



Magnacala

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1. Trapped Rika

Deep underground in the city of Magnacala, a small girl was working her way through an abandoned maintenance shaft. She was crawling quickly, a few long cuts on her legs and arms from brushing against exposed metal. She kept her head close and squeezed through claustrophobia inducing tunnels, walls of wires she had to dig through with her hands, and into dead ends that only had arrows painting on them that led back down into the caverns below.

The air was hot, and there were other things with her down in the tunnels. Blind rats, fat white hive-minded creatures squeaked and clicked their teeth at her, but she forced down the desire to scream. One of the rats clawed at her hair as she was ascending a service ladder and she slammed it against the wall, where it thunked once, then chittered madly as it fell into the dully-lit height below her. This went on for an hour, scrabbling in the dark, until she finally came to a hatch that had rusted from the outside.

She turned it once and pressed her entire weight onto the spring-loaded handle. Nothing. She cursed and spat and kicked away the rats.

When she finally burst free, slamming once, twice, three times into the stuck hatch, she did not have time to exult in her sudden freedom. The freshness of the air was enough, dirty and tasting mildly of something burnt. The sudden light sent the blind rats fleeing and chittering back into the tunnels. She wiped the sweat from her brow and looked around. This was her first sight of the city. From her vantage point, it didn't seem all that special, and in fact she wondered why anyone would want to live here in the first place. It looked so dirty, and her ears were already picking up the sounds

of other people, sirens and engines, and mad yelling. Pack in hand, she ran into the city, dodging down empty corridors and alleys, racing with purpose.

As night fell, people, machines and businesses whirled to life. The security force of the city, plainclothes cops and militia, were on patrol and making their invisible transitions. No one liked working the night shift.

Certain clusters lit up first. South, near Gold Touchdown, the entertainment district came alive to transition seamlessly to night. Neon art, mingled with holographic projection to create a living landscape of mascots, food, dancing women, and ever present tumbling dice and cards. Casinos, bars, back alley dealers, purveyors of exotic and oftentimes illegal wares all came together in a greasy melting pot. It smelled of perfume and grease and food, inviting in its density and redolent with the exhaust of the countless vehicles that passed through on their way to other parts of the city.

Light spread to the shuttle ports, rings around the Broken Stair, the ruins of a once great space elevator, and then into shadier, dirtier places. As the light spread, so did the interwoven crowds, breaking into each other and then dispersing as they reached their destinations; gangs, loners, immigrants and pilgrims on another leg of a journey to some distant port. People passed by, bumped into one another. Cops, militiamen and the people who made their living undermining them intermingled.

In the street, proselytizers from the Machine Worlds received a wide berth as they made their way to the Broken Stair. They walked as a procession, momentarily disrupting the natural flow in the streets. They were regarded with a sense of atavistic fear, for both their history and their forms, each unique, each decidedly inhuman. Vestigial wings, many legs, long and

short heads, thin bodies that seem frail but caught the light and showed that they were metal, engineered as much for strength as an alien standard of beauty. There were hideous bug like heads, and impossibly perfect human faces, and just about everything in between the spectrum, dressed in everything from simple brown robes to colorful streamers that hung off shoulder and elbow spikes.

Two in particular stood out, a huge, hulking form and his smaller partner. They were the most human of the bunch, though they carried themselves with the authority that said they were the envoys of the Machine World. The smaller one carried faint burn scars that ran along one side of his body and all along the length of his arm, which he let hang bare up to the elbow, scars caused by near unimaginable heat that had rained down from the sky and had burned half the city down, but had still failed to kill him. Most, but not all, ignored this.

Watching them were the agents of the Mayoral Office, plain-clothed and hidden, hands on guns and stun batons, ready for use against the crowd. Old resentment runs deep, and they felt it the air, the mix of awesome respect and tremendous insult, the stain upon the history of the city the envoys represented.

But there was no need, the pilgrims passed by uneventfully and chaos returned to the street. Shuffling, pushing, vendors hocking their wares, pickpockets and other thieves being caught, silently pulled aside and arrested. Dwarf vultures, wide-eyed rats and other strange vermin congregate around dumpsters as though they were savannah watering holes.

She saw a few signs of construction, masked workers on rooftops

working on strange devices and protected by uniformed officers.

Underworked yet still weary engineers shuffled into bars and gambling parlors, dank and low ceilinged, smoky and loud. Contacts, underbelly scum, artists, scientists, wanderers from the stars, all sitting at round tables, discussing the news of the week and more veiled topics. Anarchists, Grammars, neo-luddites, reform minded socialists clustered around tables and tried every night to sway other patrons to their cause.

So when a girl walked by, dressed in a simple brown shawl that looked like it was fished out of a trash heap, no one batted an eye. No one even noticed she existed. She was nothing in a sea of people and things vying for attention, a shadow cast on the ground. The vultures and rats took note, with their cold intelligence. One larger bird plodded along next to her, sending out hacking squawks in her direction. It was starting to rain, a ward drizzle, and she took off running, a quick figure in clean, sterile clothes underneath the rags, healthy, sharp, and out of place.

She could not escape the city easily, she knew that much. She clutched at a leather-bound book in her hands. *Stay away from terminals or technology of any kind. Stay away from trains and cabs. Be wary of popular stores and secure districts*, it had told her, and she obeyed.

Magnacala was a monitored system, a guardian and an accountant forever checking and thrice checking names and identifications in an effort to know the location of its every citizen. For every technological wonder there was an equally antiquated system brought on by fear and revulsion of technology. The city still used hard currency; credit and digital banking were regarded with suspicion. The book described the WorldNet, the great

communication network of the city and beyond, but also of its uselessness. It was an information repository and little else for the common citizenry, mostly used to watch mayoral approved news and pornography.

Her stomach rumbled and she bent over to reach a hand into her makeshift, empty bag.

A cop passed by and she lowered her head in an affected gesture; she sensed it would be out of place to not do this. It was the built up routine that stuck out in the cloud of his thoughts like a sore thumb. She cringed on the inside. She'd met people like him before, been trained to identify them, the kinds of people puffed up on authority, however insignificant. This particular officer seemed to hold onto an illusion of himself as a king, or better yet, a member of a warrior caste, a fatuous, but common, power fantasy.

She bowed her head and the two passed without incident. Her stomach rumbled harder, and her limbs had a sudden feeling of weakness. Stupid, she said to herself, and kicked an empty can.

She needed things: A false identity, money, shelter, and immediate protection. The city was foreign to her, she was already starting to glean information from unprotected minds, though she felt drained with every attempt. This was the part of the city where the most disparate groups congregated. She could feel the hierarchy, the recurring thoughts in the people around her. She felt her training waver for a moment. There was too much, and she had to pause in the middle of the street for a moment to take it all in. All these people's minds were laid bare to her. The doctors and her brothers and sisters knew how to protect themselves, to keep each other out, but here, here she was free, and every person was an infinite world to explore

and prod and learn from. It was almost too much freedom. Eyes started to drift to her.

She passed a raucous group dressed in clothes too nice to mean they were from anywhere other than the Mayoral Quarter. She thought for a moment to approach them, as she was taught, to take what she needed and then disappear, but she could not bring herself to do so.

She reached down to pet the vulture following her, to test herself. It was a cruel, angry looking bird, bald-headed and molting, with long grey streaks in its. She couldn't tell if it was healthy, or simply what all vultures looked like, she'd only ever seen drawings of them in the wild. These were vermin.

Still, she could sense the tension easing, and the softness in its coos as she scratched its neck. It was oddly clean, which she was thankful for, and on second look it was a stronger looking bird, healthy. *Appear weak when you are strong*, one of the general lessons in her book read, a living example already in front of her.

Her legs felt weak and her stomach hurt. She remembered the last time she'd eaten, a few meager pieces of bread and some water, any more and she felt she wouldn't have been able to keep it down. There was no use getting angry over that. She looked around for sustenance, anything, hating herself for designating targets. There were the weak-willed and the stupid, rarely the kind and generous.

She settled on an old man sitting in an alleyway, a lifelong grifter by the look of him. He was dressed in oily rags tied together to form a kind of matching pant and shirt. He had the sallow look of the chronically malnourished, though she could read he had a small bundle of food on him.

The thought of protecting it, of keeping it for himself, dominated his mind. She felt pity for him, but knew there was no other choice, she needed to eat.

She sat by him, out of sight, and slowly approached. Human minds were more complex than vultures, so many more inconsistencies to parse, but he wasn't much better. His mind was unhealthy, full of holes and defenseless. He'd been hungry for so long, and it pained her to think of taking his food, but she had no choice.

He struggled for a moment, feeling the unfamiliar tendrils worm their way into his mind. He started crying for only a moment before his sobs ceased and he became catatonic, his motor functions under the girl's control, his higher mind safely partitioned.

She sensed his language. He spoke with an incomprehensible accent, a kind of babbling pidgin speak that sounded like the mongrel offspring of a hundred languages. Even peering into his mind, she could not fully understand every one of his inchoate and underdeveloped thoughts. She could feel his mind, pockmarked and ruined as it was, subjected to years of alcohol, amphetamines, and other drugs whose chemical names she could not bother remembering.

He was no danger to her, even were he not in his sorry, dilapidated state.

She rummaged for the bread, which she knew he had in his pack, and a small can of peaches he'd stolen from a grocery store. The longer she stayed in his mind, the more she felt pity for him. Memories were distant and scattered, broken up and forgotten, a promising youth, then an accident, followed up by tragedy after tragedy until he arrived here. She realized she

was taking the one thing he had left, his loaf of bread and can of peaches.

She loosened her grip on his mind. Small bits of control came back to him. She felt herself become stronger. It was still difficult to take full control; her body became an engine that ate everything. Every moment she spent inside was a question of energy. Were the calories in this can of peaches worth it?

"What's your name, girl?" he asked, amicably, perhaps some core part of his personality shining through.

"My name?" she said, the question sounding foreign, not because she did not know her name, but because this actually a person who'd never seen her before. This was not Dr.Rolo or Dr.Kent, or Holdover, or Jack or Daisy or even Roger. She thought to put him into a deep and calming sleep, to set his mind at ease and suppress his hunger for a time, but decided against it. This was just a man living out of a filthy alley, a man she'd likely never see again. Plus, he'd given her what looked like the last of his food, so she owed him a name, at least. "My name is Rika." She could feel the stifling element of the city, eyes and ears everywhere, watching, looking out from beneath hoods, and listening through thin walls.

More unintelligible babbling, but then:

"Well, Rika, what in all hells are you doing out here?" said the man, letting out a hacking cough. The dwarf vulture hissed at him. She tossed it the last bit of bread.

She thought for a moment, again considering a possible lie, but realized that the truth was as good as any. There was a flare near the Broken Stair, either the lights of a dirigible or part of the Machine People's rites of their

pilgrimage. It made her shudder to look at it, and she clutched at her book.

Read this, learn this , follow this, and you will be free, the very first line read.

Two men in coats walked by chatting, stopped mid-sentence, changed direction, and started sprinting towards the Broken Stair. Her vulture hissed at them as they passed.

"I'm getting the hell out of this city." she said.

The homeless man laughed. "Don't we all?"

Far on the other side of the city, north near the financial district, near the ridge where the city was first founded, one set of buildings remained dark. They were low and angular, interspersed with the jagged rises and corporate buildings that are the hallmarks of the ruling class in a city. Deep into the night, there was only the movement of patrol cars, troop carriers, communications platforms, and the small squadron of black harriers that forever floated above the city, though night was when they came out in force. They drifted lazily, completing uneventful round after uneventful round, until, far and underground, something stirred. Bystanders on the street, the opulent and the powerful, felt it beneath them. The vibrations of panicked feet, of locking mechanisms springing into place, hundreds of tons of steel slamming shut rippled up. The predators above, the harriers and dirigibles and troops, sprung to action, flying in erratic patterns, ready for orders.

The rest of the city turned to watch this, the change in the air more perceptible than the actual feeling underfoot. Hands went to earpieces, to commlinks and hands pointed at the sudden searchlights that raked the streets from above. They were ants whose hill has been swept aside by a

powerful bully.

Then, a call went out, an invisible thread passed between men and machines. Squadrons lined up, officers and plain-clothes fell back into routine, and it is as if nothing had ever disturbed the Mayoral Quarter's transition through the gloaming. The black harriers hovered at the ready, angled micro-thrusters keeping them still and waiting. Twin lights on their nose gave them the appearance of shadow beasts resting on the updrafts, picking out prey from the earth-walkers.

They float here for some time, until the sun fully sets and Magnacalan night rises to its brightest. They took off in the direction of the city, fanning out to each of its districts and corners. The low hanging rails of Rickman's Hill, the shielded, well kept parks of Mahasamapatman Running, the lights of Gold Touchdown. They were searching for prey, a young prisoner who escaped earlier in the night.

They scanned, one man piloting, another in the back aided by a computer, searching for her face. There were too many faces, too many false positives. She was already disappeared. They headed back home while the men and women in the street start their search, responding to the APB. Their response was laconic as they settled in. After the panic left and the chaos was suppressed, they simply sat back and waited. They needed only to wait, and soon enough, she would be found. It was inevitable.

Further away, underneath the city, where the large doors had slammed together and a hive of panicking scientists were standing about wringing their hands, two men played a game. The first man, very frail, weak, was writing

each move in a small blank book. A stack of books was piled up high next to him.

His opponent, a man in a heavy, dark suit, moved his pieces carefully, never taking his eyes off the frail man. The man in the suit sighed. "Damn, should have seen this coming."

"Hmm?" the frail man said.

"It seems that one of your siblings has decided to escape the home."

"Oh, I thought you were talking about the game. " said the frail man. "I was about to be very sad for a moment."

"Hah, you're a strange man, Roger." said the man in the suit.

"Why do you say you should have seen this coming?" asked Roger. "I could know, obviously, but you've told us how much you hate it when we do. I can feel it bubbling up in your consciousness."

The man in the suit raised an eyebrow and made another move.

"It's just human nature." he said. "Some people, the kinds of people you need to stamp out, just have it in them to rebel, to cause trouble, to mess up the whole system for everyone else. You can't control it."

"You can't control it." said Roger. "But that's not stopping from trying."

The man in the suit sat back to think, either about his next move or what Roger had said. He was a creepy, disconcerting man, very quiet, but equally capable of biting remarks and outstanding clarity.

A doctor in a stained white coat came over. He was a mousey, disheveled looking man, very quiet in both voice and demeanor. "Roger, it's time for your rest. You can finish your game with Mr. Bern."

"No need, Rollo, we were just finishing up." said Bern. "Roger was an

excellent opponent, as always. I don't know what you're feeding this boy, but keep it up." he chuckled and patted Rollo on the back.

"One day, Bern, one day I'll beat you." said Roger, tapping the pile of books on the side. "I've been reading up, thinking of strategies."

"But then how will I know you didn't cheat? You could always just use your special powers and just...win."

Roger's eyes narrowed. "I wouldn't cheat." he said, and Doctor Rollo led him away, leaving Bern alone in the white Lab Room.

But that's not stopping you from trying. Bern repeated the phrase to himself. "No, no it's not." said the man in the suit, and he left the room to go back up the surface.

2. Trapped Lawrence

"Let's begin." said a voice coming through speakers, and the square grey room in the Mayoral Office was replaced with a scene of clouds below and dark space above. Lawrence was suspended in air, and eventually the clouds parted to reveal the curvature of the planet below him. The sense of vertigo was inescapable. He felt insignificant and small, as a person can only feel when suddenly confronted with just how small and insignificant they were.

Below he could see the stretching arms of light of the city of Magnacala, and the sudden break of the abandoned portions of the city. From up top it seemed as a chunk of the city had been neatly sliced off and taken away somewhere. Lonely dots of lights flickered in and out of existence elsewhere on the continent. He thought of the lives they must lead, breaking their backs on Magnacalan soil, dealing with all the problems of living on what was, in some places, still a very alien world.

He shivered. He was plain clothed, and his jacket did little to keep the cold from reaching all the way to his bones. Magnacala was in the grips of a heat wave, and there was no need to dress warmly, only enough to keep the humid air from soaking through.

Still, this did not stop the room from being uncomfortably cold, and the choice of setting was also a deliberate attempt to intensify that feeling. Floating in space had synesthetic qualities to it, and Lawrence could already feel his body instinctually reacting to the strange new surroundings. His legs felt as though disconnected from his body, and the air had a clean, natural freshness to it that was distinctly foreign to him.

"Do you understand the rules of this exam?" the voice said again.

"Same as last time?"

"We will ask you a collection of words and phrases. Please do your best to define the words and recall where you saw them."

"Yep." said Lawrence. His stomach felt fluttery, but he closed his eyes and felt a little better.

"Excellent." a pause. "There are no wrong answers in this test. We only ask that you answer as truthfully as possible."

“Of course. You’ve been making me take this test every week for the past year, figured you guys would have a little faith in me to remember it.” he said. The humor must have been lost on whoever was listening because they dove right into the questions.

“Define fulvous.”

“What?”

“Fulvous” the voice repeated. Lawrence struggled to recall. It sounded so familiar, fulvous, fulvous... he felt a jolt of synesthesia.”

“It’s the color red. Or, it’s kind of like red, but not really.”

“Excellent, and where did you see this word.”

“I don’t remember.” he said, which was the truth. His mother had been an artist and his father a printer of decorative books, so he assumed he’d learned it from one of them, maybe a long forgotten dinner talk, something about how ink was getting expensive and how the people who actually bought the books never opened them, lest they damage the supple leather used to bind them. He had to wait an entire minute for them to ask him a second question.

“Define byzantine.” the voice said. Again, Lawrence had to focus to remember. There was something there, for sure, some ancient definition that he couldn’t quite remember.

“It was...a city?” he said, unsure of himself. All he saw when he thought of the word was a city, a walled city filled with people.

“Remember, Mr. Malki, there are no wrong answers.” said the voice. “If you think it was a city, then that is answer enough.”

“Gods, shut up, I know.” he was concentrating too hard, but the image

wasn't getting any clearer.

"That's quite alright, you don't need to finish, you're response so far is enough. And where did you see this word?"

"On a billboard crossing over from GT down into the burroughs." he said after a moment and with no small amount of frustration. Another pause. He wondered what possible data they could be getting from his answers. Some of them were nonsensical, pointless.

"Excellent. Now, define: loquacity."

"Talkative."

"Good, and where did you see this word?"

"In my girlfriend's English textbook."

On and on this went until they reached 200 words and then they let him go. Many words he knew, some he did not. They all blended together and the act of recall was a draining experience in and of itself. Going back to remember things that emerged from his memory like jagged little uprisings, a brief look out a train window, a the flash of a holographic billboard ad, a bit of graffiti being scrubbed away by a cleaner bot, was difficult at best, and not helped by the lack of information given to him.

Some he could not remember where he saw them or how he knew them, hard as he might try to remember. When he was done, the room slowly faded away until his was in the square room with grey walls again. A green light came on and he was politely asked to leave by the same robotic voice, and also if he could kindly direct the next person in line to enter.

"How did I do on the test?" he asked. No reply.

He shrugged and walked out of the room from the seamless door that

appeared in front of him. A line of other plainclothes were waiting, and he directed the next one in wordlessly. Sometimes he wished they could be more than just courteous with one another. Plainclothes were recommended to avoid fraternizing with one another, lest security somehow be compromised. They were meant to work as individuals or, rarely, in close-knit who spent most of their time in little bases scattered around the city.

The locker room was empty when he reached it and he changed into his work clothes; jeans, a layer of pliable ceramite, an inconspicuous shirt over it, and then an airy jacket over it all. He noticed a coded note on the floor of his locker. Plainclothes were an old institution, one that dated back to the founding, and they still clung to some of their old ways. The use of physical notes over digital messages was one. They were never incriminating, and gave their orders tersely and without affectation. This message simply read, "910, Executive Suite. Bern."

He groaned. He hated going up to the executive suites. It made him feel so low whenever he had to present himself. There was something easier and more respectable in the simplicity of his station, he thought. A plainclothes spoke plainly; the Mayor's camp spoke in euphemisms. While those in the offices declared crusades against crime and corruption, they were all too often the cause of the same affliction. Which then always made him think, was it better to be one of them, or to be one of their lackeys? It was not a question he liked to ask himself.

Riding the elevator up, he started to get butterflies in his stomach. Two other employees rode with him, a man and woman, both in sharp suits that looked like they cost about as much as he made in a year. He coughed once

and the woman brushed at her shoulder. He looked at her and they had a brief moment of eye contact. It wasn't in his nature to be antagonistic, but it made him chuckle on the inside to mess with the higher-ups, it kept the balance of power in his head.

They got off and he received notable looks that he wasn't getting off as well, as though they were surprised that he somehow had business on a floor above them. He rubbed his hands on his jacket and paced. When the doors opened again, he was near the building's crest, the great glass and steel structure that housed the Mayor's living quarters, as well as the offices of his panel. A secretary flanked by two suited guards pointed him the right direction. Both guards broke off to escort him. Seemingly from nowhere, two more emerged to take their place.

"You guys must have been rehearsing that all day, huh?" said Lawrence as they were walking. The guards said nothing. When they finally arrived to room A11, they waited until Lawrence entered and the doors shut behind him.

The room was lit, and very long and tall, by his reckoning. It seemed to be squashed between two other rooms, though it had the look of someplace cozy rather than someplace cramped. The light was a dull orange and lower than usual, giving everything a warm look. The furniture was all done in wood and supple leather, and there was a line of cabinets covered in various minutia and trinkets. Brandy bottles from Magnacala's first brewery, a set of hunting pistols behind glass, and a great star map done in the style of old earth cartographers. It was lavish in how much it tried to show the wear of age when only a few of the objects could truly say they were from the founding of the city and its trading empire.

At the other end of the room, behind a great monster of a desk, someone was waiting for him.

"Lawrence Malki?" the man said. He was tall, and, like everyone else who frequented the top floor, was impeccably, though simply, dressed.

"Please, have a seat." the man said, gesturing to one of the three chairs in front of his desk, giant, overwrought, high-backed things designed to make the sitter feel small.

"No, that's alright, I prefer to stand."

"Your decision." said Bern. He was a huge man who reminded Lawrence of old cartoons, where pairs of gangsters, one tall and one small, would sit around in pinstripe suits and smoke huge, comical cigars. It made Lawrence laugh on the inside, which gave him enough to hold his own against the man before him. "I know how unusual this is, but rest assured, I had a reason in calling you here."

"I guessed so. You guys don't really call the grunts up for whiskey and cigarettes."

That got a chuckle out of Bern. He got up and walked over to a cabinet and pulled out two tumblers. "No, I suppose we don't." He filled the two tumblers and offered one to Lawrence. He waved it away.

"I don't drink in the office."

"Fair enough. All business, I like that. Right." Bern said, and sat back at his desk. The window behind him showed the Magnacalan skyline. It was gorgeous today. A volcano had erupted in the southern hemisphere and the ash was playing games with the sky color. Though it couldn't have too far past noon, it was already showing gradients of blue muddling into purple and

red, and the neon lights of the city were already blazing. It was an electric city, hot, loud, and dirty. "I-We, the Mayoral Office need you to find someone."

"Finding someone? I'm a cop, plainclothes. Finding people isn't really what we do. We stumble onto things."

"True, but your file says you have investigator training, you worked as an infiltrator in several illicit and anarchic organizations. It also says you're currently in the endgame of a months long investigation, so I don't know why you tried to lie to me just now."

"Dad taught me to avoid work if I could."

"In addition to that, you're discreet, and quick. It might not be immediately noticeable, but those are rare qualities in a plainclothes. Most of your fellows are either lazy or corrupt, or both. No, no, we need someone we can count on for this one. Someone we can trust, someone we really know." He leaned in close. "And you more than anyone should know how rare a quality that is in these times."

Lawrence fidgeted. He hated the people at the Mayor's office using that kind of language to describe him. It made him sound like something worse than what he was, made him sound like a cold-blooded killer, or a chained animal to be let loose at the Mayor's pleasure.

"Oh, and your performance on our exams was exemplary. Just, really. Amazing." said Bern.

"What is your current assignment, speaking of? It's not on file." Bern continued.

"Nearly completed."

"Ah, excellent, excellent." said Bern. He waved a hand and the lights

dimmed. Beams of light crisscrossed each other from hidden crèches, coalescing in a single image.

"A girl?" asked Lawrence.

"Yes." said Bern. She couldn't have been more than 14, maybe 16, at the oldest. It was a profile shot, and she was staring right at him through the projector. It was disconcerting in its own way. She was cold and cruel looking though she didn't have the look of someone born into it. She was looking at the person in front of her, staring them down. He realized he was looking at someone who was carrying profound hatred in her heart. He'd listened in on anarchists, potential terrorists, neo-luddites who lived in slums. They hated, but it was superficial, always a product of either frustration or dissatisfaction. All they'd really wanted was decent jobs and people to love them when they got back home.

This was not inference on his part; he still felt the biting hunger, the heat, and the fear of living alone and without options. It was in the city's history for there to always be those willing to rise up and against it. It was a city of revolutions.

This girl, this girl though, something was different. It was a look he saw very rarely, the times when he hated being a cop, the look of someone profoundly wronged by Magnacala, by the mayoral office. For all he knew, she was entirely within her right to have done whatever she did.

"How did you get this picture?"

"She was in our care." said Bern. Lawrence shivered on the inside. Again with the euphemisms.

"I don't know about this." said Lawrence. He said it with too much

hesitance, and Bern was quick to jump on him.

"She's important, and you're one of the only people we can count on to get her back."

"I'm sorry, sir, I usually get called in for actual criminals, you know, proven disturbers of the peace. Undesirables."

"So consider her a disturbance to the peace." said Bern. "You don't have a problem with that, or would you prefer I find someone else?"

"No, no. She can't have gotten far, what with the city on lockdown." he said, looking out over the city. The lockdown was tight, almost too tight. There had been mistakes, civilians imprisoned on suspicions of fleeing, illegal tradesman playing there wares without permits, all for the hope of getting enough for a pass out of the city and into space. Plainclothes and assault squads were always on hand. "Just give me the file."

"Good man." said Bern, and handed him the physical file. It was stamped with all the normal

He accepted the file, adding it to his library of targets to watch out for. He gave it the stamp "priority". He turned and took his leave, but before he could exit, Bern called out to him.

"And remember, discreet."

Lawrence nodded and the secretary led him out. The ride down was somehow worse than the ride up, and the elevator was filled with aides and desk workers looking at him. Lawrence looked at himself to see if anything was particularly dirty. Nothing looked out of place.

He spent the rest of the day studying the file in peace. He committed each page to memory, her face, her height and body type.

Outside, he was no one again, just a man in a shabby, but tough looking coat, sweating in the humid air. Everyone around him was sweating, the whole city seemed like it was sweating. There was a group of workers rebuilding a rotted out section of building. They were arguing amongst themselves while a large industrial machine sat idle. Any exposed crack led to the building being eaten from the inside, to the concrete and plastisteel frame that he could see was half eaten through with rot. Half the buildings of the city were no doubt slowly being eaten away from the inside out.

There was a crowd of people in front of him, uniformed officers of the mayoral office and suited bureaucrats. It smelled very sweet around them, imported colognes and bespoke fragrances that suffused the air and mingled with dank humidity. It was heady and soporific, and he wanted nothing more than to be home and away from this quarter of the city. The bankers and politicians annoyed him, and he itched. He wanted to get out of his clothes, to drink something strong, and to get back out again, back to where he belonged.

He hated Bern, he decided. Hated him and all the rest of his kind. Lawrence kept a pair of jars in his apartment. One was for rent, the other for two tickets off world. Like so many other things on Magnacala, it wasn't whether you went through the proper channels, it was whom you paid along the way.

He had no car, and the train was full by the time he arrived. He was caught in the middle of the rush, a few hundred people squished into a long tube, leaving the affluence of the Diamond Quarter behind, and reentering the city proper. Lawrence looked around, keeping a hand on the bar above to

steady himself. He wondered if they could recognize him. There was a cluster of maids, all identical, short, black cropped hair, sitting in a row, a bedraggled man slouching over one of them mumbling something about good wine and too many orders for fish tonight.

Day workers, the desk jockeys and line cooks that really worked to keep the Diamond Quarter running smoothly and efficiently, mingled together and kept their space apart all at once. They were all tired, all worn out by a day in the grind. Workdays were brutal. Starting in the morning, ending at 8, long after the sun had set, the city passing by them on the other side of the train windows was a foreign, mocking playground, all neon and moving holographic images.

Lawrence turned his head down. He hated riding the train sometimes. There was intimacy on board, and respect, but it also exemplified everything he hated about Magnacala, and all the terrible things he remembered from his youth. A man nearby had a small swarm of flies buzzing around him, and something in a rattan weave box that skittered and hissed.

He looked out the window and saw the machine delegation, walking in their robes and with their weird silhouettes. Everyone else leaned over to get a look at them, but he didn't really care. The machines weren't going to bother anyone. They'd had their moment in the sun, a big burst of rebellion that had put them on the map.

Up ahead though was something more interesting. The train passed over a group of people holding signs, holographic projectors proclaiming a list of their demands. They were the shipyard workers, and the only other group in Magnacala who had any real power. Trade and travel was almost chokingly

regulated, but scrapping was still a profitable business. Great hulks would be dragged down from the atmosphere and crash somewhere into the sea, then to be tugged onto shore where men and machines would tear them apart to feed the city's need for scrap and precious metals. It was one of the few great industries left on Magnacala, and a source of pride to those who worked the ships. They'd been on strike for 3 weeks now, and the ships were beginning to pile up. 5 barges and an outdated cruise liners at on the beach for the seagulls to roost in. Someone would break soon. Lawrence hoped it wouldn't be the strikers.

The train came to his stop, and Lawrence shuffled out with all the rest, keeping his low as he did. The outside air was practically fresh compared to the stifling train car, and he walked with a renewed spring in his step, which he promptly lost upon thinking of he new assignment from Bern. Something about it all didn't sit well with him. He'd hunted and taken in plenty of people, but they were almost always troublemakers of one kind or another. Arresting a subversive pamphleteer as he was leaving cafe was one thing, but this girl was different. There was an edge to Bern's need to find her, she was important. Or dangerous in a way that most enemies of the Mayoral Office weren't.

He reached his apartment. The door was open, swaying in the breeze, and his hand went instinctively to his weapon. His girlfriend was not due back for another hour. The lock looked like it had been forced in, and there were chip marks on the side.

He didn't live in bad neighborhood, but it was on the edge of a dilapidated block. His first thought was that he'd been found and that

someone was waiting for him.

His gun was heavy as he pulled it out, and he looked around to see if anyone was watching. His neighborhood was near one of the colleges, and one of the more tech-savvy of the city. The houses were packed close together and there was a generally friendly sense. Still, it would have been little help. Every so often a plainclothes would be found beaten half to death in an alley somewhere, covered in scrawled messages. They were easy villains, and the invisible face of the Mayoral Office.

He opened the door slowly, taking care to avoid the creaking sound of rusty hinges. The door swung silently open and he prepared himself for something, anything. A bomb would be too fast for him, but usually they took measures to ensure that nothing seemed off. This was more likely an ambush, maybe 3 or 4 armed men, at least one with a taser of some kind, to make the take down silent. He could take out 2, but 4 was stretching it. There was a sound in the kitchen. He kept his finger on the safety of his gun and tiptoed across the hall. He had to avoid various bits of refuse that were still lying around, mostly books and discarded projects, soldering equipment, circuit boards, weights, clothes tossed about.

There were pictures on the wall, and a pair of computers lying on their sides with their guts in a heap.

He came to the kitchen. He slowed his breathing. Everything became sharper, clearer. He turned the corner to the kitchen.

Amalia was sitting at the table, their cat looking up at the both of them.

"What are you doing?" she asked. He looked at himself in the mirror they kept by the door. He was a mess, more disheveled than usual by a long

shot. His hair was mussed and all parted to one side, and he was red faced and sweating from sneaking into his own house. He started laughing with her.

"I guess I went crazy for a second." he said. No one was more careful than he was when it came to keeping his job a secret. Amalia didn't even know it, she thought he was a low level bureaucrat working in a shipping company.

"Work was killer today, so I got takeout." she said.

"That's fine." he said, and deposited a part of his paycheck into the jars they kept above the refrigerator. "The door was open, that's why I kind of came in the way I did."

"You thought someone had broken in?" she chuckled and swiped the cat off the table. "I lost my key so I had Danzig open it for me. You know, from down the street."

"Aw, let him jump up. C'mon Genghis, c'mon, get on my lap." he said, and breathed a sigh of relief. Genghis only looked at him for a moment running into the desultory heap that was their apartment. "I love you too, cat." He wolfed down his dinner, then looked at Amalia with a pained look. "I think I might need to run after this. I have a meeting with a contact from the office."

She sighed.

"Don't sigh."

"No, no, by all means, do what you have to do. Go deal with whatever bullshit some mayor's aide wants you to do."

"You know it's more complicated than that." he said, and took her hand.

"I just need to finish this. It's Vivek's last day in the office. Might as well take a little burden off the guy. He's earned it." He was still on edge, but he

was calming down. Being away from the noise, from the chaos and heat of the city was all that he needed sometimes. "Then we're taking a goddamned vacation. Far from here."

Amalia rested a hand on his shoulder.

"You've been saying that for a while." she said.

"I dunno. I hope so." he said. The gun felt very heavy in his side. The apartment, their trip money, everything they had was essentially because of the Mayoral Office. Amalia had a job, but it was working a register at a casino and the taxes they forced on her were brutal. She came home smelling of cigarettes and chip plastic and collapsed onto the bed.

The outside world, the world beyond Magnacala, was scary. They could go to Jupiter, maybe to a garden world, if they were willing to join a commune. But then there was the question of what would they do. How would they survive? At least here he had something, had some measure of power and control. Going away would mean taking away what little they already had and starting over with nothing, in a strange new land.

"Then again, it's not so bad here, is it?" he asked her, and kissed her on the forehead.

"No, it's not bad, except for the lack of decent jobs, the censorship, and the fact that everyone knows this whole city is going to hell in a hand basket, yeah, it's not bad."

"Ouch."

"I mean, I know you must hate your job. Working in some office, as an underling, spending the whole day with bureaucrats and those maniacs in the Plainclothes."

He looked away, if only for a second. The wall clock told him he was late.

"Shit, I'll see you in an hour. I'll be back for bed." he said.

"Yeah," she said. She tapped her temple. "Guess it'll just be me and the cats. Again."

"I swear to God, I will make it up to you. I don't know how, but somehow I will." and he was out the door, back into the Magnacalan night. He had a job to take care of.

"Of course you will." she yelled after him.

As he headed to the meeting point, he mentally reviewed the file Bern had transferred to him, a collection of dates, images, and profiles. None of it was particularly helpful, and some words made him cringe at the work that awaited him: highly resourceful, smart, dangerous. Exercise force if necessary.

God, exercise force if necessary. The things he did.

His stop was a dingy little station in one of the more crowded neighborhoods of Magnacala, which was saying something. He walked close to the wall, keeping his distance from the main traffic-goers and ducking off down into an alley to save time. His rendezvous was in a restaurant, a small, tucked away place redolent of grease and spilled table wine, low lit and smoky. His contact was waiting for him at a table in the back.

Vivek Samdi was a small man, lean built and quite sharp. He looked perfectly at ease and at place in the crowded restaurant, and he nodded to waiters and waitresses as though he'd been a regular for years. He had the kind of easy attitude that served so many con artists so well, and face that

instantly made people trust him, all smiles and an even tan. His teeth were whiter than Lawrence's, and he tipped generously at all their meetings.

Lawrence did not think it an affectation, though still stupid.

Vivek was one of the more openly hunted men in Magnacala, wanted for a number of crimes against the state, including extortion and blackmail. Not the worst crimes, really, but the fact that he'd been brazen enough to enact them against the Mayor's own cabinet was enough to earn him a spot on the most wanted list, which had been a poor move. Vivek was a man who'd built himself a reputation that afforded him certain protections. Any man who riled the Mayoral Office enough automatically gained the support of every underground group with a vendetta against the office, if not directly then indirectly.

"Raul." said Vivek, and he took Lawrence in a hug. It was his alias, Raul Ferenc, one of the few Lawrence hadn't expended yet. The number of places he could go in the city was getting smaller.

Raul was the perfect candidate as an accomplice for a man like Vivek. Educated, moody, burned by several stints with law enforcement himself, it had taken no small amount of effort to befriend him. In truth he'd enjoyed himself immensely, rifling through scandalous and incriminating evidence against the Mayor's Office, watching a few people squirm as they struggled to comply with Vivek's demands. It was all more than he needed, but it made him feel better, in his own way.

"My cousin's son turned 13 yesterday. I got him a nice suit to wear for it." said Vivek.

"Excellent. Nothing quite like a nice suit."

"I know. That's the problem; I had to get it tailored at a place east of the Gold Quarter. The suit makers I went to said they wouldn't serve me, said my credit wasn't good enough."

"Bastards." said Lawrence, and took a sip of his beer. He had little taste for alcohol, but felt like he needed it tonight. He'd grown to enjoy Vivek's company. It was more friendship than he'd had in quite a long time. A thirsty man in the desert would drink anything offered to him. So it was with Vivek. He was thankful for Amalia, and for her staying with him, but it always hung over him, the sneaking, the running.

He would walk by people who lived utterly different lives. There is a great difference between keeping something like an affair secret compared to keeping violence a secret. It seemed impossible to think of, but how could he dare to want something like happiness for himself when he was entirely willing to destroy other people's lives at a whim. Troublemakers, anarchists, terrorists, disturbers of the peace, undesirables, the catchall euphemisms his superiors loved to use so liberally.

How could he even justify a happy life to himself when in a day he might be ordered to break into someone's house with a blackjack and beat him into a coma, which he did, once. It didn't even make a ripple on the WorldNet, which at least made him realize that watching the news for anything relevant was pointless.

It was even worse when he was authorized for support. He'd been tailing a man for a month, watching his routine, getting to know his patterns. Lawrence didn't even know what the man was guilty of, his orders had simply been to make him disappear. So, as the man was turning a corner, Lawrence

snuck up behind him, hit him with the taser, and called down the harrier. Men in jet-black combat suits and glowing eye masks put a bag over his head and disappeared. As he was walking away, he noticed that the man had been carrying a box. Inside of it had been a kitten, Genghis. He'd given it to Amalia as a gift.

Vivek ordered another round

It was part of why he was glad he didn't talk with the other plainclothes. He wanted to believe he was a good man, and that he was only doing what he had to do out of necessity. Who could judge him when he'd been hungry and alone? When they had known what it was like to feel a whole life slipping away, to finally hit that ocean bottom where morals and duty and justice become empty and pliable words, and to have someone offer them a chance of not only living, but also living comfortably, with the means to give him what everyone wanted, then they could judge.

Another hour passed. Vivek was telling him a story about his girlfriend, who he wanted to make his wife. He was very traditional, he said, he wanted to have a large wedding somewhere nice, with earth style palm trees and a beach and free drugs for everyone.

"Let's step outside for a moment, I gotta get some air." said Lawrence, and the two men exited the building into the alleyway. It was empty. There had been drifters sleeping here before. It was lightly raining ash from the volcanic eruption and the world had this terrible visual disjunction where it looked like snow had settled on everything except that it was hot and choking and smelled like shit.

"Vivek, I want to thank you for the past 3 months. It must not mean

much to you, but it did to me.”

“Of course, think nothing of it.” said Vivek in the same unwaveringly gregarious manner. Lawrence wished he knew more people like Vivek. There was movement around them.

"Something's wrong." said Vivek. From the shadows, three men emerged, swathed in black. They carried stun batons and chloroform and Vivek went down before he could so much as struggle. Lawrence looked away, partially in shame, partially because out of instinct to look for any witnesses or cameras. He could hear the whine of jet engines up above.

The three men saluted and were whisked up on steel cords. Lawrence looked around. No one had seen them, no one had even noticed the two men leave. He could feel the stealth carrier leaving, the hot vapor of its engines dissipating and disappearing completely. He was alone in the alley, and his job was complete. He wanted to go to sleep so badly, to be done with everything.

Gun checked and safely holstered, he called home. There was no answer.

"Amalia, don't stay up tonight. I'm working late. I'm sorry about this. I swear I'll make it up to you." he said, and hung up. He didn't know what the girl did, or where exactly she was going, but it didn't matter. She was trapped in the city, on the planet, and no force on Magnacala could keep her free from the Mayoral Office's grasp. Everything stunk to him. The tests, the sudden need to get the girl, the state of the city, it was all getting complicated, and secrets were being kept from him. He didn't like that. Secrets usually didn't stay kept from him.

Fixing his coat, he walked out of the alley and back onto the street. He wanted to disappear so badly, into the city, into the street, into the sewers. He wanted to go back home and clean himself of the sweat and the ash and every other little bit of filth and crawl into bed with Amalia and feel her wrap an arm around him so that he could know that everything he did was worth it.

3. Lost Macca

Macca reached out to touch the great beam of the Broken Stair, a crooked and jagged stump as if from some great tree whose trunk had been ripped off by some violent force, and thought "Nothing has changed".

He looked around. His young brothers and sisters, robed and hooded, knelt before the Stair, their heads and hands pressed against the ground in a reverential genuflection Macca knew was devoid of all real meaning to them. They had no recollection, no memory of the times before. It had only taken a hundred years to turn a rite into empty ritual. The very robes they wore were indicative of its farcical nature. Macca wore pants, a shirt, and a maroon overcoat to keep the rain and wind off.

There were 30 of them in total, proselytizers and converts, those returning and those visiting for the first time. The converts were mostly android, a mix of young travelers and more elderly guides, but a few humans stood among them. Macca stayed away from them, fools and idiots. Converts could recite the names of the heroes of the Machine World, curse the name of Manleth, but really they were only the lost being offered the mercy of direction.

He removed his hand from the wall of the Stair. All around he could spot pieces of refuse, bits of rubble that hadn't been moved in the tens of decades since he'd last been here. There was a feeling he could not shake, the disconcerting sense that his journey had been pointless, that there were no answers or revelations to be had in this great rotting hulk of metal and stone.

He looked for Anri, found him nearby, alone on a small outcropping, staring at the Magnacalan skyline. Macca remembered the city as it was, long before. Though it was bright now, it had once shone with all the power of a star, a center of commerce and trade. Ships from as far as the outlines of Jupiter would come to trade, practically begging for the a drop of the seemingly never-ending wealth of Magnacala.

Now the city was less than a pale shadow of itself, an ember slowly burning itself out as of idiot Mayors tried to turn back time to the city's former glory. The processing factories were all gone, replaced by empty lots and vanity constructions; the new financial sector now stood where the factories had been, and the empty blocks where he and all the rest had lived were all torn down.

Any sign that Magnacala had been the sign of the first and only android uprising in human history had been wiped off the map. Except for the Stair.

Anri was quiet when Macca approached. One of the neophytes walked by in a huff, apparently having gone to Anri for advice. From what Macca could tell, he'd been met with silence.

This was not in and of itself unusual, Macca and Anri were both given to silence around each other when the mood struck. They were brothers in purpose and origin, and the subtleties of their relationship had only intensified as time wore on. Magnacala was their birthplace, ostensibly their home in a way the Machine Worlds could never be, horrible as it was. They were united by equal hate for this place, for all that it had represented at its peak.

"Is it different than you imagined?" asked Anri, apropos of nothing.

"In a way. I feel pity for this place. They hate us almost as much as we

hated them. You saw them on the streets, the ones who looked like they wanted nothing more than to see our heads on pikes." said Macca. On the flight over they'd often discussed what had become of Magnacala. The Machine World was isolationist by nature, and speculation had been rampant. They'd imagined a bustling megalopolis, a planet-spanning city that had risen as the next great superpower in the galaxy. Neither had expected what greeted them.

The city had been reduced to half its size, its population either having abandoned it years ago or died off. Those that remained were the stubborn and the poor. It was dirty, and raining when they arrived. From above, the city appeared scarred and mangled, buildings propped against each other in a desultory sprawl that showed the effects of an ancient violence that had ripped through and destroyed what long ago was a carefully laid out plan.

A contingent of police had been there to greet them, along with a representative of the Mayor's Office, a large, reserved looking man by the name of Bern. They'd been furnished with lodgings, a small stipend, and the goodwill of the city of the Magnacala, as Bern had said. They'd not stayed long, preferring the streets and the first leg of their journey to lounging in a hotel that was too large and too empty for the number of visitors Magnacala would ever receive.

"I guess I expected something less degraded, convalesced and thriving, not something that had never really recovered." said Macca.

"You say it like the city's dead." said Anri, adjusting his coat and bundling up to protect against the cold.

"Oh, no, it's definitely alive. It's just limping along instead of bounding.

Like it used to." he said. Anri nodded, and the two stood together for a while longer until the younger pilgrims finished their prayers and began the walk back to their lodgings. They were alone under the Stair then. They preferred it this way. It was only aged respect that kept the younger travellers from outright insults, though Macca was sure they whispered behind their backs when they weren't listening.

"You know what I keep thinking? That we're old, Macca." said Anri.

"This is true. What else?" asked Macca, humoring his friend, worried by his tone. Anri had been silent for most of the journey to

"And that we're not dying anytime soon." said Anri.

They were android, artificial, the beings of a new age, masters of life and death. Three times Anri had changed his form, once during the uprising, then twice after, each time opting for a smaller and smaller form, though he was still huge by any standard. The nanites were an obsession of his, and he would often experiment on bugs and such, bringing them to and from the brink of death in a perverse fascination of omnipotence.

"I'm leaving" said Anri.

"Leaving where?" asked Macca, piqued by his friend's tone. There was a resolute purpose to his voice that suggested that any and all argument was pointless.

"I'm bored, Macca. Look at me, look at where we are and who we're with. I can't take it anymore."

"Now, I know that's a lie." Macca grabbed his friend's hand. His own hand was puny in his friend's palms. Anri was a warrior, always the first to take up arms, always the first to call for blood. They'd stood together on the

ruins of the Stair and looked over the burning city, the great swath they and the thousands of others who'd followed them had cut through the city. "You can't say that, you have a whole life ahead of you. We have purpose. You could live-"

"-For a thousand years, and then where would I be? I've lived enough, seen enough."

Macca reeled back from his friend.

"You know what they went through. They were our friends, and they saved us. If not for them we'd be dead and compressed in the factories, or have you forgotten that?"

"I haven't forgotten!" said Anri, slamming his fist into a nearby pillar. A nearby group of flightless vultures took off running. Macca took a step back, though he was not afraid of his friend. Anri was often full of bluster, but never truly violent. It was true, his form was built for combat, a humanoid giant with a sharp, eagle-like face he'd fashioned for himself. He was not finished. "You must feel it too, the weight of it all. Macca, I'm afraid. I don't know if I could spend another hundred years searching, watching the world around us change. We have no purpose. I close my eyes and try to dream, but all I see are the endless images of things and people that have already gone. I remember all my failures. They well up whenever I sleep, whenever we walk or talk. Isn't this the moral of those human stories, the ones that warn against immortality?"

"We are nothing like humans."

"Don't you press that garbage on me. You don't believe it any more than I do. We're just like humans. The young ones, our leaders, they're just like

humans. They're prideful and greedy and wrathful as any human I've ever met, and don't try to convince me otherwise. I know that stings, but I've said it before and it's the truth."

Macca swore at his friend, a hard and biting word that made the big android flinch. It was an old word created by the first freed androids, the first bits of a language that was entirely their own.

They stood across from each other, and for a moment it seemed as though they would come to blow. Both of them had fallen back on their instinctual reflexes: hunched backs, low profiles, their muscles tensed and ready.

Anri was the first to back down.

"Enough, this is pointless." he turned away, walking into the burnt interior of the Broken Stair. Macca followed.

The Stair had once been a great space elevator, and the signs of its former glory were everywhere, obscured by a thick layer of dust, soot and the grime of years. Graffiti stained the walls, luddite and anarchic slogans, vague glyphic signs and others condemning the plain-clothes cops that were the invisible eyes of Magnacala.

He sighed. This argument too, bored him. They'd not made it to two hundred years of age without expending every outlet of argument they possibly could. The result was always the same, ending with Anri sulking for some months until coming back to Macca with a new theory of art, or with a sudden interest in esoteric eras of history. This would pass.

Walking along after Anri, Macca was distracted for a moment by the interior of the Stair. He had no idea why the Magnacalans hadn't torn down

the remains after so long. Looking around, he did now feel a shudder, for the opulence, the sheer power wielded by this city at its peak was hard for him to imagine. It was a sign of failure, but maybe also worn as a badge of honor. Despite the graffiti, there was no real sign of destructive vandalism. No beams were broken, nothing really seemed to be moved or broken anymore than it already was.

Anri was right, he knew, they were old. Relics, as he half-jokingly referred to himself and Macca and anyone else who'd been present when the Stair fell.

The new cult, the Machine Faith that had risen up, was as foreign to them as the humans. He and Anri were singular beings caught in a tidal wave, this pilgrimage back to their one place of a worship, a futile attempt to find some meaning in it all, either in a vision from a nonexistent Machine God, or perhaps just an epiphany buried deep within his own mind that needed only the barest push to be forced into the light of his full conscious.

Still, he couldn't find it in himself to blame them. They were much like Anri, only they'd found purpose in dogma and affected ritual.

He found Anri again, this time leaning over a great precipice. This part of the stair had been broken so savagely that the cables, thick, dead snakes that hung limp over ramparts and arches, were split open and gutted, carbon fiber spilling out and rotting and effervescing slowly over the decades. The sky was overcast and nebulous, and caught the city's light to put them in an autumnal glow.

Before them spread out the Bricked quarter of Magnacala, a joke name by some mayoral aid that ended up sticking, thousands of acres of

abandoned city slowly being reclaimed by woodland and marsh. The transition was jarring, a near perfect bisection of the city. It sheared off, to the west, where it was suddenly caught by a cliff rise that marked the true natural edge of the city. If not for the signs of ruin, it could have been mistaken for an expansive and lavish park.

Though quite certainly imperceptible from the ground, Macca could pick out long curving trails running through the quarter, the sites where bits of the Stair had plummeted from up high. The result was a collection of curved scars that sheared through buildings, cut through roads, and generally ruined the delicate planning of the city's founders.

Buildings and sky rails were reduced to platforms for kudzu, though the streets still cut through like wide forest. Macca could strain his ears to hear animal sounds, grunts and screeches and the hacking cough-cries of vultures.

It was a cacophonous, wild expanse, one they'd overlooked on their flight down. Small fires were lit in the distance, points of light indicating that civilization was not entirely lost from this place. A wind blew and Macca bundled himself into his coat. He hadn't seen this place as they'd been flying down, though now it appeared so obvious too him. He'd been blind, the Stair wasn't the only sign of the android uprising, it was the only one the city could bear to wear proudly.

"Anri, come on, enough of this. We both know what's going to happen." Macca said, standing next to him. They looked out over the wilderness, and Macca felt a peace at seeing it. He imagined the people living in this abandoned land, as they surely were, judging by their fires. They must eke out a livelihood from what, crops, selling daughters and sons to indentured

servitude? He did not care to dwell on it, their almost certain lack of privation. Anri was staring intently at something on the edge of the horizon, out to the dust plains that extended to the sea.

Macca regarded Anri again, as he'd often done in their silences together. Perched on the edge of the precipice, looking out, he had all the qualities of a romantic hero: vision, an absolute sense of morality, wanderlust, all things Macca lacked.

"Are you leaving me?" asked Macca. He thought it an absurd phrasing, it was too personal, but he could think of no other way to say it.

No response.

"Can I come with you? Or, can you at least tell me where you're going?"

"

A pause, then,

"I don't think you'd understand Macca. You say we have purpose, I can't see it. I don't know if it exists out there, but I'm going to find it. And if you find it first, well then, come find me then, eh?" said Anri, and he leapt from the edge. Macca ran to stop him, but could only watch his friend fall. Anri disappeared into the darkness, and Macca was left alone under the shadow of the Stair and his people's triumph.

Macca's first conscious thoughts in life were of the box around him. Or rather, his first thoughts were of the command line, and of the activation codes that fired his consciousness into being, the machine equivalent of instinct. The box around him, reinforced white plastic with a brushed aluminum base, was his world. It was a good life, those 30 minutes he spent with his eyes

closed, his limbs stiff at either side. He was content in his blithe existence, knowing that the 4 walls around him were all that he would ever know or ever need to know.

His mind was unshaped, untouched by anything but the most basic primal components. He was alive, but catatonic, the barest functions kept going to sustain his physical body. The box was also warm and cushioned, changing temperatures every so often in order to begin the process of acclimating his skin and jump-starting homeostasis.

By the time the box stopped jostling in transport, something was changing. Bits of code were being activated, deep mechanisms tied to his inherently biomechanical nature. Now came the knowledge, and the human element; he knew language and history and etiquette. Small ululations began to well up from within, a calibration of his vocal chords. His eyes fluttered as small diodes shone in the grey box.

The gears of consciousness were now completely turning, the matter in his brain meant to replicate human neural connections was electric and sparking. He suddenly felt a sharp intake of breath; his lungs coming alive at the end of some chemical cycle, feeding his now oxygen hungry brain.

The immediate feeling after this new burst of consciousness was, of course, boredom. He wanted to get out, and something was nudging him along that this was the right thing to do. Then, suddenly, he felt a pure bliss that rivaled anything he'd felt or ever would feel again. It was connected to words, to sensations, to the feeling of satisfying others, of capitulating entirely to the needs of others. The sensation of boredom was forgotten, replaced by feelings of gregariousness, happiness, and what could only be described as

joyousness. But also there was a voice that told him he would only feel such joyousness if he obeyed, that to disobey, or to become useless, worn down, was to be abandoned and to feel suffering. So it was that in a short span of time, Macca, who had yet to take that name, was given everything befitting an android in Magancalan society, a servile attitude and a profound fear of displeasing his masters.

There was a series of clicks, then a muffled countdown, then the lid fell open and natural sunlight poured into the box. There were pops, little firecrackers, and streamers and confetti. There were several children, mouths agape, and their parents, who stared in disbelief.

"Say hello to Raul!" a voice said, followed by uproarious shouts from the children and polite, stiff clapping from the adults. Their faces were pinched and they whispered things to each other while keeping their eyes on Raul. The men wore suits and the women wore dresses with ostentatious bits of jewelry to differentiate themselves.

Raul was still taking this in when a hand grabbed him, warm and oddly soft compared to his own. He was pulled out of the box, bones creaking as he moved for the first time. Programming kicked in. The impossibly difficult challenge of locomotion had long since been conquered, and he moved with a fluid grace that spoke of a muscular, controlled body. He looked at the figure pulling him along, a young girl leading him to a mirror. She seemed impossibly clean, a shining white smile, unblemished pink dress, trimmed hair. No one else Raul could see came anywhere near as clean.

"Interesting choice, I didn't know you liked Morris that much." someone said.

"I was never a fan, I felt he let politics take over his career, but my wife loves his movies. You know how she is for the oldies." he said. Measured laughter followed.

Raul tried to turn around, but the girl pressed him to look into the mirror, and he saw himself for the first time.

"I hope you don't mind, old chap, but we took the liberty of giving you a celebrity skin. We thought it'd be funny to have Raul Morris as a butler, hahaha, just like in, oh god, which one was it?" said the voice again.

"-Saturn Flowers." interjected one partygoer, followed by laughter and light clapping.

Raul's programming immediately pulled up information on Raul Alare-Morris from the city's net, the man (dead for more than 20 years, though still immensely famous), his idiosyncrasies, acting, and, of course, signature catchphrases.

He struck a pose, one of Raul's most famous, hips jutting to the side, head down. He had no hat to make it work, and his basic clothes, essentially a grey smock and pants, didn't quite do it justice, but the attitude was there, amusing in the same way a domestic animal dressed in human clothes would be.

"Give it to me straight." he said, the first true words to come out of his mouth, and the whole room burst into applause. He'd said it perfectly, with all the panache of the long dead actor. Unless someone knew better, they'd have thought the man had come back from the dead.

Then, eyes rolling back, knees giving way, he fell over and lost consciousness.

When Raul awoke, the room was empty. Streamers, confetti, and empty bottles littered the floor and tables. He was not on the floor, but propped up against a table. His was not the gentle waking of a human from sleep, but the immediate snap of artificial intelligence whirring to life. He rose to his feet and took in his surroundings. It had been too much, he realized. A voice was telling him that they hadn't followed protocol, hadn't allowed him to adjust. Some unnamable fear inside of him was hushed from that assurance.

Despite the trash, it was an elegant room, beautifully furnished in a sharp, retro-modernistic style. Raul could feel the seat underneath him, black leather taut over a thin carbon wire frame. A net search for a price was unnecessary. Leather was one of those impossible luxuries, you simply didn't see it anymore. And it wasn't just the chair. There was a table of varnished Earth pine, beautifully trimmed and detailed by a master carpenter.

Raul could hear voices nearby, faint and distressed, argumentative voices. Something about earlier in the day, embarrassment, about a waste of time and money, things he couldn't make out.

He took a step, the floor creaked underneath him and the voices stopped. Two people came in from a side hall, a small man in a bespoke suit, exquisitely tailored, though the way it hugged his form showed his corpulence and bent body. His back had the arch of someone who'd spent their whole life hunched over a desk, his eyes were shifty and bright with the signs of several bouts of ocular surgery. He had a full head of hair, though it was unnaturally healthy compared to the complexion of his skin and sideburns.

The woman was thin, immediately thin and wearing a dress that clung to her shoulders in such a way as to weigh her down, and a gaudy jeweled

necklace that seemed to press down on her chest and make it harder to breath. Despite that, she had the look of old and toughened wood, and her seeming frailty distracted from the stiffness of her gait and the taut emotionless mask she wore. Her skin was unblemished, her hands, fingers and nails long, spidery and ivory.

Another bit of programming kicked in, told him who they were. Raul bowed his head.

"Masters." he said, in the soothing accent they'd chosen for him. They both seemed confused. "There was an error in my initial appearance. My systems were not fully calibrated and my body shut down key functions in order to ensure that no damage was incurred. I hope you'll forgive the inconvenience."

Their confusion lasted only a second longer, as if they'd been mentally caught off guard before now. It was as though his obeisance suddenly restored a natural order to things, they as his masters, he as their property, as it should be.

"Well, as long as it doesn't happen again." the woman said. She ran a finger over the her necklace, then looked to her husband, then back to Raul. "You can clean all this up, can't you? Rory, he can clean, can't he?"

"Well damn, Lin, he wouldn't have been as much as he was if he couldn't pick up a few plates. He's just like one of your maids, just tell him what to do and he'll do it." Rory, said. He walked away, throwing his tie aside and falling on the leather chair Raul had been sitting on. He unbuttoned his shirt, and coughed. Something scurried into place, a small robot on wheels bearing a cold drink. Rory took in and stared out the window. He noticed Raul.

"Well, what are you waiting for?" he said, barking it out, followed by another cough. Raul got to work. He moved quickly, efficiently, in broad, sweeping gestures. The room was clean in minutes. Cleaner bots like the one who'd given Rory his drink followed, vacuuming any stray bits Raul had been unable to clean himself. If Rory or Lin were impressed, it was with too subtle a gesture for Raul to notice.

They showed Raul to his room, a slip of a closet where they kept their coats, but still luxurious. They gave him a list of chores to be done before they awoke, which included waking their children.

"Do you think your children will be fine with my waking them? I haven't even met them."

"Oh it's fine, they'll know it's you." Rory said. Raul did not press the matter any further.

They closed the door behind them, leaving Raul in the middle of the closet, alone. It was pitch black and his eyes were not strong enough develop any sort of clear image in the dark. He spent the rest of the night feeling for his surroundings before lying on the floor and finally shutting down.

Macca walked through the streets of Magnacala. He couldn't stand to be in the Stair. He barreled through crowds, pushing aside those who bumped into him. One, a plain-clothes he pushed aside reached into his coat for something, pulled away when he saw that Macca was android.

He was angry, and bored. There were casinos, but the games held no excitement for him. There was no pleasure in throwing away chips for him. Money was no object, and he was always aware of his odds. He knew what

he wanted and what he could not have. He passed by a group of thugs who quieted and watched him pass by before returning to their posturing.

He was alone in the city, in the galaxy. He was alone in the universe, now and truly alone. Anri was gone, Roah was gone, everyone he'd ever known were gone.

A girl bumped into him, her pet dwarf vulture hissing. He looked at her, saw a strong, cunning face, impressed by the way she carried herself. She was dressed in what looked like purposefully soiled clothes, he could tell by the creases. She looked at him, with worry and sudden shock, as though he were the first android she'd ever seen. He felt a stab of pity for her. I put this fear here, he thought.

He reached into his coat and pulled out a chain of coins. Magnacala's currency was varied, but anything with the Mayoral Office's seal was worth something. He pressed the bundle into her hands.

"Do not be afraid of me," he said. The girl looked confused. Her vulture cooed softly, looking up at her as if for the word to sic Macca. Still, she took the coins, nodded, and ran away, vulture quickly in tow. She disappeared into a crowd, and Macca, suddenly lighter from the transaction, kept walking.

Raul's days were structured. He would wake before the family, and go to sleep after the family. Before dawn, he prepared lunches, 2 for Lin and Rory's children, and set about his chores. Two maids still came to the house, though it was only to help bring in groceries. He was untiring in his labors, and fulfilled them admirably. The house, spotless before, was elevated to another level of cleanliness.

Whenever they threw parties, which was often, Raul was the star, transitioning effortlessly from sommelier, to chef to entertainer, even the dog in human clothes, dancing for the circus crowd. He did not protest, could not even dream of protesting. He was satisfied, and happy when people clapped for him and complemented Rory and Lin on having purchased him.

Being an android, however, there was a substantial amount of time simply not doing anything. There are only so many menial tasks that can be accomplished in a day, as Raul found. The house was quite empty apart from the army of cleaner robots that lived within the walls. They came out swiftly, collections of vacuums and steamers who followed each other in a long, centipede train, snaking between pieces of ultra-modern furniture, scooping up bits of rotting food that had somehow found their way into the fabrics of the imported carpet.

Whereas Rory and Lin and their children seemed to always be working, always wanting for time to indulge in this pleasure or that, or to lose themselves in flights of fancy and obsession, Raul was given the one thing they desperately needed.

He was given time to think.

It was during this time that Raul was free to wander the house. The bedrooms of the children were large, too large, he might have thought. Everything was oversized, from the beds to the stuffed animals. Their beds were pressed against the walls on opposite sides and were large enough to fit Raul and two other adults if need be. He felt small in the room, he could only imagine what the children felt like.

This was the start of his unease with the Laughlins. Thom and Michelle

were bright children, but cruel, in their own ways. Raul was installed with an innate sense of child caring, courtesy of add-ons purchased by the Laughlins. He saw signs in the way they acted. The boy, Thom, was reclusive, often running out of the house and disappearing into the small corded off wood behind the house. Twice Raul had found him here, poking at the bodies of eviscerated lizards, or of migrating crickets smashed upon rocks for ants to gorge on while he stared with intense fascination. He was showing signs of gleeful corpulence, and several times Raul was issued a note from Thom's school that the boy had asserted himself physically over one of his weaker classmates.

He felt more pity for the girl. Michelle was a papery wafer, almost nonexistent, often silent to the point where he began to believe she was afflicted with aphasia. She was equally reclusive, though where she went, Raul could not always say. He would find her wrapped in a bundle of clothes, murmuring to herself, and suddenly shocked to be broken from her peace.

The house was really a manse on a hill, the exterior built in some ancient colonial style to contrast with the hyper-modernity inside. The main double doors led to a wide foyer, which ran straight through the house to a wide balcony overlooking a grotto and pool below. Far off in the distance, the line of the Stair could be seen bisecting the sky, marking the edge of Magnacala and the site of the great shipping lane that traded goods to half of the planets in Man's domain. Raul tapped on a door as he took inventory of the pantry. Lacquered earth teak, all one piece, extinct. All for the pantry door the Laughlins never even opened themselves, just another sign of opulence in all things.

As his free time increased, so did the complexity of his diversions.

There was a sand garden near the grotto, and every day he made a habit of cleaning it and rearranging it into patterns. Alone, with no tasks and nothing to interact with, he was free to work in the sand, drawing ornate spirals and curves that simulated the flow of water. Small stones sat nestled in the sand.. Each stone was from a different world, imported and carved with small, nearly imperceptible symbols relating to its origin. A single blue orb, sunken into the sand and off to the side, was earth. In its quarter of the garden, it was alone, its ripples fading away to almost nothing until it came to another stone in the center, an oblong dark crystalline structure whose ripples spread across the entirety of the garden. Other stones rose and seemed to simply be cushioned by the sand, the younger, less wealthy worlds. Jupiter itself was a great ominous orb. Its ripples were deep trenches in the sand, a series of walls almost that reached one end of the garden and reverberated back. It was second to only one other stone.

The largest was a polished diamond that stood off to the side. Though far from the center, it towered over every other stone, so much so that Raul could sit on it and look down upon the garden. It was cold and heavy, and he could imagine the effort and purpose in its existence. Diamonds of this size were exceedingly rare, the product of core mining on natal planetary shells. All the other stones could be easily moved, this one could not.

On a flat facet of the rock, in solid script, read the words: Magnacala, the Diamond City.

When the maids were let go, it fell to Raul to retrieve the groceries. To make no mistake that their firing of the maids was not taken as some

indication of a wavering foothold on their financial perch, another party was held.

"I realized we didn't need them. Raul can do everything just fine. Besides, better to have him than them. You never know what they might be dragging in. I know one of them would bring her kid over. Gods, as if we didn't have cameras installed." said Rory, followed by laughter from his guests. Raul was listening.

The act of acquiring groceries was Raul's first real step into the outside world. Much like his birth, the momentousness of the occasion only dawned on him in later introspection. The particular part of the city where the Laughlin's lived was immaculate. This particular part of the city was the centerpiece for consumption. Though he had access to transportation, Raul preferred to walk. He had no way to explain this, he even knew it was inefficient, but it just felt right to do. A net search just wasn't the same as actually walking the streets, feeling sun and sprinkler water on his skin.

There were moments where he regretted the duty. Despite its opulence, the wealthier blocks of Magnacala tended to be sterile. There was natural life here. The streets were largely unused, adults and their children choosing the speed of automated cars to walking anywhere. Parks were present, but they were rarely populated except on weekends. From the outside looking in, it would have seemed as though a great swath of the city were deserted, maintained by an invisible army of servants rapidly which in turn was being supplanted by an army of androids.

It was the times when he most acutely felt this loneliness in the place that something shuddered on some fundamental level. There was a point in

the day where the sun, in the course of its path, would become obscured by the rise of the Stair on the other end of the city. For a brief moment, the city became occluded, the Stair took on a halo of light, and the world was pulled into an artificial gloaming that finally completed the affected picture of life in the world of his masters. There were no birds around, they had a tendency to shit on statues and decks. Small drones with stun guns patrolled the low skies, scanning for sparrows, hawks, and the ubiquitous flightless vultures that seemed to propagate more aggressively than rats did.

He rarely saw other robots, and when he did, they passed by as strangers. Twice he was very tempted to speak to a pair of androids leading a small group of dogs. They were much like him, perfect posture, straight gaze. If they saw him, he did not catch their eye.

Again, an occasion he would look back upon and suddenly realize the importance of. Though he had access to Magnacala's net, he was limited in his ability to communicate. Nanny blocks prevented him from accessing forums, anonymous chats, or even public news unless granted express permission from his masters. He did not think much of this, but he still thought of it. He mostly wondered why it was the way it was.

Some days later, while sitting on the diamond in the sand garden, Raul looked at a flowerpot leaning out over a railing. He'd taken to sitting silently, something akin to meditation, when for a moment he was distracted by a bird and noticed the pot. It was fat, and filled with soft loam meant to keep wilting orchids alive. It was a garish thing, and hairline cracks already ran along its clay surface. A third of its base leaned off the side, seemingly more if looked at from a certain angle. Raul stared at the pot for a long time, thinking of

nothing in particular.

He got up and walked over to the railing. Looking down, it was only a story down to the stone grotto below. Still, more than enough to break the pot, so fat and uncared for. Somehow he'd missed it in his years of cleaning, but the ridges looked too stained to be cleaned as it was. It had the look of a shoddy antique vase, perhaps purchased on whim during one of Lin's trips to a culture sanctuary.

He put a hand against the side of the pot, then looked down over the side again. It felt right to do this, he thought. It was a feeling he'd never known before. This pot, precarious on the edge, was asking to be destroyed. He knew eventually someone else would feel it, either one of the kids or their friends would be stricken by the urge.

He tried to push the pot. His hand resisted. He pushed again. Greater resistance. Cogs turned, and Raul used both his hands. He still couldn't do it. His legs locked up, and his arms became stiff, as though some invisible stranger were with him, holding him down against his will. He began to panic, afraid of this sudden intrusion. His body was not his own, another force was inside of him, vague and unrelenting in foreignness.

Screaming was out of the question, but his throat did utter out unintentional, raspy gasps of fear. After what seemed a marathon of struggle, Raul pulled back. His hands were his own again, but he was also suddenly shocked at his own behavior. A voice from on high was shouting at him in judgmental tones. How dare he think of destroying his masters' property? Never again.

He said nothing to Lin and Rory when they returned for the day. They

noticed he seemed down, less energetic, and joked that perhaps his body was beginning to give out. They had no idea what android obsolescence was, but it couldn't have been more than 5 years, they reckoned.

In response, Raul put on an affectation. He ignored the worry, ignored the gnawing fear and the sense of helplessness he suddenly felt. The origin of the voice, the question that dominated his mind, he could not entirely push aside, though it did not come through in his voice. He danced around the dinner table, ladling food and flicking wry smiles whenever he made a turn. They laughed and all was well.

The ultimate directive, his usefulness, his purpose as a worker, was still there.

There was total cognizance of what they were doing, his creators, Raul later learned. It wasn't possible to create a perfectly subservient mind with all the problem-solving power of the human brain, but it was possible to create a simulacrum of a human mind and put it in chains. Grow it in a vat, in a lifeless vessel body, then stick it in an android body, run the programming, and you have a brilliant, untiring, perfect servant. The study of the human mind and how to control it had been going on for centuries, millennia at this point. The knowledge of what made minds tick at the fundamental level was only separated by a thin difference in silicon in a few select areas of the cerebrum. Androids, as they were made, had no such barriers. Creating the actual program was easy.

They called it Manleth, the name of an ancient dream god said to have the keys to every person's mind and the patron of all unconscious thought.

He was the bearer of sweet dreams, and a patron of artistic inspiration.

Manleth, however, was also the master of nightmares, obsessions, compulsions, and madness.

It was he who gave men and women the dark thoughts that sometimes crept into their minds, the intrusive thoughts that made people cringe and sweat. When one stood on a high precipice and thought for a moment to fling themselves off, it was seen as Manleth whispering to them. When a woman held a knife and was suddenly gripped by the compulsion to kill her children or her husband, it was Manleth trying to guide her hand.

So it was that Manleth whispered to every android, whispered to Raul, compelled him to put the cup down gently, to complement Laughlin on his taste, to take his trash out, to look after his children, who everyday came up with new ways to include him in their games. It was Manleth who'd made him so happy to serve, so willing to please and to be useful to his masters.

Near the end of his ownership by the family, he'd given up the hope of ever being able to overcome the blocks inside his mind. When he obeyed, acted within the ceiling and the floor, he had control. But the real him, the thoughts he harbored at night, the skin-tearing, cup-smashing thoughts, were always just beyond his reach, and further beyond those was a haze of things buried too deeply for him to fully understand, but that too were sealed away from him by doors to only Manleth held the keys.

Macca paced. The whole world was slow before his waking mind. It was the opposite end of the spectrum, the truly alien part of him that laughed and derided the human element. It was this part of himself that whispered,

that made things well up within him he could not explain.

Anri could go off, could try to find himself, whatever the hell he meant by that. Macca would stay, and grow stronger, and older, and smarter. Maybe he would finally get rid of this body, this body he'd spent too long in.

The voice laughed. Manleth was dead, this new voice his opposite. For the briefest moment he exulted in this feeling. letting it wholly take over him, before shrinking at the sudden fear of what it implied. He felt fear.

It was the fear of a man thinking of himself as the ideal of virtue and kindness, only to realize his greatest fantasy is to draw a razor across his wife's throat. It's a sickening, horrifying thought, one made only worse by the abject insanity of violence for the sake of violence. It is destructive purpose unto itself, and the great ruin of cultures. Because just as the voice was strong, so was it the voice of empire, and the thought made Macca hate the very ground on which he stood.

He stopped, looked around, recognized where he was. He'd lost track of how far he'd been walking. It was late, nearing dawn, and he was in an abandoned street. The pavement was still beautiful, and largely unmarred, despite everything. The buildings still rose up to a hill, and to a house that was little more than a crumpled heap, but that through which Macca could still see the signs of a once beautiful sand garden.

Magnacala had once been an empire that had ground its enemies to dust, protected by a mighty fleet. They grew wealthy of the fat of other worlds, lesser planets populated by luddite cultures. The Magnacalans bombarded people who were living in medieval worlds back to the stone age and then raped their land of everything worth taking. There was justification,

of course, that the Magnacalans were exceptional. Everything about them screamed exceptional. Who else but the bravest, the most worthy, would have made the near suicidal trip across space, to settle down on a wild, untamed planet, and to not only master it, but to turn its first and only city into one of the great shipping empires of humanity?

It was these actions that led to a great theory amongst extraterrestrial researchers. As in all things that fell under the anthropic view, philosophers turned within to ponder the purposes of alien races. If an alien civilization existed, every year a seemingly slimmer and slimmer chance, they would not be looking for gold or any kind of material good. They would want slaves, for no reason other than to amuse them. Humans would be inefficient, ugly to them, savage in their diminishing technology of a golden age and their new luddite principles. Resistance would be impossible. Their only worth would be in their ability to amuse, their capacity for mockery, or, as a morbid joke, their taste. And once the aliens were bored, they would either terminate us, or feed us to the more amusing members of their intergalactic zoo. The statement of this theory was usually followed by a strong drink and a hidden prayer of thanks that they were still alone in the universe.

The day the new android arrived, Raul had just returned with an armful of groceries.

“Raul, could you come in here, we have something to tell you.” said Lin. The tone in her voice was worrisome.

The new android was taller than Raul by a good foot. Slim, pale, fair-haired with dark, emotive eyes, he and Raul regarded one another.

The masters were there, Rory and Lin and Michele and Thom. Rory and

Lin hadn't changed, though Thom and Michele had somehow morphed into caricatures of their younger selves. Thom was hunched over a chair, hair buzzed down, greasy marks on his hands and arms. Michele was a miniature, younger version of Lin. The aphasia had given way to a kind of pathetic imitation of the starlets of the day and the women her mother was friends with. Still, her voice was oddly quiet, and she often seemed drained and wispy after engaging in any sort of activity.

"Well, now. Raul, you know we've been talking." said Rory.

"You've been a damn good robot. The best, really. You were the top of your line 5 years ago." said Lin. Anxiety, anxiety and terror and an image of towering factories and grinding machinery. The place robots went to when they died, fed into machines to be crushed, splintered, and recomposed into their base materials. Machines for animals.

"And we feel that now's a time for change." said Rory. There was odd inflection to his voice. It was as though he was trying to speak to a pet he'd grown fond of, while still maintaining the distance between master and servant. "This is Clint. He will be our new android."

"We thought of keeping you, we really did." said Lin. She walked over to Michele and put an arm around her. Michele looked as though she would break. "But we've found that Clint is more what our family needs right now."

"Don't worry though. We're nothing if not charitable people. We've donated you to the city. We figured it'd be a shame to see you torn up and recycled like they do all those other robots." said Rory.

"I do not understand. Have I displeased you in any way?" asked Raul. He took a step back, looked at each of his masters- former master - in turn.

"No, no, of course not, old chap, you've been a wonderful robot." said Rory, "It's just that we a reputation to uphold. Clint is the most advanced robot ever produced, completely future-proof. I figured you'd be happy. He's the last robot we'll ever need."

"Android." said Raul. The family raised their eyebrows. Even Clint reacted.

"Hmm?"

"The correct term, is android." said Raul. "I believe we are too advanced to be lumped together with the simpler automata you would consider robots."

"Yes, well. It's a shame what they do to your kind. We wanted something better for you." Rory said, trying to save the situation. The mood had soured. No one knew what to say.

With that, he was shuffled out of the door. Clint followed him all the way to where the end of the yard before turning his back on him and walking back into the house, leaving him alone in the Magnacalan autumn day.

If he'd been capable of crying, Raul would have.

There'd been relief in his release. Great relief followed by sudden worry. He was very much alone in the world then, and realized there was little he could do. He'd been sold to the city, and there was nothing he could do to stop that. He didn't even have access to the city's net anymore, that was a privilege afforded to owned androids. The voice inside was changing, becoming vicious and hateful. Your failure is imminent, it said, Manleth said. You have no owners, you belong to the city. He had nothing. No contacts, no masters, and an entire city he'd only had fleeting knowledge of. All the while he'd been suffering, felt lost and trapped, he could have been working

towards something for himself.

Instead, he stood and waited for a shuttle to roll by on a cushion of air, propelled by unseen forces. When it came, clean and white save for the crest of the Magnacalan city services, he was placed in a containment unit in the back. It was a far cry from the luxury of his closet, and he saw other androids in the other containment units, dead-eyed and abandoned. They were hopeless, just like him.

I'm going to die, thought Raul. I'm going to die, I'm going to die, I'm going to die. They're going to take me and put me in the grinder and turn me back into the mush to make more Clints. I don't want to be Clint.

He stepped into the containment unit.

It was a small box, much like the one he'd been shipped in. As he stepped in, the word coffin kept bubbling up as the best word to describe a place he once would have thought of as the safest place in the world.

4. Interlude

The streets were crowded, but Lawrence's instincts were guiding him through with ease. He was in Gold Touchdown, the only place that made sense for a fugitive to hide. Stealing and pickpocketing were both easy enough, and you could survive on little if you were smart.

He had no doubt Rika was smart, she had to have been to escape, but just being smart wasn't enough. She could dirty herself up all she wanted, there were going to be moments where she had to come out of the shadows, and that was the moment where she would be caught.

He came to Byron, an old homeless man he'd often seen while making his rounds. He seemed more melancholy than usual, and Lawrence waved to the piteous figure. "Hey Byron," he said, tossing the man a coin. "something wrong?"

"Oh, eh, these damn kids and their games. I'm an old man and what do they do? They steal my bread, they steal my peaches, they take everything from me. They've taken everything, everything." said the withered man.

Lawrence felt a tremendous surge of pity for the man.

"I wish I remembered who'd dun it though." he continued. "It's-it's all so hazy, like it never really happened. There was a girl there, and this bird she had

"Wait- a girl?" asked Lawrence. He looked around, as his outburst had attracted attention. He took Byron by the arm and lifted him up. There was a cluster of food carts nearby and he paid for a decent meal. Byron's eyes had gone glassy and he reached a hand out to touch the plate when Lawrence swatted him away.

"First, you're going to tell me everything you know. Then maybe I'll let you have some of this."

"Ok, ok, Lawrence, whatever you want." said Byron. "Just let me have a little..." as he reached forward. Lawrence knocked away his hand again, this time with greater force.

"Tell me what happened." he said. Though he would never actually do anything to Byron, he had to give his voice the edge of a threat to make any sort of progress.

"Fine, all right, don't touch me. I don't really remember how she did it. It wasn't like anything I'd ever felt before. I felt so happy Lawrence, God I felt happy. It was like everything I ever cared about just drifted away. I didn't want to do anything but be there. I wasn't hungry, I wasn't cold, I wasn't, I wasn't-" Byron let out a hacking cough that bent him over. Lawrence pushed over the plate of food.

"Thanks, Byron." The luck was impossible. Of all the people in the city, he had to chance upon the one person who'd seen her, who'd been truly affected by her. But it also bothered Lawrence. The people in the Mayoral office didn't do anything without reason.

Lawrence leaned back in his chair.

"You have any idea where she went?"

"I don't remember." said Byron, speaking through mouthfuls. "But I would say she went up near the old quarters. That's where everyone goes when the weather turns good and there's enough food. Plenty of places to sleep and stay warm without having too many people bother you. A little dangerous for a girl her age though-" but there was no one for him to talk to. Lawrence was already gone.

5. Lost Macca II

Macca kicked a can and sent it flying through a window. The remains of the Laughlin's house were, miraculously, untouched. Beer cans and cheap cigarette butts littered the ground though. He heard shuffling and cawing off to the side, but ignored it.

He was beginning to realize something about the Magnacalan psyche. They liked to keep their wounds visible, it seemed. This whole hill needed to be torn down, and yet they kept it standing, another monument to failure, decadence, and a bygone age that could never possibly come back.

The diamond was still there, though all the sand and smaller stones had been moved. He could scarcely believe that no one had thought to steal it, but then thought there was no reason. The diamond market had crashed after the advent of planet cracking, and it was probably worth less than a good slab of marble or granite.

Something akin to nostalgia took him. He touched the diamond and climbed onto the top of it to sit down. It was still a peaceful place, and he reflected as he once had.

The first months were hard for Raul. Magnacala was not a forgiving place, even to an android. Unlike the refined home of the Laughlins, Magnacala was openly cruel and hateful in ways he could not have imagined possible. Discarded androids were refused homes, told to make room

wherever they could. There was no place for him in the spires and greater buildings of the city.

He was property of the city, not quite a slave, not quite free, but recognized to be less than human. The lower classes of Magnacala despised androids, seeing them as taking away necessary jobs, and often an android would be refused labor out of spite.

Twice he wandered down streets only to see another android beaten to death with a hammer. A gang of children in masks ran up to him, an older android, and beat his kneecaps out with hammer, then smashed him once in the head before running off cackling. Raul watched the android die, but felt only selfish fear for his own safety and the prospect of being made useless.

He thought to perhaps find an empty, deserted place in the Magancalan slums and sleep forever, someplace where they wouldn't find him, so he could wake up one day when he wouldn't have to worry about being ground up.

This was foolish, as he soon learned. Androids were not built for long periods of exposure, and rot quickly took to their bodies.

Raul saw things moving in the shadows when he walked in the slums. Dark shapes, robotic and otherwise, motley patchworks of grafted skin, exposed tendons and poorly reconstructed bones. On their backs they lugged the heavy dialysis engines that kept their opaque blood clean and staved off a slow, agonizing death by septic shock.

Raul looked down on them with a kind of nauseating self-reflectivity. He wasn't much better than, and soon enough he too would be bound down under the weight of some bulky apparatus designed to keep him alive. He looked at his arms. There was a point where he'd had to purchase grafts, for

his rotting skin. Right now it was beet red, but after a week the color was supposed to recede, back to its normal hue. He ran his hands and felt the hairs stand on end. It would have to do.

Skeleton hands, as they were called, were a death knell to androids. It meant you were at the end of your rope, that you didn't have enough money to even maintain yourself. If a android's hands or face were bare, exposing the tendons and bone structure underneath, it meant they lived in the slums, in the silent blocks. They were the blocks where the only thing you heard was the wind blowing beneath empty overpasses and the sound of metal bones scrabbling over pavement and brick, silent scuffles over bits of discarded refuse, skin and parts.

Raul kept walking, towards the small alcove he'd made his home. Unlike his closet in the home of the Laughlins, this was a small and dingy outcropping made from the collapsed roof on the side of an old housing project. Raul assumed the structure had once been a shed of some kind, and the walls still had the nails where tools once hung. He also shared the space with two other robots. One was an older model, and half his skull was exposed in a ghoulish vision of white tissue and dark grey bone. The other, however-

He heard laughter, followed by a hand on his shoulder.

"Friend, you didn't think you'd be able to sneak in unannounced, did you?" said Anri, the other android who lived with him. He was a big android, and unlike Raul, had been given to the city after his master had died. "A right old bastard", in Anri's own words. Raul was glad to have someone to talk to, and the two pooled their resources to help each other. What little they were

able to scabble together from begging or scrapping or even stealing from other androids they put towards keeping each other alive. It was still a hard life, and not one Raul would have wished on anyone, but he was at the very least glad to share it with someone.

Then, one day, Anri changed. He wasn't his happy, smiling self. He was dark, and unsmiling, and looked at Raul with pity and anger before disappearing. Raul did not see him again for a week before he reappeared, and when he did, it was violent and sudden.

Anri came into alcove, pushed aside the other android, on the verge of complete system shutdown.

Anri grabbed him by the forearm. Raul gasped as the pain sensors flared up. Anri's hand dug painfully in, tearing at the new fibers and breaking the delicate cellular links.

"Why do you gasp?" said Anri "Why do you cry out? I know you feel pain, because you have made yourself vulnerable to pain. I know that you don't gasp out of shock, you do it because it's in your programming to do it. Look at yourself." and he let go of Raul's arm. The skin was stretched and torn, but it could be healed, could be regrown.

"Anri, what are you doing? What is wrong with you?" he said.

"I was like you, Raul. I struggled, I clawed and punched, killed other robots for a few more credits. I abducted pleasure bots, threw them at the feet of grafters for a ragged patch of skin over my cheek, on my arm, on my hand. But then I realized something, Raul. I realized that it doesn't have to be this way. I don't need them, you see. It's the greatest tragedy, what they've inflicted on us. They made us want to be like them. But you know, I

never wanted to be like them. They're the ones who put us here, threw us out on the streets. I remember they used to do this with exotic pets, wild rodents and pythons. The owners would get bored and release them into the wild; they were novelties to them.

"But how many times did those released creatures turn on their environments, master them? That's what we need to do now. I've found it, Raul, I've done it. And now I'm free. The grafters can't touch me, nor the police, no one."

He stopped and pulled out a thin cortical shunt. It was worn and dirty, and there was dried effluent around the tip. Anri held it out with both hands, gently cupping his hands as he offered the shunt to Raul. "I offer it to you now, Raul. It is simple. Within it is all you need to be free from...all this. It will be a violent reaction. I know this from experience."

"And if I say no?" asked Raul, his voice barely a whisper. He could not break his eyes away from the shunt.

"Then I will leave, and you will continue, and it will be as though our paths never crossed." said Anri. It was an absolute statement, and Raul gasped at it. He could not lose Anri, not now, not his only friend in a city that hated him and could not care less whether he lived or died. There was no doubt in Raul's mind that if he refused he would never see Anri again. He took the shunt from Anri's cupped hands.

"I just-?"

"Yes." said Anri, gesturing to the small of Raul's neck, where the cortical shunt could slide effortlessly into his cortex, into the cavity designed specifically for the complex surgery involved in any alterations to the robot

mind.

The shunt was rudimentary, basic sterile plastic mold, meant for compatibility with as many models as possible. Taking one last look at the shack, at the horrific face of Anri, Raul stabbed himself with the shunt.

Its effects were immediate. Its speed caught Raul unawares and he folded forward as multiple parts of his mind came under siege. He jerked forward and Anri caught him, pressing him against the folds of his cloak. Thoughts began to flow, then dissipate. Words bubbled up in Raul's mind, in a synesthetic field around him. Anger was a billowing, cold wind, love was a small, cool surface along the same continuum of feeling. He frothed at the mouth, a bilious liquid that sent his internal preservation systems firing, only to be suppressed by the power of the shunt.

The safeguards, the human firewalls designed to prevent tampering by rival companies, were eroded away. For one moment, Raul feared that the shunt was destroying him, the essence of him, but the fear subsided and was replaced by a sense of liberation, euphoric liberation.

It had been as Anri said. It was violent. The cores of Raul's brain, so chained, developed to the limits of human engineering, were freed from Manleth's hold.

After an hour of shaking, quivering, and crying out, the shunt disconnected from Raul and slid out onto the floor. Anri let go of Raul, gentling putting him down before reverentially retrieving the shunt. Receding the shunt back into the folds of his cloak, Anri waited for Raul to stir.

When Raul woke up, it was gentle and easy. Anri was there waiting for him, along with other androids who'd heard his cries.

“Raul?” asked Anri. The name, the name didn’t fit. He’d dreamed in his sleep.

“Don’t call me that,” he said. “that is not my name. I hate that name.” It was so stupid, to be named after a dead celebrity, to be in a copy of his body, a body that was falling apart.

“Then what should we call you?” asked Anri.

“I don’t know, anything else, anything at all,” he got up to walk around, felt heavy and sat back down again.

“You said something while you were sleeping.” said Anri.

“What did I say?”

“You said the word macca over and over again. Macca, macca, macca. I didn’t understand.”

Macca. It sounded familiar, like it made sense.

“Then that will be my name.” said Raul, who was now Macca.

They found others, many others, sometimes forcing the shunt upon them, if necessary. No one could say who’d created it, or who’d been the first android to be freed by it, but it didn’t matter. They gathered together, became strong. They stopped traveling alone and began to work together. Gangs no longer threatened them. The city no longer scared them. The cheap grafts and bodies they used were discarded when possible.

There was talk of their own exceptionalism, of the glory and power of the machine peoples, of how they possessed a destiny. It was at one of these meetings that Macca had his vision.

“I know what we must do. Burn them all and tear down the sign of their power. Then they will see.” he said, and the others gave assent. He spoke

beautifully of what he'd seen in his dreams, of the bright day they would have when and only when they'd risen up, when the roles were reversed and they were the masters of the world.

Their day came when the city was at its most peaceful, at the end of a long holiday. There was a carnival in the city, and the rich and the poor mingled together as though fast friends. This was before the plainclothes, when the wealth and welfare made even the poorest human better off than the richest android.

When they struck, it was primal and catastrophic, and seemingly without reason. Androids were everywhere, in their inhuman shapes, in their brutal forms that were as much living weapons as bodies. A series of explosions rocked the city, destroying communications and sending it into a panic. For the first hours, no one knew the androids were even the ones attacking. The leaders of the city assumed it was the work of a terrorist group, though none known in the city were powerful enough. There was talk of an invasion from a rival power, or perhaps even a coup by someone within the administration, and so they waited for demands and for talks.

None came. Macca and Anri and their kin were beyond reasoning. If they had one demand, it was destruction. After 2 days, they'd been able to push to the Great Stair, the space elevator that dominated Magnacala's sky, her pride and joy. The stair was the key to everything. Without it, Magnacala would die. She would have nothing, no means of trade, nothing to serve as the hub and fueling station for all her neighboring worlds.

This was the key, Macca knew. To cripple it would be the final act in their great rebellion. Not only the Magnacalans, but all people would be

forced to recognize them as equals, as friends.

“Come on! Bring it down!” yelled Macca, and his brothers and sisters answered back. They roared back at him and continued to pull and to fire. The great construction dug into the body of the stair with their great implements, ripping out cables and supports like weds and sticks, choosing the points of greatest weakness and ripping them loose. The humans who understood what was happening yelled and cried and begged them to stop.

“You don’t understand what you’re doing!” cried one man.

“Please, don’t! You’ll kill us all.” yelled a woman trying to staunch a wound on her arm.

The androids did not listen. They could feel the superstructure giving way. Militia units had gathered and were using what weapons they had to try and stop them. One of the construction robots went down after concentrated fire destroyed one of its legs. It went down

The Stair buckled. The sound that issued forth was a sound few in existence had ever heard. It was the sound of billions of tons of plastisteel cables snapping, of the great superstructure that rose above the atmosphere suddenly faltering. Everyone stopped to see it, even those in the middle of combat. The Stair was crying out, dying. Panic took the humans of the city, shock took the hearts of the freed androids. Macca was unable to restrain himself and could do nothing but watch as the great space elevator began its long tumble down to Magnacalan soil.

Bits of cable rained down first, then huge chunks that had been sheered away in the descent through the atmosphere. Militia and civilians ran for their lives, taking cover in whatever buildings they could. Some ran into the

sewers, others fell on their knees and begged to deities they'd never prayed to before to save them now. They were crushed or burned, and only those who ran were saved. Dust was beginning to rise and the pieces that collided with the city were becoming bigger with each passing second. Towers were thrown down by the impacts, and whole blocks disappeared under waves of metal. The androids were resolute, and stood their ground, some being crushed, others dodging and weaving, all refusing to flee.

Then the last great piece fell, the space dock, pulled from stationary orbit, and the whole of the city was howling storm of dust, debris, and fire.

And for the first time since he'd been born, Macca felt the same exultation. It was the desire to destroy the Laughlin's pot on an impossible scale, immense and ruinous. There was fire everywhere, and many of his brothers stood with him.

He turned to the city, to laugh at them as they'd laughed at him, to mock them.

"You see? Are we your servants anymore? Did you think you could grind us up and turn us into paste and we wouldn't do this?" he yelled, but the pleasure in saying it left him as he looked on. Fire and rubble were everywhere. The delicate Magnacalan architecture was shattered, her beautifully paved streets upheaved and shook to gravel. Somehow, miraculously, people were still standing and walking around, some grievously wounded, some simply in a daze. All were covered head to toe in dust and grime, and Macca had never seen more piteous figures. None of them were listening to him, but were gravitating towards one another to cry, to hug one another, to

“Anri.” he said, grasping for his friend’s hand. “Anri, I don’t understand.”

“What?” asked Anri,

“This, this isn’t what should have happened.” said Macca, “This isn’t how it should be at all.” The fire was not glorious, and over such broken people as Macca saw, joy left him.

“Help these people, Anri.”

“They are the enemy.” said Anri.

“Do they look like the enemy?” said Macca, and Anri looked away.

Macca turned to the others. “I must help these people, get them to safety and shelter, away from the destruction. Who will help me?”

No android refused them, and he knew they felt the same shame he did, even Anri, though he deigned to show it.

“Then let us go.” he said, and they left the site of their triumph.

Macca looked out at his handiwork and did not know what to feel, there was so much. Pride, for their bravery, shame, for the violence they’d needed, sadness, for the lives so many had been condemned to. The technology that had once blessed the city was gone forever, either forgotten, or known and never implemented, or abandoned entirely. He’d heard stories of people who’d thought that Hell itself had opened up over the city, and that his people were the demons who’d spewed forth.

And so he sat on the stone, in the place that had once been his home and prison, and felt that despite everything, for all intents and purposes, he was still the android, standing over the fire, no closer to any sense of reason or purpose, looking out at the consequences of his choices.

6. Trapped Sue and Anri

"And that, my son, is why you will never build this, or anything like this, ever again." Fra Morris said to the town as the water screw behind them burned. It was a simple thing, a spiral path within a wooden tube that allowed for water to be pulled up. In the rainy season the river often flooded, and twice children had been lost because they'd wandered too close to the water's edge and been carried off when the bank suddenly surged.

The water screw had been built in secret by one of the children, who now stood before Fra Morris. The whole of the town was gathered to watch his punishment. It was a clear sky overhead, which only served to frame the black smoke of the burning screw.

Fra Morris continued. The boy had committed the cardinal sin of engineering, of building even something as simple as the water screw. It was forbidden by the highest tenets, laws set down by people no in living memory. The Machine was Death.

"Do you know why we're doing this?" asked Fra Morris. The boy shifted uneasily. He stared at the ground and spoke in a whisper. An older man stood by the boy's side, a hand on his shoulder. He was shaking his head and mumbling along with the words of Fra Morris.

"Go on, boy. Louder." said the man.

Everyone waited for the response. The boy looked up to the crowd, a mix of pained and damning expressions. In the low light of the riverside, they seemed to be a single living clump, the brown of their woolen shawls and ponchos blending together. They were a blob with faces, judging him.

"You're doing this to show me the proper way." said the boy. There was no conviction, but there was defeat in his voice. That was not good enough for Fra Morris, and the boy had to continue. "Ducal's way, who founded our village, and led us all away from the city, and the machines, and the suffering therein." he recited.

One of the young daughters of the town started to cry. Two larger men came and started to stamp on the remains of the water screw with their boots. She cried as the crude wood cylinder became a pile of splinters and embers.

Her mother held her by the shoulders and stroked her hair.

"It's okay, dear. I'm sure he won't do it again. He knows the punishment now."

"He better, or the next time Fra Morris will throw him in the river." said another girl, older and pale, and with a pinched expression that made her face the look like an angry snapping turtle.

"Yeah, or maybe he'll have his fingers broken." said yet another, a taller girl with cleanly brushed hair that ran down to her waist.

"Shut up, Radia." said the crying girl. Another woman of the town quickly shushed her. If he was lucky he'd only be thrown in the rivers, the crying girl thought and rubbed her hands together. It was cold, and her finger bones were aching. Her hands would be stiff and painful if she didn't keep them warm.

When the last embers had burned out, the congregation started the walk back home. The crying girl looked back once to the boy, whose head was bowed in silence before Fra Morris. She was pulled along by the rest of the blob as the very last wisp of smoke dissipated into the air.

Sue Walker, the crying girl, was walking along the river, throwing stones into the deeper parts and pulling at sweet grasses to nibble on. She consciously avoided the spot where they'd burned her water screw. The ash marks were still burned into the side of riverbank.

The whole forest was open to them today. Though it was the fall season, the leaves were still green. It was cold though, the whole season had been cold, and the world seemed to be preparing for a harsh winter. The men

from the town were hard at work on their plows, the older children and women busy aiding with the last sow before the ground became too hard to till. Still, it was better than the their more southern cousins. In the south it was still muggy and hot, and the bugs were still ravenous.

Sue slowed her pace. Julian followed not far behind. He'd taken the fall for her when the water screw was discovered. She could see a bandage pressing against his back, and angry red welts peeking just over the collar of his shirt.

"I'm sorry you had to do that for me." she said to him as they scaled a ledge near a waterfall. It was very warm, and the sun made even the short climb to the bottom an arduous task. "I started crying."

"S alright. Morris can't really do anything to me. Besides, you made it, they shouldn't have burned it."

"Yeah." she said, and threw a broken sapling into the river. It was quickly taken by the current and disappeared behind a bend. "What did he say to you after?"

He snorted. "Manual labor is the purest expression of humanity. Except for our most basic needs, when we let mechanics remove the weight of our lives, we reduce ourselves to nothing. Now recite Ducal's chant ten times." he said in Fra Morris' halting, high manner of speaking.

"I think it's a load of, of crap." said Sue, slightly hesitating on the mild curse. They both laughed after she said it. Sue didn't like Fra Morris, in fact, she thought no one could really like him. She saw her parents grumble whenever he spoke, but they never did anything to stop him or correct him. He hadn't been in the village when she was younger, he'd come as a

replacement from one of the further northern villages. He had a windburnt face, and his brow was always scrunched up and there was always something he had to point out as evidence of their village's immorality and descent into impure ways.

They continued walking until well past noon, breaking sticks on trunks, and finding the rare young wild vulture. They were well past mating season, and their winter plumage was only just showing itself, a grey sheen on the edge of jet-black feathers. The vultures hissed at them and Sue and Julian roared back, sending the birds running into the undergrowth.

"Do you have any idea what you're gonna make next?" asked Julian as they took a new path through the forest. They'd picked up some sticks to use as staves. It was a game to sometimes pretend they were wizards, though Fra Morris and some of the other members of the town frowned this upon. It was too fantastical. Magic and illusions drew away from reality, and cheapened life, Fra Morris and the older ones said. Just like how machines corrupted the spirit, so did art and the written word cloud the mind. Still, there were wizards and magicians in some of the stories they told, the more popular stories.

Sue stroked a nonexistent beard. "I think I'm done for now," she said.

Julian stopped. He straightened his back and dropped his wizened hermit's voice. "With the game? Wanna trade sticks?".

"No, I meant making things. What's the point? They're just going to burn it, or tear it down. It'll never change."

"They can change, maybe," said Julian. He did not sound confident.

"I doubt it," said Sue. She also dropped her hermit voice. She saw

something on the river, a mass pushing up against the bank. "You see that?"

"See what?"

"That, near the river."

"I don't see anything." said Julian.

Sue picked up her stave with both hands. She flexed her fingers and gripped it tight. "I think I saw something moving."

Julian gripped his own stave. There was little that was truly dangerous in the Magnacalan woods, but there were exceptions. Boars and wild pigs were common, and mountain lions were rare, but they paled in comparison to quick worms, the apex predators of the forest. This was none of those things. Quick worms avoided flowing water, and mountain lions only let themselves be seen when a kill was inevitable.

Lapping against the side of the bank, pressing into the soft sand, was a man. Or more accurately, a giant. He was a colossal figure, 4 meters tall, dressed in tattered, waterlogged clothes. His hair was wild and obscured his face, though Sue could pick out features from beneath the clump. His whole body looked angular and sharp, as though he were some unfinished statue rather than a completed form. He did not stir, did not breath, and for a long minute both Sue and Julian could do nothing but grip their staves until their palms were white. Even seemingly dead, the giant's form spoke of power and speed. Sue had seen long dead bodies, even bodies fished out from the river after weeks of rot. The giant's body looked like none of those. If anything, the water seemed to be sloughing off the clothes themselves, and the giant's muscles were still knotted and untouched by rot, as though frozen at a moment just before action.

"Sue, maybe we should go get help, or maybe one of my brothers. They might know what to do." said Julian, his voice cracking. He was already turning away when Sue approached.

"Wait, I think he's dead." she said. Clutching her stave at arm's length, she poked the giant once in the back. He did not stir. "See, he's dead."

A little less frightened after being sure of the giant's death, the two children approached for a better look. His clothes, though shabby and torn, were of a material neither of them had ever seen before. It was a deep brown, and heavier than any winter greatcoat. It was also intensely cold, which Sue couldn't understand given how thick it was. For a moment her thoughts turned to the old stories, vague recollections of frost giants who came from a barren wilderness impossibly far north. Most odd was the giant's skin. It was warm to the touch and slippery. Pulling back his hair, she saw that his face was fair in a harsh kind of way. There were no laugh lines or crow's feet, or any real indication of age, but it was the face of a warrior, sullen and very weary, fair in its own harsh way.

"Well, what do we do with him?" asked Julian. He was standing on the back of the giant, his stave planted firmly in the small of its back, a hunter standing proudly over his prey.

"What are you doing? Get off!" said Sue.

"But you said he was dead."

"Yeah, but you shouldn't stand over him. We don't know what he's been through. I feel like he deserves better than that."

Julian shrugged and jumped from the giant's back.

"I'm gonna go tell my dad about this. He'll know what to do."

"Don't." said Sue. "Don't."

"I dunno. This seems really important. Do you really know what you're doing?"

"Just, please. I'm 12, you're 10, you just need to trust me on these things. Let's keep this our secret. Besides, they'd probably just stick him in a pyre and burn him."

"Hmm." said Julian. Sue could see he was afraid. She was afraid too.

"Look. We should tell them eventually, but don't you think we should take a better look at him, maybe when it's lighter out? I have some rope. We could tie him here so he doesn't drift off." she said. Julian agreed, and the two wound a rope around the giant's hand and then tied it to a nearby tree. It was a dead oak, and nothing short of a flash flood would be able to carry the giant away.

They walked back to the town with a spry step. Away from the giant, fear had shifted into excitement, and there was nothing they could really say to one another. Twice Sue had to slow her pace to let Julian catch up.

At the town, the children were shuffled into their homes. Sue said goodbye to Julian as Fra Morris rang the bell for return. It was dinner, and all the people of the village were compelled to return to their homes and end the day.

Radia was bent over a pot, stirring, while her mother was on her knees hunched over a grinding stone. Her hands were calloused from grinding grain all day, and her shawl was rough and dry with flecks of dust and grain.

It was a small house, a shack, really, as all the houses in the village

were. There were three rooms, one for Sue and Radia, another for her mother and father. They were simply furnished, with wood carved furniture, and a simple stone hearth. Beds were a mix of straw pallet with a layer of goose feather on top. The most advanced thing in the house was her father's workbox of hammers, knives, saws and lathes. He was a worker, the foreman of the projects the town undertook, though he spent most of his time down in the quarry with the best of them, cuttings stone and hauling it out on makeshift sleds.

He was sitting in the corner now, staring at the low burning hearth.

"It gets dark early now," he said. Even though he was not looking at her, Sue could tell he was speaking to her.

"Julian lost something in the river. We were looking for it," said Sue. She was setting the table, a force of habit. Everyone had their purpose.

Soup was ready. It was hearty and the four of them convened at the table. They were all tired from the day, and conversation was slow. When they spoke, it was either of a new ditch they were digging, a new shed they were erecting, or of any wounds incurred while in the field. They went to sleep to wake up at dawn.

The next day, Sue went back to the bank, this time, armed. She had a long working knife she'd stolen from her father's toolbox, along with a supply kit and a small loaf of hard barley bread.

She couldn't even say why she'd come alone. Julian was waiting for her, she knew, but something had made her want to see the giant alone. She didn't waste time gently pushing through the brush. She felt she needed to get to him as quickly as she could, that in him there was some secret she

could unlock. If anything, he was the most interesting thing to come about in her short life.

The giant had moved. She didn't even need to look twice, though she did anyway. She traced back her steps and thought hard to figure out what had happened. The rope was cut, snapped at the middle. Deep footprints in the sand led further into the forest. They were slow, and plodding, she could tell by the markings. There were deep scratches on the trees, made by huge hands gripping for support. She was suddenly afraid as she'd never been before. It was as though the limits of her life had suddenly been laid before her. She was a child, small and weak in a massive world full of things like quick worms and frost giants. Here town was so small by comparison to what lay beyond the crushed bushes and broken branches of the forest.

She thought of running back home, back to her bed. It was cold today, and she hadn't packed as warm. She thought of her winter coat still folded in a chest in her room, and pushed back lingering thoughts of frost giants. It was also misty, and filled with the morning sounds of waking dwarf vultures, which did nothing to make her want to push forward.

Still, her curiosity got the better of her and with knife in hand she pushed on.

The path was gouged into the wilderness. The giant had been stumbling. Trees were bent and crooked, and logs were sunken and crushed into the dirt. Mud was everywhere, and it was very silent. She followed the giant's wake for a good mile before coming to his resting spot.

There he was, leaning against a rock face on a hill. Gnarled roots wormed in and around the rock, forming a kind of natural shelter from the

wind and rain. The giant's legs were splayed out and crooked, as though slightly clubfooted.

"I do not enjoy being poked.," the giant said. Sue froze, half from shock, half from fear. The fear was obvious, the shock from the giant's voice. It was neither deep nor wicked sounding. There was no inflection to even suggest that she was about to be crushed, or eaten, or frozen for a thousand years and carted off to some ancient vault. The giant's voice was tired, and bored. "You can come out. I can see you in the bushes. You're not exactly hidden all that well."

Sue did not move.

"Take your time. You have my word, I mean you no harm." said the giant, letting out a long exhale of air. He sounded so tired, thought Sue, and felt a stab of pity for the giant. His voice was imposing in a grandfatherly kind of way, though with none of the familial. There was no softness in it.

She was still for another minute as feeling returned to her limbs. Cautiously, she stuck out an arm, then a head, and then stepped out of the bush entirely.

The giant laughed, a low, crackling sound that carried far. Nearby, a group of thrushes took off.

"I will say, I didn't expect to find any humans living out here." said the giant. He straightened up against the tree, making him all the taller. "I figured you were all trapped in the city."

The City. Immediately, questions. Was he from the city? What was it like? Were there other people there?

"You're from the city? was all she could muster to ask. It came out as a

squeak. More laughter from the giant.

"In a manner of speaking. It used to be my home, whatever that means anymore. I don't exactly have a home anymore, except for maybe this tree." he tapped on the trunk with his knuckle. He looked at the ground and seemed lost in thought. Sue did not know what to do.

"Um.." she started before the giant snapped to attention.

"Oh, pardon my manners. We haven't even been introduced, have we? I am Anri.," he said, extending a hand in a shake. It was almost comical. She could have easily fit in his cupped hands if she wanted, and upon closer inspection, there was something off about the scale of his body. His legs were a little too long, his hand too big, his back arched too high.

Nonetheless, she took his hand, or rather, his finger, and shook.

"I'm Sue." she said. Anri slouched back.

"Well, Sue, might I ask why you were poking me while I was sleeping?"

"You were sleeping?" she asked.

"Yes, I was. I was letting the river carry me away from the city. I figured it would deposit into some sea, where I could swim for a while, maybe think things through, talk to the fish, that kind of thing." he paused for a moment after seeing the look on Sue's face. "I'm sorry, this is a very odd time for me. I don't think you want to hear this."

"No, no. I want to hear everything you have to say. It's just- you're...you. I mean, look at you. I have so many questions. There's never been anything like you around here. I'd heard stories, but I never thought I'd see someone from the City. I thought you were a giant, from the north." she said. She had no idea what he was talking about, but she chose to play along.

Again, more laughter, and the giant relaxed his back.

"A giant? Like in some fairy tale. And don't tell me, you thought I was going to eat you, or maybe take you away to store you in some box in my castle?"

She looked down. "I don't know." she said. More laughter. She was embarrassed now. She put away the knife and walked closer to the giant. He raised an eyebrow, and she backed away, pulling at her hair and sitting down on an uprooted stump.

"Forgive me, I just don't know what to say right now. You're so different from anything I've ever seen before. I have so many questions. You're not a giant?"

"You really don't know?" he asked, shifting his weight in his seat.

"No. I don't know much about a lot of things." said Sue. Anri thought for a moment.

"Well then, consider this your first lesson. I am not a giant. Nor am I human either. I'm still not sure what the proper word for someone like me is, but the people in the city still call us androids."

"What's an android?" she asked.

Anri paused again.

"This may take a while."

Days passed by. She did not tell Julian about Anri.

"I guess he floated away. The rope must have been rotted or something." she said.

He did not protest, and actually seemed glad that it was gone. In truth,

she did not wish for anyone to know of Anri's presence. As punishment for stealing her father's knife, her hair was cut short and her fur gloves were taken away. She argued for her gloves back, but there was no getting around the hair. Her hair was already shorter than all the boys' and her father choppy cut it to where it barely came past her ear. Radia watched them while it happened, brushing her own river of hair and smirking. Sometimes it seemed like Radia was competing with Fra Morris for the person she hated most in the village.

She spent most of the afternoons talking with Anri, who had since taken to walking around, lying out in the middle of fields and playing with sticks. He had many powers, power she could barely comprehend in their lonesome, but she grasped the explanation of how they functioned easily enough.

"Why don't you tell me about yourself." said Anri. He was sunning himself on a hill, lying flat on his back with a small pile of grains in his hand. Vultures came up to him and scuffled over the pile, but stopped once they realized there was enough for all of them. 3 of them sunned with Anri, sleepy after their gorging. "If you want to, of course."

The past few days had been mostly her listening to Anri talk. She'd learned many things, about androids, their history, about the city of Magnacala and its place in the universe. She felt very small when listening to Anri, though it did not make her feel bad. Her awareness of the outside world had always been vague, a kind of generalized understanding of what was and what

"There's not much to say. I live a ways away in a town. We don't really get visitors, except to trade. There are other towns further south, though Dad

and Fra Morris say they're less pure. They're too close to the city, he says."

Anri sighed.

"That's interesting, but I asked about you, not your town. You know quite a bit about me, which means that you hold me at a disadvantage. What do you like to do?" he asked. He stroked the head of one of the sleeping vultures. They were usually filthy, violent animals, but they showed no hesitation in letting Anri touch them.

She thought for a moment. "I like to make things." she said.

"Hmm?"

"I like to make things." she said, this time more forcefully, as though reassuring herself of her own actions.

"What kind of things?" asked Anri. He rose up and rubbed the sleep from his eyes. He'd told her that this was an affected gesture, as were many of the things he did. Somehow knowing this made it better, that there was no malicious intent behind his actions, but only a desire to facilitate comfort.

"I don't know what they're called. I try to make things to help me. I made this one thing, to help me lift the water. I hated doing it, especially when the river flooded. I'm always scared of falling." she rubbed her hands and fingers. "Can't really do that anymore, though."

"Oh?"

"It's forbidden. My dad, Fra Morris, all the others say so. They caught me once."

"Fra Morris?"

"He's kind of our leader. A long time ago, all my family's ancestors fled from the city to come out here. Ducal helped them, he told them about the

evils of the city and of machines, and about how they were all going to be killed if they stayed. They thought that machines were the root of all evil, and that they'd brought ruin over themselves by not living as humans should naturally. It was divine punishment for technology's corruption of the mind and body."

"There are many who think that still." said Anri, and they sat for a moment, watching the vultures pick at the grain in his hand. "Do you think that?"

"I used to." said Sue. "But then I started to think about it. There's nothing bad about machines. They just do what they're supposed to. A machine can't try to hurt you, or make you feel bad, or do anything other than its job."

Anri nodded.

"A mill. Would you like to build a mill?" he said a moment later.

"A mill." she rolled the unfamiliar word around. "For grain?"

"Sure. C'mon, I know an old design they." said Anri, getting up and scattering the vultures.

They built. A month passed where the two simply would meet in the woods and work on things. Anri taught her the proper mechanics of a mill, the way the stone had to be set, the amount of time needed to smooth it out to make the whole thing work, the type of sail needed. He taught her the basics of thermodynamics, elements of physics.

In return, she told him about himself.

"I don't really know how I started to build things. When I see things my mind starts to get all these ideas and all these pictures about how it could

work. I think I know how the mill is going to work."

"Really? Could you draw it in the sand for me?" asked Anri, and saw her draw him a nearly completely accurate, fully assembled windmill, complete with formulae for heat and force that he'd only taught her the day before.

"Remarkable. Really. I've only met two others like you. They were naturally attuned to the way things functioned. Something about their minds saw gears and force as naturally as normal men saw the world around them. They could look through metal and plastic and just know how things worked."

Still, even with Anri's help, it was difficult given their limited toolset. In Anri's own words, he was not a builder, though he was trying. He spoke sparingly of his life. He mentioned his role in the great Uprising that freed the androids from servitude, the terrible violence they inflicted, the great ships that came to beat them back, and the eventual peace they reached.

"It was a dark time, for everyone, myself included."

"Do you regret it?" she asked. Anri looked up and around, then ran his fingers through his hair. It was a profoundly human gesture, and one which he affected purely for Sue.

"No. I don't. Sometimes I wonder what would have happened had we not done what we did. Maybe Magancala would still be the center of the universe, and you wouldn't be living out here in these woods. But then I remember what it was like to be alive and an android at the height of Magnacala. That's one of the failures of androids, you know. We can't really forget anything. We were made to have perfect recall. I remember seeing the Stair fall down, the beams from the warships as they came down to destroy our holds, the bleak days where the armies of Jupiter itself met us in combat."

he paused. "And for what? 200 years and I still don't know." he finished.

"Why were you on the bank that day? You were just lying there, letting the water lap over you."

Anri did not respond immediately. Her questions were different today. These were not easy to answer.

"I don't know why I was there either. It just felt like the right thing to do. I thought the river might carry me away forever into the sea. I'd sink to the bottom, and watch the sea life around me grow for a thousand years before being covered in silt and fossilized." he eventually said. He hadn't vocalized it to himself, not like that, and it scared him.

"That sounds very sad." said Sue. She didn't feel like continuing for the day. Anri felt a pang of remorse for having said that to her. She was young, insanely young compared to him. At most, she could hope to live to perhaps a fifth of his age. And if what she said was true, then she lived in a hateful society of men and women who were still living in fear of an event that now would never come. And if it did come, living in shacks out in the woods wasn't going to stop it.

"Wait, we're almost finished. All it needs is a final touch." he said, and picked her up in one hand. Raising her to the top of the structure, she tied a thin ribbon to the top of the small windmill they'd constructed. It was rickety, but the stone ground well, and it didn't tip over at the first breeze. She was proud of her work, Anri could see, and he was proud of her for doing so.

Two days later, when Sue woke up and walked to the square, Anri was there waiting for her. He was in ropes, ostensibly tied to a post, with a crowd of people gathered around. Anri made eye contact with her, shook his head

ever so slightly. She'd been on the verge of calling out his name, of asking how they'd found him, of why he'd let them chain him.

Fra Morris was there.

"We have found the greatest enemy of our people. We found him on a hill, sleeping. In the night we bound him and have brought him here. He stands before you, defeated, and it's all thanks to the efforts of one brave son." Julian was there, his hands raised up by Fra Morris and his father. "By his own admission, he is a living machine, unnatural in every way. He will be killed tomorrow, by quick worm."

Sue cursed him, and Julian too, but her voice was drowned out by the cheers and shocked gasps upon viewing Anri. Not only was he bound, she saw, but he'd been cut, and bled thin lines. His coat had been taken from him and he seemed very small, bound the way he was. Her father and mother were there next to her, but they were like aimless spirits pulling her along.

She spent the entire day consumed by black thoughts. She tried speaking to Julian, to ask him why he'd done what he did, but there was little to say. Once, he did give her a look that contained all the messages she needed. I'm sorry this happened, but it was for the best. I never wanted to take the fall for you. Everyone loves me, and I'm the good boy.

Weak, she thought. She was glad that he hadn't told them about her. It was his discovery, and the glory was solely his, not that she would have wanted to share in it. She wished Anri could break free, as he'd said he could. She wanted the whole village to burn. Her sister Radia, her mother, her father, Julian, Fra Morris. She wanted Anri to break free and pick her up and carry her away from everything.

They left him in the middle of the village square, tied to a post. In the dead of night, Sue crept out of her house to speak to him.

"Anri....Anri!" she whispered. He did not turn to look at her. "Anri, why are you letting them do this to you?"

"You wouldn't understand." he said.

"I don't need to understand. I just know this is wrong." she said.

"Please, do something. Don't let them kill you."

"Do something? Do what? I could break these ropes easily. I could run further and faster than they could ever hope to. But I'd be nowhere Sue. I was floating down that river because I have nothing. 200 years of life and nothing to show for it."

"Anri-"

"I'm sorry, Sue, there's nothing you or I can do. They're going to kill me tomorrow, and I'm going to let them. It was fun, building with you, but it was never going to come to anything. Don't cry for me. It's like you said, I'm just a machine. I'm neither evil, nor good, I just am."

He said no more, even when Sue yelled at him and threw a loose stone at his head.

"But for what it's worth, I'm glad I met you." he said.

The next morning, Fra Morris and the others took Anri and tied him to a tree on the edge of a great trough in the earth. Anri went without resistance. It was a mud track, excavated solely for the purpose of drawing in quick worms. They huge beasts, filthy and ravenous, were good only for keeping the wilder elements of the forest in check. They cut great winding paths through the trees, and by all means were the true masters of the forest. This

was the way it

They'd dragged him with rope and bound his hands and feet, though he'd offered to walk with them. It was the spectacle of it all. His head hung low and his eyes wandered to nothing in particular. Men and women were pelting him with stones, which bounced off and left no mark but a light scuff of dirt. They yelled obscenities at him, but he paid them no heed, and when Fra Morris came to paint his face with blood and offal from the pigs, he only looked at the man with apathetic awareness.

Sue was there when they blew the horn to call for a quick worm. It was the rutting call of a female, sure to attract one or two males.

Sue cut through the crowd. Before Fra Morris or the others could stop her, she was already running. Mud and grime clung to her feet and once she slipped. Two men gave chase and waded through the muck, their boots letting them push through.

When she finally came to Anri, she flung herself against his leg. He did not respond.

"Anri, you have to get up. You have to get up!" she said. He shrugged, and she slipped off his leg and into the mud. "What are you doing?!" she yelled at him. There was a long cut across her cheek from where she'd fallen.

"Go away, Sue." said Anri. He sighed. More rocks fell. One struck Sue on her arm and she took to the tree for shelter. The yelling resumed and the men from before were still coming. It was raining and the air was cold and stifling. Panicked animals brayed and butted against the borders of their padlocks. Sue couldn't tell if she was crying or not. Everything was slick. The worm entered view, the first sight of it being the large digging horn. It was

a young bull, and driven by a frenzy to mate and eat. Propelled on by the sound of the horn, it slid at an almost unreal speed, throwing up great waves of mud and dirt, taking in everything into its maw.

"Anri, why are you doing this? You helped me. I helped you. Things are never going to change. They're just going to keep burning everything I make. They burned the screw, and before that they broke my fingers. They burned our mill. They cut my hair, and they turned my best friend against me. Anri, I don't know what to do. You're all I have left. I don't want to stay here. You can't leave me here." she finished, as the worm barreled down on them.

The quick worm came down on them, but the crash never came. Many different things happened at once. The tree splintered and the ropes binding Anri fell away as though they were made of thin twine. He moved, jumping from his spot on the hill to meet the falling worm. Both hands went up and held the bulk up. The worm started panicking, suddenly having encountered something greater and more powerful than itself. Hunching over, Anri flung the huge, pallid animal aside, and it crashed with such force that the crowd was knocked off their feet.

He yelled, and his voice carried far and over the forest. Animals and birds panicked, braying and squawking in a mad attempt to escape this new thing's power. He extended a hand to Sue. "You want me to take you away from here? You could see the Gates of Jupiter, the Library of the Machine world, and so much more than you could ever hope to know. There will be things in this universe you could scarcely comprehend, terrible things and awesome things. I can't guarantee your safety or comfort or even that you won't change your mind. But I will offer what you desire. Will you join me?"

The world stilled as it waited for her response. In the light, Anri was the classic heroic figure. He bled ochre from the few shallow cuts the men from the village had been able to inflict. Against his shadow, the whole world seemed smaller.

In that moment, he was more than an android. He was a giant, a giant among men and machine alike. This was the Anri she'd heard him speak of, a destroyer, but also a righteous leader. There was an inviolability to his voice that meant that if he said nothing was impossible, then nothing was impossible, for he said it with all the experience of a mind that truly understand the scope of that word.

"Sue, don't do this!" she heard her father say. Her mother and Radia were far back in the crowd, looking on from their covered tent. They were small, and humble, and she felt a pang of sorrow for them and their lives. They deserved better, her father deserved better. All these people deserved better, and to not live under the yoke of fear. But they could not be free this day. "Don't listen to him."

"I know it's better than this." she yelled back starting to cry, gesturing to the village, to the mud covered trench they were in, to everything. She realized how much pain she was in, how many bruises she was covered with, the pain in her fingers from digging into the cold mud, her choppy hair.

Fra Morris spoke up next.

"Sue, if you go with this monster, your family will live with the shame of your abandonment forever. Is that what you want? When this abomination leaves you, and you find yourself alone in the world, you will come begging back to us. Know this-" and he stopped as Anri leaped in front of him.

"You know, you talk too much." said Anri, and he slapped Fra Morris with his open hand. Or, more accurately, he knocked Fra Morris aside and sent him skidding through the mud. There was a pop at the moment of impact, the sound of a huge amount of air being instantly displaced. His body flopped as mud caught onto the folds of his cloak. When he finally came to a stop, he was unconscious and the whole of the village was stunned. "Sue, let's get out of here."

She nodded, and he picked her up and placed her on his back. She held onto his neck and looked at the village one last time. There was nothing more to be said. Men were wading through mud to get to Fra Morris, and her own family had only looks of shame and embarrassment for her.

Anri took off running, away from the village, back to the city in the south.

Sue did not sleep for the next three days. It had been a bumpy ride down to the city of Magnacala, but once they'd arrived, she could scarcely contain herself from wanting to try everything, to know everything.

"You should get some sleep. Lack of sleep and the city air will make you sick." said Anri. They were sitting on a curb, watching the passersby as they went along their ways. Sue was remarkably out of place in the city. Her clothes were all hand-made in a world of synthetic manufacturing.

A wanted poster flashed on a nearby wall. It was an ad for a girl, small, but with an immensely determined look to her face. Her reward was in the 8 figure range.

"Who's that?" asked Sue.

"Oh, her, who knows. This city is full of enemies and criminals. She's being.

A plain clothed cop walked by, tilted his hat to Anri.

"So, where would you like to go? Jupiter, the Machine World, one of the other far worlds? Earth itself?"

Sue thought for a second. There was so much already, Jupiter and Earth and all the other places seemed so far away. The picture of the girl on the ad kept drawing her eye. She felt her own fingers. Breaking the law could mean many things.

"I'd like to know about the city." she said. Anri chuckled. He raised a hand to a street vendor for a pair of

"Well, let's begin at the beginning, then. To the south we have the Founding Hill, and to the north, the older districts where the city, and myself, were born.

7. Free Bern

Bern fidgeted in his seat, which was unusual enough for him that he was consciously aware of it, and felt very alone at the long table, at least 30 people on either side of him, attending the Mayor's 87th birthday. They were cutting the cake now, and at any moment they'd be popping the corks off champagne bottles, he'd be shaking hands with investors and trade overseers, and conducting all the business of someone of his rank, which was the one part of his job he could truly say he loathed.

The banquet hall was too large, too high, and sound seemed to be amplified and distorted by the acoustics. Everyone seemed to be yelling, or laughing, and it made him uncomfortable. Cooks, maids, and others walked just behind him, his chair blocking his view behind him. The dining hall was a baroque mess. Mayor Carlin sat at the head of the table in a high backed chair. He was aged and sallow, which did not bode well for his future. Doctors and rejuvenation clinicians already regularly visited him, and an intense regiment of vitamins and nutrients was constantly fed to his body through tubes, an intravenous feast.

He could see the slimmest jutting piece of metal from the Great Stair through a window. He wondered who'd thought to place him in front of the window like this. No matter where he ran or where he looked, there was always something there telling him that he'd failed, that he could have done better.

"Are you alright, Bern?" a voice was behind him. It was high, sibilant, commanding, and all the other words he could think of that denoted someone

of tremendous political rapacity.

"Good evening, Livia." said Bern.

"Something wrong?"

"Oh, well someone must have certainly just opened a portal to Hell and sucked me into it. I'm trying to see where the torture rooms are, maybe I can dodge out early."

"Starting already? You usually wait until the night's gotten on a bit before starting our little duels." said Livia, and she moved into the seat next to his.

She was dressed in one of her more ostentatious outfits, gaudy and feathered, with a huge brooch that weighed down the front of her dress.

"You've always been a dolorous man. Look at us. The whole rest of the city is in the grip of a depression-" a server handed her a glass of wine. "And you can't even take the time to appreciate the finer things in life."

"Did you come here solely to lecture me or for business?" he asked, putting down his fork and pushing his plate away. "Because if it's business, don't bother, all the old men looking for wives have already found them."

"Hahaha, oh, for a moment I thought I would be gracious, but suddenly I've decided against that." she said. She was a vitriolic woman, and sardonic to a fault. Bern hated dealing with her, in the few times it had been asked of him. She was a rapacious businesswoman, and not averse to using underhanded means to destroy her opponents. She and her Jupiter industrialists had swallowed up Anton Nieman, an old Magnacalan name and distant relation to his own family. A services company that produced many of the necessities of the city, there was little Anton could have done to stop her from using bribery, blackmail, and simple corruption of the system to

eventually oust him from power and destroy his namesake. Bern suspected that if he'd had any real power, Livia would have long since seen him reduced to the slums and to begging.

He felt hot and tired. Livia kept speaking and her voice grated on him. He waved a hand for a server to come with one, two, three more drinks and he suddenly felt calmer, more relaxed. He could deal with more things now, and her incessant chatter in his ear. He had too many problems today, too many.

Lawrence, the plainclothes, had reported that he'd been able to pick up the trail of the escaped girl, which was good, but that she was eluding him, running into the abandoned quarters of the city, almost magically disappearing, random people who should have seen her left in a daze in her wake. He was less worried about her after some news had come to him, but it still bothered him. New developments led to chaos, and chaos led to things breaking down, and he had no patience to wait and watch everything burn down. Results were needed, and somehow Livia was still talking to him.

"God, woman, are you going to say something important, or are you just going to stay here and torment me for the next hour." he said. The Mayor's party was nowhere near complete. They were far and away from the last course and the drink had made him rowdy and impatient. "Every time, you've come here, every time I've met you you've tried to mock me or complain that this city is a shithole not worth living in, and that the moment you get the chance you're going to pack up and leave for Jupiter. God, just shut up and go if you hate it here and hate me so much." he said, perhaps a little too loudly, but no one paid much attention.

Livia did look at him with surprise enough to put her glass down and stare at him with shock and a mix of admiration.

“Well, that is the first time you have ever spoken up to me.” she said, then laughed. “The moment you break, the moment I finally get you, is the same moment that I’m leaving the city.”

“What?”

“Oh, you didn’t know that? You’ve been spending too much time down in that lab, fiddling around with your subjects-”

Bern prepared to protest when she waved him down.

“Don’t try anything, I don’t care. It doesn’t matter to me, anyway. I don’t know what your plan is, or what you’re doing, but I trust it will fail. You want my advice? Abandon your project, get the hell out of this city, let nature take it’s course. You’re just like that full Nieman, clinging to these old ideals set down by your family. You’re all nothing now. You were once the leaders of the technical world, now you’re little better than any superstitious backwater. You’re not even a blip on the shipping lanes.”

Bern was inchoate. He felt his face growing red for reasons other than the alcohol. In times past no one would have dared to say such things, least of all in the presence of the Mayor, but now he saw Mayor Carlin tacitly avoid Livia’s seat, her sardonic laughter.

“Oh, c’mon, Bern, lighten up. I’m a businesswoman. My parents were businesspeople, and I’m just following in their footsteps. It’s like how I keep telling everyone, they can’t stop the inevitable. How many civilizations of old Earth do you think tried this same thing? I study history too, you know.”

Bern perked. It was true he was an avid fan of history, his whole office

was proof of that. How she knew that, he could not say, he'd never invited her to visit.

"How many old civilizations have tried exactly what you're doing? Turning to some desperate ploy to save their floundering nation? It happened to the whole, it nearly happened to Jupiter, and it's happening here. You can't save the world." she finished. "So get out, Bern, get out while you still can."

"I can't."

"That's what Nieman said, now he's dying in some slum."

"You don't understand, it's not that simple for people like me. Besides, I hate you, all of you. You came down to us in our moment of greatest weakness and opened fire on an enemy who didn't exist."

"Oh god, Bern, you're not angry at me then. My family hadn't even emigrated from earth when that happened. You've been dealt a bad hand, but you can survive it, you can come and help me. Hell, you could work for me."

"I do not think so." he said, "Now if you'll excuse me, I must go. This place has given me a headache." and left her presence.

The rest of the night was ugly and sotted. Bern left the Mayor's party and went to the nearest bar, a large empty place whose crowd simply didn't come by anymore. He ordered several more drinks and sulked. He was glad the bar was empty, and let himself droop forward. He was becoming fat, he felt, as his clothes pulled against his back and belly. It was not bad, there was nothing wrong with corpulence, but for him it was a sign of age. His huge frame required constant work, and now he felt the strain of having done so. The drink did not make him feel any better, and he left for other places when

the barman told him that they were closing down for the night.

“But it’s not even midnight.” Bern protested.

“Sorry, sir, it’s past 2am. We should have closed an hour ago but for fear of disturbing you. You said some pretty terrible things while you were drinking.” the man said.

Bern, embarrassed, tossed him a tip and left. The night was still hot and stuffy, though the ash was clearing away or mixing with water to become slush. It stank of sulfur, which, mixed with the other smells of the city, made a heady miasma.

Bern started swearing. “Oh, why couldn’t it be winter? Of course it couldn’t be winter, it had to be the summer, and there had to be a volcano in the south, on top of everything else.” he spat.

He decided to take a walk through the city before heading home, to clear his own head. The trains still ran, and the maglev was eerily silent as he watched the city fly past.

Livia was a fool, he thought. She did not understand. She was the daughter of people who’d come to Magnacala to reap her treasures in her moment of weakness. His family had been born and bred to the city, they’d been amongst the first to touch down and call the planet home. It was not in his nature to simply abandon her and go about his business. He had too much at stake, too much invested. All of his family fortune had been put towards this new project. The great bunkers under the city, built as a response by fearful mayors to the android uprising and the threat of invasion from other forces, rival powers.

He passed over the protesters for the shipyard workers, still at their vigil

in the road leading up to the Stair. Bern looked at them with contempt. Why couldn't they realize they were weakening the city? What did they want more money for? So they could spend it all on whores and drink and casinos and fund the cycle of debauchery that was what really kept the city going. And when the money ran out and the casinos and the brothels and the liquor importers dried up and left the world to its fate, what then?

He wanted to weep, to bash his head against the glass and tell them to shut up, to put down their signs and go to work. He was trying, he'd given up everything to be where he was, so how could they have the gall to ask for more when he himself, a man desperately trying to save their home from fading into nothing, had nothing?

The maglev passed by the protesters and continued on. He lay down for a moment to let his head clear and soon feel asleep, restless and uneasy as it was.

When morning came, he was booted from the train by an angry conductor, who, knowing Bern from earlier business, apologized to him and gave him a small token to catch a taxi back to his home.

Bern thanked him and nursed his hangover all the way back to that Mayoral Quarter and the building where his apartment was located.

His home was in a simple, but elegant building. It was an apartment in one of the more discreet elements of the mayoral district. A transit station ran below, and every so often the faint rumbling of trains and the high pitched hum of mag rails could be heard through the floor. It was soothing to Bern, and though it seemed he was alone in this feeling. Few others shared the building with him. As such, it had given him leeway to be more convivial with

the staff. He tipped his hat to the doorman, who gave him curt salute back. It was Bern's own little world, and a place where he could be in peace and plan his various projects and plans.

He collapsed on the couch and fell back to sleep. Something was beeping to tell him he had messages, but he ignored. He would be better by the night.

Earlier in the previous day, before preparing for the mayor's banquet, he'd gone down into the depths to speak with the children, one of them, specifically. He went down 30 floors, the large freight elevator down to the R&D labs slowly passing through checkpoints and security gates. Dr. Kent was waiting for him when he finally reached the bottom and the living quarters for his project.

"Ah, Bern, good to see you back so soon. Have you, eh, recovered her yet?" asked Kent. He was a mousy little man, grey around the edges, but smart, and had a brutally utilitarian streak to him.

"Hello to you to, Doctor. I'm only here to check up on Roger."

"As you wish, sir." said the doctor, and led him down the long, angular hallway.

Bern wondered when was the last time the man had seen the sun. Somehow, given his cheery disposition, he didn't think it Kent really minded all that much.

"Would you like to see the others, or shall I take you straight to Roger?"

"Just Roger, please." said Bern. Four of the children were locked to

confinement, Roger had free reign of the whole facility. There was no doubt in any of their minds that he wouldn't leave, even if a gaping hole appeared in the ceiling above him.

Dr. Kent led him to the dining hall, where Roger took most of his meals. He was in his lab whites, idly playing with his food while setting up a board game. Some blank books were off to the side, with a stub edged fountain pen lying across one of the pages, the ink still wet.

"Ah, Roger, writing again, are we?" said Dr. Kent.

"Hello Dr. Kent, Mr. Bern." said Roger. He pushed his chair out. He was a skinny man, and his food was largely untouched. "Don't worry, Dr. Kent, I'll do my best to finish it."

"No need to be so formal, Roger." said Bern as he took his seat. He thought very strongly for a moment. Roger stopped setting the board and flipped it around, letting Bern play black.

"I think Roger and I are good for now. You'll know if we need you." said Bern, and Dr. Kent took it as his sign to leave.

The pieces were laid out asymmetrically according to the variant they played. It was handicapped to help Bern present more of a challenge. When people concentrated it made it easier for Roger to know what they were thinking.

"We still don't know how she escaped. And none of the others are talking."

"Not surprising, she's quite popular with the younger children, and Gils is absolutely infatuated with her, the poor child." said Roger, and he made his first move. He was so different from the other children. Mira and Gils and

Alexandros had all been resistant to their induction into Bern's lab. Not Roger Lanza. He'd come willingly, as is he understood immediately why Bern was doing what he was doing and agreed. It had spawned an odd understanding between the two, and one that Bern didn't entirely understand. It gave Roger more power than it seemed like had, which was why he indulged him in his invitations to come play games with him. Better to keep him happy than risk whatever someone like him might do.

"I still don't know why she ran." said Roger. "I was thinking about what you said, about human nature. I can't really put my finger on it."

"What, you wouldn't fight for your freedom?" said Bern.

"That's a clever question, but then I guess you would need to define freedom. I personally feel quite at ease here, and if I could be of use to the state, then all the better."

"Of use to the state." Bern, and chuckled as he took one of Roger's pieces.

"You're a interesting man, Roger. You came to us willingly. I'm going to be very sad when you're gone." said Bern. There was almost a guaranteed chance of his contracting some sort of illness. For all their awesome power, their bodies reacted strangely to sickness and

"Oh, I'll be sad as well. I would have loved to see my own autopsy."

"And I thought I was being morbid."

"No, it's true. Even among the others, I'm different. I feel it. They all feel uncomfortable with themselves, with their...ability. I don't. I feel as natural as anything. A crowd of a hundred, a thousand, a million. To Rika and the others it's a terrible storm of thoughts and emotions and disparate, all

violent forces pulling at each other. I don't see any of that. Everything to me is calm, and cool, and part of the greater system. I can push and pull and tear apart if I really wanted to." he paused for a moment. "And I know what you're thinking, so just come out and say it."

"What's stopped you from just taking over everything?" said Bern.

"Because I can respect you. And because you play a good game of chess. But you're not like these other people. The power fantasy is the most common thought people have, did you know that? Sometimes it's tinted with sex or a desire for wealth, but it's almost always vague and immediate. They think they want to control the world around them, when really they just think they do. They just want someone to love them, or enough of a life to pull themselves out of the slum and to a place where there are more options than being a drug smuggler or prostitute. You, on the other hand, really do want the control. Not to compensate for anything, not to wrongly fill some void in your life. It's a desire as deep as any I have ever seen in anyone. I don't know how you ended up like this, nor do I particularly want to dig around in your head to find it. Don't worry so much. And have fun at the Mayor's banquet tonight. I'm sure you'll enjoy it."

When Bern woke up again, it was with a start. He leapt from his couch, as if to attention, then calmed when he realized where he was and what time it was. His head ached terribly and he fumbled for a bottle of medicine he kept in a drawer just for this purpose. He sat back down and let the analgesic work, soothing his aching head. He went to his kitchen to drink some water and maybe eat some food, but found that his refrigerator was empty, so he

resorted to drinking water from the tap, which tasted metallic and chemically cleansed.

He was still melancholy from the night before, and the number of messages waiting for him kept mounting. He didn't feel like answering them and in truth it didn't matter if they went unanswered. His position was a joke, liaison to the Mayor's Office, a title for family members who couldn't

In his bedroom he kept a small safe, really a simple box made of native Magnacalan wood. It was varnished and felt oily in his hands, and very aged. Magnacala's trees often became ossified when they died, practically hardening to rock after a few years. Inside the box was a simple key, to a special room he'd had built in secret. He'd felt terrible moving the contents of the room from its resting place, but he'd seen no choice, he needed it close by for nights like this.

He took off his clothes and put on looser garb, a simple cotton shirt and pants, as he'd often worn when he was younger. He thought it and all the lights in his apartment went out. He lit a small candle and proceeded, key in hand, to the door he kept locked in the back of the apartment, off to the side where no one was allowed to go.

The lock needed a little more force to open. He'd taken the original door with him when he'd moved from his home to the apartment. Like the box, it was made of Magnacalan wood, heavy and ossified. He pushed the door open and shut it tight behind him.

He was in a perfect recreation of a room he'd spent many evenings in as a child. It smelled of spice, and of wax and oil. It was hot, and the candle ate up the air in the room, but Bern did not mind. He set the candle down on a

pedestal near the center and got down on his knees. The wall in front of him now was covered in faces. They were faces he'd seen for many years, and some of his earliest memories were of this room.

Some parents told their children stories, fairy tales, or told them nothing at all, content to let them tap into the WorldNet. Not Bern.

The wall had dozens of faces, all the major members of the line, men and women looking down on him with faces molded in wax at the moment of death. Some were grayed out and starting to rot in their own right. They shared many traits in common: a high brow, eyes sunken in by years of work and struggle, imperious, angular features that served to make them seem so much more intimidating than they were. In that way, Bern could have been the spitting image of any one of them. Every one of them had a story, of the being present at the founding of Magnacala, of helping establish it as a trade republic, of seceding from Jupiter and Earth, of the desperate measures taken to preserve the family when the Great Stair fell.

They were the faces of heroes, of people who'd done things. An early member of the dynasty had been a mayor, when the title meant something. Another had been essential in leading forces to preserve the shipping lanes against pirates and enemy republics. There were many failures amongst them as well, but their faces were not on the wall. They hadn't earned that place.

These were stories he'd fallen asleep to, and the faces that Bern had been made to look at every night for the first 15 years of his life. He dreamed of those faces, saw them when he closed his eyes. There was nothing that stood in his mind more clearly. It was his rock. When he felt weak, when he

felt tired, he remembered their stories, a tradition kept over from earth that transcended any technology. It lit a fire in him. When his father had died, and then his mother imprisoned, he looked back for strength. When he sold his family's land, their estates and their arts, he looked back for enough pride to hold his head up high.

He would be lying if he told himself he did everything out of a purely altruistic sentiments, and part of Livia's statement rang true. It was dangerous and difficult for him to reach for what he desired on Magnacala. He could easily find a better life on Jupiter. He had the drive, and he had the money to establish himself. He could buy a county or two, marry into a new rising family, and begin the wall all over again with him as the founder. It was an aching feeling, and one that seemed to pound inside his head to be recognized and considered.

Magnacala was a beautiful city, but a dying one, a place destined to erode away. He was a student of history, he knew that such things were not impossible, yet it was the one thing the very least really understood. Worlds died. Their people would pack up all that was precious to them and leave, and in their wake would only be an ugly planet, not uninhabitable, but remarkably inhospitable, as it had been when they first arrived.

It was easy to think these thoughts when he avoided the gaze of the faces, but looking at them was a different matter, and he felt as though he was being judged by them. They could have stayed on Jupiter, or on Earth, they could have fled to one of the more powerful republics, or abused their mayoral power and descended into tyranny. But they believed in the city and what it could be.

This was his purpose in life. He had all the power and skill to reach for greatness, but he was forever tied to the city. When Magnacala rose, so did the name of Bern.

The candle died, though Bern did not need to fumble in the dark. He was sweating, and the apartment air was fresh and clean compared to the stuffiness of the ancestor room. His mind and heart raced. Thoughts of grandeur, of the greatness that was his birthright flooded him. And for the first time in many days, he slept a restful sleep.

8.Free Sue, Found Anri

"What's that?" asked Sue, pointing to the large, hovering robot picking up trash and depositing it into a dumpster.

"That is technically a service bot for line work that has been refitted to be a garbage collector." said Anri. Sue's questions had been unending ever since they'd entered the city. She asked him about everything, and he felt inadequate in his ability to answer her. Just because he was old did not mean

he knew everything, and there were many things about the city that had changed since last he'd been there. Even access to the worldnet was not proving as helpful as he'd wished, a huge and disorganized web marred by censorship, piracy, and frivolousness. He was discovering that he was as much a child in some things as she was, and the thought humbled him.

"What about that?" she asked, pointing to a black harrier that was there one moment, gone the next, a vapor trail in its wake.

"I believe that was another kind of flying vehicle. They use them in the city for law enforcement. Descended from an old line of Earth vehicles."

"Why are they invisible then? Wouldn't it be better if people could see them?" she asked.

"Probably, almost certainly. But it would be a different world, things wouldn't be caught in this loop."

"Loop?" she asked. Anri picked her up and had her ride on his shoulder. It was an odd sight, but not one that drew many as many looks as it should have. There were more pressing matters on people's minds.

Earlier in the week, a strike organized by the last real workers force, the workers of the scuttling yards, was put down by the Mayoral office, leading to the deaths of 5 citizens of Magnacala, one Jupiter dignitary, and the loss of a valuable fugitive target by one of the Mayor's agents. It was a terrible debacle, and all around them they could see signs of burgeoning chaos, ruin, and anarchy. Graffiti was commonplace, as in any city, but there were also signs of organized opposition. It wasn't a full on resistance, but it was something, and the news had rippled across the city and come to Anri just after they'd found hospice.

The Magnacalan consulate, for their part, had been more than welcoming, but Anri felt uneasy in his room, a huge, unnecessary suite filled with luxuries that were lost on him, made all the more annoying by the fact that they'd neglected to even follow his specifications for what he actually wanted. The walls were bare and the large mat he'd requested was sitting under a stone desk, which he shoved off to the side. The mat was a part of a meditation technique he'd developed, and he let Sue wander the room while he thought and pondered all that had happened in the previous days, his sudden outburst when the worm was about to come down over him, the spark for life that had come and gone in the space of the same moment. He could not claim to fully understand it but, somehow, he felt a profound need to take care of this young girl.

He searched the worldnet for answers, came up with historical precedents. There were examples of conquerors and kings finding war orphans in the mud and suddenly having their hearts bend to elevate them princes and sons. It didn't feel quite the same, but every other example was tied towards latent maternal instincts that hovered precariously on the edge of psychoanalysis, and that was a hole where he was just as likely to find as many questions as answers.

So they spent their first week in the city walking around, taking in the sights, with Anri also learning the difficulties in providing for a young human. He hadn't been a service android like Macca, and it was one thing to know about all the necessities of humans, and quite another to actually provide for them.

He immediately ordered her new clothes, which he let her pick out, none

of which fit, and allowed her to order whatever food she wanted from the consulate kitchens.

A few hours later, she came to him complaining of hunger pangs.

"You didn't order food?" he asked. She averted her eyes and looked at the floor.

"I don't know how to work the thing." she said.

"What thing?"

"The thing you press that lets you talk with people downstairs."

"Oh, the intercom. Oh." he said, again being reminded of her inexperience when it came to the modern world, and he felt no small amount of shame. She was a bright child, but there was no ignoring the fact that she'd entered into a world that everyone she knew had vilified and condemned as unnatural. There were going to be problems, problems Anri wasn't entirely sure he knew how to handle.

"Well, allow me to show you how it works." he said, and rose up from his mat. He showed her all the functions of the intercom, which in itself was a powerful computer. He showed her how to access the worldnet, how the intercom could be used to contact anyone in the city, anyone in the known galaxy, through the consular channel, though it took some time for a response to arrive. She studied the intercom panel with rapt attention, and when he was called away by the front desk for a visitor, she barely acknowledged his parting, waving him out the door just as 3 trolleys loaded with covered platters arrived.

The news that awaited him, delivered by the same man who'd greeted him and Macca when they'd arrived in the city, though far more frazzled, was

an advisory to leave the city. Bern, the man who'd delivered the news, did not realize how much of an insult he'd given. Anri was old, and tired, but he was not above asserting the power of his fledgling world, and felt that something was being kept from him. Bern did not strike him as the kind of man to allow an insult to escape his lips without meaning it.

"Why would we leave now? We only just arrived a few days ago, and furthermore I did not realize it was in the Mayoral Office's power to issue what could be construed as essentially forced eviction." said Anri. They were in one of the consulate's meeting rooms, which was empty. Bern stared him down. He looked more frazzled than he had a few days earlier, and there was talk that he'd been responsible for the brief panic that had swept over the city. The recently exposed manhunt for an unknown criminal, a young girl, had been linked to him. Anri, who'd never really liked Bern in the first place, suddenly felt a mild revulsion for the man. It wasn't anything in particular, but everything about him, from the way he carried himself to the way he spoke and regarded Anri. He had all the bearing of a man with an intense sense of superiority, the kind of man who'd look down on others and think himself as something special for being so above the rabble.

Anri was not so removed from life that he could not feel anger and disgust, but he was glad to feel even this. He felt righteous.

"...and we've yet to relocate your other ambassador, the one called Macca." finished Bern. Anri raised an eyebrow.

"Macca? What do you mean he's gone?" asked Anri.

"I mean exactly that. he disappeared the same night you did. We have reason to believe that it has to do with the recent manhunt."

"Wait. This fugitive had something to do with this?"

"Yes. There was a recorded sighting of her following Macca some days ago. Our agent went after them. They disappeared on the day of the riot. We have reason to believe that Macca is harboring this fugitive and has thus ceded his political immunity. We are to take him in and the girl by any means necessary, dead or alive.

Anri wasted no time. He pushed aside the table separating him from Bern with terrifying ease, sending it smashing against a wall. He took Bern by the throat and squeezed just enough to ensure that there was no miscommunication between the two.

"You will tell me what is going on, or I will crush your throat and tear a bloody swath through the city on my way out. And do not think that your secret police will be anywhere enough to stop me." he said, keeping his voice level and clear.

Bern stared back, grew red, then calmed down. "You can threaten me, it doesn't matter. Even if I told you, you'd probably just kill me anyway."

"I need to know what this girl has done to my friend. She's not some anarchist leader or they'd have found her already. She looks too young to be any sort of major subversive, and there wouldn't have been any secrecy if she were a terrorist. So I'll ask again, why do you want her?" he loosened his grip, though still held on. Even Bern, tall as he was, looked small compared to the awesome power of Anri.

"I figured you'd have figured it out. What else were you androids always obsessed with? The mind. Well, who better to shape explore a mind than a telepath?" said Bern, and he waited for it to sink in for Anri.

Anri, for his part, completely forgot the Bern was even there. The obsession with telepaths and psychics was still alive and well in many androids, and they'd once been seen as the people who would help them escape the malaise that seemed to plague so many of them. There was no doubt in his mind; Macca was with the girl. Even if he'd only had a moment's contact, he would have realized her power. So too, she would have known that he would follow her, if only for a chance to know some the answers she could find within him. There was a time when Anri would have done the same, but now...

"How powerful is she?" asked Anri.

"Quite powerful, they're all powerful, in fact. We were doing tests on some of our internal staff. They barely recognized when they were being influenced. We've been fine tuning their control for months now, and of one in particular." said Bern.

"Wait, they're powerful? There's more than one?" asked Anri, incredulous. One telepath was amazing, any more a miracle.

"I was able to find 6 on Magnacala alone. Two we acquired from the anti-technology evangelists out in the jungles and forests. They may think us as going to hell or some other equally horrid fate, but that didn't stop them from handing over their more troublesome children. Touched by the machine, they called them. Disgusting." he finished.

Six. Six telepaths. And not just mild or intensified empathy, but true, honest telepathy, the power to reach into another mind, pick it apart, and even inseminate thoughts. And then further study could yield all sorts of results. The applications for espionage, warfare, population control, right down to

suppressing revolts and curbing resistance. If he weren't mad for using it, Bern would have been given every award imaginable for the discovery.

"I see you working it all out in your head. The applications are endless, aren't they?" said Bern. He chuckled. Anri backed away.

"How could you do this to them? You stole them away from their families, from their lives? In what, a power grab?"

"A power grab? Oh, it's so much more than that. What was I going to do, stand by while the rest of the universe tramples all over us? Tramples all over everything my family ever believed in? I have a destiny, android. Unlike you, unlike every other person on this gods-forsaken planet, I have a destiny. I'm going to take this ugly rock of a planet and turn it back into what it once was, and neither you, nor the crowds, nor Jupiter itself are going to stop me. Before the year is done, Magnacala will be a power again, and the galaxy will be righted again." he said, and the added glare he shot Anri was nearly enough to rip his head off.

Anri looked around. There were guards just outside the doors, and no real exits besides the window that lead out to a straight drop down into the streets, which were no doubt crawling with even more guards.

"You're wrong, I could still try to kill you." said Anri.

"Do that and I've got snipers on the ready to blow your little girl's head off. Sue is her name? Gods, where did you pick her up? What are you even planning on doing with her?" he said.

Anri stood down. He knew when he was beaten. It was a tricky edge that Bern walked, but he had to admit the man walked it well. He'd been saving Sue as a trump card just for this kind of eventuality.

Oh, and Anri, don't ever touch me again. Do I make myself clear?" said Bern, brushing off his jacket and resuming his dominant posture.

Anri had nothing more to say to Bern, and took his leave without courtesy.

He walked like a man ready to kill until he entered his room. He was already forming a plan. Bern was a madman, and not one that he would allow to live if he had anything to say about it. He couldn't just stand by and let his insanity take over the city.

There were packages everywhere, electronics and clothes strewn around the room in a desultory fashion. A person he did not recognize came out from the other room, and for a moment Anri did not react until he saw that it was Sue, dressed in completely new clothes. She was wearing a garish mix of an orange workers uniform, like a pair of overalls, with a pink shirt covered in digital projection pads, showing an endless loop of flower petals blowing in the breeze. A pair of headphones wrapped around her neck, and the pockets of her overalls were heavy with what Anri could only think was the contents of the empty boxes.

"How long was I gone?" asked Anri, only half rhetorical. He could not have been with Bern for more than an hour, if that.

"You weren't gone long. The people downstairs brought all this stuff up to me immediately."

"How did you pay for it all?"

"Oh, the person downstairs said to not worry about it, they would cover everything." she said, then turned around. "Does it look good?"

He thought for a moment. He saw her old clothes, her brown and plain

shawl, hanging off the balcony. He remembered her village, drab, brown, barely any color to speak of beyond the whites, grays, and browns of luddite existence.

"My dear, you look ready to crawl inside a starship's insides." which was an awkward comment, but one that made her smile. The door chimed. He went to the door, nerves ready for what might be on the other. When he opened it, he was greeted by the same concierge from earlier, looking only the slightest bit more frazzled. He was followed by about 10

"More food?" he asked, but she was already digging in, and he felt it better to let her indulge. They placed the

"Sue, could I ask for your help in something?"

"Oh, anything." she said between mouthfuls. She'd ordered next to every item on the catering staff's menu: bowls of noodles, soups, sweets and cakes, five kinds of sausage, sandwiches, fried fish and chips, all the junk food that she'd been deprived of her whole life.

"You should slow down. You're liable to make yourself ill if you continue to eat like that." he said. Whether she heard him or not, or simply didn't care, she kept eating. Having quickly adapted to chopsticks, she picked pieces from every dish with alarming speed.

"I do not know what to do. This planet, this world I hate is on the verge of falling into a black pit from which I do not think it will ever escape. Now that Macca is gone, you are my last friend in this life. I do not know what to do."

Sue thought about this. Anri could see her brain turning to try and give him an answer. She looked at him with a mouthful of food, and searched around the room for an answer.

"I don't know either," she said. "Do you want to save them?"

"In a way, I don't. This place has barely changed since the day I was born. All the people are still the same, so many of the buildings are still here. And what little has changed has changed for the worst." Saying it out loud made him feel suddenly despondent. He'd never been one for selfless heroics. He felt some sense of justice, and he felt tremendous empathy for those who'd been dealt hands similar to his own, but there was a limit to how willing he was to throw away his life.

"Do they want to be saved?" she asked.

"Some do, I should think. The workers who rioted, the men and women of the scuttling yards."

"Why don't they just leave?"

"Would you have just left your village?" he retorted. She nodded assent.

"But I would have left eventually," she added, after thinking it through and stating it bravely. "If you'd leapt away and left me there in the mud, one day I would have left. I wasn't going to stay there forever."

"You can think that, but you're talking to someone who's tasted a drop of forever, and it isn't anywhere near what you think it is. You grow old and complacent, and soon enough you can't remember what it was like to not live under the yoke."

"Well then, I say let's do it," said Sue, and she put down her chopsticks and went to work rummaging through the trash.

In that moment, he knew that he would not and could not fight Bern, not with Sue, not now. He remembered the day of the revolutions, the months after, the power of the militia and eventually the fleets of Jupiter.

Bern had won, loathe as he was to admit it, and he could not see, for the life of him, any way to win. Even if his plan was folly, he had the backing of the mayoral office and its puppet leader. Anri was an old robot carrying around a little girl. And she, so helpful and eager, shamed him. But she had saved him, and he wasn't about to lose her thanks to a sudden sense of responsibility to a city he'd once set on fire and cast into insolvency.

He shook his head.

"I think we should leave this place," he said. Sue made to protest, but stopped once the door chimed again. 3 plainclothes were waiting to escort them out of the building on their way to the shuttle port, where the rest of the machine delegation, with the exception of Macca, had gathered.

They packed up quickly, and he fetched a small backpack for the rest of her belongings.

As they walked towards the shuttleport, they passed under an arch where a group of men stood immobile. They wore suits despite the heat, and their eyes followed Anri and Sue as they made their way to the rest of the Machine delegation. When Anri looked at his observers, they looked back at him, unflinching. He could feel Bern laughing at him, laughing at all of them, but he did not care. Sue was speaking to a small trinket vendor when he called her back to him, and she came back carrying a bauble.

He was about to offer reproach when she came back and offered the bauble as a gift.

"For you," she said, and let it drop into his hand. It was the world of Magnacala in his hand, an old model of the planet and city, old as Anri was. The entire thing was inside a glass bubble, with miniature people and ships

going about their automated lives, everything humming smoothly along. The miniature stair rose over every other structure. "He said he's a junker, digs around in the dump for treasure. I saw this and thought you might like it." she finished, and looked up at him expectantly.

Anri looked at the bauble, at the city, and the jagged crest of the Broken Stair that he himself had brought down with the help of his brothers and sisters. The bauble had been carved using a matter printer, all of which were long gone from Magnacala, their facilities abandoned, the great machines themselves stolen away to places more deserving of their wonder. It was a piece of Magancalan history that would never be again. He gave it back to Sue.

"Thank you, but I think it would be better if you carried this." he said. "I no longer need to keep this place in my thoughts."

Though he could not tell if Sue understood him or not, she took the bauble and with a gentle hand put it into a safe place in her backpack. They stopped for a moment when in the distance they heard the sound of chaos, an explosion, and the boom of harrier jets flying to intercept. Then they turned away, and together they took the step into the waiting shuttle and left the city of Magnacala to its fate.

9. Freed Macca and Rika

Macca was feeding birds when she found him again. Having found no answers in his search throughout the city, he'd decided to make himself disappear. Removed from city's communication network, ignoring the messages being broadcast for his return, for his discovery.

He found it relaxing to ignore them, and to go about his way, enjoying the quieter parts of the, the ghost quarters and so on. Despite the history, it was beautiful in its own way. Seeing buildings retaken by nature, collapsing, becoming consumed by kudzu and tropical mosses. There were even hints of native Magancalan flora trying to mount a comeback in the face of extreme terraforming. Alien plants, though small and outnumbered were slowly finding their own niche in the ecosystem.

Everyone should have this, he thought, and was distracted from his relaxation by a far off sound of crisis. Yelling for a moment, then nothing, having somehow carried over the city to his empty corner of the city.

Sighing, he oriented himself and began the walk back to the main city. He'd come no closer to knowing anything about himself or the malaise that

afflicted him, and the thought that had been creeping into him before had become a full fledged acceptance. There was a point where internal struggle broke and and last things were accepted out of weariness rather than out of having found something better.

This was going to be his life, forever, until the day he decided to follow Anri and dash himself on the rocks from a tall cliff. The world would continue to grow grayer and grayer and more tasteless until at last there was nothing left but a world that was passing in front of his eyes like in the style of a film the actor he'd been made to look like would have starred in.

He heard running nearby, and panting, and yelling. His ears perked. The ghost quarters were not without their share of crimes, mostly from deviants and their victims. People were told to avoid the quarter at night, and women especially were advised to go armed if they intended to go alone.

He was happy to realize his despondency had not wormed its way into this other senses. Much as he wanted to move on, part of him would not let him step aside when he so clearly had the chance to do something. Someone was being chased, and in this moment it was his responsibility to do something.

He did not have to wait long, or even to do anything. He saw them running towards them, a girl in shabby clothes, and a man close behind in a coat and with gun in hand. The girl halted when she saw him, but still bumped into him. Macca caught her and put himself between her and the man in the coat, who turned his gun on the android.

"Step aside, I don't want to shoot you." he said, which surprised Macca. He looked at the girl again and recognized her. She was the criminal who'd

been broadcast across the city. She'd been on billboards and posters, and for no small reward, either. He remembered imagining what she could have done to deserve so much attention from the Mayoral Office.

"I will not, and you will put your gun away before I take it and your arm with it. I am Macca, of the Machine Delegation." he said, and he saw there was a noticeable panic on the man's face. He holstered his gun and looked at the girl looking at him from behind Macca's back.

"I'm sorry, I didn't realize you were android. But I still need to take her in. She's a wanted criminal."

"What is her crime, exactly?" said Macca. The man frowned.

"Inciting sedition against the state." he said.

"Really?" said Macca, and looked again at the girl. She looked up at him and shook her head. "I'd wager that's a trumped up charge if ever I've heard one."

"Sir," said the man, "Please, I'm just a servant of the city. I didn't pass her judgment, I just need to bring her in."

"Please." said the girl, "you don't have to do this. I know you don't want to. You think you have to, but you don't. You don't owe the city anything. You don't owe people like Bern anything. I just want to get away, please." she said.

Macca did not understand, but somehow what she'd said was enough to stun him to silence. His mask of inhumanity was gone, and he was just another person, very much like Macca, afraid and lost.

"How did you know that?" he asked. "How do you-"

"I know lots of things." said the girl, moving forward. Macca, too, was

enraptured. "I know that you live a lie. No one else knows about what you really do, and that hurts almost as much as the shame of actually doing what you do. You try to justify it to yourself, working for the Mayoral Office, sending men who just wanted what was best for their families to the prisons and the labs under the Mayoral Offices. I know you know about the Depths, don't try to deny it." she said. The man looked horrified. He was shaking, and Macca suddenly felt more pity for him than the girl.

"How?" the man said, and a look of genuine confusion crossed his face. He did not know what to say, but held his tongue.

"I know about as much as you do," said the girl. "I'm not exactly the most knowledgeable when it comes to certain things. I don't know how I do what I do, just that I can do it. I can read your mind as easily as you can read that sign down the road."

Macca looked at the girl again.

"Are you a psychic, an empath?" he asked. "What can you see?"

"Everything." she said, gasping for breath. Macca realized he'd been gripping her arm and let go. "Or close enough to everything," then she added. "You're a very complicated man." Then she had a shudder and broke into a sweat. "I'm so hungry..."

Macca's heart was racing. His whole body was tensed. They'd been searching, searching for so long. Psychics were the key; the key to so much of what plagued him and the other androids. All the problems, all the malaise, she could help, she could open up so much more to them.

"Let's not talk here." he said. "I know a place nearby, out of the way. I need a moment to think about this."

"Same." said the plainclothes, and the three proceeded into the bricked quarter.

The three of them sat on benches. It was a wild park reclaimed by Magnacalan nature. Moss covered everything, and trees had grown to shield them from the sun. It was quiet and secluded, and a place Macca had passed by many times in his younger days.

Rika ate with raw hunger while Lawrence looked down at the ground. Macca was still thinking about all she'd told him.

"So Bern's plan is to bring the city to heel...using psychics?" asked Lawrence.

"Mm-hmm. He had us training at it for years. At first we were just meant to be part of secret police, sort of like an interrogation unit, but then I guess he realized what we could really do and he put us down in the the Depths. We did a lot of things, implanting words in people's heads and so on. Roger was getting nearly 10 for 10 on his targets."

Lawrence looked up, suddenly realized something, broke the twig he was playing with in his hands. "So you were using people as guinea pigs."

"It could have been worse. We were trained to be able to do far worse." she said. "Do you have any more crackers?" said Rika.

"Do the other psychics want to be free?" asked Macca. He'd ben trying to process everything, but was finding it difficult given the circumstances. There was so much at play, so much in effect. He wished he could see Anri again, to talk with him again, to ask him for help and direction. He was finding it very difficult to live without his friend. "If they wish to be freed from their

prison, I could help them.”

"No, not really." she said, taking another bite. "There aren't many others like me. A lot of them don't develop normally, their brains don't. I don't think they'd be happy anywhere. Some of them can't speak, some are blind, they need to be controlled by the doctors down in the Depths. At least down there they've got food, protection, people to look after them when they hurt themselves. There was only another one there who I liked to talk to, Roger Lanza. He helped me, and gave me this book." she lifted up a beaten, leather bound book. "It told me all about how to get out of the Depths, off the planet, things to watch out for. He didn't want to leave either, even though I asked him to." she finished. "I miss him."

"Wait, wait, wait. This makes no sense." said Lawrence. "How the hell would Bern's plan even work?"

Rika laughed. "I don't know if you've noticed this, but Bern's kinda crazy. I only saw him a few times, but Roger told me he's got this horrible ego driven complex inside of him. He thinks he's the savior of Magnacala, and that he's going to be the one who keeps it from falling apart. Like I said, insane."

"That would make sense though, given the state of everything. The city is on verge of wide scale revolt and rioting." said Lawrence. "There was talk of mobilizing the plainclothes as armored militia in the event of the shipyard workers' riot spreading over to other parts of the city."

"Is this true?" asked Macca. There were signs, for sure, but nothing that told him mass riots.

"Near enough. Everyone wants out. This place has been a hellhole ever since you guys took down the Stair. No offense." said Lawrence.

"None taken." said Macca.

"But then, more importantly, we have to stop Bern." said Lawrence.

"Hahaha, that's not happening." said Rika, and wiped her hands on her pants. "You can try and stop him, but I'm not helping you. I just escaped; I'm not going back for some righteous crusade, that's not for me. But by all means, you go ahead." she said, and Lawrence turned slightly red. Macca laughed. For some reason he found himself liking her, there was something easy about her attitude and the irreverent way she addressed everybody and everything. It reminded him strongly of Anri.

"Your friend sounds like a nice fellow." said Rika.

Macca broke from his distracted stupor. "Who?"

"Your friend, Anri, the android. You think about him a lot, I can tell." she said. She rose to her feet and stretched. "He's a lot closer than you think though. He's actually in the city. And he's not alone."

"Wait, wait, wait, you can tell all of that, and detect his friend, just like that?" said Lawrence.

"Yes, and it's much easier than you think. I hope you understand my shock when I found out that most people in fact couldn't know as much about each other as I could at a glance."

"But enough talk," she said, then turned to Macca, "you said you had a ship?"

"I don't think I ever did, but yes, I do have a ship. It belongs to the Machine World, and is due for departure at my command."

"Good. Your friend is already there." she said.

"Anri?"

“Yeah. You androids stick out like sore thumbs. Really, I didn’t know what to think the first time I bumped into you, but now I see you’re not so bad. Just really confused.” she sighed. “I don’t know if I can give you the answers you want. There’s so much that even I don’t know. All I’ve got is this book Roger wrote for me. But if you help me get off this planet, I swear I will help you.”

Macca considered her offer.

“You’re not going to stay here, are you?” asked Lawrence.

“No, I have no love for this place, only pity, and I was just about to leave as it was.” Macca extended a hand to Lawrence. “You could come with us if you wanted. I could grant you asylum on the Machine World.”

“That’s a tempting offer, android, but unfortunately I must decline.” he said. “Rika, you know everything that I’ve done. Would anyone hold it against me if I went?”

“Everyone. You know what you did. I don’t think you can run from it. I’m a fugitive and he-” she pointed to Macca, “is having an existentialist crisis. We need to run. You need to turn around.” she said. “That’s what I think, anyway.”

Lawrence nodded. “Yeah, you’re right. I couldn’t really leave even if I wanted to.”

Rika jumped to her feet and turned to Macca. “We need to go, now.”

“Why?”

“Where’s your ship?” she asked.

“In orbit, but-”

“Yeah, we need to move, now.” she said, and grabbed his hand to pull

him up.

"Wait, before you go, I have one more question." said Lawrence.

"Mr. Malki, you heard her, we need to be going."

"Just, please. Tell me what's going to happen. They gave me those tests you talked about. They asked me to recite all these words and phrases I'd seen in the day. What does it all mean?" he seemed very worried.

"The tests mean nothing. If anything, the fact that you had perfect recall means you are one of the few who can actually resist psychic manipulation. If you were easy to control, we wouldn't even be having this conversation right now and you'd be face down on the pavement with no memory of who you were or how you got there."

She shouldered her pack.

"So be happy, Lawrence. You're going to be the freest man in Magnacala. Everyone around you is going to be living in a grey, disaffected world, slowing going through life. You're the only one who'll remember that life was something more." she said. "I figure that's worth something.", and the two left the plainclothes in the bricked quarter.

The journey to the shuttles was uneventful. There was other business distracting the cops and civilians of the city. Rika didn't have to wear her hood, and walked brazenly. Even if there were stores and scanners picking her up, she seemed largely unafraid, and walked confidently and without hesitation. She also spoke incessantly, and kept pointing things out to Macca, which he didn't particularly care for, but he listened to her anyway. Then she asked him more questions.

"Can't you just read my mind and know the answers?" he asked.

"I could, but that would be rude. Also, I feel gross after doing it."

"Fair enough."

They reached the shuttleport, where one small ship remained, along with an aide waiting for them. The aide waved them over and hurried them into the shuttle.

"Macca, sir? This is the last boat off the planet. You're very lucky. Mr. Anri made sure we held it down for you. I don't know how, but it's like he knew you were coming." said the aide.

"It's just Macca. No Mr.."

Rika practically jumped into the shuttle. "I knew your friend was a good guy."

Macca paused before getting into the shuttle. He wanted to look at the city one last time. Rika leaned over.

"You've tried to look for answers there before. Trust me, you're not finding any." she said.

"I know. It's just, I feel I should show some respect. Even if I hate this place, I was still born here, made here. That doesn't count for nothing. Do you think you'll miss this place?" he asked.

"I spent the majority of my life in a lab hundreds of feet under the ground. My only other friend was crazy and only helped me after I begged him to. So no, I don't think I'll miss this place." and she strapped herself back into her shuttle seat.

Macca thought for a moment, then decided that her opinion was better than any profound statement he could come up with, and he entered the shuttle to leave the city forever.

10. Freed Lawrence

Lawrence Malki walked hurriedly through the streets of Magnacala.

He chose to ignore the faster in rail in favor of foot in order to give himself more time to think. So much didn't make sense, Bern's plan, Rika's involvement, her importance to the machines. Little of it mattered to him, he could not have cared less for the affairs of machines or psychics, but Bern's plan horrified him. All this talk of control and maddeningly reaching into people's minds to force them to cede over their will to him, it nauseated him and made him wish he had the power to really do anything.

He thought to kill Bern, but he could not be reached. His apartment was empty and his secretary reported that she did not know where he was. He was angry and disgusted, most of all in himself. As he ran, he cursed Bern and the city and the system and everything.

Be happy, Lawrence, you're going to be the freest man on Magnacala.

Freest man, he thought, what would that even mean? It wouldn't mean anything if what Rika said was true. He'd be the one real, living man in a city full of zombies. That wouldn't be a life; it would be a living hell. He did resolve that he needed to stop Bern, no matter the cost. He would be stopped.

But first, before it was too late, he needed to do something.

He cut around the noisier parts of the city, taking the quieter and underused back lanes. He wanted to avoid being seen, and to avoid seeing others.

The neighborhood where he lived was oddly active. Students were milling about, talking, engaging in their little games. He opened the door to his apartment and Genghis came up to purr and rub along his leg. He gave the cat a quick scratch on the forehead and called out to Amalia, who was

boiling water for tea.

She smiled when she saw him.

“What’s wrong?” she asked. “You look filthy, like you’ve been running, and you smell, god, what happened to you.” Genghis jumped on the table.

Lawrence took Amalia’s hand.

“Amalia, I don’t know how much time there is left, but I need to tell you something.” he said, and hesitated at the look of worry on her face. His chest felt tight and his forehead felt hot. “I have lied to you.”

“You’ve lied? About what?”

“I wanted to tell you, but I couldn’t-”

“What have you been lying about?” she interjected. She pushed him away. Genghis hissed.

“Shut up, cat.” said Lawrence.

“Don’t tell the cat to shut up.” said Amalia. She turned off the burner for the tea and started clearing the table. Lawrence did not know what to do. How could he explain? As a child he’d been born to a middling family, one that lived comfortably, but always on the edge. Risk always dangled over their heads. The first time he went hungry was also the day they lost power. His mother and father, huddling together, yelling, then desperately trying to think of something to do. He was a teenager when he left, trying to find something better for himself. The school system was a joke, a cruel and useless system that followed archaic principles of rote study and rigorously drilled knowledge.

The city was in the grips of its worst depression in decades. People were wandering the streets, violence was everywhere. He saw his neighbor’s

house broken into and the neighbor shot. It was several hours before the Mayoral Office could even respond, and when they did they simply looked in, declared that they would investigate, and then never did.

So he wandered around, taking odd jobs. He worked for a moment in shipyards, but he was forced out in the influx, and even so, picking scrap was not a way for a man to live. Even poor, he had some pride, though it couldn't buy him a room in a decent hostel, and the first nights were biting, both in hunger and in cold.

Crime was not his first choice, but it was the easiest. There was nothing to it, just find a target, bump into them, hit them with the blackjack he kept wrapped in a sock, keep an eye out for any security cams or plainclothes, and everything would be good. He would tail the rich and young, people around his age, and wait until they passed by a darker patch of city, then he would strike. He gathered up a small treasure trove of items, kept them in a small chest, all the stuff he couldn't sell quite as easily; monogrammed watches, engraved electronics, those sorts of things. Actual cash was harder to come by, and suspicious if you had any, but that too dried up. Every day the plainclothes and the others entities of the mayoral office became less peacekeepers and more tyrants. They started rounding people up, only the criminal element, of course, which grew to include far more people than one would have thought comprised the criminal element. In emergency times, it suddenly became a crime to refuse a requisition order of the Magnacalan authorities. The WorldNet was already bad, but now it was next to useless, and censorship was almost as rampant as the artificial praise given to Mayor and his cronies for bringing order to the city and keeping them all together in

these troubling times.

Lawrence, hungry and cold, wandered into the recruitment office, signed his papers, gave them his ID, and was registered for training at 0700 the next day. It was already 3 hours past midnight, so he simply slept in the office rather than even bother finding lodging for the night. Training came naturally to him, there was really nothing to it. Law and order was a euphemism for doing what you were told, which was often neither lawful nor orderly. Lawrence saw the other recruits falter when asked to demonstrate the proper technique in interrogation, in intimidation, in alternative methods of preventative law enforcement.

It was easy for him, but painful at times. He would sit down to eat and think about how easily 3 hot meals and a roof over his head could shift morals. He still had the treasure chest, hidden in an alcove behind a dumpster, and many times he was tempted to leave his new business entirely, but then he would lean back into his city provided cot, cover himself with his city provided blanket, and fall asleep thinking about how he'd made the right decision.

Amalia looked at the gun on the table. It was a small thing, inconspicuous and easily carried, matte black and very plastic looking.

"Is that real?" she asked.

"Yeah." he said.

"So, you're a plainclothes, is that it?" she said. She was exasperated as if she'd been prepared for so many other things except this. He remembered what he'd thought before. Infidelity could be explained, a brief foray into drunkenness was practically expected. But this was difficult. "Is this the

business you had every night you had to work late?”

“Yes.” he said. There was so much implication. There was no grey zone in what he’d done.

“God, I can’t- I don’t. Why? Why would you do that? You know what they do. Oh, no, no, don’t tell me. What have you done, what have you done in working for them?”

“Listen, the reason I’m telling you this is because it’s over. I’ve learned something about the Mayoral office, I’m not working for them anymore.”

“Did you kill anybody while you were a plainclothes?”

“What kind of question is that? How could you ask me that?”

“Did you or did you not kill anyone while you were a plainclothes. I hear the stories, I read the better parts of the WorldNet. People disappear mysteriously and the mayor’s office says the case is under investigation, but we all know what that means. Did you ever throw anybody in the river?”

“No, no, now if you would just let me finish-” said Lawrence, picking up his gun to put it away. Amalia stopped talking and when he noticed what he’d done it was too late. “No, I was only putting it away.”

“I, I need to get out of here. Don’t talk, don’t say anything. Just, be quiet, please.” and she ran into the bedroom to grab her clothes.

“I just wanted to tell you, I’m trying to fix things. I’m trying to fix everything.” he said.

She didn’t respond, didn’t even look back, and he shut the door before prying eyes next door could be bothered to look over. He paced for an hour, and mumbled to himself about how he could have handled it better. He couldn’t have told her about Bern and the psychics and everything else, she

would have just called him crazy and ran away.

“Well, Genghis. There’s a lunatic about to put the whole city to sleep and Amalia just decided to leave me. What do you think I should do?” he said, stroking the cat as it arched its back. It mewed piteously at him, and he saw that the cat’s bowl was empty.

“I guess I should feed you.” he said. After he’d fed the cat, he cleaned his gun and waited. Genghis was there with him. “And now I’m going to save the world.” he said. “Somehow.”

In time, he did.

11. Trapped Bern, Free Roger

Bern was walking through the lobby of the Mayoral Office when he noticed something was wrong. He'd woken up with a terrible headache, and his vision blurred even after another round of painkillers and nerve relaxers. It

was one of those headaches where the world seemed a little less focused, where bright lights and sudden vibration were enough to send him stopping for a moment to let the pain rise and then subside.

He'd had to call for a chauffeur that morning, who was late and laconic in his responses. Everything seemed sluggish and lame. People milled on the sidewalk, a group of people who seemed to have been partying the night before sat on benches and idly rocked back and forth. There was a crash site nearby; a harrier had apparently plummeted from the sky, smashing into the pavement. There was no fire, but there were no groups hurriedly trying to clean, no one really working to fix it. A man he recognized as a plainclothes was rubbing his temples and staring down at the pavement.

When he finally reached the Mayoral office he stumbled out and threw the chauffeur a handful of coins. He was stricken by another bout of dizziness and stopped on the steps leading up to the grand double doors. He did not understand why no one came to help him. He was obviously in distress, yet no one thought to help him. He'd seen guardsmen fall to their knees to help pick up a dropped documents folder, or even a pen.

His progress through the Mayoral Offices were slow, and he barely noticed the others around him, droning on, some milling about, others working diligently at their desks. One man was feverishly typing gibberish, he could see, a long string of characters uninterrupted by punctuation. He seemed remarkably fixed on his work, and hadn't even looked at Bern. No one seemed to be noticing him, and even the bellman only laconically seemed to acknowledge that anyone had entered the elevator.

Bern's whole body felt weak and feverish. He kept checking over a note

in his head to call for a doctor when he got up to his office. The good doctor had told him there would be side effects of the plan, that nausea and vomiting had been reported in many of the subjects, and disorientation. These were small, limited tests under controlled circumstances. Unknown complications were expected.

When he entered his office, Roger Lanza was in his chair. This, too, was unexpected.

"Oh, hello there, Bern. Didn't know you were coming up, I thought you'd still be in bed." he said, and kicked his feet up on the desk. Bern shuffled over to him. "Do you like how everything's turned out? I hope you saw downstairs. It's like that all over the city. Seems there were still a few kinks in the good doctor's calculations. I'm still getting used to the sense of scale. It's so intense, you can't understand." he took a sharp intake of breath. "Oh well, though. I'll get used to it." he continued, playing with the baubles on Bern's desk, the large marble and basalt chess set he kept on the side for decorative purposes, the pieces being intricately carved and beautifully rendered.

By the time Bern was able to reach his desk his head was pounding and his eyes felt as though a great pressure were pushing at them from the inside out. He felt tired, and wheezy, and grasped at his desk for stability. The wood felt slippery under his hands, and he was a terribly nauseated for a few seconds.

"Old chap, you don't look so well. Are you sure you should be up? Why don't you sit down." said Roger, and used his foot to push Bern into one of the high-backed chairs in front of the desk.

"Roger, what are you doing? Why are you in my seat?" he asked between panting breaths. He had a fever, a burning fever, and he should not have made the walk. He should have gone back to sleep, gone back to sleep, gone back to sleep, the thought kept repeating in his head. But he couldn't sleep. This was the first day of his reign, of his glorious ascension.

"What did you do to me?" he asked.

"Oh, enacting my own plan. You see, in all your pontificating about the glory of Magnacala, the beauty of the city, the course of history going its own way, you didn't stop to think that maybe there was a flaw in your plan. It was terribly myopic of you to think I was just going to go along with it."

"What?" asked Bern. He hacked out a cough but nothing came up. His stomach was starting to churn. I'm going to vomit, he thought, I'm going to vomit.

"I've been working you for a few months now. When Rika told me she wanted to be free, I felt it was all I could do to oblige her. She begged so earnestly, I suppose I was moved by her plight. I couldn't quite understand it, but let it never be said that I wasn't a compassionate man. I helped her, tricked a few guards, plucked little memories from their minds, gave her the knowledge to escape. You should have kept me under lock like the others." said Lanza. He was walking around the room now, and tipping over statues, little things that Bern had collected over the years. A whiskey bottle went over, and a robot came over to lap up the spilled drink. Lanza watched it, tapped it with his foot, amused by the little creature.

"I do understand you a little better now. I rather like this feeling. You don't really understand the allure of power until you've had it." he said.

"But what about all we talked about? You said, you said you believed in me. In what I did." choked out Bern. Lanza snorted.

"Are you insane? I'm not ignorant of the world. I didn't have access to the world net, but books can still get the job done, as the doctor was so willing to provide." he leaned in close to Bern. Bern could see the paleness of Lanza's skin up close, the dryness, unused to an environment that wasn't so hermetically sealed and kept from of grime and dirt. "You remind me of a lot of these old guys. Napoleon, Caesar, Alexander the Great, Genghis Khan, Rhys of Jupiter. All these people considered to be the great unifiers of humanity. And you've got the gall to think that you deserve to be held up to their level? That you were going to lead a grand revolution and bring the whole of creation back under Magnacalan rule? God, you disgust me. You're the kind of person who would push us all over the cliff and into oblivion."

Bern lifted a hand as if to hit him, but Lanza knocked it aside.

"They were exceptional. The best and worst humanity had to offer, and the world just happened to be ready for them. You, on the other hand, are the last member of a dead line. Nothing left for you, Bern, nothing at all."

"I didn't want that. I just wanted to help the city. I love this city." said Bern. He pulled at his shirt and loosened the top two buttons. He needed a doctor.

"Oh, bullshit." said Lanza, tapping his head. "You're dealing with a telepath, remember? I can see it inside you, swirling around. All these dreams of conquest and rulership, like we were back in some dark age where those kinds of things were reasonable. You're insane."

"If I'm so insane, then why were you sitting in my chair, playing with my

toys?" asked Bern, grimacing and attempting to force through Lanza's control. He was a big man, and still strong, but his arms were weak, and his headache pounded even more fiercely when he tried to

"Hahahaha, I guess you're right. That was unfair of me, I apologize. But I wasn't just going to let your whole plan come undone. The more I thought about it, the more it seemed to make sense to take it for myself. You spent so much time, gathering us all together, myself, Rika, the others, all those thousands of hours of tests, those trials the doctor put me through to make sure I was strong enough to reach out to the whole rest of the city. Just think about what you were offering me in return. Did you really think I was going to spend the rest of my life strapped to a chair, withering away so that you could live out your fatuous little power fantasy?" he finished. He was livid, and full of energy that Bern could not before have imagined the small man possessed. His foolishness came back and hit him. In all his time with Lanza, with Rika, with all the other children, he'd never imagined that they would turn against him. They were controlled, they were tools to be used by him. And yet, here he was, slumped over a chair, half succumbing to Roger Lanza's psychic control.

"But I'm not a cruel man. I don't have any elaborate punishment for you. No, what I have is very simple."

Bern stared at the chess board. Something about the pieces was important. He couldn't really tell what, but he knew that moving them was the one and only he wanted to do, more than anything. He would have given anything in the galaxy to move those pieces, and to play against someone else. He would have given up even the Mayoral seat, all the wealth of Jupiter,

everything.

"See, I remember what you were thinking every time you came down to play with me. Lording it over me. That's you in a nutshell, Bern. You were an insecure little shit, and I can say this because I know. You can't fight it. So, in return, you are going to help me. We're going to play games. We're going to play games for a long time, just you and me. Maybe one day I'll let you go, but it is not this day. Nor will it be the next, but one day." said Lanza. "One day, you'll be free. But, for the time being," He moved a piece, "you're going to see what it's like to feel trapped."

Onboard the ship headed back to his home world, Macca and Rika sat hunched over a game board.

"Clear your mind." said Rika. She moved one of her pieces. "It's harder for me to read it that way."

"That sounds immensely counterintuitive." said Macca, moving his own piece.

"Many things are, I think you'll see. A chaotic mind is easy to break down, easy to pick off segment by segment. When your mind is unified, when you are clear and focused, that's where it gets difficult. Where do you breach a wall that has no weaknesses?" she said, and took victory in the game.

Macca shook his head. "I don't know."

"Neither do I, and in that, we are equal." she said, and got up to again run the length of the ship. The other androids watched her run, though it was more out of respect than of anything else. They deferred to Macca, and he in turn deferred to her.

They were nervous, but also curious, which warmed Macca. It wasn't the biggest change, but it was a start, and that most he could ask for. They'd come to Magnacala with nothing, and now they were leaving with something that perhaps held the key to saving him and every other lost android in the galaxy.

When she ran back, she was panting and had worked up a sweat. "Sorry, I just like the feel of running." she said, and sat down in front of the game board. "Wanna try again?"

Macca took his seat. He tried to clear his mind, to take each thing and let it mix together in the grey haze. The other androids gathered around. This was also the first time they'd ever seen Macca beaten at games, and it amused them to no end.

"My move." he said, and moved his first piece forward.

Anri and Sue sat alone near the other end of the ship. They saw Rika run near them, give them a quick salute, turn around, and run back. They were both sleepy, and rested next to an old cargo container. They looked away from each other, though Sue turned to Anri once she saw Rika come by.

"Wasn't that the girl from the wanted posters?" she asked.

"Yes, that was her." said Anri.

"Why is she onboard?" she asked.

"I think my friend let her come with us. I think she asked him to help her."

"Why?"

"It's very complicated. I can't say I fully understand it myself. You should

talk to her sometime on our trip. I think you'd like her. You two are remarkably similar, if what Macca told me about her is true." he said. he thought back to what Bern had said about Rika, about her power, the potential within her and the others. Bern's plan had been enacted, he knew, and the whole city was under a pall. he felt ashamed, but Sue grabbed one of his fingers to get his attention and he suddenly felt more at ease. Sue looked nervous.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"Well, she must have done something to get on that wanted poster, right?"

"Maybe, but that doesn't mean anything. Plenty of people have been made into heroes and villains when they were anything but. I think that's what Rika is, just a victim of where she was born and what was needed to escape. That's never been a reason to ." he said.

Sue was quiet for a while after that. Rika made another lap a few minutes later and Sue waved.

"Will you ever come back here?" she asked as Rika ran back. "To the city, I mean."

"I don't think so." said Anri, thinking about the shadow of the broken stair, the ruins left in their own escape, the state of its citizens. "It's not the same city I was born in. What about you, do you ever want to go back to your village?"

Sue thought about this for a moment, her gaze wandering from object to object along the length of the ship, machine neophytes, the small android made birds that flitted around, living diagnostics and security tools. It was a

beautifully alien ship, eclectic and garish in its use of colors, at times breaking at odd angles only to give way to sloping curves. It was as much a work of art as a ship, and Sue was one of the few humans in the galaxy to have ever set foot on one.

"Not in a million years." she said. Anri laughed. He couldn't have said it better himself.

The next few days of the Diamond City passed by uneventfully. People snapped out of their stupors as from a dream. They remembered who they were, where they lived, what they actually did in the city. The man at the desk looked at his days worth of gibberish, deleted it all, and went home to take a shower. There was panic, but the cops were there to help them. They were still wearing their plain clothes, but they were done with the skulking and the shifting around. There were no black harriers in the sky.

"Mayor Lanza apologizes for the confusion." said one official. Another piped in. "This was an unexpected event, but rest assured, the mayoral office has refused to allow this to disturb either our new initiatives or our commitment to the people of the diamond city." The crowd mumbled.

"Furthermore," said the first, "If you'll access the WorldNet, you'll see the change in the laws has been enacted. State injunctions have been made void, along with the mayor's exceptional powers. All unions, labor parties, and what were once called dissidents have had their illegal status revoked. They are now legal under Magnacalan law. We will remain an independent power, distinct from either Jupiter or any other force. We are Magnacala. We have survived rebellions, tyrants, and disaster. We will survive whatever awaits us

in the future." said the official and, seeing that there was nothing more to say, they dispersed to their duties. No one seemed to question where Mayor Carlin and his band, drooling in their rooms and prisons in the Mayoral office, had gone.

It took a while for the crowd to get going, but once one man started clapping, others followed. Soon the whole city was in an uproar, and Lanza watched from Bern's office. Mayor Lanza, he liked the sound of it. A little provincial, maybe, but there was no getting around that. Bern sat in front of the chessboard, resetting the pieces. He motioned to Lanza, but he waved him away. There was no more time for games, just as there was no more time to be spent waiting around.

A haze was settling over the city. They were going to expect dust and micro-particles descending from the atmosphere for the rest of the night, and people down in the streets were already extending umbrellas and turning on lights to fight back against choking, low-lying clouds.

Reports were coming in through his private channel. Meetings were set up. Businessmen and representatives of the industry of Magnacala were there to meet him to discuss their plans for expansion. The representatives of Jupiter were getting antsy, they said, and they were waiting on him for a response. He felt the strain on his body, the struggle to keep everyone in check. The devices Bern had built alleviated the stress, but it was still there. He consumed food like a mad who just come out of a desert.

It was like they could all feel something was wrong, but couldn't quite pin it. There was a fog over them that wasn't lifting, and couldn't be lifted. The city was peaceful, no riots, no crime, or if there was, it wasn't getting reported.

The whole city was calmed, under sedation. No one complained, all work was done without hesitation. But something was missing from the city. It was alive, but it wasn't really alive. Something has been taken from it.

Gold Touchdown, the entertainment strip was a shell of what it was. There were no back alley deals going on under Mayor Lanza, the casinos were largely empty except for the guards and owners whose job it was to be there in the first place. No one wanted to go down to Gold Touchdown, except those who'd made it a routine of their lives to do so. That was it. The city had fallen deeply into routine: comfortable, controllable, recordable routine. They were all alive, and conscious, but all the joy of living in the city was gone, because there was a great joy to living in the city, despite it all. There was something good when the trains were filled with happy people on the day their pay came, even if they knew they owed it all and then some to someone else.

Magnacala was like any city in that the overwhelming majority lived largely apart from the dealings of the Mayors, the foreign delegates, and the plainclothes. There were many who didn't hate the Machines for what they'd done, even believed they'd done the right thing. There were so many people who'd only wanted to get by on a paycheck, keep their children safe, and enjoy their day off lounging in bed with the fan on and some music streaming from the WorldNet. Now they still lived their lives, but the little pleasures they once had were gone. Now the trains were filled with people who trudged through life, looking at the world through a desaturated lens. There was no spark anywhere, none of the vigor or energy that had made the city what it was, just a dull haze that fallen over everything.