

Michael! Get your ass down here. I have had it up to here with your bullshit!" The sound of my mother's voice came harshly over the house intercom, a grating interruption that shattered the fragile silence. I stood in my room, panting, my heart pounding in my chest like a frantic drumbeat. Pressing my bare back against the cold metal wall, I could feel the warmth of my body leaching out, as if the wall itself was absorbing my stress. This always had a calming effect on me, like a dog lying on the cool bathroom floor on a sweltering summer day. The light in my room pulsed to the rhythm of my heart, a dull red emanating from the mood-setting LEDs that lined the inside edge of my bedroom floor.

Everything seemed to be made of metal now, a testament to the scarcity of natural resources. I have seen pictures and videos of houses built of wood, a nostalgic reminder of a world long gone. Now, nothing like that exists. Precious resources like wood, rare metals, oil, and anything else our planet may have produced naturally were long gone. The Galactic Bank and its inter-dimensional marketplace made sure of that. Legislation, pushed by the Galactic Bank's lobbying efforts, made it illegal for ordinary citizens to produce natural resources, effectively giving the Bank an iron grip on Earth's economy. Again, my mother's voice came shrieking from the intercom, "Michael! I said now!"

Peeling myself off the wall, I quickly scanned my room for a clean shirt. Clothes were strewn across the floor like the aftermath of a battle, and my hamper was upside down in the corner next to my desk, as if it had been knocked over in a fit of rage. I hated lugging the damn thing down the stairs and preferred to just wear dirty clothes in lieu of having to do any work. My eyes landed on what looked like a semi-respectable shirt, its red color mirroring my current mood. The sleeves were missing, as was the current style, and the form-fitting fabric felt like it was trying to squeeze the life out of me as I pulled it down over my head.

Notifications were blinking incessantly on the periphery of my vision, a constant digital nagging. My Iris integrated HUD showed I had a small letter icon with a number 4 on the top right corner. I already knew what these messages were about. I needed to get myself under control and wrap my head around the situation before adding anyone else's emotions to the mix. With a mere thought, the notifications winked out, disappearing like extinguished stars.

I crossed the room to my hamper, flipped it over with a swift kick, and started throwing clothes into it. If I was already going to be dealing with my mother when she was this heated, I didn't want to stoke the fire with one more thing she could complain about. Picking up the last piece of clothing, a pair of brown pants, the light reflected off the object underneath. The metal shine of the phaser caught the red light, casting a menacing glow that filled me with foreboding. Last night's events were a turmoil in my mind and my heart. I shook my head, as if the physical action could dispel the haunting memories. I grabbed the phaser and stuffed it into the top drawer of my desk, the metal-on-metal sound making a resounding ting that echoed my inner turmoil. I shoved the drawer closed with a sense of finality and prepared myself for the battle to come.

I walked toward my bedroom door and it slid aside for me, the light of the hallway invading my gloomy solitude like an unwelcome guest. I rubbed my eyes, as if I could wipe away the impending confrontation, and stepped out into the hallway. I spent a moment looking out the window directly adjacent to my door, watching as the autonomous transport vehicles sped in and out of each other, gliding through the air in their respective lanes like metallic birds of prey. I imagined all of the blue-collar workers sleeping or getting themselves ready on their way to work,

and the late-night prowlers catching a wink on their way back to whatever hole they crawled out of.

I turned from the window and made my way down the hall to the stairs. Descending the stairs, the sound of my mother's voice echoed off the metal walls, a haunting melody of disappointment and frustration. "I'm telling you, John. He's getting worse. I have tried, God knows I have tried." The stairs wound around in a half-circle during the descent, and as I reached the halfway point, I could see my mother sitting in the living room. Her back was ramrod straight, and her face was a complex tapestry of emotions—anger mingled with sadness in her eyes. Her tight blue form-fitting dress waterfalled off her crossed legs, the slit up the side revealing smooth tan skin. Anyone would agree she was a beauty. Her hard blue eyes and perfectly proportioned cheeks to chin would turn any man's head and many a woman's. That beautiful visage was often one of horror for me, as she rarely had a kind word to say. I was a troublemaker; she knew it, I knew it, and the many police officers who have graced our home with a visit knew it. My father had accepted this fact and often directed me to channel that energy elsewhere.

My mother continued talking, her eyes staring into the void as if she were in a trance, the seat across from her conspicuously empty. "I don't know what happened! Sheri messaged me saying Johnna was missing and to ask Michael!" I realized she must be conferencing with my father through her Iris integrated HUD, a piece of technology so ubiquitous it's simply known as the Iris. Engrossed in her virtual conversation, she hadn't noticed my silent descent. I seized the opportunity, slipping down the last half of the stairway, each step a muted thud on the cold metal, and made my way toward her. Just five feet away, she abruptly turned, her eyes locking onto mine with a gaze as cold as the metal surrounding us. "Sit your ass down!" The brevity and sharpness in her voice propelled me into motion before she even finished the sentence, a scene that had played out countless times in our tumultuous relationship.

I turned to face her and sank into the crescent chair, its cold metal surface offering no comfort. I ran my hands over the armrests, the slick metal refusing to absorb the sweat from my anxious palms. My fingers left wet streaks, a futile attempt to wipe away my nervousness.

My eyes darted around our living room, avoiding her piercing gaze. The kitchen stood directly across from me, its entire structure a gleaming metal alloy that seemed to mock the idea of warmth and home. A breakfast nook, where we ate our synthesized meals, was adjacent to drawers that held our silverware and plates. The food synthesizer dominated the entire left wall, a monolith of convenience and control. Cooking was a lost art; now, a few taps on your Iris would have any dish materialize in moments, the cost deducted from the family food account. My parents had programmed it to only accept 'healthy' options from a list they had curated, a digital leash on our dietary choices.

To the right of the kitchen was the apartment exit, a blinking number above the door indicating the elevator was in use, currently 10 floors above and ascending. Leaving the apartment was always a logistical nightmare, waiting for the elevator to be available or descend was a test of patience. With 115 floors in the building, it could take an eternity. Sometimes, after all that waiting, the elevator would arrive only to be too full to board, adding insult to injury.

"Michael, stop ignoring me and look at my face." Her voice had lost its edge, replaced by a calm that was almost more unsettling. She wanted a discussion, a civil conversation, as if that could mend the fractures between us. Her eyes softened, but the simmering fires behind them warned

me not to mistake this for weakness. Her jaw remained clenched, and the vein that traveled from her neck to her forehead pulsed visibly, a ticking time bomb of maternal frustration.

I sighed, and as if a dam had burst, tears began to cascade down my face. "What happened, Michael?" Her voice was tinged with a genuine concern that I had not heard in years. The last time she saw me cry, I was just a child; nearly a decade had passed since I had shown her this level of vulnerability. My lip trembled, and the emotional floodgates opened, releasing all the pent-up pain and memories from the previous night. A guttural sound started in my throat, but words failed me. My attempts to speak only resulted in incomprehensible blubbling, as if my vocal cords had betrayed me, refusing to articulate the chaos swirling in my mind. I let go, surrendering to the overwhelming torrent of my emotions, and cried.

My mother slid her chair toward me, her feet scraping against the metal floor as she pulled herself closer. She reached out, her hand gently touching my forehead, a rare moment of maternal tenderness. "It's okay, baby. It can't be that bad. Just tell mommy what happened. We can figure this out together. It's okay." The sincerity in her voice almost jolted me out of my emotional paralysis. My throat loosened, the constriction easing just enough to allow words to form. "He's dead, mom. Johnna isn't coming back. Now I have to tell his mother he's dead. It's all my fault." My emotional dam broke again, and I was engulfed in a new wave of uncontrollable sobbing. My mother sat there, her comforting presence replaced by a stunned silence. The weight of the tragedy, the impending rift between our families, and the irreversible consequences of my actions hung in the air like a dark cloud.

After what felt like an eternity, my mother finally broke her silence. Her eyes met mine, a storm of conflicting emotions swirling within them. "What happened, Michael! What did you do! How...How could you let this happen? Did you kill him? Are you a murderer now!?" Her voice escalated into a tirade, each word a dagger aimed at my conscience. The onslaught of accusations and insults snapped me out of my emotional stupor, replacing my sorrow with a white-hot rage directed inward. For a fleeting moment, thoughts of the phaser in my room flashed through my mind, a dark temptation offering a quick escape from this unbearable reality. But then, my mother broke down, her face crumpling as she sobbed. All her anger and frustration had been expelled, leaving her in a state of emptiness and despair. My self-loathing was momentarily eclipsed by the sight of this beautiful woman, so profoundly hurt by my actions. "I didn't kill him! I had a plan, an idea for a big score for my friends." My confession was interrupted by a stinging slap, her hand connecting with my face in a blur of motion. I was so lost in my thoughts that I hadn't even seen her move. She glared at me, her eyes ablaze, the red rings accentuating her wild expression. "You and your scores! You and your criminal friends and their delusions of grandeur! You think you're big shots in this city, that you can do whatever you want. Well, guess what, Michael, there are consequences to your actions! Did you think you could go on forever doing whatever you pleased? This world doesn't bow to your whims! There's an entire galaxy out there, an unending expanse of space, and you choose to be a piece of shit nobody right here on our own planet!" She paused, taking a deep breath as if to gather the remnants of her composure. Her eyes bored into mine, as if she were trying to excavate the truth buried deep within my soul. "I'm sorry," I whispered, the words barely escaping my lips. She stared at me for a few agonizing moments before finally speaking, "You're fucking sorry. That's just great. Tell me the whole story and leave nothing out. I need to know what happened."

I inhaled sharply, the memories of the previous night rushing back with renewed intensity. The violence, the death, the screams—it was all too vivid. I struggled to find a starting point, to put into words the series of events that had led to this moment.

"Johnna! Wake the hell up! We promised the guys we'd be there half an hour ago!" I grabbed Johnna's shoulder, shaking him violently, trying to rouse him from his sleep. I had crashed on his floor last night, as was often the case. We'd been up until the early hours, lost in the virtual worlds of the Iris. Scanning the room for something to splash on his face, I found the cups from last night were all empty. His room was a mirror image of mine—cold metal alloy, a bed, a desk, and the ambient lights that pulsed along the floor. Johnna preferred a constant yellow glow; he claimed it was soothing. I probably spent more time in this room than my own, a testament to our brotherly bond, one forged in the absence of our fathers and a shared resentment toward them.

Johnna was a stark contrast to me—short, stocky, with dark brown hair and eyes, whereas I was taller, leaner, with red hair and blue eyes. His skin was a rich chocolate hue, while mine bore the dark tan of excessive sun exposure. I approached his door, expecting it to slide open, but it remained stubbornly shut. "Stuck again! What the hell!" Johnna's building was older, a symptom of his father's gambling habits that left them with less money than my family had. Frustrated, I pounded on the control panel next to the door. After a few false starts, it finally gave way. Stepping into the hallway, I was greeted by the familiar window across from Johnna's room. Unlike my window, which offered a view of the ceaseless flow of autonomous traffic, Johnna's window faced a bleak wall barely five feet away. I turned left and entered the bathroom, its interior a testament to Johnna's mother's obsessive-compulsive tendencies. She always said she wanted everything perfect for the day her husband might return. Shaking my head, I filled a cup with water and hurried back to Johnna's room. To my surprise, he was already sitting on the edge of his bed, yawning. "You were gonna douse me again, weren't you, you bastard?" he said, grinning. I chuckled, taking a swig from the cup. "Nah, just needed a drink," I lied. Johnna eyed me skeptically. As I was about to laugh, I choked on the water, sputtering. "Serves you right, dumbass. And make sure you put that cup back where you found it. My mom will have a fit otherwise," Johnna retorted.

I gave Johnna a thumbs-up and returned the cup to its rightful place in the bathroom. When I emerged, Johnna was already in the hallway, an impatient look on his face. "What took you so long? We're already late," he said, his tone tinged with annoyance. I stared at him, incredulous, before he broke into a smile. I punched him in the arm, and we headed downstairs.

The house was eerily quiet, a sign that Johnna's mother was out on one of her nocturnal escapades. She found solace in the city's nightlife, a distraction from the loneliness that came with her husband's absence. Her dalliances with other men were her secret shame, fueling her obsessive-compulsive behavior. She lived in constant fear that her husband would find out, so everything had to be immaculate, a facade of perfection.

We stepped out into the dimly lit streets, the air thick with the stench of exhaust and decay. The city was a cesspool, its soul long sold to the highest bidder. The Galactic Bank's stranglehold on Earth's economy had turned it into a dystopian nightmare, a place where dreams came to die.

As we walked, I couldn't shake the feeling that something was about to go horribly wrong. It was a gut instinct, a sixth sense honed through years of navigating the city's underbelly.

"Where are we meeting the guys?" I asked, my voice barely above a whisper. Johnna looked at me, his eyes narrowing. "The old warehouse on 5th. You remember, the one we used for that botched job last year?" A shiver ran down my spine at the memory. That job had almost cost us our lives, a stark reminder of the risks we took for a shot at something better. "Yeah, I remember," I said, my voice tinged with regret. "Let's just hope tonight goes smoother."

As we approached the warehouse, a sense of dread enveloped me, as if the very air had thickened with foreboding. The building stood like a decaying monolith, its windows shattered, its walls marred by graffiti that seemed to scream in silent agony. We entered cautiously, the sound of our footsteps reverberating through the cavernous space, each echo a haunting reminder of our vulnerability.

The warehouse was a dark abyss, its corners shrouded in shadow. The only light came from a flickering bulb hanging from the ceiling, casting an eerie glow that seemed to dance with the darkness. The air was thick with the smell of rust, dampness, and something else—something metallic, something that made my stomach churn.

And then we saw them—our crew, our childhood friends, lying motionless on the ground. Their bodies were contorted in grotesque shapes, as if they had been twisted and broken by some unimaginable force. Blood splattered the walls and pooled on the floor, a gruesome testament to the violence they had endured. Their faces were frozen in expressions of terror and agony, their eyes wide open, as if they had seen the devil himself.

Johnna let out a guttural scream, a sound so primal it seemed to come from the depths of his soul. He fell to his knees, his body shaking uncontrollably, his face contorted in a mask of anguish. "This is your fault, Michael! Your goddamn fault!" His voice was tinged with hysteria, each word a dagger aimed at me.

I stood there, paralyzed, my mind struggling to process the horror before me. It was as if reality had shattered, leaving me adrift in a nightmarish landscape of blood and death. "Johnna, listen to me. We need to think clearly. Panicking won't—"

"Think clearly? THINK CLEARLY?" Johnna's voice reached a fever pitch. "Our friends are dead, Michael! Dead because of your ambitions, your reckless dreams of a better life!"

For a moment, I felt a sense of disassociation, as if I were watching the scene unfold from outside my body. It was a coping mechanism, a desperate attempt by my mind to shield me from the unbearable weight of what had happened. "I wanted better for all of us, Johnna. Not just me."

"And look where that got us!" He gestured wildly at the lifeless bodies around us. "We were happy, Michael. Happy just being together, like brothers. And you ruined it!"

My heart sank into a bottomless pit of despair. These were more than just crew members; they were our brothers, our family. We had grown up together, our parents interconnected, our lives intertwined in a complex tapestry of love, friendship, and shared struggle. And now they were gone, snuffed out in an instant, leaving a void that could never be filled.

"We can't just leave them here!" Johnna's eyes were filled with tears, his voice cracking. "We have to take them home, call the authorities, do something!"

I shook my head, my mind shifting into overdrive. "And what? Get arrested? They'll pin this on us, Johnna. We have no alibi, no evidence to prove our innocence. We need to think about survival."

We were in danger, in a situation so dire it defied comprehension. Whoever had done this was still out there, lurking in the shadows, waiting for the right moment to strike. Panic surged through me, a tidal wave of fear that threatened to drown me in its depths. We had to get out, to escape this hellish nightmare before it consumed us.

Johnna looked at me, his eyes filled with a such a sadness it took my breath away. He stood up without a word, a slow deliberate movement holding all of the weight of the world. He looked away, clearly resigned to whatever fate lie before us.

As we turned to leave, I had a profound sense of what was to come. We were crossing a point of no return. A line had been drawn, and we had stepped over it, plunging into a future filled with uncertainty, danger, and loss. And deep down, I knew that this decision, this moment, would haunt us for the rest of our lives, leading us down a path that would ultimately end in tragedy.

The autonomous vehicle purred quietly, its electric engine a mere whisper as it navigated the city's maze-like, crumbling streets. The sparse, flickering cabin lights cast an unsettling, spectral glow on Michael and Johnna's faces. Their eyes, wide and devoid of focus, seemed to absorb the surrounding gloom, mirroring back only a haunting emptiness. The air inside was thick with an acrid blend of sweat and fear, a tangible miasma that clung oppressively to every surface. Both young men looked disheveled, their clothes stained and wrinkled, their faces slick with perspiration, and their breathing uneven and labored.

"Listen, Johnna, we're going to survive this," Michael began, his voice tinged with an urgency he couldn't fully disguise. He inhaled deeply, as though trying to draw courage from the air itself. "I'll keep you safe, okay? We'll make it through." The words felt like empty platitudes, even as they escaped his lips—comforting lies meant more for himself than for the visibly traumatized Johnna.

Johnna remained still, his eyes hollow, as if his very essence had retreated to some unreachable sanctuary, leaving only an empty vessel behind. He was a shell, gutted by the horrors they had witnessed, now filled only with an overwhelming sense of foreboding.

"Come on, Johnna, respond!" Michael's voice wavered, the tension of maintaining his composure becoming unbearable. He took another steadying breath, attempting to regain his emotional footing. "We have to find out who's responsible. Jack is our only lead. We need to get to 'The Library,' and fast."

As the vehicle glided through the city, the world outside melded into a surreal landscape. Neon signs flickered intermittently, casting brief, garish illuminations on the faces of the city's forsaken inhabitants. The looming skyscrapers stood like forsaken monuments, their windows dark and vacant, as if even the buildings had succumbed to despair.

Michael's thoughts spiraled into a vortex of dark reflections. What had he turned into? He had wanted to evade the soul-sapping monotony of life in the lower blocks, where people were reduced to mere components in a machine fueled by insatiable corporate avarice. A system that exploited its citizens to satiate the unquenchable greed of the ruling elite.

In his mind, he envisioned 'The Library' for what it was—a refuge for the city's pariahs, a nexus of underground information where disparate sects and gangs could find a modicum of structure amid the anarchy. It was a place where people chose a life on the edge over the numbing grind of societal norms.

Johnna's voice, barely audible, broke through his dark musings. "They killed everyone, Michael. Whoever's behind this will be waiting for us."

Michael met his gaze, his eyes laden with a sorrow so deep it seemed to cast a pall over the confined space. "What other options do we have, Johnna?"

As the vehicle halted, a wave of apprehension enveloped them, as palpable as the grime that coated the city's façade. They were at a precipice, staring into an abyss filled with uncertainty, peril, and irreversible loss. And as they stepped out, Michael felt the gravity of their choices enveloping them, a shroud that would follow them into an uncertain and shadowy future.

The door sealed behind them with a muted hiss, severing their last tenuous connection to the sanctuary of the vehicle. As they approached the looming structure each step seemed to echo with finality, pulling them further away from the remnants of their former lives and deeper into an enigmatic abyss.

The building itself stood as a grim monument to the city's decay, its face pockmarked with the scars of neglect and time. Graffiti adorned its walls like cryptic runes, the vibrant colors dulled by layers of grime and soot. The windows were dark, some shattered and others boarded up, as if the building had long given up on letting in the light.

The air grew heavier, thick with the stench of rot and dampness, as they neared the entrance. Faint sounds emanated from within—muffled voices, the distant thump of bass-heavy music, and the occasional guttural laugh that seemed to mock their trepidation.

As they crossed the threshold, a shiver ran down Michael's spine, contrasting sharply with the emotions he'd felt on previous visits. In the past, this very building had been a sanctuary of sorts, a haven where he'd approached the door with a sense of hope, even excitement. It had felt like an awning in a storm, a place that offered a brief respite from the relentless downpour of hardships that characterized life in the city's lower blocks.

The environment was a mirror to their emotions, a physical manifestation of the internal chaos they were grappling with. It was as if the very walls were soaked in the desperation and fear that had come to define their lives, and now, they were stepping right into its epicenter.