

THE AUTOMATIC DOOR SLID OPEN A FEW INCHES AND THEN BENT AND BROKE FREE OF ITS TRACKS AS IT WAS HIT BY A BRIGHT BLAST OF FIRE. Though each member of the family had their hands up—nine in all—two of them caught a red beam to the face and had a bright, burning hole blown through their foreheads before they collapsed onto the hardwood floor. Smoke billowed up from the back of their scorched skulls, and a smell like overcooked meat and burnt hair enveloped the living room. Soldiers burst through the door's fiery opening, the soldier in the front a tall, muscular man, with a beard and mustache that covered most of his face. His hair was thick and black, his eyes were dark, and what was visible of his face looked strong.

"There's someone not quite human being hidden in this residence! That's why I am here! This person is believed to have been here for the last year! What I will need from you ladies and gentlemen, is to point out who it is, and right now! Now, my name is Mehdi, and I need you to get ON YOUR KNEES!"

The family obliged, falling to their knees as if collapsing, their hands up and their palms facing forward. Fifteen laser rifles were aimed at the front of their heads, each soldier visibly excited about their new acquisitions. Some surely had itchy trigger fingers, waiting for someone to jump and do something sudden.

One hundred thousand units transferred via palm-phone for these acquisitions and half the soldiers in my squad are ill-equipped to use them. Twenty long range laser snipers, fifty electro-pellet blasters, fifteen laser AK's with the stippled grip, and ten multi-shot, triple barreled shotguns, stolen by Aldo's soldiers three days ago, leaving us with this quality, but unfamiliar option purchased at the last minute. So many weapons lost and so much money spent thanks to Aldo. There will be longer training sessions after tonight, fifty hours a week, if we can find the time. Of course, I might have to lighten the flock by then. A quick toss off the edge of our home platform will be the means of doing that. Of course, I'll have to deal with an explanation to some of the surviving members, and Mina, I'll have to tell her. She'll want to know that I'm not just killing indiscriminately. She'll want—

"Boss, what are we doing?"

Mehdi blinked. He came back to the present, saw his soldiers in their black fatigue uniforms and their laser-rifles aimed squarely at the foreheads of the family members

"All right," Mehdi said, and pointed to the stairs. "Make sure all the rooms on the top floor are empty." Two of the fifteen soldiers ran up the stairs with the barrels of their weapons out in front of them.

"All right, ladies and gentlemen, I promise this will be quick. Now, where is the humanoid?" He stepped forward, and his eyes slid over the family. One Black woman looked about fifty, and one Hispanic woman, perhaps seventy. There were three younger girls, each around ten give or take a year. A middle aged Hispanic man that was probably husband to the woman in her fifties. And a teenage boy, probably thirteen, biracial. All the kids, probably biracial. But that told him nothing.

"Boss," one of the soldiers said. "Toward the wall."

Mehdi looked around and saw a glass case, and inside one Pulse Ray shotgun, and a scope, for long range firing. The red beam version. A very deadly, highly illegal, and extremely expensive weapon. Seventy thousand units at least. Mehdi's lips broke into a smile.

"I'd ask if someone's collecting, but I don't see any other firearms in here," Mehdi said, stepping over to the glass case and admiring the fine feat in robotic engineering. Everything in the year 2146 was built by robots. He strolled back to his original place, and looked at the family. His eyes were alight. "So who is the owner of that fine piece of weaponry?" None of the family members looked at him, but each kept their hands in the air. "Who has the access in this family to acquire such a firearm? This is Alias-77 after all, the platform with the fewest illegal firearms on the street. The weapon contained behind that glass is highly illegal. It was made or purchased. I don't think you have the means to purchase such a piece of machinery."

The family remained silent. Ten seconds passed before Mehdi raised his right index finger, his expression indifferent, and pointed it at the middle-aged Hispanic man. A split second later a loud whistle sounded, and the back of his head erupted as a thin laser tore through it. Blood splashed on the white sofa, and his body leaned back and lay half against the sofa he'd dirtied. His head lolled. A thin trickle of drool depended from the corner of his wet lips. The middle-aged woman screamed, her old, seamed hands going up to her mouth. The girls and the boy began to cry.

"I'll make it simple," Mehdi said, scratching at the section of beard on the right side of his face. "Point out the humanoid in this residence and I take my men and we leave." The cries continued. They gave no response. The lady—apparently, the wife—threw her body upon the dead man. The others kept their attention on Mehdi.

Not bad. The team seems calm. The team might be ready for missions beyond this.

Mehdi raised another finger, and pointed it at one of the ten year old girls. Then came the whistle, the splash of blood on the couch behind her, and the sound of the back of her head hitting the couch as she was knocked back with the force. What followed were shrieks, from the apparent mother, grandmother, and sisters. The thirteen year old boy only stared. The two soldiers that had been sent upstairs came back down to the main floor.

"Nothing?" Mehdi said, looking at them.

They shook their heads. "Nothing," said the one on the left.

Mehdi nodded, the fingers of one gloved hand on his chin. He didn't think he could trust any of his men completely. "Okay. Yeah, okay." He put his attention back on the family. His eyes rested on the mother who was now holding the dead girl in the crook of her arms. She was talking to the body in a different language. Mehdi, his expression turning colder, said, "Hey, be happy you still have most of your family left. Now, who's the next target going to be?"

No answer. He pointed his weapon and the mother looked up at him and screamed, "Nooo!"

"No? Well, do you have something to tell me?" The fingers of one gloved hand drummed against the side of his leg, as he waited.

"There is no humanoid here!" she shouted at him. "Go somewhere else and look for humanoids!"

He nodded. "It starts with one." He took a step forward. "It starts with just one. You saying no only makes my job harder. You think you're protecting your kid, but you're not." He knelt down, now just a few feet from the mother and the rest of her family. "One day it's not just going to be a humanoid that moves like you or me, understand? One day it'll be weaponized. It starts with one and then before you know it they overtake our world."

The mother stared at him with trembling lips. She shook her head, her dark eyes locked on his.

"There is no humanoid in this household. And if there were humanoids do you think you can just go house to house, and get every single one? What you're doing makes no sense."

"What did you do, mother? Hide it and tell it to wait until we left? You hide it away in some secret place? Do you think we won't be able to find it?"

The mother's face held firm, but it didn't make a difference. Mehdi already knew she was lying. Years of interrogations had made him adept at reading the signs.

"Take them all out," Mehdi said. "Make sure you save the mother for last."

Ten of the fifteen soldiers opened fire, and thin red lasers punctured and split up the bodies of a family that had lived on this street for ten years. The screams that came didn't last long. The soldiers had to do little to get the ones that attempted to run. It was effortless. Mehdi stood up and turned toward the staircase, his mind on where the mother might've told the humanoid to hide. And right there, standing near the bottom riser of the stairs with his hands at his sides, was an eight or nine year old boy. His shirt was red and had a picture of a popular cartoon, *The Galaxy Kids*, a show that had been a hit for the last seven years. He was looking down at the floor. His sobs broke the silence left after the slaughter. Mehdi's soldiers turned, aimed their weapons. Mehdi smiled.

"Now if you had come out here earlier you could've saved us so much trouble, little man." Mehdi extended his hand, and with a quick movement of his four gloved fingers, beckoned the boy in his direction. "Come over here, little man. I'm not going to hurt you." A muffled chuckle from one of the soldiers with a weapon aimed at the boy followed this. Mehdi

ignored it. The boy hadn't moved, and Mehdi made a different request. "Pick your head up boy, and look at me."

It wasn't the first time he'd seen a humanoid, but still, he wanted to look into the boy's eyes before he signaled one of his men to take him out. Wanted to see how human the gaze looked. *Felt*. The boy, however, didn't look up at him, and instead kept his attention on the hardwood floor.

"I'm only going to ask one more time," Mehdi said, and lifted and aimed his own weapon. "I want you to look at—" And the boy did, lifted his head and looked directly into Mehdi's eyes before he could finish the repeated request. What Mehdi saw looked anything but human, it was something, in fact, that he had never seen before. The boy's eyes, which should've been brown, green, gray or even blue, were instead red. And before Mehdi could even begin to touch the trigger of his weapon the boy dashed upstairs and a split second later was out of sight.

"What the fuck," one of Mehdi's soldiers whispered.

"Upstairs!" Mehdi shouted. "Now! Go get him!"

The fifteen soldiers, comprised of twelve men and three women, moved past him and raced up the stairs. As this happened Mehdi stepped toward the glass case that contained the Pulse-Ray shotgun, and before he could even get his fingers on the glass he heard a scream. Seconds later one of the soldiers was thrown by some unseen force—obviously the boy—and made impact with the soldiers that had been working their way up to the top floor. The triggers of the guns were inadvertently pulled, and nail thin lasers shoot from the barrels and puncture the ceiling. There comes another shout from the top floor, then the sound is violently cut off.

"Help! Heeelllp! H—" Another voice cut off. Mehdi moved toward the stairs, his own laser rifle aimed. He moved quickly, climbing over two dead bodies, and taking a place at the

rear of the line of the soldiers as they were getting up from being knocked on their asses. But they had their own weapons aimed, and Mehdi made his way up the stairs behind them.

2

Her name was Sherri, and she watched helplessly as the little boy yanked the laser rifle her fellow soldier was holding away, kicked him into the corridor wall, aimed the man's own weapon back at him and fired. This seemed to happen in a split second, and before Sherri could aim her own weapon and take a shot, the boy was gone, having dashed into the nearest room. The bedroom door shot shut with a hiss. Sherri moved toward the door with her laser-rifle aimed, her breathing shallow, and her heart ramming hard inside of her chest. She could sense other soldiers right behind her, soldiers with their own weapons aimed. And she could sense that most of them shared her fear. Sherri pointed her weapon at the door, then held three fingers up for the soldiers behind her. She ticked off one finger, then a second, then a third—

Sherri tapped the necessary screen to the side of the door and it shot open, revealing an empty room. Mehdi, now at the top of his stairs, pushed his way past Sherri and looked inside the room. He moved quickly toward an open window, and Sherri felt instantly embarrassed that she hadn't noticed it first.

"Dammit! Downstairs men! No-"

She heard the door downstairs open, and wondered who could've been coming back into the house.

Who do you think, a voice in her head screamed out. The boy! Who else?

But why? Why would it be the—

She followed Mehdi and the other soldiers back down the stairs, now the last in line. She kept the butt of her weapon against her shoulder. From the back of the line and at the top of the stairs she could see the open door, and watched as the soldier at the bottom of the stairs and the front of the line, attempted to aim his weapon and fire at the boy. The boy, holding a laser-rifle of his own now managed to get off a shot first, and connected directly with the center of the man's forehead. A hole the size of a tennis ball blew open the back of his head, and blood splashed the first three soldiers behind him. The soldier leaned forward, all life gone from his body, and tumbled down the stairs. The soldiers behind him scrambled to get over him, some firing at the boy from the risers. The boy managed to dodge their shots by dropping his weapon, leaping forward, and rolling on the floor and toward the living room.

"He's going for the case!" the soldier at the front of the line bellowed. "He's going for the case!"

Mehdi shrieked at his male and female troops. "STOP HIM! FUCKING STOP HIM!"

3

The soldiers with a clear enough aim pointed their weapons and fired, and Mehdi watched the boy dash forward, the bright, red lasers trailing him like dust as he ducked his head, leapt, and launched his tiny body through the glass enclosing the Pulse-Ray shotgun like a torpedo. Glass shattered and flew everywhere, lasers continued to zip at him, and in a quick, mid-air, acrobatic movement, one that could've been missed with a blink, the boy grabbed the Pulse-Ray shotgun. Then he landed, the Pulse-Ray shotgun in his thin, brown arms. The move was unbelievable, and something Mehdi believed him or any soldier he'd ever known would've

never been able to duplicate, even if given a ten thousand tries. The soldiers ran up behind him, and the boy pivoted with a speed that was uncanny and fluid, and down on one knee, the butt of the massive weapon jammed against his shoulder, fired. Mehdi tried to warn his soldiers to turn the other way

"NOOO-"

But it was too late. A red beam as thick as a pillar tore out of the barrel with a deafening whistle, and ripped apart the door and the three soldiers in front of it. They flew out of the house, arms and legs detached, their limbs and torsos bouncing off the end of the walk, and rolling into the street before ultimately coming to a stop, what was left of them dead and aflame. Mehdi turned around and charged back up the stairs, and before all the other men could head after him, the boy pivoted with a second lighting quick motion, and fired upon them. A hole was blown through the side of the house, and several screaming soldiers went through it, their bodies landing aflame and in pieces in the neighbor's yard. The soldiers the boy didn't catch, switched direction and ran down the stairs and at the giant hole newly blasted into the front of the house. With his eyes glowing red, and his face taut and emotionless, he pulled back again, the recoil barely nudging his body back as he sent another four soldiers soaring backwards, their bodies incinerating and dying in midair. They landed in random spots on the street, lighting outside like additional street lamps. The boy stepped out the front door, the massive weapon held steadily in his arms.

Five or six of us left, Mehdi thought, his forehead beaded with sweat. He blinked perspiration out of his eyes. He wasn't even sure of the count, anymore. He had ducked for cover when the boy had taken a shot at the four soldiers running at him. The ensuing eruption had sent bits of flaming house flying in every direction.

"Slowly now," Mehdi said, and coughed as hot smoke stung the inside of his throat. He waited a few moments for the smoke to clear, and then moved forward with his soldiers behind him.

"Maybe we should go," Sherri said. She was right behind him. He could feel her breath against the side of his neck. She put her hand on his shoulder. "We're overmatched here. We need to regroup, we need to—"

He yanked a laser blade out of his right fatigue pocket, freed the blade, and turned and shoved it into Sherri's neck, again and again and again. She went to the floor and he continued to stab at her until her head was nearly decapitated. Satisfied, he shoved the laser blade back into his pocket, and looked at the remaining soldiers. "Does anyone else feel we're overmatched?" The soldiers shook their heads. "Good."

He did a quick count. Four soldiers, plus himself. That should be enough to end this if they were careful. He led his men slowly toward the giant hole in the front of the house. Most of the smoke had cleared by this point, and from the inside he was able to see a number of burning corpses out on the street. It looked like a collection of purposely set campfires.

Mehdi peered into the night, looking for the kid with the Pulse-Ray shotgun. For a moment it seemed as if the kid had disappeared, and then he suddenly spotted him. The kid was on his knees, his back turned to Mehdi and the rest of the group.

It has to be a set-up, Mehdi thought for a split-second, and then thought that it wouldn't have made sense. He and his men were standing in the door way of the house. All the little boy would've had to do was turn around, with the Pulse-Ray shotgun aimed as it had been, the butt jammed against his shoulder, and fire at the remaining five soldiers. The boy must've known they were there. No way a boy like this didn't.

Mehdi put his hand up to signal the remaining soldiers not to fire.

"Everyone remain cautious," he said, and like Mehdi, the rest of the soldiers kept their weapons aimed. Mehdi stepped out of the house, the remaining soldiers flanking him. Outside smelled like smoked meat. The thought that the stench Mehdi was smelling was of the burning flesh of his fellow soldiers made the smell somehow worse. The crackle of the fires engulfing the corpses of his men and women was distinct, but did nothing to drown out the sound of the kids whimpers. Mehdi took another step forward, and the bottom of his shoe, crunching a pebble on the ground, made the kid's head perk up. Mehdi put his hand up again, to make sure that his men didn't fire. The kid looked over his shoulder at the men. The glow from the surrounding flames gave light to his unlined face, highlighted the tremble of his bottom lip, and the sparkle of the tears that has swelled in his eyes. One thing that had changed was the red glow that had been there. Now the nine year old boy's eyes looked like every other set of nine-year old eyes. The kid's eyes touched on one soldier, then a second, then Mehdi. Then he pleaded,

"What happened?"

"Yeah," Mehdi said quietly. "What happened?"

He pointed the weapon directly between the kid's eyes and before he managed to pull the trigger the kid's eyes flashed red again, and he snatched the firearm clean from Mehdi's hands, cocked it back over his shoulder, and slammed it into Mehdi's nose, breaking it.

I don't understand it, Mehdi thought wildly. I don't fucking understand it.

Mehdi fell back from the impact of the gun, and as he lay on the ground, surrounding by fires and staring up at a star-studded sky, he heard something near to him break, a gasp, a grunt, then another snap. He knew another of his men were dead.

"Heellp m—" another soldier grunted—Mehdi knew it was a man named Andy—and the words were cut off, and reduced to the fading sound of gurgles. Another man deceased. A third man shrieked, and the voice was temporarily cut off, and what followed was a half-shriek, half gurgle—a sound Mehdi had never heard before—then Mehdi's sweaty face was splashed in warm blood. It leaked into his eyes, its bitterness found his cotton-dry tongue, and he wiped at it, spit it out, then rolled onto his stomach to see what the boy was doing now. The boy had his fist shoved down the throat of the last soldier that had travelled this way with Mehdi. The soldier's eyes were wide, his mouth monstrously stretched and unhinged, as the boy strangled him by pressing his fist into the back of his throat. Three seconds later the soldier was dead, and as the boy was pulling his hand from the soldier's mouth, Mehdi yanked out his laser blade, freed it, and took one last desperate leap at the boy, his arm cocked back, his hand squeezing the hilt of the knife. He connected, shoving all seven inches of its laser bordered steel into the back of the boy's skull. A jolt ran through Mehdi, knocking him onto his back once again, and the laser blade flew out of his hand and slid against the concrete before stopping and flipping automatically closed by the curb. The kid stilled, then slumped forward as if becoming suddenly tired. He remained in that position, hunched over.

For five minutes Mehdi gazed up at the sky, breathing in great, shaky gulps of air. And he muttered the same words between his breaths.

"I'll do whatever it takes. I'll do...whatever it takes. Whatever it takes...whatever it takes..."

5

2150

Quantum-59, is the second planet that the human race inhabited and is made up of platforms that hover thousands of feet above the sea. The closest thing to land that this world consists of is a number of massive black cliffs that jut up from various areas of the water like giant fingers, and caves are known to dwell within some of these structures. If you happen to visit or live on a platform that is low enough you can see them, otherwise your view would be obscured by clouds or ocean mist, more likely the latter.

Platforms hover at different levels and depending on the height you may or may not need a self-warming and self-cooling uniform, meant both to keep the human body at preferred temperatures during hot or cold weather, and to protect from airborne diseases that float up from what is a highly infected vast ocean. Most of the citizens make their way around the world by the commercial shuttle, a glider, or a rocket-pack.

The basic platform is a vast circle with a radius ranging between ten and one thousand miles, and the border of said platform is bordered by automaton guards, an invisible barrier, or in some rare instances nothing at all, the latter being a failure of that particular platform's government. Areas to leap from platforms with a glider or rocket back have been designated, and safeguards are set up in such a way as to not let individual citizens leave without the proper gear.

Arka is the name of one particular platform in the North, and is one of the many spots that the eighteen to twenty year old crowd show up at. This platform is less residential and is seen by many as a hangout spot and tourist destination. Though no age limit has been implemented on this platform, anyone that shows up on the platform younger than seventeen is told to leave, usually by the leader of some random clique.

It was a cloudy day when one group showed up on the platform, each person dressed in red or blue self-cooling and self-warming uniform. This group consisted of five people, three of them students at the local high school located half a mile beneath this platform.

"I'm looking forward to this film," said a brown skinned male with dark, short cut hair, and a red uniform. His name was Carlo, a nineteen year old that was of mixed race but mistaken by friends and acquaintances alike of being purely Hispanic. *No one's pure anymore,* Carlo would often say with a half-amused smile and leave it at that. He unlatched himself from his glider harness and locked it up at a nearby glider stand—a quick hit of the switch and the glider was instantly incased inside of a tamper-proof glass tube. The remaining four did the same.

"You got the drinks, right," Maxis said. He was a black male, with a small afro of curly black hair. He wore one of the blue uniforms, and was looking down at his phone as he spoke.

"You know it," Carlo said, holding up a red backpack for the group to see. He slung the backpack over his shoulder. "We get caught with this shit though and we're going to have issues man. You know what Maxis? Since you wanted the drinks so bad you get to hold the bag."

"Give it to Alexis," Maxis said. "Security's not going to try to check a girl."

"Yeah, until it's already too late to do anything," said a black haired, light-skinned, brown girl (purely Hispanic, Carlo would often joke), as she stepped away from the glider stand. "What are you going to do then, huh?"

Alexis slapped Maxis on the back of the head with one hand and Maxis shoved her away and she shoved him back. This was how Alexis and Maxis got along, and Carlo believed he was the only one in the group that found it childish.

Carlo looked at other two in the group, the twins, both blonde haired and blue eyed boys, and waved to them to hurry up.

"Come on," he shouted at them, his hands cupped to his mouth. "I want to hurry up and see this movie! You pretty boys going to mess all this shit up!"

"Sorry Carlo," one of the twins said. His name was Steven. "What movie are we going to see again?"

"Tripoli. With Lena DeCaprio. I told you this."

"Tripoli?"

"Yeah, Tripoli. The one with Leo DeCaprio's great, great, granddaughter."

"Leo DeCaprio?"

"Leonardo DeCaprio," Alexis cut in. "You got to watch the old movies. He's so cute!"

Maxis smiled. "His great, great, granddaughter doesn't look so bad herself." He clutched his hands into fists and made a couple of quick pelvic thrusts, and the twins and Alexis chuckled.

"Okay enough about them," Carlo said, looking around the platform. "Where the hell is this theater at?"

The group helped Carlo look around the platform. They saw nothing but a fueling station and a bunch uniformed teenagers, about forty or so feet to their left. Carlo approached the fueling station and the rest followed. The fueling station's front side was made up of a glass wall with two automatic glass doors in the center. When they reached the fueling station the doors opened

and the group stepped in. The drinks were in fridges along two converging walls. Aisles of snacks made up the center of the store.

Carlo noticed a hall that led into a rest spot in the back, where for twenty dollars, a person could lie down in their own private opening in the floor, on a single mattress with a blanket and a pillow and nap, undisturbed. Carlo knew these stations well—liked them very much too—the dial that allowed a customer to adjust the temperature in their space without affecting the other guests his favorite feature.

Carlo turned to the clerk, shoving his backpack into Alexis's hands.

"Hold that, will you sweetie?"

Alexis took it and shoved it into Maxis's arms. "Hold that for me will you, sweetie," she said, and pinched his cheek.

Maxis rolled his eyes, but accepted it, slinging it over his right shoulder.

"Where's the theater," Carlo asked the clerk.

"Straight down that road," the bald man said, cocking his thumb over his shoulder. He wore a collared red and white shirt, and had a goatee. For some reason, he didn't seem to care for the question.

"What about the clubs," Carlo said. "Any clubs here?"

"Check the places around the theater and you'll find those too." The clerk put his hands on the counter, watching Carlo closely. It was as if he expected him to make some sudden move.

"All right," Carlo said, turned his hand over, tapped his rubber wrist band, and brought the home screen of his smartphone to life on his palm. "Give me a couple of singles."

The clerk did as he asked and Carlo swiped his hand over the scanner so it could deduct the funds. There was a light ding, the funds were successfully deducted from Carlo's cloud bank account, and the clerk handed him a couple of single cigars. The group left the gas station. They headed toward the theater, blending in with hundreds of tourists and consumers, some standing around in circles and talking and some heading in the same or opposite direction.

"See, we should've just gone to the one that we always go to," Carlo said. "Now we have to do all this walking." Problem was, his issue with the platform went far beyond that.

"Stop whining," Alexis said. "It's good exercise."

"Yeah, you're in a chipper mood, aren't you," he said, lighting his cigar with his lighter and inhaling. Carlo relished the taste. Smoke shot out of his mouth in a light gray plume.

Harmless tobacco, he thought. *Ah, the convenience of human ingenuity*.

Maxis almost dropped the backpack as he switched it to his left shoulder.

"Yes," she said, taking one of the cigars from Carlo and slipping to between her right ear.

"I am in a very chipper mood, indeed." She looked over her shoulder at Maxis. "Maxis, I let you hold that backpack because I trust you." She grabbed Maxis suddenly by the shoulders and shook him. "Because I *trust you, dammit*!"

She smiled and the twins laughed.

"Oh shut up," Maxis told her and picked up his pace so he could hand the pack back to Carlo. "Here. You act like they're going to search your bag just because you approach the counter with it."

"The goal is not to draw attention to it," Carlo said coolly. "And I must've did something right, because no attention was drawn to it, now was there?" He took his backpack back, slinging the strap back over his shoulder.

"Yeah whatever. Sounds like some paranoid bullshit to me."

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