

Earth Reconquered

By Kevin Berger

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Smashwords Edition

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Chapter 1

Patrolling the tightly packed, overpopulated buildings in City Central was a young cop's beat. Meandering the miniscule alleyways, barely enough for two large people to pass side-by-side--that was my life. The streets were narrow and claustrophobic. I longed for the sprawled out valleys that filled my imagination.

Heated sounds of aggressive voices came from one of the upcoming alleyways. Andy and I started walking a little faster towards the commotion. He looked at me and grinned, "Sounds like a little action". Just then the sharp pierce of a woman's scream broke through the surrounding male voices. I broke into a run and turned the corner. A girl's eyes met mine. Her face was drawn and white. Her whole body quivered.

The man twisting her arm behind her back looked happy as her face grimaced.

"That's what ya get!" one of the others said, his finger pointing right into her face.

The third one was the first to notice us coming. Soon the three turned to look at us, the looks on their faces melting into shock. They had matching jeans, black sneaker, and tight long sleeved shirts. The sleeves rolled up the same way like some sort of uniform.

"Damn, a cop!" one of them said.

Two of them bolted the opposite way down the alleyway, knocking a garbage can to the ground in their getaway. The one holding the girl seemed too shocked to know how to react. He continued holding the girl's arms, a dumbfounded look on his face, and turned her towards me, as if she could be used as some sort of human shield. She screeched again, the turn obviously twisting her frail shoulders in an unnatural, painful way.

I pounced on the hapless abuser. He pushed the girl away seconds before I was on him. With wild eyes, he took a desperate punch in the general direction of my head. It was easy enough to dodge the amateurish attack and he went by me. I grabbed his arm by the wrist as he went by, twisted sharply and pushed his arm against his back. He let out a pained cry, similar to the one he squeezed out of the girl, and I grinned as I leaned on him, shoving his face against the alley wall.

Andy came around the corner. The other two thugs were now nothing more than shadows quickly disappearing around the next corner down the alleyway. "Aah, ain't worth it," he muttered as the two got away.

"Take it easy man!" the young man wailed.

I grit my teeth as I twisted his arm behind his back.

"What's going on!?" Andy barked.

"What's going on sleaze ball?" I asked. "What are you guys doing?"

"Man, it's nothin' man! Nothing! You guys don't even have to get involved. I don't want no trouble!"

"Nothing! "three of you sleaze balls ganging up on a skinny girl," I said.

“Oh man, she’s nobody, don’t worry about it,” he said. I grabbed his shoulder and spun him around to face me. One short sharp shot to the stomach knocked the wind out of his lungs and he collapsed to his knees in front of me.

“That’s enough Jonz. I don’t wanna waste my time here. He’s right--she ain’t worth it--just animals fighting in the zoo.” Andy said. He pulled me back and we both stood over the young man as he tried to right himself, regain his composure; but the shot to his midsection left him still doubled over.

I heard the young girl panting behind us. I turned to look at her. Her arms were pressed against the alley wall. She was about my age, but her lost-child expressions gave her the impression of nothing more than a babe in arms; fragile, unable to take care of herself—perfect fodder for street thugs.

“I think he’s had enough.” Andy judged. “Have you had enough punk? What are you doing out on the streets at this time? You know its past curfew.”

“Curfew’s not the problem here punk! Now tell me what’s going on here,” I cut in.

Andy sighed. I pulled Andy aside. “There were three of them. The other two took off like cowards. This scum was holding her arms while the others were yelling and hitting her.”

Andy shook his head and turned to the girl. “What are you doing out here?”

“I’m just trying to survive, just trying to make a living? I got a right to live, don’t I?”

“Show me your identity card?”

“I don’t have one.” Her long blond hair fell over her deep blue eyes. They were the colour of everyone else’s, but they seemed to be a deeper blue. Her black dress looked expensive but worn and stained. It had seen better days.

Andy glared at her for a couple of seconds. He turned to me and whispered, “Can’t you see what this is? No identity card. She knows if she carries it on her, we’ll swipe the card and get a full hologram view of her file and all her record. It’s obvious. She’s just a whore. She’s dealing with her pimps--or customers she ripped off.”

“We don’t know that.” I said. “Besides, that’s not our problem. To me, three men attacking a defenceless woman, its clear cut, we should get involved.”

“It’s clear cut all right, customer or pimp; either way—who cares! We should get outta here. It’s too close to the end of my shift.”

“No!”

“Fine, you want justice for this little whore! You already beat the guy. You wanta get some more?”

He turned to the guy still on his knees who was still trying to recover, and kicked him. His head banged into the garbage packed against the wall. He groaned again, sighing like a newborn unable to speak any language, then seeped back into the pile of garbage.

“We should do something,” I said.

“We’re not social workers,” Andy insisted.

"It's our job to serve and protect!"

"You been watching too many movies Jonz. You make me laugh sometime. You're getting way too soft--even for you." Andy waved his hands in the air, almost stretching across the narrow alleyway.

"We should be more vigilant than ever," I insisted.

He rolled his eyes and looked up at the stars--as much as you could see from our cramped city, looking up through the dome.

"Not with this Exodus crap again! Ya gotta get with the program. Your head's up your ass dreaming about old Earth. It's gone buddy!? We ain't gonna get all these degenerates cleaned out of the domed city before the Exodus. Vermin like this," he looked to the girl and her assailant, "they're not all getting cleaned up by us. We ain't supermen!"

"I'm just tired of all this--" I started, but Andy pulled me out of earshot of our bewildered listeners and said:

"This is our job, but be realistic. We're gonna have a harder time down there. We ain't going to a candy shop. You're getting way too gung ho about this political "new beginning" crap--don't believe everything you hear on that stupid screen."

He pointed up to the City Central screen high above us.

"The President would want us to prepare. You don't care about what a historic time you live in?! Over a hundred years in this friggin' dome! We need to--"

Before I could continue he pulled me a little farther away, looking around at the tightly packed high rises surrounding us, scanning the windows to see who could hear us.

"Just shut up! What, what are you thinking now?"

He must've known I wasn't listening to him anymore. The girl's sad eyes were all I could see.

"I know where I know her from."

"Good for you Jonz," he scowled as he looked at her. "I dunno--maybe we seen her before. Big deal. Am I supposed to recognize all the whores in the god-damned city!?"

"Last time we saw her, wasn't here in City Central."

"What?! A whore like that--where else?"

"In the outskirts."

"In the outskirts!? Wow--she don't look like a high-class whore--but whatever--maybe she lost a better paying gig."

"Naw, she was living there."

"Okay Jonz, you got me slightly curious. How did an outskirts dweller end up being a two-bit whore on our lovely beat full of the city's scum?"

"I don't know that Stoneman? I'm not stalking her. It was a domestic dispute--remember?--that arrogant SOB beating up his wife?--had that vase worth more than our annual salary raised in his hand when we walked in--you remember?"

"Oooh yeah--but I don't remember her." He scratched his chin.

"She's the daughter who was crying on the street corner when we showed up."

Andy looked at her again, examining her timid and grimy figure, stuck on the wrong side of town--then he shrugged his shoulders and looked back at me.

"Still, who gives a crap--a rich girl who screwed up her life."

"You mean a girl who had to leave an abusive home."

"Whatever--still don't give a crap. How do you survive this job?"

"No, we're not social workers Stoneman, you're right."

She was still there with her back against the alley wall, hands out wide, like she needed the wall for support.

"Where do you live?" I asked.

"I dunno," she shrugged.

"Do you usually work around here?" I asked.

She looked long and hard in my eyes and then her look relaxed and she looked down at her feet.

"Yes, I usually work here."

"I'll keep an eye out for you" I said.

She looked up at me for a second and then quickly down at her feet again.

"Get up," Andy said, waving his arm to the attacker on the ground. Strangely enough, he had his identity card with him. I swiped the card on my wristband and his holographic citizen's file came up. 'Page one of seventeen' it said at the top.

"That's quite a list of felonies. A couple of outstanding charges. Looks like you've been a bad boy," I said.

"Don't tell me ya wanta waste your time with this small time punk Jonz?"

"Is that a rhetorical question Stoneman?"

"Great Jonz, just Great. You did hear me say it's almost the end of shift?"

Andy activated the luminescent restraint rings around the attacker's wrists, staring hard at him. The attacker cowered and his eyes squinted as he met Andy's glare.

"Happy now Jonz? Another hour wasted back at the precinct processing garbage."

"But don't you feel good about cleaning up the streets?"

"Yeah--feel fantastic," he said as he pulled on the attacker's arm. "Come on you! Don't slow me down. And you!" the girl cried out slightly as Andy turned towards her "Don't let me catch you here again!"

I looked at her still standing in the same spot against the dirty wall among the piles of garbage left in the alleyway from the countless residents that filled the high row buildings towering over both sides of the narrow alleyway. As we dragged her assailant away to the precinct, I thought I saw a slight smile of relief come to her face.

Andy muttered and complained the whole hour we processed that punk. For me it was worth it.

Back on the streets, we came to the checkpoint at the end of a long street. We showed our police credentials and the lazy-eyed senior officer let us pass, barely looking up at us from his comfortable little booth along the border of City Central. The lights of downtown were less erratic, more illuminating and useful than the dank streets of our beat. The wide roundabout of downtown, with the sensational Dome Tower at the center, was always jammed with people. Some areas of the city may have been forced to sleep at certain times, but the very center was always alive and vibrant. The affluent citizens from the outskirts needed a place to party, away from their homes; and unfairly near the City Central citizens who were forced to obey a restrictive curfew.

I walked out to the edge of the roundabout. Here the people flowed by us without interruption. I looked up and felt the claustrophobia drift from me as I soaked in the impressive view of the Tower and all the wideness of the roundabout. People were drifting in and out of the stairwells up from the transit system. Jostling and laughing. The noise continued unabated from the balconies of the bars and clubs that jutted out from the lower levels of the tower. Above this cluster of party establishments, the higher levels of the towers had a collection of giant advertisements selling everything from shoes to appliances, all glitzy images; some two dimensional, some three dimensional and jutting out over the traffic in the roundabout.

Up above the streets, in the middle of all the fancy advertisements, there was a giant telecommunications screen beaming down over the crowd. It was on City News. All the news stations were discussing the planned exodus back to Earth. This night was no exception. They were constantly replaying the President's news conference from earlier in the week.

"Haven't you heard that often enough?" Andy asked.

"What?! You're not interested in the Exodus now Stoneman?"

"Course I am, but don't need to hear that same crap over and over."

"The President is just trying to inform the people about the strides we made--how Earth is finally safe again. People need to know that the terrorists are defeated."

"Safe again--spoken like a real General's son Jonz. They're gonna send us soldiers and the City Central scum first. Do you think your dad and his buddies are gonna be cutting trees for the first settlements?"

"Yeah, that's right. He's going to go from top general on the space station to lumberjack down on Earth."

"He can help with the reconstruction--no?!"

"Quit laughing Stoneman--you're not funny. Show some respect for the soldiers that risked nuclear contamination over the last hundred years."

"I'm showing the ultimate respect. I'm gonna join'em soon. I'll stick by you too. Safest assignment is near a general's son."

"Sure, now that the contamination levels are under control."

"If they really are Jonz--if they really are."

"What?! Now you think they'd send us down and let us travel past the Earth dome to get contaminated and die?! Come on Stoneman, now you're pushing me too much."

"Sorry for the reality check Jonz, but I don't believe everything they put up on that giant screen--spouted by our fearless leader." He looked around at the sights. "Why can't we spend our shift here? Be more tourist guides than anything. Easier than the scum we gotta deal with."

"That's for the senior guys Stoneman."

We made our way to the other side of downtown. A drunk woman stopped us and put her arms around Andy. She wanted her friend to take a picture of her with two strong policemen. We obliged; happy for the distraction.

The bright lights of downtown blinded us passing through the checkpoint to continue our shift on the other side of downtown, the other side of City Central. The noise of downtown quickly faded along with the lights, the jewel at the center of our domed city. The good-spirited shriek of a woman was the last loud sound we heard as we sank into the other side, right back into the heart of City Central and the curfew.

The continued ebb and flow of illegal activity was all around us. We only stopped for the more brazen, the more obvious outlaw night-dwellers. Through the intermittent light of the alleyway, loud intoxicated voices were bellowing; distracted, not paying attention to the police officers heading in their direction. The plaintive howls of tenants above could be heard, pleading for an elusive night's sleep.

Andy picked up the pace, walking powerfully towards the commotion – eager, yet trying not to announce his arrival too easily. The doorman had just realized who was beside him when Andy pushed him aside.

Inside, our arrival caused the usual sudden halt of activity; but it was more pronounced, more shocked, in these more dangerous surroundings. The room was relatively large considering the City Central location. Enough room for a dozen people to sit comfortably. The bar at the back of the room had the usual array of glasses and bottles on display, distorting the soft glow of lights from the wall in back of them. This was the only light in the bar, so it left the patrons in a shadowy haze, stumbling around even before they became intoxicated. Andy and I entered, the aforementioned silence abruptly filling the room. Andy stood in the middle, wide stance, searching out a target. One particularly nervous character fidgeted in the corner; his eyes darting back and forth helplessly in the shadows. Andy sensed the weakness and pounced.

"Do you know what time curfew is?"

The man looked around, beads of sweat starting to form on his forehead. "Who, me?"

"Yeah, you!"

"T-twelve, twelve o'clock"

"That's right, my friend – and what time is it now?"

"One th-th-thirty."

"Right again." Andy looked around, in mock approval, like a schoolteacher happy with a bright primary school student. "So what is it that you don't understand about the principle of curfew?"

Andy's face leaned in towards his helpless foe. The man squirmed; sweat now drenching his face. The man's face contorted as his mouth moved, twitching; searching for an explanation.

"You may as well leave him alone. He's just having a drink, not bothering anyone," said the bartender from behind. "If it's good enough for the golden citizens from the Outskirts partying downtown, why not us?"

Andy's head turned towards the interloper. The bartender matched his gaze, unfazed, a pair of worn eyes, looking older than their years, losing their youthful blue, and fading to an experienced, yet cynical pale grey.

"I don't think you should be sticking your nose in, buddy."

"Let's not make more of this than it is my friend," the bartender said.

The bartender was making a drink, deftly using only his left hand, his right shirt sleeve rolled up neatly, not needed, considering the bartender had no right arm. Below his grey eyes, a deep scar slashed its way across his cheek, narrowly missing the left eye. Continuing to mix the drink, bottle clinking against the glass.

"I know what you guys are all about. So do most of the guys in this bar. So don't get excited. We were all in the same situation a few short years ago."

"Ex-cop?" I asked.

"Yeah, ex-cops, and we did the next level too."

"Earth combat duty?" Andy added.

"Yeah, of course you know what I'm talking about, don't you? We were in the same position— young, gung-ho, patriotic, idealistic – sound familiar?" The bartender let out a hoarse chuckle as he distributed the drink to an eager patron. "We went through the same steps as you guys. They always start the young military recruits in City Central street patrol. Combat training twice a week. Soon you'll be going to your Earth combat boot camp. Am I right? Of course I am. We all know the routine here. We're all brothers in arms. Every one of the guys you see here--" The bartender slowly, methodically pointed out each of the dozen men that were in the bar with him. "—each one of these guys knows what you're going through, and more--where you're headed."

Until then, the bartender's eyes were fixed solidly on Andy or me , now he diverted them to his bar for the first time. His tone grew deeper. I felt unsettled.

"I remember the shuttle down to Earth. Mind you, things have gotten better lads. We've expanded conquered land on Earth nowadays. You lads will have it easier than we did, I hope. But I remember how we all felt. It's a noble fight, isn't it lads? Anyway, it was so clear before it all started. I mean, damn, we need to liberate Earth from those goddamned terrorists. That's clear isn't it? But it all got murky at some point, at some point after the mission started."

The bartender looked at me.

"When you get out of the Earth dome, it's very unsettling. You're not protected. I'd never been out of the dome before. Of course, you guys know that only a few have ever been out of the dome, at least, no one apart from the lucky soldiers making settlements on Earth. It's weird not to have a dome over your head, a solid, impenetrable dome. The security, it's what we're used to, I guess. Born, raised in a dome so when you shuttle down to the Earth dome, it's not a big deal.

You still have that security, that solid, impenetrable dome. But we're different from all the civilians that shuttle down to Earth. They go down every day by the thousands, shuttles filled with people, just a daily routine, going to work in the farms, plants, and warehouses, but there's a big difference between those thousands and us soldiers. They take underground tunnels from the dome to their daily workplace, to their farms or warehouses or plants. They always have protection from the overhead... the overhead..."

His voice stammered, trailed off, but then he got his strength back.

"The overhead bombs that you have no protection from outside of a dome. Sent by anonymous, faceless bastards from somewhere out there in that wasteland where we all came from. They're in their element down there. They've survived the nuclear destruction they reaped on the world. Right boys, we're 2184 now – right? I can't even remember. Of course it is. It's going to be one hundred years next month that they've been surviving, living, thriving in that environment. One hundred years on Earth since they destroyed it for all decent human beings with their bloody nuclear attack."

His anger grew.

"One hundred years. They prepared more domes and tunnels. Thank God we got it back from them. Thank God we got the Earth dome and its tunnels before the bombs razed the Earth, and all its cities--to the ground. Thank God for that—a battle won. Thank God for all the battles won against those monsters, but there are more to win, aren't there lads?"

Grunts of approval and head nodding went on around the bar. Andy shuffled in his spot, looking at me but then straight to the ground when I looked back.

"You don't know how it feels until you yourself are outside of the dome, feeling weak, vulnerable."

He raised his one arm to point straight at me.

"Yeah, you heard me. I'm not too macho to admit it, not anymore anyway. You're vulnerable as hell when you leave that dome and you know what the worst part is? You don't have a clue where they are, your enemy. I never saw one of them in my life, only heard stories from other Earth front soldiers--other poor bastards just trying to build that goddamn first settlement. Safe zone--my ass. You don't know what the truth is and what macho talk is. Everyone wants to tell stories about how they came face-to-face, strangled one of those bastards with their bare hands. Everyone wants to tell those stories and they do. But how many are just stories, and how many stories are real? Maybe none. But I know what I know. I never saw one, not even from a distance. Look at what's left of me though."

His one arm flicked at the neatly rolled sleeve where the other arm should be. His fingers rubbed the prominent scar stretching across his cheek.

"Look at what's left of me. They leave their mark, namelessly, out of the sky. Our tracking systems could always tell when the missiles are launched. When you're in the field, they call you, tell you it's coming--but it's always too late. Who knows, maybe not always, maybe once in a while we hit one. But we don't know out there. They're mobile. I've seen one of their hovercrafts, or at least I'm pretty sure I did. Flying over one of the countless bomb craters out on the Earth surface. We're driving them farther away, taking more territory, but the Earth won't be safe until we've taken back every square inch and that includes underground too. Who knows

what they have underground. They're so dangerous. We'll win though. It's getting better. This generation is taking the Earth back."

"Not without sacrifices from previous generations," I added.

"No, not without sacrifices, that's true, many greater than mine. I'm still here, parts of me anyway."

A heavy silence fell on the room.

Andy looked at me and said: "let's go".

We walked out.

Chapter 2

From the seedy depths of City Central, our shift always ended back at the squad room. It was like flicking on a light switch in a dark room; waking to the familiar and comfortable from a restless, anxiety filled sleep. The precinct occupied the bottom three floors of one the densely-packed sections of skyscrapers. Throughout the city, scrapers pushed up towards the dome--mostly residential--with our police station jammed in between. There was always a lot going on in City Central, but outside the precinct was usually deserted, except for the cops coming in and out--sometimes with unhappy guests.

Approaching from the street, the precinct was distinct. The outside of the main floor was like a cut out; covered with a one inch thick bulletproof, laser proof, spit proof plexiglass. Everyone could see in, but it was impenetrable. At the same time as Andy and I, Martina Lever and Doug Lloyd were coming in from their nightly shift. The three of them passed in front of me. Andy was the tallest and most imposing figure among us. He struck a cop poster boy image. Martina too, was strong and athletic; her sometimes serious look did not diminish her attractiveness. She had a strong aura around her. She had fewer issues on the streets than a lot of female cops. Doug was smaller and always slouched a little bit, appearing timid and out of place. Like Andy and Martina, I too, took a strong interest in my physical conditioning. Despite being a little smaller than Andy--maybe I was the poster boy more than him. We passed from the street into the precinct's glass entrance. There was a security checkpoint just as you walked in. We all waved our identity passes in front of the laser interface, I heard three approving beeps as Martina, Doug, and Andy passed in front of me. A hologram of our personal record appeared for the career cop guarding the entrance. Old Sergeant Waverly's glazed eyes didn't seem to register anything. He knew all of us and just grunted a tired "hello" as we passed.

I swiped my card, and I heard the familiar beep. My name, Tyler Jonz, and my record details appeared in front of the Sergeant's glazed eyes. I tried not to laugh.

"What was your night like guys?" Doug asked.

"Same crap as usual, Dougie boy!" Andy answered.

Doug frowned. "Just asking."

"Jonz shouldn't be a cop. He should be a social worker."

"Oh no, here he goes again," I groaned. We walked past the open precinct; many cops doing their paperwork--some arguing with captured criminals.

"Welcome back to Hell Central," one cop sarcastically said to us. He was stuck listening to a particularly upset detainee. At the back of the open precinct was a hallway that took us to the cop's lockers; rows of narrow, metal containers-- rows of benches in front. It was the end of night shift and there were already many cops in there changing.

"Tonight he was heartbroken over a little prostitute with cute eyes. I thought he was gonna take her home and give her a bowl of soup. He's too soft for the job man." Andy fell heavily onto the bench in front of his locker.

Martina laughed. "You two are worse than a married couple; it must be all the sexual tension. Maybe you two should just consummate the relationship and get it over with."

"I'm sure I'd go to Earth and get some mutant nuclear fallout woman that would be much more appealing than this guy" I said.

"Don't be so sure Jonz. Those mutant women got standards too you know" Andy replied. "Mind you, you could probably get one of those City Central night stalkers, right Jonz? Just like the one tonight. Why do ya waste your time crying for every whore on the streets?"

"Look, I can't help--" I stopped myself.

Martina stood up between us and clapped her hands. "That's good enough girls. Jonz, you're a social worker, and Stoneman, you're a caveman. It's settled now. Let's get changed and go for a beer and forget the night." She grabbed her clothes out of her locker and went to one of the changing rooms, muttering: "we should have our own changing room--away from you perverts--to hell with this team spirit crap".

"Sounds good to me!" Doug said, more interested in her plans for the night than her comment about women's changing rooms.

"Beer's always good," Andy said.

"Sorry guys, I'm too tired. I need to crash," I said.

"Come on Jonz, don't be sad, we all love you," Andy said.

I looked at him in surprise. I knew he was being sarcastic, but it was still surprisingly affectionate for a caveman, much better than the usual verbal club to the head that I got.

"Like I said guys, I'm really tired."

Martina wandered back to slap me on the back. "That's okay, I'm sure you'll get a real good chance to relax tomorrow on your day off, training with your dad."

They all laughed. I grinned.

When Martina came back from changing, the others were already ready and Andy chided her:

"Always waitin' for the female."

"Get used to it Stoneman," she said, "it'll only get worse when you're an old married man--that's if you can find anybody to settle for you. Jonz, you sure you won't join us?"

"Naw, like you said, gotta get up early for my relaxing day off."

"Daddy's little whipping boy," Andy said.

I smiled. I was just happy the day was over, but Andy was right. I couldn't get that girl out of my mind--not that I would ever admit that to him.

"See ya later, alligator," Andy said as they left. The three headed out without me.

I sat in the squad room a few more minutes and then headed down to the Personal Transport Pod system under the city. The PTP access stairwell out front of the station was more or less deserted when I finally got myself in gear and went out.

At one of the cross streets nearby, there was a clear booth. When you walked into it, you immediately dropped down to one of the underground PTP access rooms. The room was small and simple; if there was a line up of people they'd usually wait up on the street--only two or three down at the same time. Through the room ran a clear tube which was part of the transport system. Beside an opening in the tube was a pod, ready to be shot in the tube. The traffic and integration of the new pod was controlled by the PTP information system. As soon as one pod was occupied and the travel coordinates were set; the pod shot into the system and another popped up from underneath for the next traveler.

When I was strapped into my pod, the holographic interface popped up, inquiring about my destination. There was a map of the city and the network of tubes underneath it. All the stations were mapped out.

The Space Station underneath the domed city was a large flat utilitarian shape. Within it were the infrastructures for climate control and warehouses for food and other essential storage. The Domed City was built on top of the main Space Station. It was where all the average citizens lived and worked. Underneath in the Space Station, access was usually reserved for military and governmental personnel; or others who had a specific function to gain access to the main Space Station. The main population stayed in the Domed City; many never travelling below to the Space Station. If average citizens did travel, it was on the shuttle to Earth; to manufacturing or farming jobs in the tunnels underneath the Earth base.

Within the PTP system, the different lines had different colours, and at the bottom of the map, was a short black line with only one destination marked—Station Entrance. In italics underneath, it stated: Authorized Personnel Only.

I tapped on that destination and my personal pod was quickly sucked into the web of tubes. Different pods went by and over me in different directions, making a soft whooshing sound as they passed. At this time of the morning, I was traveling against the rush as I headed to the space station entrance; so I dropped down below the city with no one in front of me.

As I got out of my PTP, the soldiers at the main space station entrance didn't even get up to check my credentials. I suppose I couldn't blame them. The system wouldn't let me through the main steel sliding door without a positive ID check. I did get my positive check, and the doors glided open soundlessly. Before me lay two long round hallways each leading towards different halves of the space station. I went to the left and started the long walk towards the end of the hall--towards my apartment.

Even though the shiny metal, perfectly lit hallways of the space station were cold and lifeless compared to the domed city above, the portholes provided clear and breathtaking views of space outside. A view like that was normally reserved for the rich and privileged in the city. City Central dwellers had to almost bend over backwards to get a view of space and stars high above their heads, above the scrapers. My head always turned to stare out the long line of portholes as I walked towards my place. On my right were the combines in the climate control warehouse for the city above. The rumble and metallic clicking of my work boots on the metal grid walk path always hypnotized me as I passed here.

My apartment was located just before the maximum-security section of the space station at the end of the hallway. Past this point was a restricted area, reserved for government and military officials with top level security clearance.

People like my father.

I didn't want to live down there, but free rent was certainly nothing to be scoffed at. My father arranged it and I guess it was an easy commute now that I had more and more military training down in the space station. All the military gymnasiums, fields, and classrooms were down there. It didn't have much atmosphere, but it was functional and practical for the needs of my life, my planned career. Inside the apartment, it was much like a tiny army barracks. I had bunk beds despite the fact I lived there alone. It would not win any interior design competitions. Clothes and food containers were everywhere.

I had a thirst quenching glass of juice from the healthy selection in my fridge. I sighed as I kicked off my boots and removed my clothes while lying on the bed, staring out my tiny porthole.

As I stared at the stars, thoughts drifted back to my childhood as an only child. These memories sometimes felt like they were from another lifetime, slivers of comforting life memories placed there to make sense of a more stressful, driven present. Those memories enveloped me, reassured me, took me away from this metallic, cold space station and brought me to the root of what makes a human content, to the happy family I was raised in; my loving mother, my dad, and me--an only child. I missed my mom terribly, gone so young; but like a warm blanket, I was comforted by the memories. They lulled me to sleep behind the constant din of the climate control system's turbines.

**

"You're late," Brad Jonz barked as I walked into the gym. My father was taller than me. His short grey hair was always freshly trimmed. He was in the same shape as me or any of the young, athletic recruits. The only time I saw him out of uniform was in the gym; and he was still in the official military sweats..

"Sorry Dad," I sighed. "I need to rest some time, you know."

"That's enough soldier, I don't want excuses."

Compared to the densely packed city streets that I patrolled above, the gym was huge and open--especially when I trained alone with my dad. It could hold hundreds of soldiers and they'd still have room to work out. The ceiling was three stories high and it stretched across a hundred metres each way--my dad's voice would resonate throughout the large empty gym as he barked out orders:

"When you come here, you come with a military attitude. I want to see some sharpness in your senses. I want you to be ready for the challenge." His conditioned physique flexed as he made his point. "Discipline is the key. Do you think terrorists are going to care if you're tired in a battle? You have to keep these signs of weakness out of your mind. Look at your physique, it is perfect. You are a fighting machine soldier, but you need to condition your mind."

He made a slow, deliberate motion of pointing his finger forcefully towards his head. "That is what you have to work on. Now let's warm up. Ten minutes of light running and then we stretch." He slapped his hand on the running machine beside him. I looked in his hard, steel blue

eyes. His uncompromising gaze stared right through me. I jumped on the running machine and heightened the preset pace which my father had programmed. He laid out a satisfied guffaw and put his hands on his side. I glanced sideways and saw his look soften.

**

Walking up to street level from the PTP system underground, downtown seemed especially lively for a Sunday night. There was always a lot of activity, but the air had an extra charge of electricity. I scanned the clubs for my friends and found them in Martina's favourite dance club. It was a popular place but not extremely large. They had funky clear glass pillars filled with water and lit from underneath. It was one of the many visual effects that set the tone. Poor Doug looked like a fish out of water, leaning against the bar, trying to look cool. When he was in an environment like this, he got clumsier than ever; usually spilling one or two drinks a night. Whenever he approached a girl, it did not go over so well. Like his military uniform, his civilian clothes always seemed a little ill-fitting. The look he gave was an attempt at aloof coolness, but it looked more like constipation. I came up from behind and knocked his leaning arm off the bar, jostling him off balance and slightly spilling his drink on his fancy new duds.

"Aw man" he said, "watch what you're doing!"

"Sorry dude, you can't go into a bar and not expect some spilt alcohol on you."

"Yeah, I suppose." He dabbed at the stain on his shirt.

I spotted Martina. She was on the dance floor. She was in her full glory moving rhythmically to those electronic dance tunes. Watching her, she almost made that music sound good. She cleaned up very nicely for a cop. I laughed to myself. I felt sorry for any lout who tried to get farther than she wanted him to go. I whistled to gain her attention and waved at her. After a couple of attempts she noticed me and tried to wave me out on to the dance floor. I feigned deafness and incomprehension. She rolled her eyes and continued dancing for a few more minutes.

"So Dougie," I said, "did you guys have fun last night."

"Sure, after Stoneman stopped bitching about your softness--it was alright."

"That's okay. He talks like I'm the one all nervous about the Exodus, but he's whinier than ever."

"I guess we're all nervous," Doug twitched on his seat, trying in vain to catch the eye of passing girls.

The club was alive with action that night--seemed more so than usual.

"I wouldn't call myself nervous. I'd call it anxious. I'm ready to go."

"Still, can we trust everything the government says? How safe will it be?"

"Aw Doug, take it easy man. Do you want to be cooped up here forever? Think positive!"

I slapped his back and caught the sight of a fine young thing looking back at me. She reminded me of the girl from the other night.

"You're right Tyler, but you know me--worry wart--I guess."

"You ain't that bad Doug--you're a cop--takes some balls--especially now!"

"True. Man, this place is rocking tonight."

We looked around. More people were flowing in to the cramped club. I tried to keep my eye on Martina, but now there were too many people around. In a place like this, she always had guys around her--though she rarely paid them a moment's notice. She came to these places to blow off some steam from her stressful job, not get picked up.

When Martina was getting a little tired, she wandered over to us--leaving a string of disappointed guys who had been dancing around her.

"Wow, I'm sweating."

"You're blowing too much energy Lever," I said, "should save it for the job."

"Don't worry about me Jonz. I got plenty to spare."

"I'm tired of yelling. Do you guys want to go someplace quieter?" I said.

"Sure why not!" Martina said.

Doug took one last look around and then agreed.

**

"Did you hear that the Exodus is starting?" Martina asked me after we got a table on one of the terraces facing the downtown roundabouts. "They're announcing an initial list of citizens for the first round of shuttles."

"No, I didn't hear anything," I said. There was still plenty of noise from the busy downtown, but not as deafening as the nightclub.

"Yeah, they say that they're going to start with City Central dwellers. That should make our lives easier, eh boys! It makes sense though. The overpopulation is starting to get ridiculous in those neighbourhoods. It looks like the World Government is doing things properly for a change. A lot of those people are desperate in the cramped City Central. Nobody knows that better than us cops who have to deal with these conditions first-hand. To tell you the truth, I'm pretty excited about it."

"Awww," I said with raised eyebrows. "Excited! Do I hear positive sounds coming from Martina Lever, the queen of cynicism?"

"Realism, Jonz, realism is the proper term."

"Soldiers are not paid to think."

"I thought you said we were cops?"

"In this transition phase, I don't even know which we are."

"We're World Government Policing and Military recruits," stated Doug.

"Let's drink to that," cheered Martina, and we all clinked glasses.

“Look who doesn’t have any dates?”

The voice was Andy’s. He stood over us with a female piece of arm-candy draped around him. It was the sort of girl you always saw with Andy. He cruised the bars every chance he got, always looking for the same type. Fashionably dressed, with the serious gaze of a model, the girl had to have the stance and posture that stated that they were chic and hip to all the latest trends. But if you looked deep into their eyes, they had to have nothing of substance beyond their "overly-caked-with-make-up" faces. It was always the perfect match. I sometimes wondered why he bothered to change girls--they all looked the same.

“This is Tiffany,” he said.

He took two chairs from another table without asking the couple sitting there whether he could. The man gestured as if he would say something, but Andy didn’t give him the time. He motioned for Doug to move over so we could all fit uncomfortably at the one table.

“I think there’s a nice romantic spot over there.” I motioned to a table at the far end of the terrace.

“If it’s romantic, then I guess you won’t need it, eh-h-h Jonz?” He chuckled.

Tiffany looked quizzically at all of us. I figured she wouldn’t even know how to get involved in the conversation if we didn’t discuss clothes or make-up; then again, looks can be deceiving. Yet she fell for one of Andy’s lines--so probably not.

“I woulda guessed you three woulda been huddled together, discussing proper settings for your laser guns.”

“Listen to the scholar.” Martina laughed. “I didn’t know that you had depth enough to notice intellectual variances in your co-workers.”

“Why don’t you go lift some bar-bells butch?” Andy barked.

“I don’t want to embarrass the big, strong man by out lifting him.”

“My, my, the conversation certainly takes a turn for the better when you show up Stoneman,” I said.

“Can’t you guys take a joke? Relax, have a drink on me.” Andy waved his arm towards the waiter.

Martina turned to me. “I suppose if we can handle this guy. Terrorists will be a cake-walk.”

Andy laughed. Tiffany appeared startled and looked around, perhaps to see if there was a clown doing tricks.

“I don’t think we should make jokes about that. We’re all going to be going down to Earth soon; and not to the safe areas where the Exodus will begin. We’re going to the front, to battle for more land from those terrorists. We shouldn’t joke about that. It’s too serious,” said Doug.

"Geez Lloyd, you're still as bad as high school. You may have gotten the best grades out of all of us, but you always thought too much," Andy said and looked at me. "Right Jonz?"

"I don't know. I wasn't there, remember?"

"Oh yeah, I keep forgetting. You're parents kept you locked in a closet until Police Academy."

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