

Contents

Prologue	2
01 - Jack	3
02 - Jenna	34
03 - Jack	44
04 - Erin	52
05 – Gerrit	58
06 - Jack	69
07 - Erin	81
08 - Jenna	84
09 - Jack	86
10 - Tess	90
11 - Lassa	97
12 - Galen	104
13 - Nera	107
14 - Jenna	110
15 - Yenah	113
16 - Jack	116
17 - Ecklund the Younger	119
18 - Jenna	121
19 - Ecklund the Younger	127
20 - Jenna	132
21 - Jack	138
22 - Johas	141
23 - Ecklund the Younger	146
24 - Jenna	150
25 - Tess	154
26 - Jack	156
27 - Erin	161
28 - Jack	165
29 - Jenna	166
30 - Ecklund the younger	170
31 – Johas	171

32 - Jack	174
33 - Ecklund the younger	177
34 - Jenna	179
35 - Ecklund the Younger	181
36 - Commander Stefford	183
37 - Jack	187
38 - Nera	188
39 - Captain Renat	190
40 - Nera	193
41 - Captain Renat	194
42 - Jack	194
Epilogue	196

Prologue

The days of peak automation had come and gone. The wars were fought the price was terrible. The 'spreading' had ignited it, a ravaging virus that showed no mercy, unprecedented in its mortality rate, a perfect selective killing machine. The chances of contracting it highest among the uncounted masses.

There were whispers of a vaccine kept for the few. A mid-level biotek blew the whistle at the time of the worst of it. This was no natural virus. The savagery meted out by those in power responding to the worldwide rebellion that followed was unparalleled, long gone were the days in which labour held a stake in society. Automation was king and the die was set, they did not need the excess vermin. The organization and response of the masses borne of desperation proved stubborn and tenacious and they endured, and finally, they wore down the few. The resources so efficiently harvested by the machines had been at breakneck speed for too long. The few drained the natural wealth and without their machines, The Autos, (as they were known), were vulnerable and eventually fell.

What replaced them was worse. The new elite had scarcer resources, fewer could run the machines, could savour the luxury, tek was expensive and human labour now so plentiful that it had become cheap...too cheap. A worker was disposable and endlessly replaceable. The age of the company nations had begun. Huge corporations brought a new feudalism. People no longer identified with a land, a nation, they identified with a company, and a CEO was their law and lord. They wore the company colours and swore allegiance to trade.

'Bless the Owners, and they lived on little'.

01 - Jack

Jack bathed in the sweet vapour. Pink swirls, so soothing, his mind floated. He sat on the step at the back of their unit, door open, and listened to the fizz and crackle of the envirodome. It was old and leaky and far above rain entered and landed cool on his forehead. Marth shouted, "Jack it's on". He sighed, he was not keen, she loved their new goggle, it was sixty inches and wafer thin, a triumph of tek. He pondered fleetingly that goggles were not regarded like other tek, with suspicion, even fear and hatred, everyone had a goggle. One of the few cheap plentiful pieces of tek, the company saw to that.

'The company will provide, bless the Owners.'

The show was entertaining and he laughed in spite of himself. They watched until late ending until the familiar prayer to the Owners rang out fierce and solemn. Jack sometimes wondered that people as good as they could exist. He could not do what they did. They gave direction and sacrifice, *bless the Owners*. They both repeated it... "*bless the Owners*".

It was an early start tomorrow. He was part of trade support, a level one fixtek. Jack was aware what many thought of him, some would come out and say it, "Automaider!" others hurled it with a spit. Even though he was helping the trade effort, only fixing the machines so they could perform this task, a good task, part of the system, everyone knew it. Why did they not understand? The Owners had designed it, made it all.

He sighed, memories of the war ran deep. The hatred of the machines still raw, and his machines flew, worse they were repurposed aerial seekers, and had been merciless and deadly.

He lay in bed that night, mind racing. The trading happened at the end of every month. Everyone knew the names, the companies; there were thirty in number, all over earth. The system devised by the Owners had kept peace for one hundred years now. Trade was its

essence. All worked to produce the trade. Each company specialized and needed what the others produced. Mutual need, mutual peace.

'Plenty is forbidden, bless the Owners.'

'The company provides what is needed and no more.'

'Austerity is good. Excess brings the downfall.'

'Disease is bad and is burden.'

Jack paled at the thought of the last; it had always been his nightmare. He was determined not to be a burden.

'Excess brings disease.'

Jack belonged to J-Son the Biofix Company. He prayed that he would never need its products. The thought galled him... a disgrace. He never doubted that he would 'commit' rather than be a burden. That was an honourable end.

His thoughts often turned dark, he needed to stop it; it troubled him, always dark...'why? Why couldn't he be more like Marth', he thought. Sweet light and happy as long as she had her unit to care for and her goggle. He sighed, what did he want? They lived in tier two, in an envirodome, it could be much worse, he had seen exenviro; the unprotected, he shuddered, they lived like animals. He and Marth worked hard for what they had, they had two leisure bikes, a new goggle and enough clothing and food credits; any more would be excess.

'The company provided.'

He needed to go to sleep. Marth already breathed deeply, sound in sleep beside him.

J-Son Industrial Complex I3 sprawled at the centre of the envirodome. It spread for miles in every direction like a great grey arachnid. A city of work. The home units, arranged in sectors, circled the inner walls of the dome, stacked high. The blocks formed deep dark alleyways that never saw the light of day. Jack worked in Inducenter 4 towards the east of I3.

That morning he emerged from the darkness and familiar stench of his alley onto the clattering and general raucousness of Centrout 6. He rode one of their leisure bikes to work and wore company orange, J-Son Biotek orange, his uniform stencilled with symbols showing his tek rank.

Unlike the alleys, the centroutes were smooth and well maintained and once on it he made good time. Tawdriness was a mid-level inducrime and a fine would take away many credits. He nudged his bike wheel into the swarm of walkers, of his journey, he hated this the most, pedestrians! They should give way to cyclists during their dogged trek to work, this 'was' enforced but the patrols were infrequent and they glared at him resentfully as he tried to make his way through to the central bike lane.

His journey, once in lane was uneventful and he soon arrived at FTU4, 'Flight Trade Unit 4' if you liked, or simply the 'Hanger', a huge single room cathedral of a building that accommodated the Trade Carriers. Jack arrived just in time, exhaling explosively as he passed through the scanner. His name lit up with his arrival time above him. No credits lost today. His mind went straight to the job, get those damn doors working. As he walked towards the locker room, Bill his supervisor rushed towards him. "Jack you need to get those doors working this morning."

"I will, I will"

"No I mean before noon. We got a damn inspection this afternoon. You got any idea the problem yet?"

“Yeah I've got a few ideas”, he lied.

"Good, get to it then".

‘Before noon’ he snorted, Bill always did this, piled on extra pressure, there would be no inspection. He got his work suit on, grabbed his tools and made his way to the hanger.

It did not matter how many times he saw them he was always impressed by their scale and majesty. A feeling shared only by a handful of flight teks who knew them intimately. Others hated and feared these machines and for good reason, they were ex-seekers disarmed, repainted and repurposed; the memories ran deep. The once complex AI that made them seem almost sentient replaced with basic navigation code. Now they did one thing, travel from ‘A’ to ‘B’ although you could not explain that to anyone, not without trouble. He sighed; today was going to be difficult. He needed to fix the rear carrier sub-doors. Today was the deadline; the trade flew tonight. He was damned if he knew what was wrong with them, it could be code; it could be hardware, who knew. He mentally shrugged and made his way to TC8, otherwise known as Bertha. She was an old bird, the oldest J-Son had, and she was notoriously buggy.

Bertha would travel a long way tonight, all the way to Mid Eurasia. She would be loaded heavy, fat with bio-goods for Eras the Leisure Company, as much as she could carry. Well almost, the most aft section of Bertha was always loaded with the 'Tribute' to the Owners; the sealed containers would come in late, delivered by the devotees, a detachment of the Holy Corps. Much ceremony surrounded the loading and the event was broadcast, always prime goggle viewing.

A mirrored flight took off from Mid Eurasia at exactly the same time loaded with leisure goods, mostly goggles and bikes. This exchange, known as 'The Trade' happened at the end of every month. Hundreds of these mirrored trade exchanges would fly,

choreographed to the second. Two flew from J-Son this evening. Bertha and the newer, TC12, nicknamed 'Sonny'.

He walked out into the main hangar high up and stood for a few seconds as he always did, awed by the sight. Bertha and Sonny sat there. Like two great behemoths, Bertha partially hazy at the far end in the internal atmosphere of the place. He walked down to ground level and hopped onto a small electric cart as it passed. They allowed small transports in the hangar, it was huge and bikes were not practical, He was soon at Bertha and he gazed up at her, gods she was huge.

"Hey Jack", it was Ed his second.

"Mornin Ed, we have to get the doors sorted this morning, Bill is on the warpath"

Ed nodded sombrely "Yeah good luck with that".

That was about right; Ed could not help him with this. He sighed and walked up the loading ramp to the large white painted doors. The doors in question belonged to the tribute bay, entirely separate from the main trade bay. There was a flashing red mark on his job's pending sheet, it was a priority, top priority. He decided to look at the ancillary control for the doors again. It was in a small compartment right at the back of the bay and it was damn claustrophobic with no air conditioning. As he approached the door, his chip implant registered and the door access panel clicked green.

He entered stooped, surrounded by an array of panels and wiring. His stool was still there, he had been here on and off the last few days trying to figure this out. He stared blankly at the control panel; he had tried everything. 'Maybe he was thinking of this in the wrong way', he thought. 'What if it was a central control issue?'

The power supply, directed by software, was the result of complex algorithms, but what it did was simple, supply power to open and close the doors at the correct time. ‘What if he rerouted power constantly to the door, anyway the doors never opened, unless manually after landing’, he considered it. It was risky he knew, it was a bodge but the alternative was unthinkable...delay the tribute. He made his mind up. He would need to go up to the main control console and reroute the power.

It took him twenty minutes. He tested the release of the bay door several times opening and closing them, that would do. He could look at it again when Bertha returned. As he walked down the ramp, Klaxons began sounding...’What the hell’! Something to do with him? No, it could not be anything he had done. He looked across at Ed.

Ed shouted, "It’s the tribute, Holy Corps coming down, whole platoon!"

“Damn!” They were a law unto themselves these people.

He instantly felt ashamed of his annoyance, they were working for the Owners, *bless them*.

He quickly indicated the finished job on his work tablet and logged off for lunch. He needed to get his gear and get off Bertha before the corps arrived. He made it just in time; he could see the corps vehicles just outside the hanger doors.

He began to walk away sweating, Bertha's engines started, someone seeing his job completed had initiated a taxi routine. She would need to travel a short distance to meet the tribute. Then a cold sweat hit him like a bolt and he felt sick. He had not reassembled the panel in auxiliary control, and worse Bertha was serviced after her flight; they would see the unassembled panel. He would lose many credits possibly a demotion...damn! The loading would take all afternoon and then straight to take off procedure. Bertha's engines were roaring now. He had about five minutes before the ramp would raise.

He looked around, nobody here; he sprinted up the ramp past the auxiliary door. He need to get to main control, his chip would register him back on board, which would prompt questions; he made his way to the control deck and got to the panel, saw his name on the occupancy log and deleted it. There, he never came back on board, he sprinted back down to the bay and ducked inside the auxiliary room, the door clicked behind him. He panicked for a moment. No it was ok, the manual release, 'quick get the panel back in', he thought. Sweat poured from him. In a few minutes, he checked the reassembled panel and pressed the door release to leave. It stayed red,

“What?”

He pressed it frantically; it stayed red. He realized with shock. All systems indicated no occupancy; he had turned it off. Although Bertha was still warming up she was in pre-flight taxi mode, internal doors would not open, even when the corps loaded, Bertha would not power down until after her flight.

Although he had routed power to the doors in the bay continually, the only thing that could override this was...flight systems. It hit him hard; 'he was trapped'. What was worse he had done it to himself. He slumped down onto the stool..."shit".

His mind raced looking for a solution; he got up and paced back and forth checking the release repeatedly. After a while, the engine note began to rise and he felt movement. He felt unreal, detached, this could not be happening. Think! Think! ... It was no use there was nothing he could do, the only access he had from inside was the manual release and it was locked out.

He thought about Marth and pictured her face, as it would look when she realized he was missing. They were going to be in trouble, he would lose his position, their unit; possibly even have to go exenviro. He shuddered at the thought. Her position alone could not keep

them at their current level on tier 2; his credits reduced for many quarters as punishment. He held his head in his hands, he had worked so hard to get to his position; he sat stunned.

After a while, Jack stirred out of his self-pity seeming to see his surrounding for the first time. Nothing for it, he was going on a journey, first stop, Owners Isle. He could not grasp it. The place was mythical to him, yet that was the first stop. Until then the door would not respond, not until unloading. He thought about how they would react to his disappearance at work. They would likely not realize for hours, he had logged himself out; it was the end of his morning shift. Not realizing he was missing until later in the afternoon when he failed to log back on. Marth would contact work when he did not arrive home. He had vanished for all intents.

He could feel Bertha taxi out to meet the corps. The loading seemed to take forever, he could hear them with the tribute but was too far back and behind a sealed door, they would not hear him, he worked up the courage and tried anyhow. “HELP! HELP!” ...Nothing. He slumped down on to the stool.

It was not long before take-off, he could not remember ever being this scared. The engines roared and the tilt upwards was severe enough to roll him off his stool. Bertha soon levelled and he looked around resignedly, nothing for it, he lay down and tried to get comfortable. Sleep came slowly, his racing mind not allowing it for long minutes.

After some time he woke, only dimly aware. Something was not right he thought, this was not his bed. It rushed back to him and he sat bolt upright. ‘Owners ears!’ This was real; a dread pervaded him. How long had he been asleep? He remembered trying to get comfortable after the take off and now... The engine noise lowered a tone, was that a tilt? This must have woken him; Bertha was coming out of steady flight, maybe in preparation for landing. The tone dropped again, the engines were definitely throttling back, then a lurch. She was getting

lower; they must be arriving at the Owners Isle or just 'The Isle' as it was commonly known.

He began rehearsing what he would say... 'What would he say'?

"I am sorry I locked myself in."

He coloured in spite of himself and groaned. It took around thirty minutes until Bertha landed and all engine noise stopped. Jack held his breath and he tried the door, it clicked to green, he exhaled explosively,

"Thank the Owners!"

As he left the small room he heard the motors for the tribute loading door spring into life, and it began lowering. 'Well, here we go' he thought, and advanced down the ramp. The door lowered fully and what he saw made his jaw drop. Bots! There were bots entering the bay. He froze; but they seemed oblivious to him. He was in full sight. This could not be! This was the Isle! He was horrified...this was sacrilege.

His anger even exceeded his fear in seeing these once reviled enemies. Bots were the foot soldiers of the Autos; they had nearly wiped out a generation of his kind. He eased further down the ramp sticking to the wall.

He quietly stepped onto the tarmac. The bots carried on with their task. Jack looked towards some buildings a few hundred yards away. There must be people somewhere he thought. He was undecided now. Who would these people be, would they be friendly. Should he go back on board and wait for the next stop. Eras the leisure company was the next stop, not too friendly to J-Son; there had always been a rivalry.

He was confused, Bertha was scheduled to stop at the Isle first but it made no sense. Why were there bots here? The teachings warned of the bots, they were the tools of the enemy they were evil. Although these it seemed programmed for menial tasks only. Maybe

the airport was using them without the knowledge of the Owners. Yes, that must be it. If he could get out of the airport and find the Owners. He thought about it, his mouth dry. The Owners, they were mythical to him, almost deities. The thought of finding and talking to them was terrifying. He shook his head to clear it. His resolve hardened he would find a way out of the airport. If anyone could make this disaster right it would be the saintly Owners, he would find them and they would understand.

He looked around, a high metal fence enclosed the area; he had seen the kind before. He advanced towards it, yep there it was, a humming sound, it was electrified. He sighed. He would have to go through the buildings. He walked to them and warily and poked his head around the entrance doors to what looked like a loading bay. There was movement, more bots. He could see no people ‘nothing for it’ he thought and walked in, the bots carried on with their tasks, ignoring him.

“Was this whole place automated?” He was appalled.

He walked through several buildings until he reached a room with large glass doors. There was an area of grass and a road outside and there were automated transports coming and going. Was this an exit? He walked up to the doors and they swished open.

Outside a transport paused as it queued to leave. The vehicles passed through a gated opening in the fence. He tapped at the vehicle with his finger; there was no reaction, he stepped onto a small ledge at the back, some kind of bumper. Jack looked for a handhold and found it on a shiny grill with warm air blowing from it. The vehicle moved forward slowly. He waited, expecting sirens, alarms to trigger as he passed the gate, but nothing happened.

Outside of the airport about fifty yards down the road, he jumped off the still slowly moving vehicle. In front of him sprawled an open valley and what he saw took his breath away. A city, gleaming in the sunlight.

It looked like no city he had ever seen. It was glass, white and silver, cosseted with beautiful green trees and gardens. Tall buildings, spires, wild and graceful designs. There were lakes and private pools, fountains!

He looked up expecting to see an envirodome; he could not see it. He saw blue sky, sun; he felt a warm breeze. He could see something else, brightly coloured, like darting exotic insects about the spires and towers.

“By the Owners!” he exclaimed, they were flying transports, many of them.

He dropped to his knees unable to process. This was evil. It was the land of the Autos! The excess! Did these people have no shame! His need to find the Owners now raised to an urgency that exceeded his own predicament.

This had to be reported, that Bertha landed here of all places. Then he saw it, one of the largest towers, gleaming white, held the insignia of the Holy Corps. His brows furrowed...what?

“They know of this”, he thought.

Then it occurred to him that the corps must be trying to convert these people to mend their ways like the missionaries he had learned of at school. Maybe that is why Bertha landed here to supply the corps in this evil land. He now knew exactly where to go; he headed directly for the gleaming white tower.

Jack looked around him gawping as he walked, everything here was different, the colours so bright, the plants and trees. He had watched programmes about tropical climates; this is what they looked like on the goggle. The heat, he was not used to it. The constant slightly chilly temperature of the envirodome was glacial compared to this place. The sweat poured from him. Even the road on which he walked was strange. It was perfect, no potholes

or defects. It was as black as night and smooth for as far as he could see. The trees neatly coiffured as they neared the verge of the road, with little bushes lining the edge in a myriad of colours. He was aghast, 'so much waste' these things had no purpose he thought, no functionality.

He began to glimpse buildings set back from the road through the foliage. Large elegant white structures with much glass. As he neared the city, the buildings came more frequently, until he found himself in what looked like a kind of suburb. There were tree lined walks and squares with fountains and pools, the buildings mostly white.

As he approached a corner he heard a murmur, was that people talking? He crept cautiously toward a wall; the sound came from the other side. He poked his head out; there were a group of people sitting at a table with a large parasol over them. They were relaxed, laughing, drinking and eating. A bot served them with something. He went to pull his head back but was too late. A man spotted him.

"Hey you there".

He considered running, then thought again, these people did not look dangerous.

He walked out "Hello" he said, "Do you know where I am?"

There was a moment of stony silence. Then they all burst out laughing. He coloured.

"What is the name of this place?" he said

"The City?" the man replied, still amused.

"Yes" he said.

"What have 'weee' been taking then?" the man leered. "Eros, Salit...a bit too much eh?"

"I don't know what that is," he said.

They laughed again. Then the man looked at him a little more closely.

"Where are you from?" he said.

Jack thought better of telling these people what had happened. Instead, he said "Sorry I have to go".

The man looked at him suspiciously now.

"Hey wait, what is that you are wearing"?

Jack was still wearing his J-Son work overalls; he did not answer and kept on walking. He turned a corner; he could still hear the man. He began to run. He could see the Corps Tower ahead, it towered over much of the other buildings and he made for it. After a while he slowed convinced he was clear of those people. He thought about their appearance. They did not look...right. Something about the faces, yes, that was it they looked like dolls. Faces so smooth and regular every feature accentuated with what looked like paint. Moreover, their clothing was not functional at all. Tight shining pants. Shirts with elaborate swirls of some type of stiff material garishly colourful, both men and women. He shook his head, how could they work wearing those!

There were not many people outside; only above, in the transports flitting around the tops of the towers. Those that he did pass seemed to be eating and drinking at tables outside or entering and leaving glass fronted buildings, with clothes, and various items displayed in the windows. He thought the word for these was 'shops' it came to him from his time in Edu history on the Autos society.

Those he did pass stared at his outfit and his face; both were plain and worn compared to their shining finery. He was 30 years old but looked forty and he was rough and unshaven because of his ordeal of late. These people all looked young and pristine; he could see no

older people. At least they must obey the commit ritual he thought, that was something, maybe the work of the corps.

It was not long before he reached the tower, its walls were like glass pure white. As he walked up to it, sleek doors opened. He considered for a short moment swallowing drily before he stepped in. Inside was much like the outside, white glass. There was a desk or console of some sort near the opposite wall. He walked to it and looked down; there was a square image on its surface in black. On it was the word 'Attention' glowing out in red. He hesitantly pressed it. Almost instantly the image replaced with the face of a young woman, she had the same doll like features of all the people he had seen here.

"How can I help she smiled sweetly."

"I'm from J-Son he said weakly.

"Excuse me?" she said.

"J-Son the Biofix Company."

She seemed to see his uniform for the first time.

"That is not possible."

"I was trapped on Bertha... sorry, TC8."

She looked at him strangely. "One moment." Her face disappeared from the screen.

It seemed like an age, he paced nervously. Finally, her image returned.

"Press the console on the wall in front of you. An elevator will take you up to me."

"A what?" he said.

She frowned, "It's a small room that can be raised to where I am, don't worry it is perfectly safe."

Thank You for previewing this eBook

You can read the full version of this eBook in different formats:

- HTML (Free /Available to everyone)
- PDF / TXT (Available to V.I.P. members. Free Standard members can access up to 5 PDF/TXT eBooks per month each month)
- Epub & Mobipocket (Exclusive to V.I.P. members)

To download this full book, simply select the format you desire below

