

IRIDESCENT CITY

The God Anima

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JOHN SKOVDAL



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*To Jeanette, who lets me be myself despite everything.
And to Dusán, who cared about this story like no others did.*

mirage

UNDER THE LIGHT REIGNITE THE SPARK OF REAL LIFE
IF YOU CAN DRAIN THE GREAT ROBOTIC MODE FROM MAN
WE ARE ALIGNED SHEETS OF METAL SLICED AND SOLDERED TIGHT
I UNDERSTAND YOU ARE JUST ANOTHER GRAIN OF SAND
I CAN'T CRY ONLY DREAM
OF THE NIGHTS UNDERNEATH
FLASHING SKY NEON SCREEN
I'M JUST MIRAGE OF MIRAGES
UNDER THE LIGHT REIMBURSE THE FATE OF WASTED TIME
BET YOU CAN'T TIME WAS LOST TO THE AMAZING PLAN
LET ME EXPLAIN THEY'LL TAKE WHAT LIGHT IS LEFT IN EVERY GRAIN
AND RAISE IT UP A SINGLE STAR TO MAKE THE CEILING POP
I CAN'T CRY ONLY DREAM
OF THE NIGHTS UNDERNEATH
FLASHING SKY NEON SCREEN
I'M JUST MIRAGE OF MIRAGES

CHAPTER ONE

Glow

WHEN GOD DIED A CITY WAS BORN.

She fell, fires trailing about her, a star torn from behind the screen of sky. A brilliant burst tore the lands asunder as she collided.

When she was ripped open, the fabric of her mind spilled out for the world's people to read. They saw the code written into the plants and the animals. Every man and woman saw their small lives crushed into a sliver beneath the mass of everything. All meaning laid bare, sizzling like dew to the sun.

Finally, the land's Air simmered down, releasing the people's choked minds. Stories go that some lost the will to live, riffling through the images bombarded onto their retinas. They tossed themselves from cliffs, staining mile after mile red.

Others were resilient. They took what knowledge had been imparted on them and they dug. They built. They glowed.

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The moving scenery on the video sheet faded.

Benji groaned, setting it back on the shelf titled *religion*. This was the third one crying about some revelation that had led to mass suicide half a millennium ago. But not *what* had been revealed, aside from vague conjecture. His friend Gom had insisted it was likely two

things, blown out of proportion. The means for humans to infuse Air, injecting soul into matter. And the sudden knowing that they were alone, none to watch over them. That they hadn't always been.

Benji didn't know why he was hoping for something more complicated. All he knew was that the city Iridescent was a hypnotizing spectacle of light, that seemed engineered to distract him... from something. Maybe that there had once been simpler times, now impossible by virtue of flesh being obsolete.

He stepped to the library's window and considered the logistics of tossing himself through the glass and falling to his death, as if he had been shaken by God's departure. Faced with the vast amount of courage it required, he pushed the idea aside. Though it seemed getting through his day wasn't leading anywhere, his body was accustomed to it.

He left the library by the elevator. In its numbing hum, he watched his mirage singed by the pale blue light washing through the glass walls. The evening sky flashed, only vaguely black behind the fogs. From the city's tall box-like towers, a thousand blurry messages shone. *Buy tooth cleaner slates. Vote for Proposition 100. Top 10 outlaws at large. The Iridescence values your reports.*

He noted that Amary Stellien had gone from seventh to sixth place on the wanted list. He imagined the ailuran outlaw had an ambition to reach the top of the charts. In forums on the *mesh*, people made bets on it, while debating how the subtle curves of her hips struck contrasts to her mean glare and her brass limbs. He couldn't deny having strong opinions in the matter.

He walked for the train station. He marvelled at outlaws managing to exist when new-borns were all installed with buoys. Deactivating the tracking capsule inside him would involve a level of hacking that he didn't have the guts to toy with. Corporations voting to have the practice abolished didn't seem realistic. Neither did he believe any vote against the Iridescence was counted.

He put himself in line, eyes fixated on the light shifting over the grime in the stone paving. Somebody had vomited here. There was a distinct smell of alcohol. Fighting off nausea, he held his breath as the train arrived. He entered and immediately gave up finding a seat in the crowd. As the train started moving, he placed himself between a hump-backed old ailuran and a girl so skinny that he imagined skeleton-like prosthetics under her jacket.

She eyed him side-ways with disdain, as if she were dissatisfied that he wasn't hooked up to a platbook in his hand like everybody else. He imagined the serrated, beaming music that'd be thundering in her skull.

A hooded man sprang up from his seat near the front of the train. His mad grin revealed several missing teeth. "Get down," he called, lifting a gun aloft. It wore the tell-tale blue light of Air rails. His arm was of brass, shining gold. One of his eyes was pitch black. *Illegal implant*. It allowed him to scan for external components of infused Air. "This a robbery. Down! Your palechips. Now!"

Every creature squealed, letting themselves drop. Benji sighed as he followed, knowing that the far-off static noise in his head was panic. He had more palechips on him than he would like to part with.

A bald woman near the thug crawled against the wall, her hands searching upwards.

"Touch that, I'll kill you!" he bellowed, pointing the gun at her head.

She looked at him, dumb and blank, as she pushed the glowing yellow button, wearing polite words of warning. A shockwave went through the train, for a moment colouring the Air vibrant green. On his neck, the thug's port smoked with ignited Air. His eyes rolled to the back of his skull, and his limbs convulsed. He pulled the trigger and the gun went off, the impact against the floor disintegrating it.

The blue flare sent components flying. Half the woman burst. The squeals intensified. The thug fell, paralyzed, shuddering beside the

woman he had killed.

There was blood. Benji looked away, covering his mouth. All other passengers were shaking, fallen flat against the floor, their ports gushing in malfunction.

He couldn't tell how long it had been when the train came to a stop. The doors opened and enforcers entered. Made of brass, their dull sheen reflected the city's lightshow. Lithe as skeletons, their hinges growled as they walked.

"Please remain calm," one said. "You have been hit by a torrent. All circuits have been disabled, and your anima may have sustained a slight shock. We will apprehend the perpetrator."

Benji pushed himself up. Looking at the passengers near him, pupils fluctuating, *slight shock* seemed an understatement. Having the very soul incapacitated was a sensation he'd prefer to never experience.

On his feet, he moved for the exit. He had a hundred places he would rather be.

An enforcer held a hand towards him. "Are you alright, sir?"

Benji blinked, instinctively trying to find emotion in the enforcer's expression, painted with Air infused green. "Yes, all good. I don't have any circuits." Aside from the buoy, not hooked up to his anima.

The doll-like face flickered. "That seems to be the case. Move along. You are obstructing my path."

Benji reached the door and turned to glance at the spectacle after all.

The enforcers knelt beside the thug. One held a spindly hand against his head. "Tip Marston, we have recorded criminal activity four degrees beyond the possibility of applying for dispensation. No probability of a faulty reading. Accept our apology. This will be painless."

The thug, Tip, coughed furiously.

As the rail in the enforcer's forearm lit up blue with a whirling

hum, Benji turned and walked.

He was still close enough to hear the *boom*, when the blue light flashed. The sound was strangely like a fruit falling into a blender. He tried to hold that image in his mind as he kept himself moving.

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He neared *Block of Haze*, the name given to his neighbourhood for the steam vents installed to sterilize the pavement. The streets were thick with people, hunched over beneath hooded clothes. All trying to shield themselves from the soulless advertisements of the stores, selling wares fit for the poor. Cigarettes, t-shirts with obscene words, greasy food. The windows held glowing letters, declaring which politicians and policies the business and its suppliers supported. Most were in favour of more welfare payouts. Here, Benji felt like royalty. He passed a long-eared jackalope holding up a handful of medallions. His horns were decorated with baubles in atrocious colours. "Real wood!" he called. "Chock full of luck, gentleman." The wood glimmered. Benji knew the scam. The glimmer would fade in hours.

He hurried on, passing by a family of three, hurrying the opposite way.

"Mom," the girl called. "What are they saying?"

"I told you," the father hissed at the mother. "We should not have let her install *ad-line*."

They were too quickly gone for Benji to hear the rest of the discussion. He stopped, looking at the front of the blinding store that he was sure had blared advertisements for the kid's inner ear.

The red letters raced across the screens. *AILURANS WANT YOU NOW*. Images of furred mollies bent over, exposing laced underwear beneath raised tails. One displayed how flexible they were, licking her inner thigh as mundane cats would.

It had been a while since he had been inside. On one hand,

spending money on pornography was a waste. On the other, he didn't have much of anything else to spend his money on.

He sighed, walking on. He should put his effort into finding a real girl to spend time with. Maybe he *should* try one of those dating services. He managed to smile at the myriad of options. Ailurans were too self-satisfied. *Cute though*. As cats were. Too cute for him. The likes of Amary Stellien would remain fantasy. If he *were* to debase himself to cross-species relations, he'd have better luck just paying off a jackalope. Jackies were simpler, less likely to complicate things. Though he risked having his wallet stolen.

He felt at the palechips in his pocket. Those would probably be all he was worth to a girl. Disheartened, he silenced his thoughts. He turned to narrow streets, littered with trash. He reached the door to his apartment complex. He heard yelling some way off. Some unlucky day in this neighbourhood, he would get robbed, and there wouldn't be a torrent to save him. But rent was cheap.

He scanned his card and delved underground. He turned three corners through the long, sterile halls and reached his door.

He flicked on the almost-white light. Inside, his possessions met him. His platcan setup, the best that money could buy. A thunder-thistle growing under lamplight. His bed. He went to the cooler and drank a bottle of water in a single draw. He took a thunderthistle cigarette with him to the bed. He turned up the switch on the ventilator and lit the cigarette with a lighter on his nightstand.

As the cigarette burned, the tension in his muscles eased up. He took off his clothes. He had put off washing them for too long. He tossed them against the door to the bathroom.

As he debated whether he wanted to boot up the platcan, to bicker with deranged strangers on the mesh, he gazed at the photograph on his nightstand. He wasn't about to pick it up, staring it down like an over-indulgent lead in a romantic movie. He knew what it looked like. His parents, still young, standing behind him and his sister.

He only briefly entertained the idea of calling them, out of morbid curiosity, to see if they wanted to talk. Knowing what conclusion he would reach, he let the thought go until it could come pester him like a skeeto at another time.

He stared at the platcan for too long before finally deciding to instead dig up some old porn sheets. Ones he had not played in ages. Seeing as Amary Stellien had been on his mind since he got off work, he singled out one where a skilled artist had made her likeness stretch at enticing angles.

He turned off the lights and retreated to the corner of the bed. As he let the videos lull him to sleep, he toyed with the thought that the prospect of female company might motivate him to get some exercise. But wasn't that just the first step of all too many?

Not like falling in love could be much better than this.

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He was woken by his alarm, a soft classical composition.

He hurried through the motions. He showered and doused himself in deodorant. On the way out of the bathroom, he kicked the clothes from yesterday closer to the washer. He downed white bread and burning ebonjuice as he got dressed.

He lumbered through the halls, through the city, to the train tracks. After having stood there for too long, with too few people around him, he realized the train had been cancelled. Cursing to himself, he begrudgingly ordered a brass mule on his platbook. The company wouldn't reimburse him.

It arrived shortly after, the blue from its turbines falling on his shoes. The hovering vehicle shifted under his weight as he entered. He sat down in the frayed seat, more comfortable than it looked. The brass doll in the front seat turned. The mock pilots had always irked him out.

"Good morning, sir," sounded its stale voice. "Where are we

headed? Be aware that due to a system malfunction, I am incapable of providing change.”

He had only palechips. No warmchips. *Scalpers*. “Funny how malfunctions always fall in the *company’s* favour, eh? 128 Slipping Street, please.” He slid the chip into the socket in front of him.

“Haha funny,” the doll answered. “Certainly. *Doricette Incorporated* wishes you a comfortable journey.” They took off, narrowly dodging a pedestrian who’d disregarded the signal lights.

Though the many turns were smooth as protocol prescribed, he managed to build up a healthy nausea before they arrived. The mule stopped before a screen listing eleven company names, one of which was Euphorica.

He hurried out, not hearing the doll’s mechanical goodbye. He entered the building, then the elevator, and tapped his foot impatiently all the way to the tenth floor. He huffed. The short run had left him winded. He continued into the office. He fumbled for the correct card to clock in with. He started, as someone tapped on his shoulder.

“Benji, where have you been?”

Benji turned, meeting the leathery face of his supervisor. “Sorry, Gryf. The train was cancelled. I came as fast as I could.”

“Yeah.” Gryf smiled in the way he did when he wanted to dish out sanctions. Unfortunately, Benji had made himself indispensable. Gryf rubbed his hands together. “Last minute change, so sorry. We have a trainee. Hate to pull you from your station, but I’m out of options for an instructor.”

Benji waited for a *please* but knew it was an order, not a request. “Should be fine.” About time they replaced the last one.

“Great, come along now.”

Benji finally got the card to scan and followed.

“Tani landed a meeting with Double A Resorts. A killer deal. They want Euphorica’s *lethargy suppressor slates* to be a staple of their get-away packages. So, her new trainee is unmanned.”

“I’ll fix him up.” Trainee duty had ups and downs. He’d have to do less himself, but he hated being responsible for someone else’s work ethic.

They reached the lobby. Gryf pointed at a boy sitting in the corner, looking at his folded hands. Likely a school drop-out, who’d heard chalking up circuits was quick money.

“You have station nine cleared out for you,” Gryf said. “You good?”

Benji gave a thumb up, and his supervisor took off towards his office.

Benji took in a deep breath and a smile spread across his face. He approached the boy and extended his hand. “Benji. I’m to show you the ropes.” Already, he felt the expression draining him.

The boy shook it and averted his gaze. “Name’s Cub.”

That’s it then? “This way.” Benji pointed towards the work area. “So, you want to make *clever brass*, eh?” There was little pride in it. Mass-produce primitive slates that once inserted into the customer’s port warped the anima to a happier state for a few days. Then they’d come crawling back for more, quite literally like drug addicts. *God’s power in the hands of punks.*

“Sure.”

Benji exchanged nods with his colleagues who were scribing away at their slates. Benji and Cub reached station nine, and Benji did a quick scan of the work equipment. Fifty blank slates of brass. Drawing goggles. Platcan. No pens. Benji pointed for Cub to sit in the chair, and Cub complied.

Benji pulled a brass sheet and placed it on the easel. “In case you’ve never seen a *non-processed slate* before, these end up as the cores of the slates you slot into your port. They are all fully bound with Air from the factory. We draw up the code on the foot-by-foot canvas. Then they are heated and pressed into rods, and the infused Air remains intact. Strongly bound metal is quite heat resistant. The rods are then sliced up. One *NPS* nets about twenty processed slates,

fitting snugly into ports.”

Cub nodded.

“We’ll need to connect your *anima* to the slate. The anima—or the *endo-torrent*—is the cloud of Air in your body. It...”

“I know about animas, thank you.”

Benji rolled his eyes. He had, in fact, needed to explain it to a trainee before. “Do you have a port?” If he had one, it was covered by his shirt collar.

“Tsk. Of course, who doesn’t?”

Benji didn’t, for one. “We do have some high-end blood pens. Don’t hurt at all.” They were harder to stomach, but even Benji had managed to get used to them.

“Circuit pen, please.”

“Aye. I’ll be right back. Put these on.” He placed the goggles in front of Cub. He pushed the button turning on the platcan. While it was booting, he went to his own station to pick up his pen and goggles. Not wanting to steal one from a colleague’s station, he went to the end of the room and picked up a circuit pen from the drawers there.

Back at station nine, he borrowed a chair from station eight and placed himself beside Cub. “For the first couple of weeks, you won’t be doing much but copying schematics one-to-one.” He leaned in and tapped on the platcan’s keys. He brought forth the image of the most basic schematic, which repeated evenly for the first five blocks. “I guess we start off with colour theory. How far along are you there?”

“I mean... they taught us in school. It’s been a while.”

Benji zoomed in on the schematic. “From dawn immemorial, then. Air takes on different colours, depending on how infused it is.” He pointed to the schematic’s many small squares. Purple, blue, and green. The higher colours would be handled by more seasoned infusers. Otherwise, chips invariably went missing. “Each colour acts differently. You’ve got your standard blue Air. This is what you breathe. You can’t see it, because it’s unbound. Blue Air likes to move

and push things.” Benji blew out a sharp breath of Air to stress his point. “It runs the circuits, like water through a turbine. Defuse blue Air one level and you get purple Air.” He pointed to the large purple areas of the schematic. “Purple Air stands still. Blocks blue Air, allows it direction. You like to start off with a canvas of purple on which to *draw* the circuits of blue. We *can* defuse it another level and make red Air. Aside from being quite unmalleable, red Air *draws* on higher states of Air. It’s crucial in the machinery of an airplant, as a means to bind the Air around us. We don’t use it for much of anything here.”

Benji put on his goggles. He flicked the switch on the side and did the same on the ones Cub wore.

“Woah.” Cub leaned in, looking closer at the prepared slate. “It’s all purple.”

“You’re supplied your sheet purple, evenly defused, divided ten by ten into blocks. You infuse it according to the instructions. Easy.” Benji wiped the needle at the end of his blood pen’s cord.

“Do I need the goggles? They’re uncomfortable.”

Benji focused on the large vein on his forearm. He looked away as he pushed the needle in. He didn’t see the blood spilling through the cord. “You *can* do this without them. But the bound Air can be hard to see when the circuits aren’t firing. Foolish to do it without them, really.”

He took the cloth strap and wound it around his arm, to secure the needle. He raised the pen.

“Our bodies naturally *bind* and *infuse* the blue Air we breathe. Makes it green. We’re not sure how it does this, but it goes slower if you’re not eating well. There’s sizzle-sugar in the lobby to keep up morale.”

He held the pen against the slate and after holding it there for a breath, the purple beneath the tip turned blue, gently vibrating. He picked another spot and held the pen against it. Once more, it turned from purple to blue. He kept the pen in place. After another breath,

the spot turned green, seeming to vibrate less, but that was an optical illusion. Infusing always made Air vibrate faster.

“Because of the tension between green and lower levels, we can quite easily infuse to green all the way from purple. But not higher.” He had an analogy with connected beakers of water ready, but there was rarely patience for it. He opted for the simplest explanation. “The green from us spills over and replaces itself easily. Green Air can be given direction and take orders, in a manner of speaking. We use it to make logic gates. We’ll get to those. At this level, you can just jot up the rough shape.”

He made three green dots, gesturing to how it looked like the schematic. Beginners wouldn’t *program* the green but simply handled the menial work. They could eventually be tasked with the exercises needed to be held in mind when scribing the logic itself. Lethargy suppressors were embarrassingly simple, but it required anima control, something too few practiced at home.

“Once you spill, you can hold a steady flow.” He infused a spot to blue and demonstrated how he could now drag the pen, leaving a trail of blue and save time. “You try.” He handed the circuit pen’s cord to Cub. “No software needed. Simple technology.” One’s anima simply needed to extend through the cord, to the pen’s tip. It felt weird to some, but most simply shrugged it off and did as instructed.

Cub dragged the cord to the back of his neck and plugged it into his port. He held the pen towards the slate but hesitated. “How do I... defuse? Say I make a mistake.”

“Call a supervisor. Or get a clean slate. Doing it on your own is complicated. It involves making a pocket of blue Air in your lungs. Your body means to infuse this with its green, but instead you have it draw on external Air instead. Don’t think about it yet. The schematic is simple. Just go slow, and you won’t make mistakes.” Yet trainees always managed it anyway. He refrained from demonstrating his ability to defuse. He’d prefer if Cub concentrated instead of calling on

him fifty times a day. “Try copying this area.” He pointed to the schematic.

Cub held the pen against the slate and waited for the purple to turn blue. Once it did, he dragged a line. Wobbly, but close enough to the line on the schematic. “That easy, huh?”

“That easy.”

Cub held the pen against a spot, infusing it green. He held the pen in place for several breaths, but found it remained the same colour. “How do I infuse beyond green? How do we get gold and white?”

The colours that allowed slates to *rewrite* animas. The colours of warmchips and palechips. “You don’t. Practically. We use chips. In theory, you super-infuse the pocket in your lungs, quickly. Then you infuse specifically using that pocket. Very stressful. Few people can do it. Don’t try it.” He would try it, as they all did. The worst that could happen was a nosebleed and disappointment.

Cub dragged, making a green line. “How long until I get brass knuckles?”

Getting greedy quickly. “Sorry, pal. Doesn’t happen here. Certainly, brass knuckles make this stuff easier. But we’re not exactly making body mods here. It’s not in the budget.” *And you doodlers are easily replaced.* The gloves that conducted anima *had* been in the budget, until several workers were caught trying to fence the components. Cub looked no less hungry than they had. Benji sighed, recognizing the impulse from himself. “After you get some experience, try applying at Relay Webs. They have some good educational programs. It’ll get you on the track to making *valuable* circuits.”

“Alright. Something you’ve tried, or...?”

“You can only get so far without a port.” One could do the exact same work with a blood pen, though they would claim otherwise. It was mostly a matter of bureaucracy. He was fine with the amount of praise his skills netted him here.

“Ah, I see...” Cub pointedly focused on the slate, clearly not wanting to say that not having a port was idiotic. “So. I just do this schematic?” He tapped the platcan, scrolling over the image.

“Sure, it’s a decent place to start. There’s plenty of explaining left on logic gates, but let’s save that for later. Try your hand at it. I have a project from yesterday I need to finish.”

“Alright.” Cub looked back and forth between the slate and the schematic. He tentatively started drawing. Benji headed towards his own station.

He booted his platcan and mounted a slate, a faint glow making waves over its surface. Through his goggles he saw the intricacies of the many colours intertwining. Only purple, blue, and green, as made by the drone infusers. To finish the slate, the green areas needed to be properly *shaped*. And the funnels near the edges needed to be dotted properly gold and white. Gold where it needed to latch on to the anima. White where it needed to pour through, possessing it.

He would save the green for when he was warmed up. Unlike most other infusers, he found that the more taxing part. He opened a prompt on the platcan. He punched in his credentials. Then the identifiers of the schematic and the specific slate to be infused. A clattering sounded and through a tube at the edge of the table fell two glowing chips, one white and one yellow.

He briefly eyed the room, to make sure no one was looking. He put the chips in his pocket and pulled out two drained chips instead. He slotted one in at the back of his pen. He took a deep breath, filling his lungs with blue Air. He pulled in a brass cube, brimming with green. His greenhouse. To make gold and white, you needed excess flow. He held the pen against it.

He emptied his mind, stopping the natural process of infusing the blue in his lungs, and started *chopping*. He focused only on the part of him extending through the pen. He felt the disparity between green and blue, but held the tension, barely keeping the pen disconnected

from his lungs. When the tension had built to the point where he felt his anima shivering, he opened the gates.

The Air of the cube and his anima flooded to his lungs. An internal scan would reveal that the Air there was now barely brighter than green.

He held the pen to the unfinished slate. Still holding his breath, he dotted the edge with tiny specks. *Gold, white, gold, white*. He barely finished two inches. He'd have to repeat the process a dozen times.

It was exhausting. But it was good money. He felt at the chips in his pocket. As long as his products matched the chips dispensed, he was at no risk.

A bigger company would likely pay him exorbitant wages for the legal equivalent of what he just did. But he wasn't about to let himself be a caged, gold-shitting cow. He'd retain what little freedom one could in Iridescent.

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At lunch, he showed Cub around the floor. They'd likely soon be moving to a larger building, to take in new hires. Benji and Cub both pretended to care. They drank several cups from the sizzle dispenser, the workers' most extravagant perk. Benji introduced the other colleagues. He hated their smiles and the fact that he wore one exactly like theirs.

The screen of the tube in the common room drew the group's attention. It was a rerun of Rou Klint's latest press conference, a subject of some controversy. The foundations beneath the northernmost part of the city were caving in, and no one seemed to know why.

Leading scientists had dubbed it *coldrot*. Through weeks of speculations, they had managed to solidify the concern that it was tied to the city's steadily higher energy consumption, resulting in more and more Air bound to the Earth beneath the city. The epicentre seemed to be between three airplants outside the city limit around

Northsliver.

Each interviewer tried to shout louder than the other, hoping to get their question heard. Benji knew that the questions had been carefully picked beforehand, but commenting on it here was a bad idea. Rou stood with a thousand-yard stare, blinking. The disarray of his hair struck a jarring contrast to the fine silks he wore.

He pointed to an interviewer who spoke up as quiet fell. “Rou. As the Iridescence *Master of Currents*, do you feel that it is your duty to put to rest the concerns the public might have regarding the newfound dangers of heedless Air-binding?”

Rou’s drowsy eyes didn’t meet the asker. “When the people of Iridescent discovered the much-needed alternative to burning ambergel, it was in good faith. Air seemed a limitless mass to draw upon, but alas, it might be that Earth is *not*. There was not a soul with the means to predict the emergence of coldrot. We stand here as heirs to the decisions of people now dead. Is it my *duty to solve the problem*? *That* is what you’re asking. I believe we must step back and assess the weight of the problem, before we spend ourselves assigning blame. The *nature* of coldrot is not yet charted. I will do what I *can*, *when* I can, whether or not it is what I *must*.” He pointed to invite the next question.

“Will solutions be presented for residents in Northsliver, whose homes have been taken by coldrot? Experts agree that the problem has already gestated to a point where the consequences have outpaced any doubts that action must be taken.”

“Yes. A committee has been elected to draft the necessary programs. Unfortunately, the populace in Northsliver needs a level of caretaking that we must ensure is properly thought out before executing.”

The place was filled with jackalopes. What he *meant* was that providing indiscriminate means for them to spill into the rest of the city invited frustrations from *finer* folk fearing pickpockets.

The next interviewer spoke up. “What solutions are being considered that are implementable *now* or in the near future?”

“Outdated technology may be a culprit. More *efficient* airplants seem to have gone free of the rot. There will be scheduled upgrades to the plants currently shut down. The fissile salts used to store energy have readily available superior replacements. We’re still awaiting the prognosis from the master infusers, but it’s expected within the next couple of days.”

The next interviewer stepped up. Benji had agreed with commenters on the mesh that he was likely one gone rogue. Sharp eyes and a wide-brimmed hat. *Sid* was his name. “Is it not a mathematical inevitability that the ground beneath even lesser plants will eventually reach the Air density measured beneath the crumbled section of city? Regardless of the *nature* of coldrot, does every reasonable thought not dictate that all airplants must be shut down entirely? And is it true that there has been found a link between coldrot and the massive flu outbreak currently going through Northsliver?”

Rou was clearly caught off guard. “One question at a time, please. It is not yet clear that the density of bound Air is *the* cause, *part* of the cause, or simply coincidental with an unrelated cause of coldrot. As it stands, shutting down Air-binding completely is *not* a practically feasible solution.”

Benji *hated* that rhetoric tactic. Exploiting the misstep of asking several questions to only answer one. The other onlookers beside Benji nodded in agreement with Rou. He had to fight not to do the same by sheer reflex.

Benji agreed with Sid. Airplants around the city would eventually run out of Earth to bind, and then what would become of the city? Coldrot almost seemed nature’s way of warning the city. Logic was against Rou, but the Eosie knew how to structure a speech, so he had the support of most of the city’s corporations, who in turn had the support of the citizens funding them. Despite actively dodging the

only realistic solution. Limiting energy consumption, returning to the organically synthesized ambergel. To not needlessly burn energy fusing metals or transmuting glass screens.

Gryf clapped his hands and turned off the screen. “Enough loitering, people. Back to work!”

Benji wondered if Gryf had intentionally cut the broadcast before Sid had asked about Rou’s son. Whether it was true that he’d erected an entire airplant to power the machineries in his newly built home. A home likened to an amusement park by some, for the glory of an overgrown boy.

They all returned to their stations. The afternoon passed with Benji providing feedback on Cub’s work, boring even himself as he spoke. He went through some of the simpler logic gates, trying to explain why they were shaped as they were. Cub didn’t understand, which was to be expected. He wasn’t hired to be an inventor, only to copy.

Eventually, when left to himself, Cub fainted with a nosebleed. He’d likely stayed honest, only over-exerting himself drawing too much green too quickly. They gave him water. Work went on.

When the shift was over, there were swift goodbyes.

Benji didn’t look back on his way out the building.

CHAPTER TWO

Stellien

BENJI HEADED TOWARDS GOM'S WORKSHOP, on the far, dark edge of Block of Haze. A licensed grafter, who skirted the law enough for Benji to like him. As hunger prodded at him, he picked up a box of marinated squid on the way. The new restaurant had caught his eye, having walls made of brightly lit aquariums. They were supplied by corporations that lobbied for policies Benji didn't agree with, but he bit down his pride.

He kept himself chewing to block out the smell of the streets he was navigating. He made sure to keep a straight back. His heavy figure was usually well enough to keep the ragged personalities in the gloomy corners from considering jumping him.

Down a small alley, he opened a door and went inside. He kicked off his shoes and delved into the shop, glossing over the nigh infinite selection on Gom's shelves. A mechanical skeeto, glowing green buzzed through the air, staying at a proper curious range. Presumably a decorative pet.

"That's new," Benji muttered, wondering what the thing was secretly recording.

"What's that smell?" Gom called with his sputtering voice. His face peered out from the back, his bristling black mustache grazing the doorframe. Gom didn't need goggles, as he had replaced his eyes. Lenses protruded from his sockets, making him look unapproachable

to most. More approachable to some who liked to take risks.

“Squid. Want some?” Benji followed Gom into the grafting quarters. He closed the door behind him, blocking off the following skeeto.

“Oof, don’t bring that in here another day. You had nausea problems, nah?”

Benji shrugged. “Don’t know. This is fine to me.” Out the windows he saw the comforting scape of the junkyard that would never be cleaned up. The tube screen in the corner ran the stale broadcast of Channel One. He averted his eyes from Gom’s current project. A man lay face down, strapped to the surgical bed. His back was cut open. Bloody tools lay splayed on a desk, hopefully cleaner than the rest of the rusty home. “What’s with him?”

“Back pain. Ordered a new section of spine. Won’t help, but I’m buzzing to take his money.”

Benji nodded. Mortal suffering was weird like that. It had a way of persisting through modifications. It kept business good at Euphorica.

Gom rubbed his hands together. “Got my *LSS*’ies?”

Benji drew his wallet and picked out the slates. He stacked them on the table beside the tools. “Five pieces, as per agreement.”

Gom scooped them up. “You fancy chippies?”

“Sure, unless you have rare merch on hand.”

“Got some vintage sheets for you. Some of that superhero shit you love. Take a look.” Gom tossed a stack of sheets before Benji.

Benji tossed the empty squid box in the trash. As he looked through the sheets, he watched Gom push one of the slates into the port of the unconscious man.

“You’re installing it on him?” He made sure to sound curious, not accusatory.

Gom drew a wire to the port from his platbook and tapped it with casual speed. “Man’s going to wake up vibing. Going to think I worked magic. He’ll be back, no time.”

Benji smirked. “Or he’ll aptly deduce you drugged him and try

calling enforcers on you.”

“Catch him complaining about being happy, eh.”

“I’ll take these two,” Benji said, waving the sheets.

“Deal, sib.”

Gom went back to work, whistling as he cut at the tissue around the man’s bones. Benji sat down in the corner.

He pulled a thistle cigarette and lit it, focused on the flashing images of Channel One. Live footage of an outlaw being chased by enforcers. Red warnings crossed the screen. *Caution. Stay indoors.* The runaway was none other than Amary Stellien. He leaned forward, eyes wide open. The lean molly’s limbs all shone of brass prosthetics. A bag tossed about aside her tail, as she leapt over roofs and dived into alleys.

Blasts of blue flew across the screen. A shoot-out. Within the last year, Stellien had notoriously had rails installed. The blasts grazed off the enforcers, their thin figures bending with the force. One weathered by a blast too many was torn clean in half, falling to the ground in pieces. *What a life.*

“Up for the club tonight?” Gom asked. “Day off tomorrow, yeah? The whole freakshow is in town.”

“You know that’s not my thing,” Benji said. “Nerves get to me.”

“Scoot,” Gom said. “You need to let off the paranoia and let me install a port on you. I just got in a heap of slates that’d blow your anima clean out. Shame inhibitors. Confidence enhancers. Even a bootleg personality rip of Hans Alcatros. You could don the walk of a rockstar.”

It never stopped. “I’m telling you. This buoy is enough.” Benji tapped his neck. “Knowing someone is glaring at a dot with my name on it on a screen somewhere gives me the chills.” And after watching Gom install the LSS on the man, Benji wasn’t sure he wanted the same treatment.

“Might have changed your mind about getting a girl up in your

business? Did your cock finally rot off? I have high-end replacements, you know.”

Couldn't even get laid without mods in this world. “Let me tell you,” Benji said, pointing at the screen. “Amy there wouldn't need to put up her tail in my bed once before I'd blow *her* anima clean out.”

Gom looked at the screen, where a picture of Stellien was displayed. His laughter roared, a crisp metallic noise. “Buoy-o, you're all hot Air and no brass, I never saw you within six feet of a girl, let alone a molly.”

As Benji was looking for a snide comeback, his attention shifted back to Channel One. *Enforcers have lost their target. Stay indoors.*

“Hey,” he said. “Isn't that this area?”

Gom stopped his work, looking at the screen. “Lights, it is, nah?”

A sound crunch filled the Air. Benji's heart skipped a beat. Through the windows, a brassed up ailuran had just landed in the middle of the junkyard. A shaggy teal hairdo. *Stellien*. With calculated precision, she bounded over the debris, aiming for the workshop.

Before either of them could react, she collided with the backdoor, leaving a visible dent. She shook the handle.

Gom wheezed. “Mollikins, It's lock—...”

He shut his mouth when the sheen of her claws dug around the lock, bending the door open by force. She shifted inside at the pace of a startled spider and wrung the door into place, hinges screeching.

She turned to the room, sending her satchel whirling. Her artificial limbs snapped into a proud posture, her joints purring with a well-oiled hush.

She raised an arm at each of them, the centre of her palms lighting up blue. “Stay calm, gentlemen,” she said, nodding with a sharp grin. “Not looking for trouble. We'll stay here until shit blows over. No sudden movements, no one gets hurt.”

Benji realized his mouth hung open but couldn't help it. Her fur was burnt red and striped as an alley cat. She wore a sleeveless

hoodie. Piercings in her lip and ears, as if dressed up for a music video. *Perfect.*

“Harbouring fugitives,” Gom said and snickered. “Cost me my license, the least.”

“Tell them I held you at gunpoint, yeah?” She nodded towards her palms, humming menacingly.

Gom stepped closer, raising a finger towards her hand. His spectacles followed the faint blue streaks along her forearms. “Those are *Air rails*? Like enforcers. Beauty absolute.”

She relaxed her posture and lowered her arms, as if deciding there were no threats afoot. She brushed her bangs from her face and waved Gom away. “Watch it. I’ve scores of deadbeats sizzling after coughing my way once too many.”

He backed away, cackling with raised palms. “I’ve had my hour. Easy, kit.”

She seemed to reluctantly let go of her glare. “Grafter, eh?” She stepped through the shop, looking at the tools. “Half decent wares.”

“Have one on the house, why not?” Gom said. “I’ve a pro-tail mod. Looks like the thing you’re missing.”

“You’d be wrong. Your specs can’t see through my anima, yeah?” She leaned back, as if sitting down in a chair. She raised her legs, crossing them. She was held up by nothing but her tail. “Brass-core, doll. A whip that’ll catch pervs like you flat-footed. Thanks for the offer, but you won’t find upgrades for me in all ‘Descent. Synthetic liver maybe. Got one of those?”

“Could have it delivered by the morrow.”

“Ah,” she shrugged, feigning innocence. “Tomorrow’s the first day you’ll never see me again.”

“Bad luck, yeah.”

“Something to drink, though,” she said, setting herself back on the floor. “I’ll be in a better mood.”

Benji had been sitting, paralyzed like an idiot. If he didn’t say

something, he would regret it for the rest of his miserable life. He rose. "Let me get you something. What do you want? Hard rye? Tea?" Why did he say *tea*? As if he were having his grandmother over.

Her grin could cut metal. "Adorable. Tea sounds *great*."

He stood for a moment, waiting for a hint as to whether she was joking. As none came, he had to gamble. "Right away." He hurried into the darkness of Gom's tiny kitchen. He set water to boil and desperately searched for the tea pellets. When he found them, he managed to knock the cupboard's contents over himself, pulling them down.

Finally, he brought out a steaming jug and three cups.

"Had a party in there, yeah?" Stellien flicked her ears in a gesture Benji didn't understand.

"Yeah," he said numbly.

She took her cup and when he made no move to pour, she stole the jug from him. She poured for the three of them and sat down in the chair before the screen. His chair.

"Back to work," Gom sang to himself. He was soon moving like she had never entered, save the cup of tea he sipped from. He deftly maneuvered a suturing beam, closing the man's wound.

"Hey," Benji said, inching closer to her. "I have a question, if you don't mind."

She turned her slit pupils towards him. Her left eye was black, like the thug on the train. A mod installed after the picture shown on the tube had been taken.

He cleared his throat. "Why can't they track you? What'd you do to your buoy?"

"Wouldn't you like to know, chub?"

The words hurt more than he figured she knew. "I'm sorry. Didn't mean to bother."

"Trade secret, scoot. Nothing personal."

"I... Alright." He stood on the spot. He took a sip of tea. He couldn't

think of anything else to say. He sighed and turned.

“Hey!” she said, and he froze. “Come here.”

He did as told. He placed himself before her, careful not to block the screen, in case she was interested in Channel One’s lament that they’d lost sight of her.

She looked him up and down, her eyes peering over the teacup. “Name?”

“I’m Benji. He’s Gom. You’re Amary Stellien.”

“Don’t need to tell me my own name.” She huffed. “Benji. That’s a dog’s name.”

“I... No, it’s not.”

She cocked her head to the side. “No port. No external mods. And I’m guessing no internal either. Why is that?”

He shrugged. “Lots of people don’t have any.”

“You’re in a dirty grafter’s shop, talking to a punk twice your weight in brass. You don’t belong here, yeah?”

“I...” Why was she so mean? “I like to walk around like God made me. Here, there, who cares?”

“God is dead, kid. Why aren’t you packing? Tell me.”

Gom stopped humming. “Hans,” he said as if to himself. “Hans Alcatros.” His humming resumed.

Stellien seemed to shake her head in confusion. “The movie star?”

Benji sighed. He needed the practice, and Stellien seemed bad at conversation too. Though in an entirely different way. He pulled a stool closer and sat down in front of her. “Metal in your body is how they displace you. Control you. The *glowies*. Yesterday I was on a train. Outlaw, like you. Tried to mug the lot of us. At the push of a button, torrent made him toast. Enforcers blew his head off.” He shook his head. “Brass. It’s a ploy by the corporations and the Eosies to move chips from us to them at the push of a button.” He expected her to laugh. Like his family had.

She nodded. “You’ve barely dipped your ass in the puddle, but hey.

You're not wrong. Can't even watch porn in this city without funnelling chips to the glowies."

"Then..." He hesitated, searching for his words. He was afraid the stammer from ten years ago would return. "Why... Why are you packing? When... you agree?"

"Fight fire with fire. I know enough of what's going on. There are precautions. You've figured my buoy's a dud. Got shell-code software for the rest."

"Shell-code," he repeated. "You colour the edge of your anima purple. How?" As far as he knew, that technology was still only theoretical.

"Trade secret. Make me repeat myself, chub."

"Ah," he said. He kept himself from hesitating again. "So, how do I... get into that trade?"

"Nono," she said, waving him off. "Stop right there. You are a nice kid. Got a mommy and a daddy. A soft bed, food three times a day. Don't let *glowies* ruin that for you."

"But..." What did she know of *mommy* and *daddy*? A *nice kid*, was he?

"Nobody *wants* this life. Thanks for your curiosity." She reached out and touched the cold, hard surface of her hand to his cheek. "I wish I were like you. Strong enough to need no upgrades."

"Thanks." He wasn't strong. "Docile enough to live in comfort."

"*Docile*, huh?" She rested the sharp tip of a finger on his nose. "Again. Wrong scene to catch someone *docile*. You are a rascal, like me. Only, I am stupid as well. Don't be stupid. Live your life." She rose from her seat. "Hey, Hans."

Gom looked up from the process of sewing the man together. "Huh?"

"Can I borrow your shower?"

"Don't cats clean themselves? Tongue and all."

"Ha. Catch me licking soot and sludge off my back, would you?"

“Sure, it’s in there.” He pointed to his bedroom. “Touch my stuff and... Yeah, not much I can do, is there?”

“Thanks.” She pushed her empty teacup into Benji’s hands. “Toots.” She waved in the general direction of them both before walking to the other room. Benji saw her drop her satchel in Gom’s mess and kick it under the bed, before she closed the door. He rose and snuck close to the worktable. “Hey,” he whispered, setting the teacups down with Gom’s unwashed dishes. “You’ve got cameras in there, no?”

“Man, you’d best hope her ear planties are off. That shit gets out, you and I are flat on the paves in a breath.”

“She has ear implants?” He listened closely and concluded the shower was running uninterrupted. He bit his tongue and shook his head. “It wouldn’t get out.” Though it’d be worth an absolute fortune. He sighed. He already had a fortune and nothing to spend it on. *No*. No motivation to spend it.

Gom pushed a fist against Benji’s shoulder. “I’d tell you to keep your dick clean of ailuran guts. But then, I’d hate to see my sib kick and miss until the day he chokes in the nursery. Shoot your best.”

“You think I’ve got a shot?”

“Ha. No. But I think I can’t stop you.”

“What... What should I do? You’ve been with plenty of women, haven’t you?”

“Humans.” Gom shrugged. “A naiad. Crunked up night. She looked human. Anyway, can’t *teach* you. Even if I had a slate with sugar-words on it, you’ve no port. I’m waking up this sob. Stand back.”

Gom shoved aside Benji and started pushing buttons on the surgical bed’s panels. The restraints released.

Benji watched the closed door. Was he having feelings? It’d been a while. Her prosthetics irked him a bit, but it put a nice edge to the *soft* fur. She was probably sweet, when you got to know her. “I’m

going to ask for her digits.”

“Could do a lot worse, nah?” Gom poked at the man on the table, who was starting to groan. “Hey. How are we feeling? Look up.”

The man blinked, pushing himself from the table. He rubbed his eyes. “Smells like smoke...”

“Did that when you came here. Here’s your prescription. Drink a barrel of water. Take your tissue-boosters.”

The man stumbled to his feet. As he wobbled, a mad smile spread on his face. He jumped on the spot and raised his arms triumphantly. “I feel fantastic! Feels like you got through all my bones there. How long was I out?”

Gom whirled his head, checking his interface. “Four hours.”

“Wooh. I am late then.” The man scoured the room for his clothes. Once dressed, he saluted the room. He left, not having acknowledged Benji’s presence.

“Did you remember to remove the slate?” Benji asked. He didn’t recall seeing it.

“Uh.” Gom scratched his temple. “Likely. Yes.” He pulled the slates from his pocket and counted. “Five. This one’s the dud. How’s the broadcast? Chase still on?”

Benji craned his neck to see the screen. “Program changed. Who knows? How long do you think she’ll stay?”

“Tonight, the least. Figure I’m stuck with you, the same.”

“If it’s no trouble.”

“Trouble’s already here.” Gom showed teeth. “Should lock the room. Turn her in.”

“Don’t joke about that,” Benji said. “She’ll level your shop.”

“Not worth it, yeah.” Gom nodded his head towards the claw marks where she had entered. “Make me ask for a new door. Going to cost hell of chippies.”

Benji winced. She didn’t seem the apologetic type. “Might have to make peace with that.”

“If you do pull it home, better make her a good customer. Brass junkies make the Air flow.”

Was Benji about to try making a move on an outlaw? She had laughed at his name... She was beautiful. He was chubby.

The window broke. A whirling orb landed on the floor. Its vibrant hum rose and ended in a flash. Green, like on the train, spilled through the room, lighting up the corners.

Gom released a tortured wheeze, doubling over. He fell to his knees grabbing at his chest. His throat convulsed, as he fought to breathe.

Benji’s mind went blank. He could only think of one thing to do. He leapt forth and caught Gom, his arms failing under the weight. They hit the floor. He managed to turn Gom to his back. He tried to remember his first aid courses. He put his lips to Gom’s nose and blew. He tried to keep his nausea in check.

As he rose to rhythmically push his palms against Gom’s chest, the door to the junkyard flew open. The nose of a dragonferret showed, and the lithe creature padded inside. Its nose whipped about it as it snaked through the room. At the end of its leash, a kelpie entered, his shoulders barely fitting through the frame. A frayed cloak seemed to conceal weapons on his back.

“In there,” he said, rushing to the door to Gom’s room that the ferret was pushing against. Another kelpie followed inside. In the gloom, their horse heads, scaled backs, and fins made them look like demons.

The last kelpie pointed a humming Air rail at Benji and Gom. “Stay back.” The gun shook in his hands. He likely hadn’t anticipated anyone standing through the torrent.

Benji hissed, feeling tears in his eyes at the efforts of keeping the Air flowing through Gom. “He has synthetic lungs, you... scum.” His voice died out as he spoke.

The kelpie ignored him, turning to the other. The larger of the two

kicked the door in with a hoof, heavy even without upgrades. They dove in.

“She’s naked, chief. Haven’t got the mod.”

“Search for it!”

They rummaged through Gom’s mess. They were searching for the bag she had kicked under the bed.

“It’s not here.”

“She’s no nullwit, Trum. She could have hidden it anywhere. Best not hang here when she wakes. We’ll fuck it out of her when Near’s declawed her.”

They re-emerged, the larger one carrying Stellien over his shoulder. She suddenly seemed small.

“Waste the chubs.”

The smaller raised the rail.

Benji threw himself towards the cover of the surgical bed, as the blue burst tore through the air. A blinding pain shot through him from his side. He landed, feeling as if his body was melting. Tools clattered to the ground from the caved in shelves.

“You’re the nullwit, shooting like you piss. On with it.”

In the shadows on the floor, Benji saw the ferret lead the thugs into the junkyard.

Silence fell. *Gom*.

He fought to pull himself to the lifeless grafter, who’d luckily dodged the blast. Benji didn’t have the strength to keep pushing on Gom’s ribcage. He had to restart the lungs. He tried to remember the schematic. The core slate would be... *here*.

He grabbed a scalpel from the floor. He cut the tip of his index finger, then tore at Gom’s shirt. Not managing to rip it, he pulled it up instead. He made a cut over Gom’s heart.

He took in as deep a breath as he could and pushed his finger to the cut. Touching animas was intimate, almost gruesome. He ignored the well of impressions and searched for the slate. *There*.

He defused then infused, trying to reboot it. It didn't work.

He defused deeper and infused with an angry push. He feared it was too much. But he felt the slate whirl. Gom's lungs started. His chest raised and sank at a stricken pace.

Benji fell back and cried. He felt tiny. He focused on his wet cheeks, and the self-indulgent rush of calm that came with sadness.

CHAPTER THREE

The Chassis

BENJI MOVED WITH LONG STEPS through the shop.

“Sit down,” Gom said. “That’s a rail wound. Let the pills work.”

“Shut up,” Benji said, pushing against his side to dull the pain. “Tell me what this is.”

In the satchel Stellien had left, he’d found a cylinder. Unscrewing the lid, he’d found another cylinder inside that seemed to contain a fluid and a heavy ball with a serrated edge. It looked like it would unfold into a bug with knives for limbs. He placed them on what remained of Gom’s desk. “The kelpies were searching for a mod. Has to be this. What is it?”

“It’s an iridium chassis, scoot. Complicated as hell.” Gom pointed to the ball. “Intelligence core. Goes behind your chest.” Then he pointed to the cylinder. “That. Contains the dust of millions of pseudo-slates. Replaces your skeleton. Painful. Can’t do it unconscious. Most would rather die. It’s worth... more than you can think. She stole it from them.”

Benji decided to sit down, after all. “Doesn’t explain the enforcers.”

“So, she stole it from the glowies. Kelpies had the same idea.”

Benji let his forehead sink against the table. How did the torrent get her? “She said she had *shell-code*. What a liar!”

Gom huffed. “Colouring anima can burn. You’d know, you make gold, eh? Catch her not lowering her guard in the shower.”

Of course. Whichever way shell-code worked, she’d need to concentrate on keeping it up. Maybe keeping it up for long was dangerous.

Benji pointed to the mod. “What does it *do*, aside from hurt?”

“Intelligent skeleton. Repairs tissue fast. It’s got to pack a punch. Probably has *shell-code*, eh?”

Some sort of tech for super-soldiers, Benji guessed. “And I suppose it allows for some other stupid upgrades, otherwise impossible.”

“Dead right.”

Benji sighed. A long, defeated noise, as he made a stupid decision. “Can you help me find her? They said they were taking her to someone called Near. Talked about *declawing*. A grafter, I think.”

“What?” Gom placed an uncertain hand on Benji’s shoulder. “You aren’t serious.”

“They were going to *rape* her, Gom. I need to find her.”

Gom laughed, the wheeze of his lungs as healthy as ever. “What will you do? You get sick seeing blood, sib.”

Benji pushed himself up and grabbed the two parts of the mod, placing them before Gom. “Help me install it.”

The laughter stopped. “You’re crazy. You think she’ll let you hit, just because you come pull her out a fire? Save my life, can’t anyone expect more. You *just* met her. She’s not worth it.”

What was there to think about? What was life at home worth? The porn, the stupid platcan. “I don’t care, Gom. I don’t care. It’s not about getting my damn dick wet. It’s about doing something with myself. Anything.”

Gom hummed. “Not many grafters they could reach before her waking up. Might know which Near this is.” Gom picked up the cylinder with the fluid. “It’ll hurt. Not just on install. Your bones will

crawl, screeching when you sit wrong.” He shook his head. “Can’t handle it.”

“So what?” Once it was inside, it was just clenching your teeth. “I’ll not handle it, and then I’ll toughen up into Hans Alcatros, yeah?”

Gom smiled at the cylinder, as if curious about the results, after all. “She’s right, you know. You have it good. Can’t go to work wearing glowie property.”

Finally, a good excuse to quit. “Let my boss blow his brains out over it. Install it!”

“My LSS’ies...” Gom said, as if someone had died. “Fine. It’ll fix the wound, the least. Guess you won’t be there the next time my lungs fry.” He pointed. “Bed.”

Benji took off his shirt, ruined by the blast. He crawled onto the surgical bed, the foot of which had been torn off. It was still serviceable.

“You want the first part quick or painless?” Gom approached, examining the intelligence core.

“Quick.”

Gom pushed the buttons. He raised his eyebrows, when the automatic systems didn’t respond. He surrendered to tying Benji down manually. “*Quick* will still require some local anesthetics.”

Benji nodded. He was supposed to feel terrified. Like a vegetarian about to be force-fed meat. But instead, he felt as if guided by some great hand. As if this was *right*.

Benji bit down as Gom jabbed him and emptied three syringes in his chest in rapid succession. “Three deep breaths. Close your eyes.”

Benji did as told. His chest was going numb. When he heard a buzzsaw start, his body reflexively wanted to strain against the straps. *Stay still, stay still, stay still*. His teeth were threatening to break against each other.

“Picture the kitten,” Gom said.

Great idea. He pictured her tossed over the kelpie’s shoulder.

Naked. What were they about to do to her? Things that made him angry. He could scream. He would punch their stupid muzzles off when he was *strong* and *indestructible*. *Take my Amary, you scum. I'll ki—...*

He squealed like a girl at the searing sensation of the saw tearing at his upper abdomen. Tears welled in his eyes, and the images in his mind washed into a distorted, red nothing. What was he doing? He had just met her. She was an *ass*. She would spit at him.

The icy burn moved slow. *Tell him to stop. There's still time.* He somehow didn't.

"Here comes the displacer."

The hissing rod that'd temporarily push back his anima. Animas weren't inclined to allow foreign objects in, and Benji was inclined to agree. As Gom's hands and tools pushed inside Benji's chest, Benji's mind struggled to find the images of Stellien again. His trusted anima was gone from his chest, leaving it dead. He suddenly hated her. This ragged alley cat, daring to come here, toying with him. Who did she think she was? Falling over, getting kidnapped, needing rescue. *Pathetic.*

He felt Gom push the mod inside. His bones screeched as it was fastened with its serrated limbs, folding onto him. His own voice in his ears was deafening. It just kept going. Would it ever stop? He had a poisonous spider gnawing inside his chest. But he couldn't move his arms to tear it out. It would eat him.

The displacer was released. Benji's anima snapped back into place, like a mother to a child. He felt his own gold and white find the mod's, interlocking, possessing it.

He dared to look down and found Gom closing the wound with the beaming suture pen. So much blood. On Gom. On himself. He wanted to vomit, but the muscles needed were paralyzed.

The mod didn't feel like he'd imagined. It wasn't some great surge of power. It was a looming entity, watching him disdainfully. As if it

were a bomb, ready to go off if he breathed wrong.

Gom stood back. “That was the easy part. Should stay strapped in. Next part might have you punching holes in the wall.”

The skeleton. Replacing his *damn skeleton*. “Second. Just a second.” He tried to still his rapid breath.

“Right. No such thing as doing this part painless. Need a live anima to possess motoric components.” Too soon, Gom held forth the cylinder, popping it open. “Drink it. While the core is primed.”

“You’re not kidding.” In the light he saw the fluid shine. Liquid brass.

“No.”

He wasn’t ready. But he would never be. “Give it to me.”

Gom held it against Benji’s lips and poured. Benji drank. It tasted like blood, thick as melted butter. He kept going, his stomach turning, every part of him telling him that it was going to kill him. His tear ducts already seemed empty.

He swallowed the last drop. The moment Gom retracted the cylinder, the spider inside Benji reared up, whirling hungrily. It tightened its grip, warping his anima left and right in glee.

“Sorry, sib,” Gom said, squeezing Benji’s shoulder, drenched in sweat. “See you when it’s over.”

It started as a stomach cramp. The fluid seemed to aggregate and shoot footlong spikes along his spine. His vision filled with erratic, white noise. His skin twisted.

Picture the kitten.

He felt it. His bones crying out as they turned to dust. The cavity left behind. The spiteful metal expanding, making his body its home. Seconds stretched endlessly long. As it worked outwards, every fraction of an inch was worse than the last.

He was a nullwit. *Garbage*. Who did *he* think he was? What did he know of *love*? It was a slap in her face, going through this for her. What was she to do? Toss herself at his feet? The fat, dewy-eyed child

who thought he could *buy* her?

So what if his reasons were childish? He'd be a knight in shining armor. A blasted super-soldier.

The pain sang higher. So high that he couldn't feel it.

He pictured her in a snow-white dress. Her splayed in a field of flowers. "I love you," she said. And he knew it was a worthless man that wanted this. As his consciousness faded, he searched for a way to turn off his anima. To simply die, avoiding the embarrassment. But his anima shoved back, offended.

You are a super-soldier.

•

Light returned in the form of a sliver creeping onto his vision. Like a platcan booting.

The inside of his body gnawed. Like his skeleton was endlessly spinning about itself. But the pain was faint.

He blinked and found himself wide awake. His vision was clear. At the edges, there were numbers, dials, and bars. *Water levels. Time awake. What in the...? I've turned myself into a rotten platcan.*

"You made it," Gom said, grinning proudly from the middle of the picture. "How does it feel?"

"I feel... like I've been asleep for months. How long?"

"Half an hour." Gom started releasing Benji from the straps.

He was about to push himself upright but froze when something rolled onto the screen of his vision. A white ball of light with a flicking tail. It unfolded, leaping to stand on cartoonish limbs. A chubby, arctic fox with bold eyelashes.

"Goooooodmorning... Benji!" she said, her face making exaggerated expressions. "What a name. Welcome to the interface of your Vulpur IC Mark Two." *Vulpur?* He sat with property stolen from the Irides-cense's primary military supplier. Probably no reason for concern. "I am your Thousand-Lesson Endo-Torrent Chassis Helper. Or *Thletch*,

yeah? Want me to run you through the user interface, *scoot?*”

He recognized the fox as a softer reimagination of Vulpur’s menacing logo. What madman had coded this for *military* equipment? “Don’t tell me you’ll be talking in slang too.” He got enough of that from Gom.

“What?” Gom said.

“Some sort of mod assistant, plugged into my anima. Shush.”

Thletch put the stubs of her arms to her sides and glowered. “I have several language and personality settings, thank you. I’d prefer it if you left the default on. True to the author’s vision, eh?”

“I’ll do the tutorial later. We’re in something of a hurry. Someone I know is in trouble. Gom, can you give me this *Near*’s address?”

“On it,” Gom said and grabbed his platbook.

Thletch made eerily wide eyes. “Hoh, that sounds like something I could look up in the *IES* Records in a matter of seconds. Want me to connect to the mesh and have a look? The chassis comes with a mesh module installed.”

Access to the Iridescent Enforcer Service’s systems. That sounded useful. But too good to be true. “Hooking up to the mesh is probably a bad idea. Gom?”

“Dead right,” he nodded as he scrolled frantically on the platcan. “They’ll come knocking for their chassis in a minute, flat.”

“Hey now,” Thletch said. “I am a discrete little minx. No one’s going to notice me poking a bit around in the address lists.”

A fox that wide-eyed could only have been wrought to lull him into a false sense of security. “How can I trust you? Didn’t they make you? How do I know you won’t call on them, first thing?”

She rolled her eyes. “I don’t suppose you’re familiar with the *primary* imperative required by ironclad law to be coded into every factitious intelligence?”

He was familiar. “If one is inclined to believe the Iridescence follows their own laws.”

“My creator believed in laws. Code of Living Circuits, Paragraph One: *Any and all circuits imbued with independent intelligence and volition must be entirely subservient to its owner.* Makes most other safety protocols superfluous. I can confirm: *Benji is my owner.* Just tell me not to turn you in, yeah?”

Only a good imperative assuming he wasn’t a thoroughly evil bastard. “Great. Don’t turn us in. Gom, how are we looking on the address?”

“Lights, not good.” He poked the platbook angrily. “Circuits are acting up. I can *show* you where the shop is?”

“We’re late as it is.” He groaned. He wasn’t in a position to refuse a gamble. “Thletch, connect to the mesh. Get me an address on a Near running a grafting shop in the area.”

“Aye, sir.” She curled into a ball and rolled off-screen. He felt a brief flicker in his anima. “Ten seconds.”

He rose. Gom pointed at a new shirt he’d generously laid out. Benji pulled it on. It was a size too big. He found his limbs moving in wider arcs than planned. He bit down, embarrassed when his motion tore the shirt’s lining.

“Ding,” Thletch said, rolling back in. “Here’s a map of the area.” The translucent image filled his vision. “You’re here. Near’s shop is here. Service had quite a few run-ins with him. Here’s the quickest route on foot. And *here* is the quickest route, if you don’t care about attracting attention, yeah?”

Over rooftops? “We’ll see. Gom, I’m off. I hope I’ll be back.”

“Come back alive, I’ll let you pick my shop for parts. Lightspeed, sib.”

Benji darted out the door, still rocking on its hinges.

•

Night was falling, the city’s glow replacing the sun’s.

Benji leapt, finding his body crossing the junkyard in three leaps,

despite it feeling heavy. The promised pain came as he landed, the chassis seeming to spill into his flesh, but it was nothing compared to installing it. A flickering number to the side told him he was going twenty-five miles per hour. He could push further but was afraid of crashing into something when making a turn. If the enforcers were about, he was best off not stumbling from rooftops, falling on his face. He settled for following the long route.

Thletch waved insistently for his attention. "What's the situation, soldier? Reading minds is difficult, yeah? I could help you *scheme*. I'm armed to the *teeth* with battle tactics." She bared a crystal-white grin.

Shouldn't she logically be able to read his mind? There had to be a way of communicating that didn't involve speaking. "We're going to save Amary Stellien. Two kelpies dragged her to the shop we're heading for."

"Amary, Amary." Instead of going off-screen, she put herself on her back, juggling a virtual ball. "Ah, there we have it." She snapped into place. "You know she was just bumped from sixth to fifth place on the most-wanted list, yeah? Are we sure this is someone we want to save?"

He was absolutely not sure. "You have to do what I say."

Her eyes went smug. "I suppose I could rearrange some sliders in my filters on what constitutes *good advice*."

That was some advanced sarcasm. "It's stupid, you don't have to tell me."

He rounded a corner, crashing through a group of homeless jackalopes. They threw insults after him. He couldn't break his momentum. If he did, his thoughts and feelings might set in. "So, what can you do?"

"What can your *chassis* do, you mean?" Thletch shrugged, somehow not innocent at all. "I'm just an anima-powered projection, sitting on the control panel."

Great. A nitpicker too. “Fine, what can the chassis do?”

“Hoh, where do I start? It can monitor and tweak a fair number of bodily functions. For instance.” She pointed to one of the numbers on the side. “Bit of excess fat weighing us down. About twenty percent above the optimal weight of a twenty-four-year-old male with your muscle mass. Want me to adjust your metabolism to fix that right up?”

This would make him insane in the long run. “Can I turn you off?”

She froze, her eyes twitching. “I... Yes. Please don’t. Let me stick around until you need to do something private, yeah?”

He supposed she meant well. “Then keep quiet, unless I ask, alright?”

“Right.”

He neared the building she had designated. A great garage, belonging to what looked like a brassmule mechanic station. By the loud, jarring music, it seemed to double as a night club. The dragonferret that had been with the kelpies was tied to the wall on the far side of the lot. Tossing and barking, sending spit flying.

How to approach? He couldn’t concentrate for Thletch’s insistent animation. She wore a sad expression that seemed to say *put me to use*.

“Can you turn off... all of this *interface*? Make it look like before. I’ll see if I need any later.”

She leapt up. “But leave myself, yeah?” She was already punching the dials and numbers off-screen.

“Leave yourself.” He’d have to get used to her.

“Yay.”

With clear vision, he stood, looking up the building’s front. A grey giant lined with neon, maybe holding a hundred thugs. He felt sweat running down his back. Apparently, the chassis didn’t magically erase his nerves. “Alright, spill it. What’s your plan?”

“Oh, I don’t know. Not like you’re giving me much to work with

here. Grafting shop. Brassed up ailuran. Two kelpies? I *guess* they are taking her apart in an underground compartment, where her screaming won't attract attention."

Thanks for that thought.

"There's generally two lines of action, *scoot*. Shock and awe." She blew up her frame, flexing her stubby arms. "Quick and easy, go home. Or *stealth*, eh?" She slithered into a crawl, shaking her rear like a cat about to pounce.

He imagined blundering in, then a thug simply pulling a trigger against Stellien's head in response. "Let's try stealth."

"Got ourselves a soldier that *plays by the book*, I see. I don't have the layout of the inside, but imagery of the outside reveals a back door. Try that."

He threw himself against the wall, heart pounding, as he heard voices near the front door. Barely behind cover, he saw an old man wearing oversized furs leaving the building. He was accompanied by two giggling jackalopes, barely taller than his waist. They had been splashed with bright, pink paint on their antlers, legs, and skirts. "Ladies," he said. "Enough of me to go around. The Great Anchorman is a kind lord."

Benji slid down the side of the building, escaping the wafts of smoke emanating from the group.

"The *Great* Anchorman," Thletch repeated. "That helps with intel. Chief's probably throwing the party. Want a rundown?"

"No thanks," Benji said. "There's enough going through my head."

He stopped, seeing a man wearing a purple suit at the alley's end. He was relieving himself with his back turned.

"Goon?" Benji asked.

"You think there are just two kinds of people? Goon and regular? Who knows, he might let you in if you ask nicely? Or net you a key card if you knock him out. Catch me working with the same info as you."

He wasn't about to try *talking* his way in. There was nowhere he would fit in less. "I'll take him out." He approached.

"Lethal or non-lethal action?"

What was he doing? This wasn't some video game. "I... don't know, Thletch," he whispered. "I'm not used to this."

"I'm asking because... Well. Non-lethal is going to be hard. I can set the chassis to pull your punches, but the setting requires practice."

He motioned his fingers, remembering how he had leapt, not knowing his own strength. He thought of blood. "Talk it is." He spoke up. "Hey, scoot. Seems like we've got a rave brewing something fierce, yeah?"

The man finished, looking over his shoulder. "Back off kid," he mumbled through the cigarette in his mouth. "Find somewhere else to get crunk, if you want to keep your head."

Benji's mind strained, fumbling with his vocabulary. "You're... messing, scoot. All the flats are in the front. Who do I need to paint white to ride with the VIP's?"

"I'll paint you seven colors," the man said, pulling a gun. "I told you. No place for you."

"Regular, old bullets," Thletch noted, as the gun pointed at Benji's head.

Benji wasn't comforted. His hand shot up, grabbing the man by the wrist. The man fired, as Benji squeezed. A force pushed at Benji's skull, throwing his neck back. A searing sensation spread on his forehead. The man cried out as the bones in his wrist caved in. Benji threw him against the wall in spite.

"Ouch," Benji said, touching his fingers to his head. He found a single drop of blood. His skull whirled and writhed, his nerves firing, but then the pain subsided. He touched it again and found no blood.

Thletch nodded, impressed. "Before you get any ideas, you're not immortal. A little lower, and he would have hit your brain through the eye, yeah? Also, entire limbs are hard to regenerate. And most sys-

temic poisons go past the defenses. The thing would short-circuit, trying to replace every piece of tissue in your body.”

He looked at his hands. He went to the backdoor, ignoring the half-conscious man groaning in agony. He made a fist and punched at the lock. As the door’s metal ripped through his flesh, he hissed. He retracted, opening the door.

In the lamps’ glow, he saw the mottled grey and gold of his moving bones. It filled the cavities, biting at his skin. As it retracted, it left a clean hand. Unscathed. “Can I punch through walls?”

“It’ll hurt, with your *meat hands*. But probably.”

Pain. It was just nerves firing. “And I’ll heal?”

“Ideally. I’ll let you know if the chassis is having trouble keeping up.”

This was a spider he might get used to living in his body. He entered, growling like a lion cub. The music shook the walls and had the Air itself a blur as men ran down the hall towards him. “Who are you?”

“I don’t mean trouble,” Benji said, raising his hands. He sighed. That wasn’t strictly true.

The tattooed man at the front stretched, glancing at the purple silhouette writhing outside. “That bastard wrung Alcor.”

“Stay back,” Benji called. “I’m... I’m warning you!”

The man didn’t listen. He drew a sleek knife, reflecting the dull lights that flashed from the uneven currents. He slashed, and Benji caught the blade with his palm.

The clean pain made Benji think of times he’d accidentally cut himself on kitchen knives. He snapped the blade in half and tossed it aside. He swiped, striking with his forearm to soften the blow. The man crashed against the wall. “Sorry,” Benji muttered.

Thletch pointed to a mohawk-wearing thug, holding a palm to his ear. “That one’s calling for backup.”

Benji leapt ahead, trusting her judgment for lack of better. He

grabbed the man's arms. *Squeezing* had seemed to work before, but he felt solid brass prosthetics resisting him. The two shoved against each other. At the man's smarmy grin, Benji considered whether to simply punch his face in.

Thletch waved for his attention. She gestured to where the brass of the thug's arms connected to flesh. "Melchior lock. Cheap. Don't push. Pull."

"Alright?" He shifted his momentum, kicking against the wall and pulling back. The wall cracked. He and his opponent screamed as one of the arms came loose, blood and bone spilling from where they had connected. "I didn't mean to do that..."

He heard no answer as someone jumped his back, clawing at him from behind. A small ailuran tom. Benji tossed, grabbing for the assailant. The tom shifted like water, dragging his claws across Benji's back.

Benji tossed his back against the wall, but the tom was gone before he collided. As the tom appeared in front, Benji punched in frustration, hitting empty air. The tom spun and his tail unfolded, presenting a flail of spikes. Benji was struck in the chest, and he staggered back. He laughed madly as he was still standing, even through the blunt pain.

"Careful!" Thletch drew a red circle on his chest. "The core is right here. I live in there. It's durable, but you don't want to damage it."

Benji grabbed the tail and pulled its spikes from his chest. He dragged in the tom and lifted him, meaning to throw.

"Stop." Thletch waved. "You need to gather *intel*, scoot. Do you want to search through the whole building?"

She meant questioning one of the goons? "You're not equipped with some sort of scanner?"

"Waste of brass. Your anima is in the way."

"Right." *Can't scan in, can't scan out.* He rearranged the tom in his hands, so they were face to face. *Deep breath.* "Grafting quarters.

Captive ailuran. Where?”

The tiny tom looked terrified. He was younger than Benji. “I... I don’t know, man. I swear. I saw them bring in another cat. I’m new here. Ask Cho.” Stellien *was* here. Part of him had been afraid that he’d gone in vain.

The tom pointed to the last one standing, almost hiding in the shadows. A pale woman wearing an obscene amount of make-up. Benji dropped the tom and approached her.

“Tell me, or...” His throat tightened up as he tried for *menacing*. “You’re dead.”

The woman raised her eyebrows as if fully realizing his lack of experience. “Down there. Left door.” She pointed to the end of the hall, opening into a lounge.

“Thanks,” he said and ran. He opened the door and made his way down a stairway leading to a basement.

“I’ll score that three out of ten,” Thletch said, jotting on a virtual notepad.

He slowed, unsure what he would find in the low light. “You’re kidding. I didn’t die. That’s a ten in my book.”

“You incapacitated exactly zero of them, yeah? There’ll probably be twenty in five minutes, and you can bet they’re bringing a rail. If going for stealth, you are now caught. You’re going too slow for shock and awe.”

She was right. “I would have killed them...” He quieted himself, now that the music was fading behind him.

“And now they will kill you. Should I recheck the math on that? Catch a rail tearing your head off.”

The mouth on this rotten piece of tech. He stopped, crouching as voices and the salty smell of kelpie met him.

“Ever tried a *limbless* whore? Popular in Inferno.”

“Not one that was awake.”

Benji recognized them from Gom’s store. The open room he

reached was littered with crates and vehicle parts. Barely seeing their silhouettes, he dove behind cover, moving closer.

“Closer and I’ll lop your cock off, you limp fish. Try me.” Stellien’s voice, ever proud.

“Oh, I will. Keep jabbing, molly, you know I like it.”

The other kelpie huffed. “Tell us where the mod is, kitten.”

Stellien snarled. “Call me *kitten*, and I’ll castrate you.”

“We’re in for a long night, Trum. We’ve got to soften her up. She’ll make us drag it out. Good game, kitten.”

Benji was frozen, knowing that once he was around the corner of this crate, someone would die.

“Get off me.” Stellien whinnied, the pride leaving her voice. “*Get off!*”

“Keep talking dirty.”

Benji couldn’t look. It wasn’t too late. It couldn’t be. *You just ripped five goons to shreds, you slug. Go.*

She squealed, as if finally curling into a scared little girl.

“Benji...?” Thletch hissed, waving cautiously at him.

Go!

He emerged, rushing at the gigantic, half-naked frames of the kelpies looming over the molly. He tossed himself off the floor, bellowing like an ill animal. He extended his fist against the bigger kelpie’s slimy cheek. The long skull snapped, and the kelpie’s head came in two.

Benji landed, stumbling. The ache of the impact extended into his shoulder. There was little skin left on his knuckles. In whirling agony, it reformed.

“What in...” the remaining kelpie yelped. “You killed him. You killed him, you scatmonger!” He rushed to the desk where his rail lay, grabbing it. It whirled.

“Benji!” Thletch called as if it helped.

Benji could only think to move sideways as fast as the chassis

allowed. As he drew a wide half circle, the rail fired, and the massive blue flare blared through the room, burning at his heels.

As the tall constellation of a cargo crane collapsed in a storm of curling trails of Air, Benji reached the kelpie. He punched, backed by his speed. His arm went clean through his target, sending scales flying in a cloud. The salty scent of the kelpie's insides went heavy and filled Benji's lungs. He retracted his hand, reeling where he stood.

He went to his knees and vomited. *It isn't that different from squid. Focus!*

"Hey! Chub. Need a hand here."

He rose, forcing himself to look at Stellien. She lay, amputated, just a torso on a surgical bed. Only concave sockets remained where she'd once had limbs. Naked. Her tail was still attached, though limp.

She glared, daring him to look a moment too long where he didn't have to. "On with it."

He went to her, hesitating only briefly before reaching out to grab beneath the stubs of her arms. In some tragi-comic world, he would forget his chassis and crush her. Slowly, his hands sunk into her fur, and he lifted. *So light.*

"I can dial down your output," Thletch said. "To avoid that teenage boy display."

He nodded without words. He lay Stellien across his shoulder.

"You installed it," she said with a disgruntled sigh. "You piece of garbage. Why did you install it?"

He *was* having second thoughts. "I don't know." He looked about himself, seeing no sign of her prosthetics. There was hardly any sign Near had been at work. *Tough luck.* He moved through the workshop, looking for the easiest way out. Stellien's lifeless tail slapped around him. He saw a lift, probably leading to the garage above.

She started squirming. "Get my rails." She sobbed. "My rails, you fat imbecile, you have to find them! Near left with them. You have to find Near. *The other way.*" She writhed as if trying to kick him with

legs she didn't have.

He glanced over his shoulder to the stairway where the music echoed from. Where some *Anchorman's* goons would pour down any minute.

"Uh," Thletch interjected. "Strong suggestion: Get your rear somewhere non-lethal. Then slap some manners into that dumb, ungrateful tramp."

"We have to..." A part of him wanted to do what Stellien said. *Obey*. But Thletch had a point. "Not die. Shut up."

Stellien hulked, defeated. "My rails..." Her squirming died down.

He entered the lift. His hand hovered over the control panel.

Thletch pointed. "This button twice."

He did as told. The lift moved, far too slow. As the room disappeared, he glared at the stairway, where nothing was happening yet. After what seemed like minutes, the lift reached the floor above. The floor was littered with brassmules, making something of an obstacle course. He dodged in sharp turns, making Stellien let out nauseated gags.

"Hey," someone called behind them. "Hey!"

He didn't want to look back. He stopped before the great gate that was tightly shut.

Thletch drew two circles. "Punch the lock on the door to the side or lift the big one."

He reached down and couldn't get a grip. He felt tears in his eyes as he scraped off his nails, barely getting his fingers under the door. He lifted. The door was too heavy for one hand.

"I guess the other way was easier," Thletch said, visibly concerned. "Firing on all cylinders!"

He lifted as if meaning to break the chassis for disobeying. "Please," he hissed. The door gave. A sliver opened. He kept going. The lock broke, and it was suddenly easy. When there was space enough, he ducked under, and he embraced the open air.

People called behind him as he ran. The dragonferret's barks echoed.

"Thletch," he whispered. "All you've got into the legs. Or however this works."

"Aye, captain."

He sped into the evening lights, not caring which way, only wanting to get far away, fast.