

Malik Al-Rashid watched carefully through the scratched glass of his black thermoplastic welding helmet as he moved his forearm to weld one steel panel to the one next to it, as he had hundreds of times before. The welding torch hovered right above his left forearm, sparks from the flame stinging his wrist as he went. The torch sat on top of two metal joints coming from a steel shell carved out of his body, continually turning his wrist slightly to adjust the heat of the flame that was dancing centimeters above the tips of his fingers, his internal thermometer displaying a temperature of 40°C in black text on a HUD displaying on ultra-thin, weather resistant panels resting near micrometers above his eyes, the time read 05:32:47.

Steel panels were being welded together along the outside of a gigantic metal frame 500 meters tall, with pipes and wires and electronics lining the interior. To Malik the maze of pipes and wires looked like his own internals and seemed as alive as he was. The metallic and silicon vascular system Malik was covering belonged to a smart city dubbed by the corporation Synthetech Dynamics as “The Line.” The city was one piece of a mega-project dubbed Neom, and aimed to hold 9 million residents between two reflective walls placed 0.2 km apart, spanning from the Red Sea to Tabuk, 170 km.

Malik watched the temperature displayed in his eyes drop quickly down to 21°C as he removed the nozzle to his welding torch, placing it next to him on the wood making up his little platform of safety along the side of The Line. He was one of hundreds of workers sitting atop Bosun Chairs along the wall, all welding together steel panels for company scrips, only usable in the temporary town constructed 5 km away from the build site, far enough to hide the town’s conditions to any investors. He was one of the lucky skilled workers, many thousands more were on the ground, hauling steel and glass plates into piles on the uneven ground below, for fake wages worse than his own.

The canister of Malik's welding torch folded back into his left forearm, the two metallic joints flattening out as the gas filled canister is quickly covered by a metal plate with a graft of his skin, leaving an outline of the plate on his forearm. He crawled across his little platform of safety in the sky, loosely secured to a system of pulleys connected to steel girders on the top of the walls frame. Malik swings his chestnut brown work boots over the edge of his chair and stares out at the horizon before him, the workers below seeming little more than ants working in efficient lines against the pink dawn sky.

After his moment of respite, bright red text flashed on his eyes reading:

WARNING INCLIMATE WEATHER APPROACHING

Malik used the zoom-in feature the company's eye implants had to spot an incoming dust storm from the north, his eyes read 4.7km. *Shit* he thought to himself as he began pulling himself down to the ground, where he could see that the lines had broken down into a swarm of tiny ants slowly growing larger.

Reaching the ground, it was total chaos. The supervisors in the trucks were shouting orders to the workers who were not, telling them to "Move those Goddamn panels now!" and "I don't care if you get buried in this storm, we can always use a metal detector to find your bodies later!" in their gruff American accents.

Very quickly Malik found himself scrambling to get inside one of many overcrowded shuttles to take him away from the storm. The shuttles were old, leftover rust buckets from the Soviet Union, somehow running almost 100 years after they were first built.

The bus's exterior hinted at white sides with red stripes near the bottom and the windows, but layers of rust overtook the long-dulled paint. The fronts of the buses were flat, with a domed top. On the inside, a layer of sand covered the matte black floors, with outlines of where the chairs used to be, suggesting they could seat 33. Currently almost 80 men were sardined inside, and on a normal day 50 stood shoulder to shoulder for the rough 5km ride back to their little shanty town.

Malik always tried to get a spot next to the windows, because he liked to watch the sunset and think of the world beyond his desert, today he was not so lucky. Crammed in between two men bigger than him, he could tell their implants were shoddy work.

They had implants that were designed to enhance their upper body strength so they could carry heavier goods, but with his naked eye Malik could spot several locations where the metal plating covering the wires overlapped the skin. He also noticed the red rubber used on their knuckles to enhance their grip strength had already begun to tear and reveal a layer of black beneath them. He thought to himself that these two must be one of the unskilled laborers, moving and lifting the metal and glass plates that he welds together into a patchwork wall.

The bus ride itself was long and bumpy, not helped by the extra load of passengers that had packed themselves in or the sandstorm they were surrounded by.

After barely holding together through its journey, the bus came to a screeching halt on the hardened sand of the desert. The overcrowded bus was quickly relieved of its cargo, a stream of workers cybernetically enhanced to increase their productivity stepped into the company town they called home.

Officially the town had no name, upper management referred to it as Jingtown, after the CEO of the company that Malik worked for, Wang Jing. Wang Jing is the majority stockholder and founder of Synthetech Dynamics, a Chinese based tech company that made trillions in the cybernetic enhancement market. They started out creating robotic arms and legs for amputees. That is where they got their start, they quickly took over the market and began developing new enhancements for productivity like Malik's forearm and became the richest companies in the world after developing cosmetic enhancements.

These enhancements are surgically placed under the skin of the patient, allowing them to customize their appearance using an app, though not all the features are available for any user, and can only be accessed through a subscription service. The full extent of the app allows users to change their physical appearance, Synthetech Dynamics limits the ability to look "overly inhuman", citing safety concerns.

The richest users ignore this, instead paying the company either directly or offering them favors to allow them to change their appearance in more drastic ways. Most often this takes the form of having animal features, such as ears or a tail, or in one instance, twelve arms (The human body is not capable of handling the intense change of twelve arms, and the user died shortly after). The secrets that allow such changes to be made are held close to Synthetech Dynamics's chest.

The Wall was the latest development by Synthetech Dynamics, designed by them to "Be a city of the future, driven forward by the greatest innovators of the modern age," that is what they would tell any potential investors. One of their biggest investors being the United States, who claims their investment in Synthetech Dynamics was "an investment in America's Future."

Another of their major investors was of course, the Saudi royal family. They had sold the rights to build the line to Synthetech Dynamics way below the projected asking price, as they wanted to have a more direct influence on the project and its inner workings.

Staring at the shack Synthetech Dynamics called his home, Malik wondered to himself how a company who made trillions making the impossible, possible, having some of the most powerful governments funding their projects, was incapable of providing better accommodations than tin shacks in the desert.

Jingtown is a small collection of shanty houses built from scrap pieces of tin that were too worn or bent to be used in the construction of the wall. Each worker's accommodations are the same, a one-bedroom shack built as cheaply and quickly as possible, each wall shared with another shack. The place was designed to be as isolating as possible by design, and Malik was.

The solitary nature of his housing, combined with the lonely nature of welding the side of the wall drove him to almost complete isolation, the two things he could do were to work and to sleep. He hardly spoke a word, and neither did anyone who worked on the site, they were all too tired and hungry to be able to chat.

Aside from the occasional natural disaster like today, Malik's life was remarkably simple and miserable; Work, bus to Jingtown, sleep, and then bus to work. The months of almost complete isolation and squalid conditions had drove Malik to almost quit several times, but any time he brought it up, any supervisor welcomed him to try and walk through the harsh desert, claiming they would use his cybernetic enhancements to track when he died in the wilderness and tear them out of him.

Those threats kept him Synthetech Dynamics's prisoner, getting paid in company money to buy himself food at one of many companies stores in Jingtown, cooking it alone in his small dormitory.

Malik started work in construction not long before The Wall began breaking ground. He comes from a poor desert village that was wiped off the map when Synthetech Dynamics bought the land for the wall. Everyone in the village was offered positions to work in construction, at least anyone they considered physically able, anyone they did not was left behind.

He was selected from his village's people to work welding, because they had a welding arm his size, and replaced the bone of his forearm with his cybernetic blowtorch.

The cycle Malik was trapped in by Synthetech Dynamics drove him to his breaking point, and one day he decided he could not be trapped any longer. His plan was to cause an incident that would halt construction of the wall, collapsing the structure and leaving Synthetech Dynamics with trillions spent with nothing to show for it.

The details were simple; after getting off of the bus to the construction site one day, he went to change the fuel canister in his arm, when he arrived at the storehouse, he took a bag and filled it with as many canisters as he could carry, sneaking near the base of the already completed first segment. He then went inside the wall, through the maintenance tunnels, placing the canisters on the floor of the tunnel behind him. Squeezing through the cramped, dark corridors of the wall, having to duck under metal pipes and fuse boxes, Malik had laid all the fuel he could. In that moment, his heart sank, questioning the very idea of his plan. Suddenly, through the dark, he heard someone else enter the tunnels, meaning for Malik, it was now or never. He opened his arm, revealing the blowtorch and its dim flame, he could see the sweat on his hand, for once not

from the desert heat. He was trembling, and he could hear footsteps echoing through the tunnel, getting louder and louder as they approached the end of the tunnel.

In that moment, he twisted his wrist, forcing the flames to roar out, igniting the nearest canister to him.

Malik was not obliterated instantly, as he had hoped. Only the can he hit directly blew up, the explosion was smaller than he planned, igniting his skin. His death was slow, painful, and meaningless in the end. The only damage he caused the company was the loss of two fuel canisters and one blowtorch augment. His body was swallowed up in the catacombs of The Wall, writhing in pain in the dark tunnel, he died forgotten and alone.