# Prologue

JOGUN'S SHOULDER BAG swung wide as one of the grown-ups knocked into it. He stumbled on his scrawny, six-year-old legs in the dusty Falari Market street. Might as well have been invisible. There in the morning crowd, that was a bad and a good thing. Bad because he got treated like shit and people ran him over. Good because they didn't notice his hands darting in and out of their pockets. At least most of the time. Sometimes he had to run.

Jogun steadied himself then shrugged the strap back into the callus on his shoulder. The pinching weight made him smile. It had been a good day. A few jewels made of polished glass and circuit board shards. A whole bottle of aspirin. Two nine millimeter magazines, one regular and one hollow point. Even a small propane tank, half full. All of it clinked heavily in his bag as he made his way through the buzzing market. *No way he's gonna hit me tonight...* He breathed a little easier, but there was one last thing on his list before going home to find out.

He saw it ahead to his right, piled on a high counter. Bread. Long loaves of it, fresh from the cinder block ovens. He waded through the crowd of colorful fabrics and stood at the end of the line to wait his turn. Stealing food was a sin. Prayers didn't come true if you used sinful bread at the Stepstones. The baker called him to the counter.

"Whatchu got?" asked the baker, scowling down at Jogun through dark, black wrinkles. Jogun rifled through his bag and came up with the aspirin. He grabbed the lid and twisted hard, but the cap wouldn't budge. *Not givin' him the whole thing...* He tossed it back in the bag and kept digging.

"Ain't got all day, boy! C'mon!"

Jogun's little fingers closed around one of the jewels. Tiny gold lines glistened in pretty patterns on its shiny green surface. He reached up and handed this one to the frowning baker. The thin, flour-covered man squinted at the jewel, put it in his pocket, then tossed a quarter-loaf down to Jogun.

"Thank you," said Jogun, smelling the loaf. As his stomach growled, a low rumble rolled down through the market. Everyone's head snapped up. The slate gray sky hung heavy above them. Rows of tiny white headlights crept in long straight lines against the clouds. Afternoon aerial traffic from the City. As the crowd whispered rain prayers to God or gods, Jogun frowned up at the distant cars. I hope you all crash. He stuffed the bread in his bag and set out west toward the Rasalla River.

The Blue Ladies gathered past the edge of the Stepstones' concrete shore, ankle-deep in the shallow, oily water with hands locked in prayer. Dwellers of all kinds gathered at the water's edge, sending little floating lights downstream. Jogun approached the beached long-boat by the water. The Blue Lady inside smiled up at him and happily showed her lack of teeth in the light from dozens of candles.

"A good day for prayers, young man," she said. "God has shown he's remembered us."

"One, please," Jogun said, passing the quarter-loaf to her.

"Bless you, sweet boy, here you go." With both sand-colored hands, she offered him the flower. Cut soda-can petals splayed out in colorful layers of red, silver, and green. A squat wax candle filled the center. Head bowed, he accepted it. With a long reed, the old priestess passed flame from her candle to his.

"Go on," she smiled warmly and nodded to the River.

Jogun walked carefully down to the edge, found a bare spot by the water, and knelt. He closed his eyes.

"God hear me," he said under his breath. "Please protect Mama, and me, and my new baby brother or sister and make Dad go away. I promise I'll take care of us after. Amen." Jogun stooped, placed the flower gently in the water, and let go. He watched the light float past the Blue Ladies and toward the round mouth of a tunnel. There, it joined the other prayers in a flickering, starry stream. The first drops tapped his shaved head like an answer. He stood and looked up, savoring the damp, earthy smell.

"Thank you."

The rain built to a downpour on his way home. Dwellers danced and sang on the rusted streets, balconies, bridges, and rooftops beside their catch basins. Too many languages to count. Jogun broke into a run through the muddy neighborhoods. He'd be in for it if their basin wasn't flipped...but maybe his prayer had come true.

He was completely drenched by the time he got there. His thin, oversized tank-top clung to his narrow frame. The grey-green freight container apartment sat highest on the Stack, staring down at him. The fight last night had been one of the worst he could remember and the look on his mother's face was fresh in his mind. Sad. Broken. Surrendered. The way she had cradled her swollen belly...

Their plastic front door was cracked open when he reached the top of the rickety stairs. The water basin sat upside-down and unmoved next to the door. Jogun flipped it over to let the rain collect and used some to rinse the mud from his feet. Through the crack in the door, the apartment looked pitch black. He leaned in.

"Dad? Mama?" His voice came out in a squeak. No answer. He strained to hear through the noise inside. Rain on their metal roof sounded like machinegun fire. *Not home.* He breathed a sigh and walked in. When the door shut, a faint whimper rose above the noise. He tensed as he saw the pale light at the far end of the room.

Jogun's father stood motionless outside the back door on the balcony, facing the shining Sedonia City skyline in the east. Jogun's eyes adjusted to the dimness of the apartment. Signs of both last night's fight and a new one were all around. Overturned crates, boxes, and tables. Their radio smashed to pieces in the corner. Broken bottles and glass lamps shattered and scattered and now...blood. A lot of blood. A spreading puddle of it led to the family mattress and stained the edge. A soaked woolen blanket covered a limp, curvy shape on the bed.

Jogun's heart sank and pounded near his stomach. The fingers on his small hands flexed as one foot crept in front of the other toward the bed. Keeping one eye on Dad, he knelt next to it. Pulled back the blanket.

The wide-open pupils of her blue eyes stared at him. Through him. The color had gone from her light brown skin. Her full lips gray and dry. Jogun dropped the blanket and threw up beside the bed.

"That you, boy?" his father said without turning. "Toss that bag in the corner, I'll look through in a minute. Better be more'n last time." Jogun heard the whimper again, louder now and coming from the balcony door. *The baby!* Shaking and dizzy, Jogun got to his feet, picked up his satchel, and reached inside. Closed his fingers around a pistol grip. Hesitated.

"Ma...Mama—"

"Told the bitch she couldn't have any more. Now I gotta deal with it." It sounded like he was talking about the chores or something. Jogun's hand whipped out of the bag gripping the jet black nine millimeter pistol. It was so heavy he almost dropped it.

The big man turned with a sneer twisting his dark leathery features. A brown-skinned, newborn baby boy lay naked in his arms. It sputtered and coughed between brittle cries in the rain.

"If I gotta take that from you," Jogun's father growled, "you won't get it back." They glared at one another as the room dimmed. Another clap of thunder. *Shoot. Shoot!* Jogun's trigger finger wouldn't obey. His arms drooped under the weight of the pistol. Dad snorted. Turned back into the storm.

Jogun couldn't hear a thing over his throbbing heartbeat. Sobs choked in the back of his throat. Then a sharp wail ripped through the room. His baby brother's. Jogun raised the gun and pushed back the hammer with both thumbs. He squeezed the trigger.



#### Brotherhood

#### Twelve years later

ON TOP OF a low island chain of concrete apartments, Matteo could almost see everything. Didn't matter that he was short, sick, and weak. Countless hazy miles of the living, breathing Slums surrounded him. The cracked, sun-drenched streets. Tin roofs and awnings sticking out from cheap brick apartments. Gutted spacecraft and hull fragments turned into neighborhoods. And a dizzying network of scaffolding, catwalks, and plank bridges tying it all together. He grumbled at the mess. Squinted further east through the early afternoon heat.

Towering bright and proud above the Slums, Sedonia City glittered in silence. Matteo's big brown eyes traced the ivory skyscrapers at the center and carved each of them into memory. Early rush-hour traffic flew high overhead, to and from the center. Where do they go? He saw one ship had a cluster of glowing, blue-green engines on its belly. He watched it shrink into the skyline until his eyes watered. But as his gaze drifted down, his nose crinkled. The Border. A half-mile high, concrete barrier that separated City from Slum. He raised his hand in front of his face, blocking everything under the Border from view. Smiled.

The sting of the soccer ball came without warning, slapping him in the face. It knocked him off his tiptoes, down into the dust of the rooftop. Against the pain, he pushed himself up on shaky, bony arms. Realized he couldn't breathe. Panic flushed through him as he fumbled at the clear plastic tube under his nose and pressed the release. Cool mint air rushed in. The airway relaxed.

A group of kids laughed and pointed at him. Oki, the biggest one, was beside himself. The asshole had hit his growth spurt much earlier than his gang but still swelled with baby fat. Yellow teeth glinted in his big mouth.

"H-HA! Hey Wheezy! Hey uh...you wanna pass that back over here? Gotta finish our game," Oki sneered.

The patchwork, semi-flat ball rolled to Matteo's feet. Head throbbing, he stared at it. Clenched his fists. He wanted to hurl it back at Oki's head. Maybe bust out some of those crooked teeth. But the results of that choice played through his mind like a memory. Oki and the other thugs would chase him until he ran totally out of breath, then put another beating on him. He'd barely survived the last one.

Carefully, Matteo shifted to his skinned knees and pushed himself up.

"Pick it up," Oki said. Matteo shot a glare at them. Softened when he noticed another familiar face in the entourage, peeking from behind Oki like an anxious mouse. *Raia*. The cute neighbor girl that lived a few family-boxes down in his home stack. She never looked at him...at least not for long. Her blue almond eyes always glanced away when he noticed her gawking. *The airtank. The tube... me.* People always looked.

But here on the roof, she didn't look away. She stared hard along with the others, waiting for him to move. Matteo found himself shying away from her. *Her eyes...so blue...* 

"PICK IT UP!" Oki shouted, making Matteo jump. They all laughed. All except her. Matteo swallowed bitter hate as he stooped and picked up the ball.

"Now lick it!" Oki said. Matteo stood perfectly still. Swallowed hard as he stared at the stained, worn out ball.

"Go on, bitch! Do it!" one of the others chimed in.

"Yeah! Come on, Wheezy!" said another.

"Oki..." Raia's tiny voice broke through the laughing. Matteo looked up to see her place a gentle hand on Oki's shoulder.

"Leave him alone, he's—"

"Shut the *fuck* up, bitch!" Oki jabbed an elbow into her boney chest, knocking her down.

"HEY!" Matteo shouted. The ball left his hand and sailed through the air before he knew what happened. It arced, then hit the ground. Rolled to a harmless stop at Oki's feet. A prickling acid wave crept over Matteo's skull as the situation came back into focus. The gang burst to life behind a still, scowling Oki. Raia sat up, dirt caked to streaks of tears. She wiped them away and continued her jeweled stare.

"Ohhh shit! Wheezy done fucked up now!" one voice called.

POP! Oki stomped the ball flat. Everyone jumped. Six lunging strides and the oversized boy was right on top of Matteo. Inches from his face. Sour breath flowed over Matteo as he looked down and away, staying silent. Oki turned his ear toward him.

"What was that? Speak up, Wheezy, I can't hear you with this shit in your face!" Oki yanked out Matteo's nose tube then shoved him in the chest. The gang behind chuckled nervously as Matteo sputtered and coughed. Oki threw his head back and laughed. They laughed louder.

Tears stinging his eyes, Matteo forced down the fit. The words came to him, crystallizing out of the fog.

"They don't really like you," Matteo said. It had come out in a whisper.

"The fuck did you sa—?"

Matteo struggled to smooth his ragged gasps as he straightened. Looked dead square into Oki's beady, close-set eyes.

"They're *scared* of you. They pretend to be your friend so you won't hurt 'em. But you do anyway. If you don't keep 'em scared, you got nobody. And havin' nobody *scares you*."

Matteo braced himself in the trembling quiet. Watched the thick fist cock back, fly forward, and catch him in the gut. The world went white. He doubled over, distantly aware of the kick that was coming next.

BANG! A gunshot split the moment in two. The kick never came.

"Fuck off. All of you," said an older voice. On the next rooftop stood a fit, broad-faced boy of eighteen with a black nine millimeter pistol in hand. He turned his sleeveless shoulder to them, showing the characters "T99" tattooed in a triangle. Oki and the other kids scattered like roaches. Raia got up, hesitated, then scampered off to follow.

Matteo crumpled into a tight ball. Looked up through throbbing vision to watch where Oki went. *Across those two wood bridges...then through Mr. Ramesh's garden*. He winced as he turned toward the sound of the shot. Scowled when he saw his older brother.

Jogun jumped across the gap in the rooftops and sprinted toward Matteo, holstering the gun in his waistband.

"Can you breathe? Are you okay?" Jogun wasted no time. He refastened the tube under Matteo's nose, sat him up, and felt his rib cage. Matteo coughed hard. Glared at Jo.

"Come on, bro, talk to me!" said Jogun.

"I'm—I'm fine.You just—" Matteo tried to swallow in a dry throat. Pushed against Jogun's grasp.

"I'm fine!" said Matteo, staring hard into his brother's eyes. Jogun hesitated. Released his hands. Matteo rolled and pushed up, head swimming with a sudden rush.

"Nah, you ain't fine, kid! I told you to stay away from them! But here you are, sight-seein' on their turf again..."

Matteo's eyes fell on the gun in Jogun's waistband. Fingernails dug into his sweating palms. *Across those two wood bridges and through Mr. Ramesh's garden...* Tensing his arm in an instant, Matteo reached out. He snatched the pistol and lunged away toward the first bridge. As Jogun reached after him, a noise broke above the midday Slums. Both brothers stopped dead in their tracks.

It rose to a roar, echoing over the rooftops. It got sharper. Louder. They looked up in time to see a white, wedge-shaped object streak overhead. Its blade wings

jutted through thrashing engine flames. A Pulsar HVX! Luxury class! Matteo's pulse raced. Whoops and cheers sounded throughout the neighborhood. Jogun, without looking, held out his open hand. Matteo placed the gun in it. Jogun got to his feet, then turned.

"Stay. Here." Jogun glared at Matteo, waited for a nod, then took off after the bulging smoke trail. He ran across a narrow catwalk, vaulted over a guard rail, and disappeared behind hanging laundry in an alleyway.

Matteo fidgeted in the excitement. *It was luxury class! I saw it!* His feet begged him to follow. Oki's gang reappeared and ran past. Turned to wave 'goodbye' on their way after the ship. Oki back-pedaled to face Matteo and clutched his chest in a mock coughing fit. That was it. Matteo took three deep breaths from the tube and trotted off after them.

Jogun bounded from rooftop to rooftop, glancing up to keep the smoke trail in sight. Ahead, two young T99s in tank-tops, shorts, and running shoes darted up a fire escape and matched pace with him. Together they scrambled over walls, up ladders, and through the apartments of cowering dwellers. The locals cleared a path without complaint. Everything else in the Slums stopped when the Nines moved in force.

As the smoke thickened, they were joined by one, and then two more guys, all with 'T99' on their left shoulders. The wreck was close. Sour smells of charred carbon fiber and burning coolant confirmed it.

"The H3!" one of them shouted, "gotta make this quick, or it's gonna go off!" Running up one final stairwell, the group emerged onto a flat, concrete rooftop. The Pulsar HVX sat wrecked at the end of a savage gouge in the concrete. Jogun sprinted up to it, meeting the several other gang members who were already tearing it apart. At the rear of the hull, Jogun recognized the radioactive symbol. He cringed as the Cutters yanked out the canisters of Helium-3 and tossed them to the waiting Runners. Nothing happened. He sighed. *No meltdown today...* 

Jogun got to work. He and two others forced open the trunk with a hydraulic hiss. Revealed pay-dirt. Groceries. Laughing and whooping, they rifled through the treasure and filled their satchels. Jogun caught glimpses of detergent, potato chips, soap, shampoo, ground beef, and... *fresh produce!* He took care not to open that bag too wide while he took his cut from it. The others didn't seem to notice. Boomer was too busy stuffing his face with tortilla chips, and Porki chewed on a frowning mouthful of toothpaste. Spat it out in a soggy lump.

The Cutters torched panels from the hull while three senior T99s drew pistols and surrounded the cockpit. Suomo, the ranking member, waved his long lean arm for a Cutter to pop the driver's-side hatch. It swung open with a flick of the crowbar. A spongy, yellow-green material crumbled out the door. Suomo checked inside, then relaxed with a metallic smile.

"All clear!" Suomo called to the group. Jogun took out his crowbar, pulled his satchel drawstring shut, and trotted over. Met Suomo at the door.

"Cheap-ass foam," Suomo said, holstering his pistol, "Did the job for us. Jo, go on and pop the other side." Jo looked inside. Stalled. A family of three sat partially encased in their seats. Hollow stares from the husband and the eleven-year-old boy in the back seat told of instant death. The wife slumped over the dash, her face half-buried in foam.

"Well do it quick, fool! Better believe the Robos gonna be here any time!" Jogun ran around to the other side, pried the door open, and climbed up just in time to see Suomo reach into the foam on the driver's side. The husband's harness straps zipped back into the seat, Suomo grabbed the arm, and yanked the corpse out into a crumbling heap of dry foam. The senior Nine started rifling through compartments without a second thought. Jogun reached in. He grabbed the dead wife by the shoulder and eased her away from the dash.

She gasped and flashed her eyes wide open.

"SHIT!" Jogun stumbled out of the ship. The woman groaned, pulling a shaky hand from the foam to touch the gash on her forehead.

"A live one!" Suomo shouted, "Go ahead wit it, Jo." Only one thing that could mean.

Jogun swallowed hard. His heart raced. All eyes watched him as he pulled out the nine millimeter and climbed back up into the ship. He found the woman struggling to keep her eyes open. Her light-brown hair was stained yellow-green, clinging to her scarred, middle-aged features. *She looks like...like Her...* Twelve years ago, and her face still haunted him clear as yesterday.

"Today, Jo!" Suomo said. Burying the memories, Jogun raised the pistol. Looked down the sight at the woman's head. His breathing quickened. His arm trembled. Awareness gathered in the woman as her eyes rolled toward the sound of the clicking hammer. BANG! Red splashed against the sick-colored foam. Her head returned with a thump to the dash. I'm sorry... Jo pinched his eyes shut and pulled her out of the cockpit. Cheers and applause erupted outside.

"Yeah!"

"GOT that city-bitch!"

"That's the shot, Jo-Gun!"

Jogun flicked the safety on his pistol, stuck it in his waistband, and climbed into the Pulsar's backseat. *Just get to business. Don't let 'em see you sweat.* He scooped foam out by the arm-full, digging for the center console. Suomo climbed into the driver's side, leaned over to Jogun, and slapped him on the back. Jogun managed a nod then continued working. He kept his attention fixed on the console and away from the boy's body next to him. He looked away as that corpse was unhooked from its harness and dragged out.

They picked the wreck clean within a matter of minutes. First the factory stereo and speakers, GPS, head-rest monitors, yards of fiber optic

cable, and anything with a circuit board. Then the heavy lifting. The seats, undamaged glass, polyurethane interior paneling, and the carbon fiber hull came out in crudely cut sections, tossed into piles on the roof to be carried off by the Runners.

Jogun, with full satchel in tow, stepped out of the skeletal remains in time to see the kids arrive. Despite their long pursuit, they had lost no energy. They pestered the Runners for closer looks at the loot. A few ran to the piles, picked up all they could carry, and followed behind their elders. A tiny kid arrived dead last. His tiny body heaved with each exhausted gasp. *Matteo!* Jogun sprinted to him, and crouched down.

"Dammit Matteo, when I say stay, you *stay!*" said Jogun. He glanced back, scanning behind him for traces of the bodies. Gone. They were carried off too. Jogun tried to block thoughts of what they'd be used for.

"I—I wa—" Matteo struggled.

"Slow down man, like we practiced," Jogun pursed his lips, drew in a long, deep breath, and exhaled. Matteo nodded and obeyed. Jogun pressed a hand to Matteo's stomach and pushed against the pressure of each breath. The boy's breathing slowed, accompanied by shrill wheezing.

"You good?"

"Y-yeah. What'd you get?"

Jogun furrowed his brow.

"Never mind what I got, boy, you need to learn how to listen! This ain't no place for you!"

Matteo frowned at the remark. He looked at the kids with armfuls of cable and hull fragments. He huffed through the wheezing.

"You ain't like them," said Jogun. Matteo shot him a dirty look.

"C'mon, I didn't mean...I just—whatever. Sounds like you need to head down to the Doc for a refill." Jogun tapped the inhaler tank in Matteo's hood, stood up, and dug into his satchel. Pulled out a ripe clementine orange.

"This should be enough... 'specially with the seeds," said Jogun. Matteo held the alien object close, studying the texture and shape, "Don't even think about it. Not one bite, understand?"

Matteo rolled his eyes. Nodded. Jogun's ears perked up at a rising sound in the distance. The other T99s did the same. The distant, familiar thrum of hover engines echoed across the slums. Getting louder every second.

"Five-O! Get the fuck out!" shouted Suomo. The gang exploded into a frenzy, holstering cutting torches, bagging remaining scraps, and securing their satchels for escape. Jogun stooped to Matteo.

"Get to the Doc, and be home before dark!"

"Will you—"

"NOW!"

Matteo shuddered at the command, and hobbled to the fire escape. Jogun watched his little brother go as he tightened the satchel straps. *Be safe, little man...* With the gunship seconds away, Jogun broke into a dead sprint across the rooftops.

The IG-6 gunship, a repurposed military relic painted EXO blue, pulled its nose up as it reached the crash site, blasting the rooftop with a breaking thrust. Vet pilots called them FFT's or 'Flying Freight Trains.'The force of the hover engines floored a few T99 stragglers as seven EXO-Cops dropped to the roof like lead weights. Sergeant Kabbard and his men stood tall in the urban camo Augmentor gear on their arms, legs, and partial torsos. Each EXO drew his weapon and formed the first-response perimeter. Through his visor, the Sergeant's steel eyes took a quick survey of the scene.

"Davis! Leitmeyer! Ruiz! Olin! Legs on! Pick up some trails and run 'em down!" The four officers nodded in their tight-fitting helmets, and crouched. Each turned dials on their upper right hip, triggering the crescendo of a high-pitched, electronic whine. Four audible clicks snapped at full charge and each officer bolted in a different direction. Their bounding, inhuman strides cleared rooftops at a time.

"Shima and Mason, you're with me. Switch to spurs." Kabbard pulled the barbed stun pistol from his shoulder holster. Shima and Mason followed suit, converged on the recovering T99s, and fired stun spurs into their backs. Short convulsions followed by deathly stillness. The three fanned out to secure the wreck. Kabbard double-tapped a hotkey on his temple, dousing his vision in electric blue. No movement or body heat signatures appeared inside the wreck.

"Sound off!" Kabbard shouted.

"Clear!"

"Clear!"

Kabbard retracted his visor and glared at the stripped skeleton of the wreck. Ground his teeth. Another failure to add to the list.

"We were dispatched what, six minutes ago?" asked Shima, "How the hell could they have done this so fast?" The mouthy rookie lifted his visor. The sharp, bird-like features gave the kid a shifty look. Kabbard didn't think much of him. Too much of a taste for violence and cool gadgets. Mason, the fatherly elder vet, was all too happy to offer a sagely answer.

"You saw the prelim scans coming in. There were kids up here. They do this kind of thing from the second they can hold a blowtorch," Mason grumbled, squatting to inspect the torch-cuts on the mutilated rear-end. Ahead, Kabbard leaned into the cockpit. *Fucking mess*. He found it difficult to focus on any particular thing in all the twisted metal and shredded plastic. Only a wet, crimson

smear on the passenger side caught his eye. His boot nudged a bullet casing on the ground by the frame..

"Sir!" Shima called from the opposite side of the ship, "I got three RFID chips here, minus three civvies! By the look of em, they were carved outta the vics' forearms right here...nasty shit! Sir." The rookie pulled out a plastic bag, dropped the bloody, square-inch microchips inside, and handed it to Mason.

"Must be gettin' wise..." said Mason, passing the bag to Kabbard.

"Won't be trackin' em that way anymore," said the Sergeant. He studied the chips. Bits of flesh clung to the tight circuits. Dark blood pooled in the bottom of the bag. All that was left of three more innocent lives. Twenty years on the force... five Governor commendations for valor...two holes in my shoulder, one in my hip, and one in each leg. None of it makes a damn bit of difference... Anger flickered inside of him, but had scarce little fuel to burn. Empty.

"Think they can pull the mem logs?" Shima asked.

Kabbard ignored the question. He pressed two fingers to his throat just beneath the jaw. Felt the familiar pop there.

"Pursuit Team, we've got civilian casualties," he paused, hating the words, "Find me at least *one* of these shitheads, and put the blue octopus on 'em. Can't let this go without a message." He released his fingers and turned from the wreck, walking straight toward one of the unconscious T99s.

"Blue octopus?" Shima raised a thin eyebrow.

"Yeah. Four cops. Eight arms..." Mason buried a fist into his meaty palm. A tight grin stretched over Shima's face.

Kabbard pulled out a stun pistol and pressed a button on the side. A dual-pronged barb flicked out of the grip. He stooped, twisted the T99's head to the right, plunged the barb into the base of the neck, and squeezed the trigger. The skinny gangster seized, shocked out of the stupor. Kabbard waited calmly as the thug shook his head and looked up at the three EXOs.

"The fuck you want, robo?" asked the gangster.

"Oh yeah, we're a *hard ass*, aren't we?!" Kabbard stood with the buzz of servos. Planted the armored toe of his boot in the scumbag's ribcage. Once the coughing died down, Kabbard knelt.

"Names and whereabouts," Kabbard said, "The pain stops when you tell me."

# 2

# **Prayers**

MATTEO CRADLED THE orange in the belly pocket of his hoodie. The faded-yellow pullover was so baggy on him, no one would see anything bulging from the pocket. Not that anyone would think to find food on a scrawny kid like him anyway. All the same, he kept his head down through this part of Rasalla. So near the Falari Market, the streets swelled with the poor and starving. One whiff of his precious cargo, and they'd swarm him.

Dusk had settled over the Slums, casting scary shadows into the alleys flanking the street. Matteo's heart pounded against his ribcage. Detailed scenarios of desperate, violent thieves came to mind without permission. He shook his head and tried to focus on his route. Right at the Alati Shuttle House, walk two blocks, and left into the Temple of the Wheel. The wheezing was getting worse. He freed a hand from the orange and pinched the release on the tube. The medicine trickled in. Starving noses nearby caught something strange as he passed them. Matteo slipped his hand back into the belly pocket and sped up. Hung a tight right around the Alati House, a salvaged medical shuttle turned hospital that signaled the start of the Healer's Quarter.

"Healing" came in many forms. If you had the cash to spend or the goods to trade, you could buy anything here from antibiotics for an infection to the best highs in the Slums. Witch doctors and surgeons worked as neighbors. Lines between pusher and pharmacist blurred. They ignored Matteo, barking over his head to the shuffling crowd. He squeezed unnoticed through the queues of sick and wounded and came out at a T-junction. Took a left. Then the second right.

A twenty foot tall, circular metal gate spanned the path. Strings of lights wrapped around the red painted frame, making it glow like a warm hover coil. Matteo smiled. The Temple's smells of honeyed melon incense and fresh-grown

herbs always felt like a greeting. Breathing was easier for a moment. Past the gate, high rafters loomed above him with multicolored prayer flags hung in long, drooping lines. He wondered what each of them said...and if God really listened.

Matteo wove through the silent evening patients to Doctor Utu's clinic. It sat at the bottom of a stack of cinder block apartments. The gray concrete peeked through the ceremonial mural and hand-woven draperies decorating the walls. The evening torches were lit, filling the air with their cinnamon-spiced kerosene. The Doc could afford it. If a T99 or his family needed care, any self-respecting member sent them to Utu.

Matteo approached the front door and brushed a hand over the hanging beads. He loved the sound. Parting them slightly, he peered inside.

"Be with right with you, Mister Matteo!" said the Doctor in his rich, laughing tone. How can someone sound like they're smiling? Copper candle-light flickered all throughout the room, interrupted by the cool glow of the exam lamp. Painted prayers in English, Arabic, and Chinese snaked around the entire space, playfully overlapping the shelves. 'Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.' Matteo furrowed his brow, thinking. Filing the phrase away for later, he hopped onto a painted stool by the door and turned attention to the Doc.

"Almost..." Utu said, crouched beside the prosthetic leg of a reclining patient. The Doc stroked his round, lightly bearded face. He wore a loose, white linen robe and his natural paunch swayed underneath. He peered at the new leg. A curved strip of homemade carbon-fiber cut to shin length and socketed into a metal cuff below the man's knee. Utu adjusted the cuff with caramel-colored hands then lifted the leg to bend at the knee. Repeated the process.

"There," the Doctor said, "Try to stand." The large man lurched forward and pivoted in his seat to face the doctor. Matteo tensed. It was Raia's dad. The man had lost the leg in the Pits to a falling scaffold...it didn't make him any nicer. Too many good nights' sleep were interrupted by his drugged out screaming.

Utu stretched out his arms and beckoned to the man. Raia's dad planted his real foot, and with a shaky heave, put weight on it. Utu braced him under the left shoulder.

"Now take your time and *shift*," Utu began gradually withdrawing support, "to the new extension of your body." The man dipped and wobbled for a moment before finding balance. He tested the weight.

"Chafing? Discomfort?" the Doctor asked. Raia's dad pursed his lips and shook his head. Utu bowed and turned to the shelf behind him. He plucked a small frond of leaves and held them over a candle, scorching them. White smoke wafted from the crackling leaves.

"What was taken, let it thus be restored...through this joining of flesh and invention," the Doctor intoned, tracing the prosthetic with smoke. He straightened and extinguished the leaves in a bucket of water. A crutch made of welded pipe

and sewn bits of upholstery leaned against the wall. Utu picked it up. Handed it to the man.

"Use this for one week as you get used to the balance. After, try walking as often as possible without it. Short periods at first, working your way up to longer ones. The muscles will ache with the new movement, but be sure to come see me if you have trouble. Okay?" the Doctor smiled up at the thick man.

The man grunted, touched his palms together, and bowed his head. Utu mirrored the gesture.

"Namaste," said Utu. The man turned, crutch under his left arm, and hobbled carefully toward the door. Matteo dismounted the stool and held the door beads aside. Though ignored, Matteo lowered his head in respect, then turned to see Utu beaming at him.

"Such a boy from *this* neighborhood...It does my heart good! How may I help you this evening, my friend?" asked Utu.

"Just a refill," Matteo rasped, taking out the orange and handing it to Utu. The Doctor accepted it, but seemed not to notice. His bushy eyebrows arched at the scratchy voice.

"And then some." said Utu, "Come! Have a seat." He wrapped the orange in a cloth and set it aside. Flipping around, he lowered the patient chair, and patted its cracked vinyl seat. Matteo climbed on.

"Let's just take this out and have a listen, hmm?" Utu reached around Matteo's head, gripped the plastic tube between gentle thumbs and forefingers, and removed it. Matteo fidgeted. He remembered Oki ripping the tube from his nose. Everyone laughing. The wheezing started as Utu set the empty canister aside, picked up a tarnished stethoscope, and fixed it to his ears. He exhaled on the metal pad and reached through Matteo's cutoff hoodie sleeve. Placed the pad there. Listened. Moved it and listened again. Utu sighed.

"My friend, what have you been doing?" Utu asked, setting the stethoscope aside. "Let's see..." The Doc scanned the shelves in the room then focused on a door in the corner. "Ah," he said. He crossed the room in a flutter of linen and opened the door, spilling white light into the room. Matteo leaned and squinted to see what was inside. Green plants of so many shapes and sizes. A broad leafed one with gold blossoms. A sparse, spindly one with red berries. The Doctor entered the closet and knelt beside a bushy one barely larger than Matteo's orange. He plucked a few coin-sized leaves from it, exited, and closed the door. It took a moment for Matteo's eyes to readjust to candlelight. The Doctor picked up a wooden mortar and pestle and started grinding the leaves.

"Well?" Utu said.

"Wasn't doing anything...just went empty. That's all," said Matteo.

"Mmmm..." Utu nodded slowly. "Hold this under your nose and take ten deep breaths." Matteo slouched in the chair, his small hands cupping the bowl under his nose. A strong menthol wave chilled his nostrils, throat, and lungs. The doctor

turned away and hummed a gentle tune as he fetched a fresh canister. Through Matteo's growing buzz, the notes seemed to have their own healing quality.

His thoughts drifted. One breath. *Two. Three.* He was back on the rooftop next to the soccer game, gazing out at the city. *Four. Five.* Memories of countless buildings in the skyline appeared. Every curve and line. Every arrangement and set of windows. Every hazy silhouette rose in his mind and was lovingly examined. *Six. Seven. Eight.* He saw himself climbing over the wall, tunneling under it, blasting through it, or flying a ship—like the one he saw today—over it. The humming tapered off.

"Where are you right now?" Utu asked.

Matteo blinked. Shook his head slightly.

"Oh, I only ask because you certainly aren't here...or now for that matter."

"Huh? But I'm—I don't understand," said Matteo

"Yes, your *body* is here, but *you*? You were far away...a place you like to go?"

A snapshot of the city skyline flashed through Matteo's memory.

"Yeah...someday...it's just a stupid dream though."

"Dreams are a gift from God! Keep that one close to you, child, and it can be yours," said Utu, pruning a jagged leaf on a potted plant.

Matteo shrugged.

"Jo doesn't believe in God," said Matteo.

Utu stopped halfway through cutting a stem.

"I know, my boy...I know. Your brother, he...has his reasons," Utu continued cutting, "What do you believe?"

"I don't know," said Matteo, "I guess I've always had this...feeling. Like I'm supposed to be somewhere else. Like I *will* be somewhere else...doing something great. Is that God?"

Utu smiled.

"I don't know either. Do you *need* to call it something?" asked Utu. Matteo shrugged again.

"Then don't," Utu said, "But it is up to you to follow it or not."

"I want to..."

"That, my young friend, is Step One to achieving anything your heart desires," Utu offered the full canister to him. Matteo looked at it. Frowned as he dropped it in his hood and fed the plastic tube over his ears and under his nose.

"I need to get better," Matteo said, adjusting the nose-piece, "Stronger."

"Now there I think I can help you...if you're willing to work," said Utu, mock frowning.

Matteo perked up. Nodded. Utu continued.

"Come over once a week from now on. There's plenty that a kind young soul like yourself can do for me around the Temple. In exchange, I'll give you regular treatments *and* physical therapy. Together we will test this 'Faith' of yours."

Matteo's heart fluttered, making him wheeze a little. He squeezed the release. A fresh tank always felt good. The sweet mint coolness swirled in his chest.

"Thank you," Matteo smiled shyly.

"So! Back to the present moment...feeling better?" asked the Doctor.

"Yes, sir."

"Good man! Now, this fine orange you gave me...it's something *very* special. Maybe too much for my services this evening..." Utu turned and trotted to a shelf. He bent and slid out a lidless cardboard box. Reached inside.

"Your brother's friends get these from time to time. They're not the most... literate lot, so they pass them on to me. Haven't seen a new one in a while though." Utu pulled out a magazine and held it up. 'National... G-e-o...gra—' Matteo squinted to make out the faded letters, but a big worn spot on the cover cut off the end. It didn't matter much though. Here was something new.

"I've read each of them so many times now, I think it's time to pass them along. At least to those who might be interested." said Utu. Matteo fixated on the faded blues, greens, and yellows of the cover photo. He recognized the curved towers and cascading windows. But this... *This was taken from the air!* The words over the top of the picture tugged at his curiosity. 'Sedonia City: The Great More Machine'

"Well!" said the Doctor, "I'll take the vacant expression for a 'yes.'Why don't you go on and take that?"

Matteo's stomach flipped. He reached forward and took a delicate grasp on the magazine's edges. Peering into the photo, he fed these new angles and foreign shapes into memory. They slid into the gaps in his mental models, widening the big picture. The thought of looking inside the book overwhelmed him. He tore his gaze away and looked up at the Doctor.

"You're welcome. Now be careful with that on your way home. The binding isn't what it used to be."

"I will, I promise!" Matteo blurted out. Shyness returned to him. He brushed a hand against the beads on his way out the door.

Utu chuckled with a full heart, watching the boy disappear into the street with the prize. Yet as the room settled, sounds of the early evening drifted in through the swaying beads. Sirens. Drug-induced babbling. Shouting. The muffled tap of distant gunshots. Utu's gentle smile dragged down into a grimace he allowed few to see.

"Be careful, child..." Utu looked up at the ceiling. Beyond it. "Take care of that one."

# 3

# Weight

GOVERNOR ENOTA SATO sat oblivious to the fourth drink he'd poured that evening. Though the kinetic dampeners prevented any sensation of turbulence in the dark limo cabin, melting ice clinked in his glass of bourbon. The vinyl seat shook as his leg bounced. Multi-colored images, news feeds, and mail windows hovered before him, blurred together by the alcohol's effect on his neurotech. The resulting lag made everything linger when he pinched his eyes shut. He rubbed them. Opened them again. Set to mute, an economic reporter raved and thrashed above a cascade of scrolling stock-tickers. 'Full of sound and fury...'

Sato pinched the bridge of his thick, straight nose. *Ring goddamn it!* His finger itched, ready to dart out and tap the simulated "Accept" button that would appear in his Neural. For now, he stared at the barrage of numbers. One set in particular made him compulsively wet his lips. 'Prescott Resource Group: -10.7, C230/share'

Text reading 'Incoming Call: PRG' appeared before him, shattering the monotony. Sato jerked in his seat. He tried to still the pounding in his chest and clear his throat. After two more obligatory rings he tapped 'Encrypt,' then 'Accept,' feeling the false vibration in his fingertips. A conference room materialized. The 3D effect offered by his Neural made him feel as though he sat amongst them. Surrounded. Seven people in spartan designer suits sat around a long mahogany table. Three women and four men. Behind them, the Milky Way drifted through an elegant bay window.

"Good evening everyone, I have two minutes before session, so if we could keep this brief—" Sato said.

"Cut the crap, Enota," the throaty vibrato of PRG matron Janice Prescott came in vivid through his inner ear, "We need to know that this...incident with the

DOJ is contained." The false youth of her century-old face sent a chill through him. He feigned a casual eye-roll to avoid her piercing stare.

"Of course. Contained *and* isolated. All evidence has disappeared into the Slums and Kabbard's hero cops are catching a few villainous faces for the eleven-o-clock news. Further inquiries into Slum dweller due process might seem a touch...vulgar, given the crimes of those imprisoned. Katheryn Roland's successor is well prepared to be less sympathetic to murderers." Sato internally loosened. The pitch. The tone. All exuded casual control, reassured by the focus augments in his head. *Let them just see how useful I can be.* 

"Our concern is not with the plan or the execution. It's with you," Prescott's response was a slap. "All you say may be true, but the method... Anyone skeptical may begin to see a pattern of 'sudden and tragic' crashes in the slums. We need to know you're solid. Four bourbons in one Limo ride make us nervous."

Blood filled Sato's cheeks as he felt the perspiring glass squeak in his hand.

"I'm *fine. Let* them look for patterns. Any crusading investigator will end up chasing the history of every civilian death in the Slums. There are too many dots to connect."

"Kathy Roland connected more than a few...right under your nose, too. What happens when someone digs up Alan Rindal?" Prescott's question hung in the air a moment. Sato swallowed hard. Only one way to conceal the rush of anxiety.

"How dare you even *mention...!*" Sato leaned toward the screen and extended a sharp finger. "Rindal is ancient history. Finished. Buried. Forgotten. You leave him in the past, and that is where he'll stay." He curled the finger back into his fist and reclined. Glared at Prescott's glowing image in front of him.

"This speaks to my point. Making this personal is a mistake. We need you to detect and respond to threats and do so *separate* from emotional bias. There is *too much* at stake to miss a step now. If you can no longer differentiate between assumption and fact—"

"I told you, I'm fine. As of now, all *facts* indicate that the DA died a martyr's death at the hands of those she sought to defend. And with her public investigation suspended, the news and the polls will bounce back to green. Now if you'll excuse me..." Sato moved to press "Disconnect."

"Work on your image, Governor," said Prescott, "And be *careful*.". Her stone expression underscored the final phrase. Meanings within meanings.

"Always," said Sato. His smile weighed a metric ton.

"Thank you for your time," said Prescott. Sato tapped 'Disconnect' and the usual message appeared in front of him. 'Call Ended. Memory Block 081274\_510p: Deleted.' A bitter reminder that he, Enota Sato: Governor of the People, had much to hide from. His Neural flashed back to the muted economic report. He swiped a hand across it, dismissing all feeds from view, then grabbed the watered-down glass of bourbon. Gulped a bitter mouthful.

He traced a clockwise circle on the armrest touchpad. The tinted windows turned clear, brightening the limo cabin with the emerald skyscrapers of the City's Center Ring. He squinted through the migraine as he peered outside. *Almost home*. He reached into his coat pocket, produced a small green capsule, and tossed it into his mouth. Spearmint erased his bourbon breath as he watched the two-hundred story high-rises pass by. The calm flow of traffic drifted in perfect choreography. It soothed him...until the thought of a crash intruded. *Jesus, Kathy... why couldn't you just take the money and keep quiet?* 

The limo merged with a climbing slope of traffic and exited into a neighborhood of luxury penthouses. Open-air swimming pools, roof deck patios, and lyrical floor-plans passed underneath. The limo dipped and touched down on the corner pad of a crescent shaped complex. Part of him relaxed, but luxury in this part of town brought with it the sensation of being utterly trapped. It took a moment to stir himself from the leather upholstery when his driver opened the hatch.

"We've arrived, sir," the driver gently reminded him. Sato's posture straightened. Chin raised, he lifted himself out of the hatch, triggering a head-rush. He winced as the ice-pick sharp pain bored into his temples. The driver moved to help. Sato waved him off, then descended the remaining limo steps, put his feet on solid ground, and adjusted his suit.

Walking was harder than he'd guessed. He reigned in his staggering as best he could along the paver-stone walkway. His rooftop villa didn't appear to get any closer. The low arcades of curved window-walls swayed ahead of him, fuzzy against the shining backdrop of the City. The driver trotted ahead and waved a bare forearm over the security plate, triggering a beep. Sato caught up slowly. Nodded a terse 'thank you' and stepped inside the foyer.

His villa was dark and still inside. The main hall windows had all been set to maximum tint and no interior lights were on. Sato paused and swayed.

"Jada?" he called out, straining to hear against the ringing in his ears. Nothing. He cleared his throat.

"Windows thirty percent." he said. The black glass panes cleared, spilling golden light into the main hall. Lacquered Spanish tables, art deco bronzes, and marble tile shone in the glare. Sato squinted.

"Make that sixty-five percent." The hall softened to a rich, honeyed orange and he rubbed his eyes. Crossed the entry hall and turned into the kitchen. Black marble counter-space lined the walls, inset everywhere with stainless steel appliances. The place was spotless. Scrubbed in a way that told Sato she'd been stress-cleaning again. He poured himself a tall glass of water, drank it down, then turned to the right. Stumbled through the dining room. High arched ceilings of glass and ribbed rosewood craned above a long black table.

"Jada?" He listened. A muffled voice carried down the hall from an adjacent room. Sato followed the sound until he made out the words.

"On-scene investigators have said that with so much of the craft having been stripped, the exact cause of the crash could not be determined. However, many owners of the '72 model have issued complaints in past months referring to errors in the navigation system and aerial attitude control. The FAA has issued a statement that formal inquiries will also be made into the impact foam delivery system of the Pulsar HVX..."

A ninety inch screen reflected its grim images off the vaulted glass ceiling. Sato's stomach turned. A GloboMetro Special Report showed HD video of Kathy Roland's family transport, gutted and stripped on a rooftop in the Slums. A series of sharp sniffles and sobs came from the leather sectional couch. He swallowed.

"Jada? What's going on? What happened?" Sato said. Jada pushed upright from her nest of blankets on the couch. The folds of her satin bathrobe wrapped her round, protruding belly. She wiped tears and bleeding mascara from her cheeks.

"Enota! You scared m—it's Kathy... Kathy Roland, her car crashed in the Slums. She's missing...they," Jada's throat tightened, "they say that she and her family have been taken...probably *killed*. She was coming to the shower next week, I..." Her soft features twisted in anguish as she cradled her round belly. Trembled with each heavy sob.

Sato sat next to her, pulled her close, and placed a hand on her stomach. She cried hard into his chest. His mouth opened to say something but the words evaporated when he felt a tiny kick against his hand. Jada's sobbing died down, and she sniffed hard.

"H-have you been drinking?"

"One in the car on the way here, that's all. Rough day."

# 4

#### **Promises**

DUSK CREPT ACROSS the overcast sky toward the horizon. Miles of evening lights flickered on, feeding the dull orange glow of the clouds and the ruddy twilight of the Slums beneath. But the south-western Rasalla district waited quietly in the dark. With the EXOs on the war path and the risk of stray bullets, the locals shut off their lamps and locked themselves indoors.

Jogun felt exposed no matter which corner he ducked into. Word was the EXOs could see in the dark...maybe even through walls. He crouched at the edge of an alley underneath a fire escape. Pouring sweat and out of breath, he struggled to hold still and listen. No engines. No thump-whine-thump-whine of Augmentor boots...at least none that he could tell. He eased a hand into his satchel and searched through the contents. Touched the cool sweat of his water bottle. A few things shifted and clinked in the pack. He winced.

Jogun gulped a mouthful of cloudy water, replaced the cap, and swallowed the urge to clear his throat. He put the bottle back in his pack then pulled the draw-string shut. Settled a moment. His exhausted muscles throbbed in the stillness. I made it quick for her...it was mercy. Mercy. He shook his head, cleared the woman's bloody face from his mind, and leaned out of the alley's edge. Scanned the red gloom of the street. Beyond a few meters of open ground, a narrow stairway carved a path upward through a multi-tiered neighborhood of scrap metal shacks and lean-tos. They'd run him all the way to the Northwest edge of Rasalla, almost to South Bogi. Jogun stayed still for a few more heartbeats. All quiet...

He sucked a breath, ducked low, and sprinted toward the stairs. No more than four strides passed when he heard it over his own footfalls. The rhythmic, violent thumping of an approaching EXO. Panic begged his body to push harder. *Shit!* 

He leaped for the stairwell and crashed hard against the mud-brick steps. Pain shot up his right side but fear kept it dull. He pressed his back against a shack wall.

Thump-whine-thump-whine-THUMP. The EXO crouched on the rooftop two buildings down from where Jogun had hidden in the alley. A black silhouette against the dim copper sky. The EXO touched something on his hip then the whine of Augmentor servos died to silence. The ambient roar of the City filled the neighborhood.

Jogun paralyzed himself against the wall. He was out of the cop's line of sight, but that didn't mean much. No way of knowing if they could hear the faintest sound, trace the smallest sign...or even smell fear. Jogun slid a hand behind his back and wrapped his fingers around the pistol grip. He eased the weapon out from his waistband.

Two electronic beeps from the rooftop shattered the moment. Jogun froze.

"No sir, it's all lights-out over here. Sector 7's on lock down—." The EXO's voice, though hushed, echoed against the thin metal walls of the block, bouncing down to Jogun.

"Yes sir, on my way." The EXO's Augmentor gear whirred to life. He straightened, stretched, then loped off East. Jogun slackened. Hearing the thumping foot-falls fade away, he holstered the pistol. Pain flushed through the shoulder that had broken his fall on the steps. He threw the satchel over the less-sore shoulder and limped toward home.

Six, eight, twelve, f-fourteen. Matteo climbed the rickety metal stairs to their apartment two at a time as he'd seen Jogun do. His scrawny thighs burned and trembled by the time he reached twenty-four, and there were forty-two to go. He grumbled and changed to slow single steps. The stairs coiled around the stack of freight container apartments where Jogun had raised him. The ragged, torch-cut window holes were creepier tonight. None of the usual candles, glow lanterns, or day-charged solars. Dark shapes moved around inside, speaking in hushed voices. Lockdown here too? Robos must be really pissed...

Dozens of tenants lived in this Stack. He passed a few sitting out on their balcony and a quick glance told him they were stoned. Sway addicts. Red powder caked their noses as they sat and stared up at nothing with giant pupils. Cigarettes smoldered at the filter in their stained hands. Further up, a man and a woman spilled out of a doorway in front of him. The man staggered back on a familiar prosthetic leg. They screamed at one another, punching, kicking, and clawing. Raia's dad, shirtless and missing teeth, slapped the straw-haired woman. Matteo waited, keeping his eyes on his feet.

"Hey, shut the fuck up, up there! The Robos are sweepin,' goddammit!" a hushed, rasping voice called up at them from nowhere. Raia emerged from the house, tugged her mother and father back inside, and grabbed the door. She

paused when her glance met Matteo's. A purple bruise surrounded one of her perfect blue eyes.

"Are you okay?" Matteo asked, barely loud enough to hear. She crinkled her nose in a show of disgust.

"Freak!" She yanked the door shut. Tingling upset washed over him as his mind wrestled with the word. Maybe she said it to push him away and protect him from the other kids? Maybe to protect herself from Oki? Or maybe IAM a freak... Matteo hung his head, hid his tears, and stomped up the stairs.

He finally arrived at the top apartment, entered, then shut the plastic door behind him. His legs wobbled as staggered to the floor mattress and flopped down. Wincing, he rubbed his thighs just above the knees. I'll get stronger. I'll do it or die trying. A fantasy of running with Jogun materialized. Jo ran with his satchel and pistol as he'd done earlier that day, and Matteo carried a fearsome assault rifle with flames painted up the mag, over the bolt, and curling at the butt-stock. The muscles of his body rippled and pulsed as his powerful legs launched him over alleys and up massive flights of stairs...taking steps three, four, or five at a time. Jo fell behind and called ahead, begging Matteo to slow down. But Matteo went faster. Faster. Faster. He ran until he reached the Border. Looking up, he flashed a brilliant white smile. No plastic tube in his nose. With the deepest, clearest in-breath he'd ever taken, he crouched and then exploded upward in a soaring arch over the Border. Jo became a spec far below him. He turned away in mid-air to look at the City. Only he was high above it, looking down.—

The book! Matteo wiped his cheeks, reached under his hoodie, and pulled out the magazine. His eyes strained to look at his prize. Too dark in here... He reached for the battery lamp then stopped. Right. EXOs. Matteo tucked the magazine under his arm, pushed himself up on shaking legs, and almost buckled again. Grunting and fighting to stay up, he crossed to the balcony door. Heaved it open, spilling the fake dawn of a billion City lights across the hard floor. Matteo sighed. He stepped out onto the balcony and willed his aching limbs up the ladder to the roof.

The attempt to sit became an awkward fall onto his hip. He swallowed the pain and pulled his legs to the cross-legged position. Bent over the magazine in his lap. The colors were ruddy and brown in this light, but the shapes on the cover were clear. Drawing in as deep a breath as he could from his airtank, he opened to the first page.

Jogun opened the plastic door of the apartment and limped inside. He lowered the satchel to the floor, then paused in the pitch black. He listened for Matteo while his eyes adjusted, but heard nothing in the close hot air of the apartment. A twinge of worry came over him. He shuffled toward the mattress and crouched beside it. Empty. Where the hell is he? The balcony door creaked slightly open and a sliver of dim orange light entered. He hated that Matteo loved that balcony so much.

"Teo?" A moment passed, then two light knocks clanged through the metal ceiling. Jogun puffed a sigh and walked to the balcony door. He climbed up to find Matteo pouring over pages of a magazine. The boy didn't seem to notice him.

"What? No 'Hey big brother, welcome home! Glad ya didn't get shot'?" said Jogun, walking over and sitting down beside Matteo. His little brother blinked and shook his head as though waking from a Sway trance.

"Huh?"

"Nevermind. Get what you needed from the Doc?" asked Jogun. Matteo nodded and demonstrated with a smooth, deep breath. "Good good. He gave you *that* too I guess... Can I take a look?"

Grudgingly, Matteo held the magazine up. Above chunks of text that Jogun couldn't read, a picture of a giant crane atop a skyscraper spread across two pages.

"Oh...I see." said Jogun. Matteo pulled the magazine back and turned to the next page. Jogun chuckled. "Dammit, Utu...I need to have a talk with him." Jogun stretched and laid back on the tarnished metal roof. Hands behind his head, he stared up at the twinkling flow of traffic. Matteo sighed sharply.

"About what?"

"About fillin' your head with all...this," Jogun waved a hand at the magazine. Matteo sat motionless, staring at the book. Jogun sat up. Leaned forward to grab eye contact.

"And I know you don't like to hear about it, but maybe one day it'll sink in. Out here, you gotta keep focused on what's in front of you. You starve, catch a bullet, or get locked up if you don't."

"Like Dad did, yeah I know," Matteo snapped.

"Y-yeah... Like him." Both of them went quiet. Jogun dug around in a cargo pocket for the hand-rolled cigarettes there. Hearing Matteo's nasally breath, he released the pack and took his hand back out. Flexed his fingers. Drug addled ravings rose from a few floors below. Matteo fidgeted with the corner of the magazine's frayed binding.

"I wish I could remember something about him. Anything," Matteo said.

"Wish I could forget," Jogun stood up. That dark apartment flashed again through his mind. Instinct turned him to look down at the boy. He saw the magazine clutched in the tiny hands, pulling his little brother away. In one quick motion, Jogun crouched and snatched it up. Matteo lunged after it but grasped only air.

"Man, *look at that wall!*" Jogun thrust a pointing finger at the giant concrete barrier in the distance. It loomed high above the shanty towns that clung to its base. Tiny red lights set at wide intervals pulsed along the top edge, and pillbox watch towers punctuated each broad slab of concrete. Everyone in the Slums knew of the big guns stationed in the towers.

"What does that say to you?!" asked Jogun. Matteo blinked back tears and turned away.

"It says 'Don't bother! We don't want you here!" said Jogun. Seeing tears run down Matteo's cheeks, he buckled. Smoothed his voice.

"Dad wouldn't get with that. Always talkin' about buyin' and killin' his way in. How Mama and me cost too much already and she couldn't have no more... It got him killed, 'Teo, and he took Mama with him. Almost took *us*." Jogun sat again. Leaned toward his little brother.

"This right here is your home. These are your people," Jogun waved a hand over Rasalla, "Smart as you are, you can find a way to help us all out right here... make things better *here...* understand?"

"Y-yeah..." Matteo sniffled.

"And don't ever let me catch you with a gun in your hand again, aight? Bad enough one of us got blood on his soul, ain't no need for you to have it too," Jogun said. Matteo sucked in a sob and nodded.

"Promise me."

"I promise."

"Cool," Jogun said, "Love you, big man..." He wrapped an arm around his little brother and pulled him in close. Matteo hugged him back. Jogun both heard and felt Matteo's stomach growl.

"Boy, you forget to eat *again?* How you expect to get stronger if you don't—" Jogun froze. His eyes rolled down to his left arm. A shiny, jagged barb stuck out below 'T99' on his shoulder. Dead cold spread out from it. His mind screamed as he watched himself slump and topple, sprawling him flat on his back. The sounds of thumping footsteps and whining servos approached from all sides. Matteo threw himself over Jogun's limp body.

"Don't move, kid!" One of four EXOs shouted. They surrounded them, glaring through lifeless black visors.

"Just stick a spur in him!" said another EXO. Behind his back, Jogun felt Matteo's hand close around the pistol grip.

"Stand the fuck down, Shima! Stun this one and his heart could stop. What do you think happens when all of Rasalla learns we killed a sick kid? Just pull him off."

The one they called Shima nodded, then approached the brothers. Matteo started pulling the pistol out from Jogun's waistband.

"D-don't," Jogun rasped through clenched teeth, "No...b-blood..." Jogun's wild eyes met his brother's. Matteo released the pistol as an Augged hand clamped on his shoulder. His bony arms tried to cling, but were easily ripped away. They tossed him to the side.

Jogun tensed as the four officers converged on him. His body was deaf to every plea for movement. They flipped him over like a carcass at the market and cuffed his wrists. The ranking officer stooped low next to him and raised the visor. *Kabbard...* The flat scowl and gray eyes few got away to talk about. The straight, sharp scar from chin to cheek left no doubt.

"You know my face, you piece of shit?" asked Kabbard. Jogun could only stare. "Good." Kabbard turned to his officers.

"So our boy here must know what we *do* to lady-killing scumbags when we catch 'em," said one of the others. An older, deeper voice. Jogun's face contorted as he tried to spit a curse. It came out in a weak hiss. Kabbard shrugged and stood up.

"You heard the man." Kabbard nodded. Shima stepped forward and landed a kick into Jogun's ribs. Two others followed suit, driving carbon-fiber toes into the kidneys and shoulders. Sharp cracks punctuated Jogun's grunts. Through the pain, he saw Matteo crumple in the corner of the roof, hands pressed over his ears with eyes clenched shut.

"Pick him up." Kabbard ordered. The EXOs lifted Jogun by his cuffed wrists. Kabbard touched under Jo's chin. Raised the bloody head.

"Her name was Kathy. She was a District Attorney. A wife and a mother. I'd kill you right here if I weren't already sending you to Hell." Kabbard's deadeyes glared into him. The Sergeant's finger servos buzzed as they curled into an armored fist. It cracked into Jogun's jaw with a right cross. The world shocked to white, then went black a moment.

Straightening, Kabbard pressed two fingers against his throat.

"Omega-Two ready for pick-up."

The throbbing of hover engines emerged from the background noise of the Slums and grew to a pounding roar as the drop-ship flew in. Jogun watched in horror. The black cockpit glass and pulsing red beacons at the nose formed a gaunt, lifeless face. A demon without mercy. A yawning mouth opened toward the rear of the thirty-foot craft. Dull fluorescent lighting blinked on inside, revealing rows of unconscious, bloody prisoners sat harnessed and bolted into metal flight seats. Two of the EXOs grabbed Jogun under the arms and dragged him toward the hatch. With agonizing effort, Jogun turned his heavy, shaking head. Looked at Matteo through eyes nearly swollen shut.

"M-matteo," his mouth sputtered blood, "Y-you got this..." Something like a smile creased his broken mouth as the EXOs threw him inside. They found an empty seat, hefted Jogun's limp body, and dropped him in. A bulky metal harness locked down on him. Kabbard and the officers stepped inside.

"We're good here, button it up," Kabbard said. The hatch door clamped shut, swallowing all of them. As the thrum of the engines picked up, the drop-ship listed heavily to the right, pulled up, then blasted off into the night sky.

Matteo whimpered. Though unhurt, he struggled to open his eyes. The rooftop was dark and quiet again, and wet black stains glistened on the metal. The magazine sprawled open near Matteo's feet. Its pages flapped in the breeze.

# 5

#### Greater Good

SERGEANT KABBARD FELT the landing gear of the IG-6 touch down at last, though tonight he couldn't let the relief of the dying engines fully take him. The worst part of the job waited outside the passenger hatch. He, Mason, and Shima unhooked their harnesses and stood up. Checked each prisoner's restraints. Kathy Roland's killer looked up as Kabbard tugged on the shackles. The swollen eye-pits stared, weeping bloody tears.

"Show time," Kabbard said as he stepped to the door. Keyed his throat mic. "Rear compartment secure, open her up," he said. The hatch hissed open, revealing a legion of reporters, camera men, and bright stinging lights. Their questions overlapped one another in a squabbling din that echoed through the main hangar of EXO Headquarters. Shima, the new kid, grinned and waved. Kabbard slapped the hand down. He felt bile rise in his throat as he prepped the broken, bloody scumbags for transfer. Cuffed at the wrists and ankles, each limp body was un-hooked and placed on a procession of hover gurneys. Kabbard sure as hell didn't feel like a movie star. Covered in dried blood and Rasalla dirt, he stepped out.

"Sergeant! Sergeant!" one of the voices called out from the paparazzi, "Which one killed the District Attorney?"

Kabbard looked at the bodies. Pointed to the boy who had shown up in the last mem-data entry on Mrs. Roland's RFID chip. A skinny, malnourished kid of eighteen covered in bruises, blood, and clear bone breaks. Kabbard knew what was coming next. The GloboMetro press corps wanted a monster. A raging, evil face to justify the fear of the people beyond the Border. This little shit-bird didn't qualify.

"Sergeant, how do you account for the prisoner's condition?"

"Resisting arrest," Kabbard said as he tried to push past the throng. The voices shouted more questions until one cut above the rest.

"Sir, Kathy Roland was a staunch defender of due process and fair treatment of the Dwellers! What do you think she would say about this?"

Kabbard stopped in his tracks. Turned to face the reporter. A jumped up twenty-something metroboy with short, carefully shaped hair and a pound of makeup. An Inner Ring yuppie who'd never known real horror.

"She can't say anything now. This *Dweller* shot her in the face for the contents of her vehicle. Happened plain as day in the mem-feed, so we were able to get the conviction on the way here, now if you'll excuse us..." Kabbard, Shima, and Mason towed the line of prisoners to the acquisitions team while the other officers corralled the press.

"Fuckin' vultures," Mason muttered.

"Just another part of the machine," Kabbard said. He was tired in his bones. The fighting would never stop, outlasting his last breath by centuries. And the City would always demand more. The procession stopped at the acquisitions team and the transfer shuttle. As the bodies started tracking into the cargo hold, most of their eyes were wide open. Scanning the high ceilings of the EXO HQ bay in animal terror. Tears streamed through the dried blood on the murderer's cheeks.

"I could use a drink or twelve," said Mason, "Dive Bar? Kid, you in?"

"Hell yeah!" Shima said, pushing the gurneys along.

"Sergeant!" an unfamiliar voice spoke up, stopping Kabbard before he could decline Mason's invitation. A blonde haired, bug eyed man in his late twenties stood behind the officers. His suit was clean, pressed, and perfect...the kind that screamed 'Government.'

"My name is Andreas," said the young man, "Sedonia Chief of Security. Mister Sato would like to speak with you."

"Look, son, it's been a day and I really don't feel like a long ride up to the Tower, so—"

"Follow me, please," said Andreas.

Kabbard recognized an order when he heard one. He looked at Mason. The old vet snorted a laugh, and nodded toward the Suit.

"Go ahead, we'll finish up," said Mason.

Andreas led the way down the platform and across a skywalk to the main complex. The massive structure of equipment bays, barracks, and office space rose from the sixtieth floor to the hundred-and-twentieth. The angled prow of the building stood sentry over the Outer Ring, the Border, and the twinkling Slums beyond.

From the main lobby, they took the elevator up to the executive level. Commander Gorman's office. *Sato's here? In person?* Kabbard thought to ask, but knew Andreas wouldn't answer. Suits were like that...solid gold rods shoved so far up their ass that they'd never bend over for the 'lower folk.' Andreas swiped his chip

arm over a security plate and the elevator doors opened onto a long windowed hall. They turned right through the double doors to the main conference room. Voices inside.

"—for us, we'll of course be in your debt," Governor Enota Sato turned in his chair, "Sergeant Kabbard! Thank you for coming and apologies for the interruption...I'm sure you're ready to clock out for the night. Please, have a seat...care for a drink? This eighteen-year-old Choril Scotch isn't going to drink itself." Sato pulled a fluted crystal bottle from the center of the table and started to pour into a short glass. Commander Gorman sat opposite to Sato with a glass of his own.

"No thank you, sir, I'm still on duty. Water would be fine," said Kabbard. Though polite as he could manage, it still sounded like a rebuke. Not giving much of a damn, he walked to one of the high-backed chairs and took a seat. The bouncy cushions felt strange against his bulky Augmentors.

"Good man. The Commander and I were just discussing what a good job you did this evening. You handled yourself *very* well with the press...not an easy task, I know," Sato said, smiling.

Kabbard frowned. Darkened.

"I told the truth. Katheryn Roland deserved justice," said Kabbard.

"Yes...yes, of course," Sato said, "Which leads me straight to the point. The Commander and I agree that your service to this City has been more than exemplary, but your abilities *far* outstrip your station. John Kabbard, I would be honored to have you for my new Chief of Security." The words seemed to take the wind out of the room. Kabbard instinctively glanced at Andreas. The young Suit seethed in the corner, holding an eerie silence. Kabbard tensed, sensing the kind of rage that could slip so easily to violence. *This kid is a killer*...

"Andreas here has done a great job for us, but it's time for some new blood in this administration," said Sato, "He will assist you in the transition."

Andreas excused himself from the room with a rapid click-click of his patent leather shoes. In the silence that followed, Kabbard realized that the Commander and the Governor were waiting.

"I appreciate the offer, sir, but...my place is here with the EXOs," Kabbard said. An assistant entered the room, quietly placed a tall glass of clear water on the table in front of him, and left.

"What, do you think, is the purpose of the EXOs?" Sato asked. The question was almost insulting until Kabbard started thinking of an answer.

"To secure the Border...to protect law, order, and democracy for those on the other side..." Kabbard stopped, interrupted by Sato shaking his head.

"I asked what *you* think," said Sato, "Men like you aren't impressed by the official version, and I know it."

That knocked Kabbard back a step. There might be more to this Suit than the squeaky-clean public persona. Kabbard's true opinion stuck in the back of

his throat. He knocked back the glass of water, swallowed, then took a breath. Forced the words out.

"Public opinion and control. Government uses the idea of an Enemy to keep civilians afraid. Scared people are easier to unify. Easier to distract. It's our job to keep the fear fresh and the wheels turning," Kabbard said. Twenty years of accumulated cynicism in a handful of words. Commander Gorman shifted his stocky frame uncomfortably in his seat, and looked at Sato. The Governor blinked. Shook his head as though suddenly disoriented.

"Well...there it is. A surprising view for a civil servant to say the least. Thank you, Sergeant...though the next question is obvious. If that's the case, why stay?" asked Sato.

"Ours is not to reason why," Kabbard said.

"...but to do or die. Tragic and beautiful," Sato said, "But I wonder. Would you be willing to hear a *better* reason?"

Kabbard furrowed his brow, skeptical but suddenly alert.

"The EXOs remind our neighbors beyond the Border of our power and authority, so that they don't even *think* of crossing the wall. You and your men, in effect, keep the desolation of the Slums from infecting the best of Humanity, but that by itself is unsustainable. So what's the solution?" Sato waited for an answer. Kabbard had none to offer. The governor continued.

"We protect our Border so that we can preserve our strength. If we preserve our strength, we can not only grow, but *flourish* again and hasten the day when City and Slum are one and the same. When the Border is dismantled and prosperity returns to all."

Kabbard looked down, staring at his glass of water. *A solution? Peace? Repatriation?* His mind rejected it instantly. A liberal pipe dream, and possibly a dangerous one. Yet his palms slicked with sweat on the cool glass. Sato leaned forward. Continued.

"John, this is impossible without a man like you. I need someone who understands the Slums. Someone who's walked in the rows of Falari Market. Someone who knows the people and someone who the people know...on both sides," Sato leaned back, "It's a lot to take in, I know...especially after the day you've had. Go home and think it over." Sato stood up and extended his open hand. Kabbard did the same and accepted the handshake. He nodded to Gorman, turned, and left the conference room on the way to the lockers. The commute back to his Inner Ring apartment went by in a flash. A blurry, distracted Superway train ride through the dingy high-rises of the lower middle class. *Peace is impossible. The Slums might as well be a separate country. A separate hostile country. They'd never trust us again.* 

"Watch your step. Watch your step," said the artificial woman's voice through the Superway speaker. Kabbard looked up, disoriented. Stood and shuffled out with the other red-eye commuters into Seraphim Station. The cavernous commercial hub throbbed with neon advertisements that clawed at his attention. All around,

people were absorbed in their Neurals, browsing restaurant menus, ordering clothes, and podcommenting on aggregator blogs. Apps as extensions of their minds and bodies. A few played aug-games, dodging simulated green fireballs they threw at one another. Kabbard's law enforcement Neural allowed him to see through all the privacy-mode blocks. He ground his teeth as he disabled it. No one was watching the news. Or giving a damn about the third world country a shuttle-ride away. They flooded in and out of the segmented Superway cars like blood cells flowing through a vein, gathering at the Commons' hundreds of shops and kiosks. *Consume, rinse, repeat. If they only knew.* 

IAfter a half-hour trip over skywalks, up commuter lifts, and into the Alessi Building, Sergeant Kabbard arrived at his single studio box in the wall. Neighbors passed without a glance as he buzzed himself in, shut the door, and plopped down in his beat-up recliner.

He looked around. Cardboard moving boxes stacked in each corner. How long had they been there? Seemed like only last week when he found Shannon's note saying that she couldn't 'take anymore' and was leaving with the kids. Their family pictures sat off in the corner, still encased in thick, green bubble wrap. He'd moved out of their dream apartment in Whitlatch and into this squat. *Must have been, what, four years ago? five?* 

The long nights. The endless browsing through her Neu feed, waiting for a message, or worse, a news update. The painful, silent dinners and days off. The nightmares. The outbursts. She'd had enough. He both hated her and understood.

Kabbard got up and stepped outside to the shallow balcony. The City wound down to its midnight humming glow. The soft roar of civilization filled him as his civilian-clothed body tingled and twitched from Augmentor withdrawal. *My City...* he thought. All the sacrifices he'd made for it. Had he really helped at all? No clear answer came.

He looked up. High above the scraper-tops, the hazy spire of Sedonia Tower stabbed into the sky. The red light at its peak blinked silently like a watchful eye. He chuckled to himself.

"Well...it'd be one hell of a paygrade bump."