

## Take a Seat and Follow the Directions On Your Screen

by Remington Henderson

Drew sat in silence a story and a half underwater. Nervous for the day ahead, he worked out chemistry problems in his head for the Societal Placement Exam. A test he was required to take that day; his 18<sup>th</sup> birthday.

*There are 3.4 grams of salt for every liter of seawater at 14°C. 14°C equals 287.15 Kelvin.*

The faint blue light illuminated the mold-covered salty walls and corrugated floorboards. His mother in her blue polka dot dress worked in front of the kitchen window, silhouetting herself against the pale radiance.

*The molarity therefore is 0.058mol/L; a low concentration so Morse's equation is needed. R remains constant at 0.08206 L\*atm\*K<sup>-1</sup>\*mol<sup>-1</sup>.*

In the aquarium view behind her, the rare sight of a school of salmon swam swiftly by. Next to him, his younger brother and sister ate at algae wafers mindlessly dressed in their torn jeans and T-shirts. Across, Drew's grim-looking father sat beside him in his usual attire of denim jumpsuit stained with black oil and a long white T-shirt rolled up his muscled forearms.

*NaCl dissociates completely so the van't Hoff factor is two.  $\Pi = iMRT$ . So, the osmotic pressure comes out to be 2.73.*

Drew looked the cleanest of them all, he was freshly showered, his brown hair was combed over, and he was wearing his grandfather's suit, a light blue three piece, with a faint blotch on the lapel.

The low rumble of a fog horn above announced the arrival of the transit. Drew squeezed out the kitchen window and ran up the rusted stairs. He was book-cased between bricks of the building and a clear barrier holding back the ocean. At the top was the boat-bus station and he hopped on quickly to the boat-bus; a long and narrow white vessel that had a long blue strip along it and a flat roof propped above to cover it from rain. Little rolls of plastic windows were tied up at the top, always ready to release if the weather turned sour. The fog was thick today and Drew could only see the first few rows.

"You know if I did my job right you'd be left behind four days out of every week," said the driver in his black uniform and salt and peppered mustache. "And you know that I don't honk the horn at any of my other stops, right? It's strictly for you."

"Yes I know. Thanks again for waiting," Drew said, a bit out of breath.

“You’re a dreamer. That’s what you are. You need to get your head out of the clouds and get your feet on solid ground where they supposed to be.”

As the driver turned up the power on the turbines to the boat-bus Drew lurched backwards a bit and caught himself on the railing. Reaching in his pocket pulled out button covered in lint and a paper clip and he remembered that he left his wallet in his regular pants. “Uhm I don’t mean to ask for a favor, Mr. Colburn, but I don’t have the fare.”

“Oh Jesus, Andrew, you know that I could lose my job if I am caught letting people ride for free.” Mr. Colburn said turning a corner.

“I know and I’m sorry. I have the SPE today. Could I run back and grab some money.”

“No. I can’t turn around and we’re already running late as it is. I’m going to have to let you off at the next stop.”

“I can’t... I can’t miss this ride...”

“You might learn something then.” Mr. Colburn paused for a second considering what he said. He shrugged his shoulders and then reached down into his pocket. Pulling out some coins he dropped the fare into the little machine, “There, consider it a birthday present.”

“Thank you so much. You don’t know how much...”

“Alright stop wasting everyone’s time. Take a seat ... and good luck on the test. I remember my 18<sup>th</sup> birthday. I’ve been here ever since,” he said muttering the latter part quietly as if it was directed to no one.

“Thanks,” Drew dreaded the thought of driving a boat-bus for the rest of his life. He was truly appreciative of Mr. Colburn’s kindness. If he had been kicked off the only way he might get to the test in time would be to take his chance in the tunnels. Always crowded people always rumored about the safety of the tunnels.

The sun on the horizon crested slowly over the water’s surface. Rays of sunshine pierced softly through the forest of skyscrapers and left beams of light through the shadows of the fog. In the glass tunnel below, a river of fluttering cell phone lights flowed slowly by.

The boat-bus stopped a few minutes later and picked up a few more people; Drew’s friend Ethan was amongst them. Born on the same day and in the same hospital Ethan and Drew were inseparable. Their father’s worked together and they played together as children and as they grew older they talked about girls and schoolwork. They were both of the same social class but Drew owned an heirloom suit while Ethan did not. Instead he wore a tattered set of overalls that

seemed to bulge at the seams. His face was gentle enough but a large purple birthmark covered the upper left half of his face and caught the awkward stare of strangers. Ethan said it was called a port-wine stain and sometimes would touch his face and wipe his 'contaminated' fingers on observers who stared too long, much to their horror.

Walking down the aisle he spotted Drew and gave a head nod of acknowledgement and sat down in the empty seat next to him.

"You're looking nice today" Ethan said.

"Thanks," hollow words.

"How do you feel?"

"Like shit."

"That's no different from any other day. I mean about the test." Ethan gave a friendly punch to Drew's shoulder.

"I know." Drew looked away from Ethan out the window.

"The test is going to happen whether or not you like it and worrying about it is not going to help. So stop worrying."

"That's easier said than done."

"If you feel so bad for it then lets study. What's the twentieth digit of Pi?"

"That's *not* going to be on the test," Drew replied.

"Why wouldn't it?" Ethan said sarcastically as if all questions on the test were that ridiculous. "Come on you know the answer, it's six."

"It's five, not six," Drew corrected turning back towards Ethan, "and once again, they wouldn't put that on the test."

"See there you have nothing to worry about," Ethan said with a sly smile clearly obvious of the error. "You're a genius. I had to memorize that little tidbit just to impress people. I couldn't tell you what comes before or after. You just know it. Come on you're set for life. What do you think you're gonna get? Engineer... dentist... no, no I know," with a smirk, "Gynecologist."

Drew gave him a cold glare.

"I'd be fine with being a mechanic," Drew lied. Life underwater was exhausting. He was tired of eating the same wafers every day, taking a shower once a week, sometimes less, and wearing clothes that were held together by a few strands of thread. Only the more prestigious

jobs could afford eggs, meat, or even bread; and those always seemed to be reserved for the rich kids. Reveling with Ethan in such notions only drained his hope quicker.

“Then you *really* have nothing to worry about. When did you reconstruct that engine for your dad? You were six, right?”

“I was seven.”

“Hey, no one fails the SPE. Either way just remember, it’s all color coded. White, white, blue. You know, it never made sense to me that there would be two white collar sections for every one blue. It feels like it should be the other way around. Even more, potentially. How ‘bout three blue to every one white. See how those ‘privileged’ kids...”

“Ethan shut up and let’s just get this day over.”

“Ok,” Ethan stopped talking and looked around while Drew stared off at the water below. Not much later he forgot Drew’s request and asked, “Hey do you remember Jeremy?”

“Johnson?” a little intrigued at the mention of a cohort they hadn’t seen since 7<sup>th</sup> grade.

“Yup, Jeremy Johnson.”

“Yeah, why?”

“He died last week.”

“What?! How?”

“In the tunnels. He was walking home after taking the SPE and drowned in a tunnel collapse. A few other people died too I hear.”

“That’s too bad.”

“Yeah.” Ethan said with a sigh.

Drew slumped over and went back to his silent state. Jeremy was the only guy Drew knew that was able to get an acquisition approved to move to another apartment off the first floor years ago. A new district meant a new school but everyone was still happy for him.

They slowly passed by lower Brooklyn and crossed the skirted along the Upper Bay to the remnants of Manhattan Island; an ironic title long forgotten in this Venetian wasteland.

The outer shell of flatiron building gave it the appearance of an ocean liner against the water. Passing by it signaled that they were close to their destination. A few minutes later Mr. Colburn’s rough voice sounded over the intercom, “Grand Central.”

The two together hopped off the boat-bus onto the station and hurried away from the edge. Another man behind them didn’t quite get the proper footing and slid back into the water.

The stations were nothing more than floating docks and careless persons slipped on the slick surface. All docks were anchored to the six-inch thick Plexiglas barrier surrounding buildings. The barricades rose about five feet above the oceans level and were buttressed to the buildings with steel pipes. On this Plexiglas lip there was a ladder that people climbed over to get to a set of stairs that would lead down to the first floor and join the tunnels below. The radically changing depths left handicapped to struggle in the tunnels below or take helicopters to the ceilings.

The boat-bus station that unloaded at was a few block away from the testing center. As they walked around the corner on the final stretch to the door Ethan and Drew were blocked though from a large unruly crowd. One was a dressed much like his dad in a dirty jumpsuit holding a large cardboard cutout with black bold letters **YOU CAN'T PLAY GOD WITH OUR LIVES**. Another woman with a missing index finger in a tattered blouse and skirt held a loudspeaker and stood towards the front chanting encouragements to the crowd.

Eventually a nicely dressed man in a black suit walked calmly out of the building. An assistant following offered him a loudspeaker but he waved it away. The mass shouted profanities at him and one even threw a shoe but missed. He stood like a statue unaffected with a genuine face. He did not need to calm the crowd with gestures as his gentle demeanor caught their attention and did the work for him. He had a sort of charisma and when he spoke the crowd respectfully remained silent. He apologized,

“I want to thank you for coming out here today. You are all strong protesting for what you believe to be an unfair and unjust system. I know and understand your frustrations. I would too if I were in your position. But that this is the way it is, not by choice, but because it is the *only* way. It works. Every form of government has had some disputes in the past, it's natural. But you have place and a purpose where you are. None of you are unemployed or homeless, are you? No. All people are given a place in our society and each person is an integral part. The population is overflowing. There is a shortage of proper food. The barrier's design is failing. You know this, all of you. But the only way to fix these problems is to find the right men and women that can make a difference. It's *our* job to find them, just like it's *your* job to be the backbone of society so that others can come forward. It's not for my safety, but for all of yours, that we identify these individuals and groom them to their fullest potential; and this test is so far the only way to find them. Thank you, again.” As the man turned around and went inside no one spoke.

People looked around at each other moved. Slowly, all but a few people started filing out of the area to go home. For the others, it had been nothing different from what they had heard before.

In the midst of the changing opinions Drew and Ethan pushed their way past the group and walked into the front door.

The design inside was simple. To the left was a front desk with an attractive blond woman, not much than a year or two older than Drew and Ethan, in front the lobby was nothing but a vast empty floor leading to two elevators at the far right end. The walls had simple pictures of fish swimming under the shadows of seaweed. The most interesting feature that stuck out to Drew was the lighting. All rooms he had ever been in that were under water always had a blue tint in the lighting, but here it was a perfectly engineered white. Above he looked and saw a row of florescent lights that started off deep gold near the windows and tapered off to a standard incandescent in the farthest corners.

Ethan gave Drew a little shove to stop looking at the lighting and move towards the elevator.

“Come on we don’t want to be late,” Ethan said.

“It’s pretty cool, right?” the blond woman commented.

“Yeah,” Drew agreed.

“You know how they do it?” she asked again.

“Sure. Light’s primary colors are different from paint so the gold cancels out the blue from the water.” The woman was a little amazed that Drew new the difference.

“You’re pretty smart. I didn’t know that when I started here. I was confused for a bit why the room wasn’t green but I figured it out eventually,” she laughed a bit. She looked Drew up and down in his suit slowly.

“Do you need help knowing which floor to take?” asked the woman while twirling her finger in her curled blond hair at the front desk.

“Yes actually, we’re looking for the Department of Societal Placement.”

“Oh, it’s the 17<sup>th</sup> floor,” she seemed to giggle out.

“Thanks,” responded Drew.

“My name’s Amber by the way.”

“I’m Drew.”

“Or Andy,” Ethan added.

“No one calls me that,” Drew replied.

“Well I’m Ethan.”

“Ok Ethan and Drew.” Looking them each in the eye as she said their names, “It was nice to meet you both.”

“It was nice to meet you too.” Ethan spoke for the two of them.

In the elevator Ethan elbowed Drew,

“Are you going to ask her out when this is over?”

“Why?”

“Are you that stupid that you didn’t notice her flirting with you?”

“Oh, well I guess I have other things on my mind.”

Stepping off the elevator Drew looked around. He saw cheap plastic trees in vases guarding the entrance to the elevator. On his left was a long a simple counter with male and female attendants sitting behind with their own work stations, the men wearing slacks and buttoned shirts and the women wearing simple dresses like Drew’s mother’s; in front of attendants stood long rows of young adults. On the right were doors evenly spaced with large numbers labeling them, 1701, 1702 ... all the way to 1711 written on a solitary door on the far wall. Little islands of chairs were placed between each set of doors where a few people were already sitting. From the front of the rows people grabbed electronic tablets from the counter and joined the others.

Drew saw the closest attendant not have line in front of her and nudged Ethan towards her direction. Ethan stood behind Drew as he spoke.

“Hello,” Drew said.

“Hello what?” the middle-aged woman said.

“I’m here to take the SPE.”

“Well no shit. What did you think everyone else was standing in line for?”

Drew fumbled for words as the creased woman in her striped white and blue dress mocked him.

“Just saw an open line and figured to walk right on up to it. Well if you could read then you would have seen the sign above my desk which says ‘Outgoing Grievances.’ That means only people who are done with their test come here; to dispute their results. Since you’re stupid be standing here now let me save you time from walking here after you get ‘delivery boy.’ *All*

*decisions are final.* I'll pretend to care and write notes as if I'm paying attention and probably say something like 'oh we'll see what we can do.' Really the company doesn't you crying too much when you walk out the front door. Now fuck off!"

All nearby eyes were on Drew and Ethan at the end of her abrasive rant. They moved towards the other side of the room where people were far enough away to not hear the verbal abuse. Patiently waiting the only distinct audible words amidst the mass of voices were the loud occasional, "Next person in line," from a teller.

Finally, Drew walked up to a slightly overweight middle-aged man. He had a large brown mole with a thick black hair hanging on his nose. It seemed to draw Drew's attention away from any other potentially nice features. Without a word the man tossed him a smart pad and a stylus. "Next in line, please."

"Do I take the test on this?"

"No, you fucking idiot. There are directions on the screen. Get out of my line. Next!"

Still turning over what the man just said to him a person nudged him as he walked towards the seating area.

"Don't worry about it. They're all assholes. They've probably got sores from sitting there for 20 years," Ethan said catching up to him.

Drew and Ethan took a seat next to each other and started filling out their questionnaires. Although Drew had filled out many questionnaires in his life for doctor's appointments and things of that nature none of them seemed had asked,

- "How much money do your parents make in a year?"
- "When you are not at home where do you most often like to visit and how would you walk there?"
- "Are you happy with the current political administration and their policies?" Y/N
- "Do you find personal interaction daunting or exhilarating?" Y/N
- "Do you tend to find that people trust and follow your judgment?" Y/N

Drew couldn't fathom how he could possibly get injured while taking a test or how other's saw him had anything to do with anything, but in order to take the test he had to fill it out and since he had to take the test he stopped questioning their place and filled them out as best as



he could. When he was finished the screen popped up, “You have completed the preliminary section to the SPE. Please go to room 1711 and get further direction once inside.”

Drew walked to 1706 and walked in. The room was long and narrow. One wall was nothing more than full framed windows. Along both extending walls were rows of computers nestled in little cubicles for privacy. On the farthest wall stood a single door that Drew thought maybe enclosed a closet. By the doorway, there was an aged man with horn rimmed glasses wearing a cough mask over his mouth and nose. He sat behind a glass desk that was a large computer touch-screen. Displayed on the screen of the desk was a blueprint layout of the room and numbers by individual computers. Next to a few computers on the display were names and a progress bar for students that had already begun. Behind him was a small cart with slots for the tablets, a rag, and a few cans of disinfectant and a bottle of hand sanitizer.

The man reached out a latex-gloved hand gesturing for the tablet.

“Take a seat and follow the directions on your screen. Remember that there is no time limit but we do look at how much time you spend on each question,” said the older man. He sprayed the tablet completely and wiped it down with the rag. Someone in a corner sneezed and the man shuddered as he tucked the tablet away.

Drew headed to a computer with next to the glass window with a view overseeing the Atlantic Ocean. He could not explain it but being so far above the water he felt awkwardly dry and out of place.

“Psst.”

Drew looked and saw Ethan sitting at the computer next to him smiling. Drew smiled and turned back to the screen.

The test had both fill in the blank and multiple choice sections for each category. It started with mathematics beginning with basic concepts like simple addition.

1) A boulder with a mass of 2.933 metric tons falls in to a small lake containing 1,113,500 liters of water. The volume of water plus the boulder equal 1,252,000 liters. Calculate the density of the boulder. \_\_\_\_\_

Progressively they got harder as Drew answered correctly. Eventually Drew came to a question that he worked on for 30 minutes.

16) If  $ONE * THREE * FIVE = 225$  --- then  $NINE * SEVEN + TWELVE = X$  ---  $225 + X = Y$  ---  $10,18,32,56,93,146,? \text{ ---} ? + Y = Z$  --- Solve for Z  
a. 4561

- b. 4908
- c. 4611
- d. 4898
- e. 4768

At that point he consistently missed all the following questions until they eased up again until he was consistently getting them right. Having taken a practice test before Drew knew the standard order of subjects. The test always worked in a rule of three. It would start with either math or science and be followed by either writing or critical reading and shift to physical jobs like electronics or plumbing.

Drew felt a bit unsure of his performance on the first two sections and it's difficultly felt a little overwhelming. He looked around the room and saw that most people seemed to look like they had a good handle on the material which only made him more self-conscious. Ethan, like him, looked a bit stressed and was so intent on his own questions that he didn't notice Drew looking over at him.

He had been able to take apart and assemble a small engine since he was seven so he was glad to have an easy section to follow to give his head a break. He had a moment of rest while the computer prepared the next section and he looked out the window. The sun floated high above the water and Drew could catch sight of the waves on the horizon. A small beep signaled that the next section was ready Drew looked down to see chemistry pop-up. "Weird," he thought. He figured it would correct itself later.

- 1) Which of the following statements about an  $sp$  hybridized water is FALSE?
  - a. It had has two delocalized lone pairs of electrons.
  - b. It is 30% s character and 70% p character.
  - c. It's hybridization geometry is tetrahedral.
  - d. It's bond angle is 105 degrees

His performance only deteriorated six sections latter and he had yet to see anything other than math, science, or English.

Finally he came upon a question that was impossible, or rather unreasonable of any student; proving a theorem not yet discovered.

- 4) Prove or disprove the following conjecture

Let:

$$\mathrm{Hdg}^k(X) = H^{2k}(X, \mathbf{Q}) \cap H^{k,k}(X).$$

**Hodge conjecture.** Let  $X$  be a non-singular complex projective manifold. Then every Hodge class on  $X$  is a linear combination with rational coefficients of the cohomology classes of complex subvarieties of  $X$ .

Thinking that perhaps something was wrong with his test Drew stepped away from his computer and walked back to the older gentleman. Looking up through thick horn-rimmed glasses he asked through his mask, a bit surprised, “Done already?”

“No.” Drew paused not really knowing what to say. “I think there is something wrong with my test.”

“Is the frame freezing or is the screen flashing?”

“No nothing like that, but the format seems to be off... and the questions are a bit extreme”

“Oh that.” The old man sighed. “They randomly change the format for a few students to discourage cheating. Don’t worry it shouldn’t affect you’re overall assessment.”

“There’s been cheating?” Drew said a bit baffled.

“It’s happened. Apparently.”

“So are the other sections going to pop up?”

“I don’t know. I just administer the test. Please go back and keep working.”

Drew sat down and kept working. At about three hours a young man in a finely spun wool suit finished and walked to the back. Drew could not hear the whole conversation but he clearly heard the old man say “congratulations” and “theoretical physicist.” A short while later more and more people in nice clothing began to finish and hear what they were going to be, a doctor, a lawyer, a manager, an accountant, a teacher. Another hour later the blue collar jobs were passed out to a few people in torn clothing.

About four and half hours into the test Drew found himself one of only three people left in the room. The questions were not only harder but impossible. Asked to find a prime number with at least eight digits long Drew tried to remain calm. He ran his hand through his hair and could not help but sob quietly as he guessed the answer. Ethan out of the corner of his eye stood up finished; only making Drew only feel worse. Ethan walked sullenly back to the old man. Ethan was physically and mentally drained and leaned on the man’s desk as he waited for his destiny. The old man gave a high pitch scream at Ethan. He sprayed and wiped down the desk

with the disinfectant. When he calmed down and spoke to Ethan, Drew could not hear a chosen career. Ethan had been given some instructions, inaudible to Drew, and turned around and started walking towards the door on the far wall. Ethan looked defeated with his head hung low and though Drew found that the words caught in his throat. Though Ethan liked to joke that Drew was a genius, he was only being modest himself. Ethan had never failed any test of any kind and the look on his face was something Drew had not seen before. Ethan wiped his face with his hand and walked through the door. It was much later that a tall, lanky woman followed Ethan into the door.

Six hours into the test Drew kept working, alone. At this point his confidence was all but gone and the test questions continued to get harder. His crying became less discreet as he had no one to sit and silently judge him other than the old man who judged everyone. At about six and half hours Drew gave up trying to figure out the answer to the questions and clicked numbly on 'c' repeatedly until the computer screen flashed "Test Complete, head to the test provider for results".

Dragging his feet practically Drew walked to the old man at his desk.

"Well what job do I get?" Drew asked.

"Not sure. It says here for you to walk to door back on the other door."

"Why? Everyone else got their positions here."

"Oh, there are special positions reserved and given out by a different department," replied the old man who almost yawned as he said it.

"Like what?"

"I don't know. I've never been back there. Someone on the other side will ask you a few questions and give you a position," the old man said.

Drew stopped after a step and thought about the other people before him. They all undoubtedly had performed in a similar manner on the test but what possible jobs could be waiting for him in the other room that weren't already stated and why wouldn't the old man himself know. The whole situation felt off and Drew began to feel a bit queasy.

"Just right on through the door," the man repeated, prodding Drew towards the room.

Drew's eyes spun. "Where's the restroom?"

"Can't it wait?" the old man asked

“I don’t feel well,” Drew’s mouth started lurching a bit and leaned on the table. He started dry heaving there.

“For God’s sake, don’t puke here.” The man jumped up and started looking around frantically. “The gentleman in the other room can direct you to one nearby.”

Nausea overtook Drew. White acidy foam flowed from his mouth on the table.

The old man’s face became almost as white as his hair. He fell over as he passed out and hit his head against the edge of the desk, cutting open his forehead. Drew looked at him unsure quite sure what to do. Grabbing the rag he tied it around the forehead. Drew set him up in the seat and then left.

Walking quietly towards the door Drew wiped his mouth on his sleeve. He was still covered in a cold sweat and couldn’t explain why he felt so bad. Something was wrong here and he knew he had to get out as quickly as possible.

Out the door Drew walked in a quiet lobby. The attendants had all left, save for the ‘Outgoing Grievances’ woman and a custodian who was dry-mopping the floor. The silence of the room was unsettling. Not giving the woman the slightest acknowledgment he headed for the elevator pretending as if he had been given his dream job. When he was about 20 feet from the elevator the old man came out the far door with his hand on his wounded head and yelled, “Don’t let him take the elevator!”

The custodian and the bitchy woman looked at each other for what to do. Not sure the janitor walked towards Ethan with his broom in both hands. Drew frantically ran to call the elevator and looked with crazed eyes around for anyone. As the janitor came near Drew grabbed one of the fake potted trees and swung it in a wild arc towards him, missing him. The janitor stayed back and Drew stood tensed and ready to react as some uniformed men came out from the far towards him. “Where did they come from?” he wondered.

Drew stood until he heard the ‘ding’ and stepped backwards onto the elevator bumping into an office cart. He swung around and saw Amber behind it. The old man in the background yelled to stop him and the uniformed men came closer. Amber screamed, “Don’t hurt me, please.” The uniformed men in turn slowed down more wary of the situation. The doors closed and quickly Drew clicked the first floor.

“I’m not going to hurt you.” Drew said.

“I know,” Amber said which confused Drew. “I screamed so they would think you were dangerous. Look we don’t have much time but I saw you on a surveillance cam leaving the room. Before they could sound the alarm I ran into the elevator with this cart heading up to you. Something’s seriously wrong here. For a while now I’ve seen people walk into the back room and then never see them again.”

“What goes on back there?”

“I don’t know. I can’t access the footage.”

Drew collapsed his back against the side of the elevator, “I can’t just walk out, can I?”

“I’ve got an idea. Here,” she said handing him a screwdriver from the cart, “there are two armed guards downstairs probably already in place by the elevator. Threaten to kill me if they don’t put down their guns.”

“But won’t they know that you helped me?”

“There are no cameras here and I have to make trips to the other floors from time to time anyway.”

He looked at her surprised. “Thank you. For all your help.”

“Here we’re almost there.” She leaned up and kissed Drew. “Good luck.” Then she turned around and stepped backwards into Drew. He looked down at the screwdriver in his right hand. She reached back and his touches hand assuredly. He grabbed her forehead with his left hand and put the screwdriver in his right under her neck.

The doors creaked open to two guards in cobalt uniforms holding guns focused on Drew and Amber; one old with curly black hair and the other bald. Amber trembled under Drew’s arms and he wondered whether she was acting.

“There’s no need to hurt anyone now,” the older one said.

“Slide your guns over to me,” trying to keep his voice from breaking.

No one moved. Finally, the sound of the other elevator door opened and Drew glanced back to see the lucid man in the black suit from earlier. He waved a hand at the two guards and they lowered their aim.

“Do you know what’s in the back room?” the man said.

“No... Tell them to put down their guns.”

“Then why are you so frightened?” The man ignored Drew’s command. “You have no need to be. I assure you.”

“Where’s Ethan? And the other girl?”

The man gave a sly smile, “Let me ask you a simple question. What kind of jobs did you hear mentioned?”

Drew said nothing. The man continued.

“Doctor, engineer, welder, perhaps. Did you by chance hear anyone get anything in the government?”

Drew thought back but couldn’t remember. His hand shook.

“You’re a smart young man. You know. Like mayor, or governor, or even president?”

Drew was silent. He gaze shook and he thought of what to do. “Where’s Ethan?”

“He’s already at the city center. They took him by helicopter. ”

It was possible, Drew supposed, but why would they want him for political office.

“Just put down the weapon and come up with me.”

He thought for a second and started to lower the screwdriver. Quickly, Amber pinched him from behind her back. Drew wasn’t sure but he trusted Amber. He shoved the screwdriver harder into her neck. She flinched and began to whimper. The two guards brought their weapons back up. The man in the black suit gave a sigh and nodded to the guards. Finally, they lowered their weapons and slid them over to Drew. With the metal rod still pressed against Amber he had her bend over and pick up both guns and hand them to him.

“Lie flat on the ground.”

The guards both slowly laid down while the man pulled out a handkerchief from his pocket and unfolded it on the floor. He went down to his knees and put his hands behind his head but it was clear that that was as far as he was going to go.

Drew wished for a moment that could say something final to Amber. He gave her a hard shove. As she toppled to the ground crying he ran for the door.

Drew tucked both handguns in his pockets and ran into the river of people in the tunnels. He pushed and shoved his way through and ran for as long and as hard as he could.

He came across a homeless man munching on some wafers and stopped. Starving he asked, “Can I have a piece?”

Looking Drew up and down, he saw the suit and said,

“Leave me alone. I don’t like being made fun of.”

“I’m not mocking you. I don’t have any food or money. Here,” Offering the man a gun, “you can have this if it really matters to you that much.”

The man eyed the gun for a moment and then discreetly grabbed it. He offered a seat to Drew, and handed him the box.

Drew sat and ate quietly and thought back to his family, and the man in the black suit. *None of you are unemployed or homeless, are you?* Drew looked over at the man and said, “Do you mind if I ask you a personal question?”

“Is it about why I’m here instead of working a job?”

“Something along those lines.”

“I’m homeless by choice as you probably gathered. I grew up in a 10<sup>th</sup> floor apartment where I had eggs every morning. Now look at me. I was even a civil engineer, once, long ago.”

“You were?”

“I wasn’t cut out for it.”

“How is that possible?”

“The SPE rigged, kid. I’m the living proof.”

“Why?”

“Why what?”

“Why would the SPE be rigged?”

“The reasons for ‘why’ I’m not altogether sure about but I don’t doubt that it does actually sort people. Maybe they’re identifying potential problem makers, I don’t know. Can you imagine a poor man suddenly becoming rich in this society?” The vagabond stopped and then looked again at the suit and asked, “Hey what do you do for a living?”

“I’m an accountant at a law firm... If you don’t mind though I’d rather not talk about it, it’s rather boring work.”

“Fair enough.”

Drew suddenly heard through the din of the foot-traffic Drew heard some static coming from the beggar’s belongings.

“What’s that?” Drew asked as he gestured towards the noise.

“Oh just a cracked tablet, there’s nothing on right now anyway except for news anyway.”

“Mind if I take a look?”



“Sure go ahead,” the vagrant mumbled through a dried mouth full of crackers passing over the little box.

Turning the digital screen a bit Drew looked at the latest feed seeing what they had, or did not have on him, yet. To his surprise there were no circulating photos of him yet. He continued to watch, though, and finally a safety bulletin popped up announcing two new tunnel leaks. There was not yet a list of everyone that had been hurt or sent to the hospital but they popped pictures of those that had been immediately identified. Drew saw a series of unfamiliar faces cover the broken screen. At last one face popped that was almost entirely obscured from the fractured glass, except for the top left half where a large purple birth mark clearly showed.