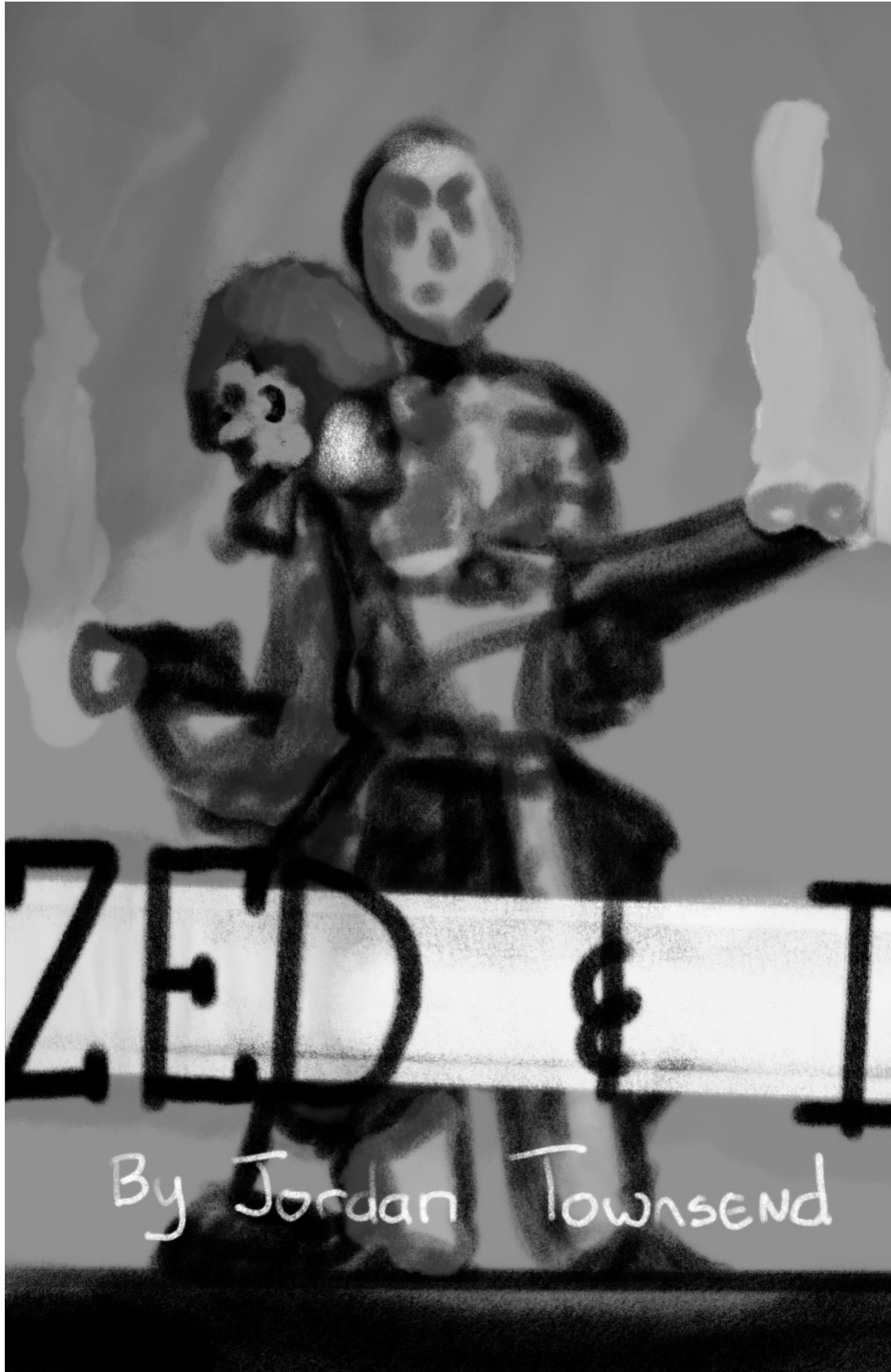


ZED AND I

BY

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CHAPTER 1 — BREAKFAST OF CHAMPIONS

I sit here in a sweltering room typing on a broken table that sways sporadically as I think of what to write next. What was once sweat has dried, staining my clothes, and leaving me thirsty. I wonder how your day has been. Hopefully nothing like ours. That we coped with it, I'll never know—perhaps that you'll never know of it helps, I think. Now that I've had a moment to go through the day, let me start with a cup of coffee.

They called it coffee, since it came in a chipped ceramic mug you might find on any military base or café old enough to carry their stock. The thick liquid that was in the mug wasn't something that we could drink though—only something synthetic could digest the nanites within the liquid without it causing instant renal failure. Someone, I correct myself. Zed might be a synthetic being, but he acutely had some form of life to him.

A smile turned the corner of his lips as he brought the liquid to them and sipped.

“Have to say that this is the best cup of joe that I've had in quite a while,” Zed said, “best to get it before it congeals.”

He had spoken with this odd style of speak from the time I pulled most of him out of the dumpster by my complex and started to fix him up—same with the mixing of odd phrases and strange loops. I don't know if it was synaptic damage or just the way he was wired, but I left it

alone as a part of his personality subsystems when reading through his code.

I grimaced and then smiled at him.

“We have a pretty busy morning ahead of us, so once you’re done and I’ve eaten my eggs,” I said as the waiter came and placed them before me, “let’s get a move on.”

Zed, still holding the mug, nodded and downed the rest of it in one pull. There were always things that unnerved me about synthetics, and their ability to eat and drink things whole was one of them.

I sat there eating my eggs, of which variety I did not know, but enjoyed regardless.

Once done and having wiped my mouth with the napkin Zed handed me from the silver dispenser, I motioned for us to get up. I threw a twenty-dollar bill on the table as Zed headed for the door and turned back towards me with an artificial eyebrow cocked in a questioning manner. He was getting faster than me. I was unfortunately getting old. With his maintenance routines I had in place, he was as spry as ever.

We exited the café and made our way to the dusty red beater we called our stake out vehicle, and got in.

Though the technology to get the thing started was ancient by today's systems, the area that we were headed was not on the up and up, and we needed to blend in—which the old fella did fine, as long as it didn't need to sit there running all day. This particular day was hot, again. As it had been the day prior, and the last few years during this time of year. Otherwise, it was storms and floods running amok, and there were plenty of folks stuck in those areas too poor to get out and make it somewhere safer. As we drove downtown the buildings began to show permanent water damage up along the walls almost to the roofs of the single floor buildings. After the first couple of years of the flooding, those stuck here, that could afford the luxury, built sealed doors and

windows that could be used in times of flood and robbery to try to save their lives and livelihoods.

The engineless car we rode in was just quiet enough to tail someone if needed but gave off enough sound to tell people not to get too close to it in case something bad happened. It really was a good vehicle, and though I knew we would be ditching it before the end of the day—stripping off the tracking marks on the paint job that we had only applied last night and crushing it for scrap at our junkyard. It was a nice cover if anyone got too close to what we were really doing. Anyone asking would be told that we were commonplace scrappers seeing if anything looked worth taking, and if they persisted a simple flash of silver on black got all if not the most unabashedly curious away from us.

“You could just move the car,” said Zed, and he laughed.

He was linked to the implant that let me telegraph my intentions towards him without error, and I laughed.

“Guess you’re right, Zed,” I said.

He kept laughing as well, a fully realistic chortle that was based in part on my grandfather’s laugh that I remembered as a child before his passing from skin cancer. It was so prevalent at the time that there was no chance of survival once it had begun. Nowadays it was a simple series of shots, some bedrest, and you were right as rain. Whatever that really meant. Dying slower I supposed.

The drive through the downtown area took about half an hour before we reached our first destination.

I parked the car and turned off the motor. The hum droned into silence slowly. Once it was completely quiet, I looked over at Zed, who was scrolling through his itinerary. It took little to no

time for him to get what he needed.

“Looks like there should be three of them in there, with I think, two synthetics, and one biological.” Zed said.

Biological is what we call each other now, not just human—since the synthetic races came into play. Only the older generations like myself, slipped up from time to time.

Zed turned to the back seat of the car, where a dingy blanket hid what he wanted.

He pulled out a small shotgun, one he had customized himself. He had chopped it to easily carry it and filled it with a mixture of anti-biological and synthetic rounds. The anti-biological rounds left no trace for the forensics teams that found our work to compare with anything—similarly to what rock salt would have done. Something he had come up with himself as we spoke about getting into the business. I pulled out my black and silver pistol and checked the chamber. One was ready to go—along with their cousins below. I would be focused on the biological, he the synthetics. Zed reached back below the blanket once more and pulled out one more item. This he slipped into his other pocket and then he looked up to me.

“Let’s get this over with,” I said.

We opened the doors of our car and closed them as quietly as we could while maintaining our pace towards the building across the street. Zed led the way, not only with the more powerful weapon, but a reinforced body meant for this work hidden beneath his work clothes.

He wrapped knuckles against a heavy metal door, their sound echoing into what lay beyond.

I began to psych myself up for what was to come.

The door opened slowly, and a metallic gleaming eye peered out at us. One of our synths.

In one fluid motion Zed pulled the shotgun from his pocket, placed it against the eye, and pulled one of the triggers. What had been the head of the synthetic being exploded inwards, lighting a

hallway reaching beyond the twitching corpse. It fell backwards from the blast, allowing Zed to slam the door open—clear the hallway, and get us inside before closing the metal door behind us.

“They’re coming, heavy on the right,” Zed passed along to my implant.

I nodded as we made our way down the hallway, hopefully ready to get in and out as soon as possible.

A gun popped out from the right door down the hallway.

Zed shot the hand holding the gun, both disintegrating in a moment of blood and metal.

The man that the hand used to belong to screamed and stepped out into the hallway. One shot from me and his head popped, spraying facial and brain matter all along the hallway walls and ceiling.

We rushed to the last room on the left, where the door had been reinforced, and got ready for the last synthetic.

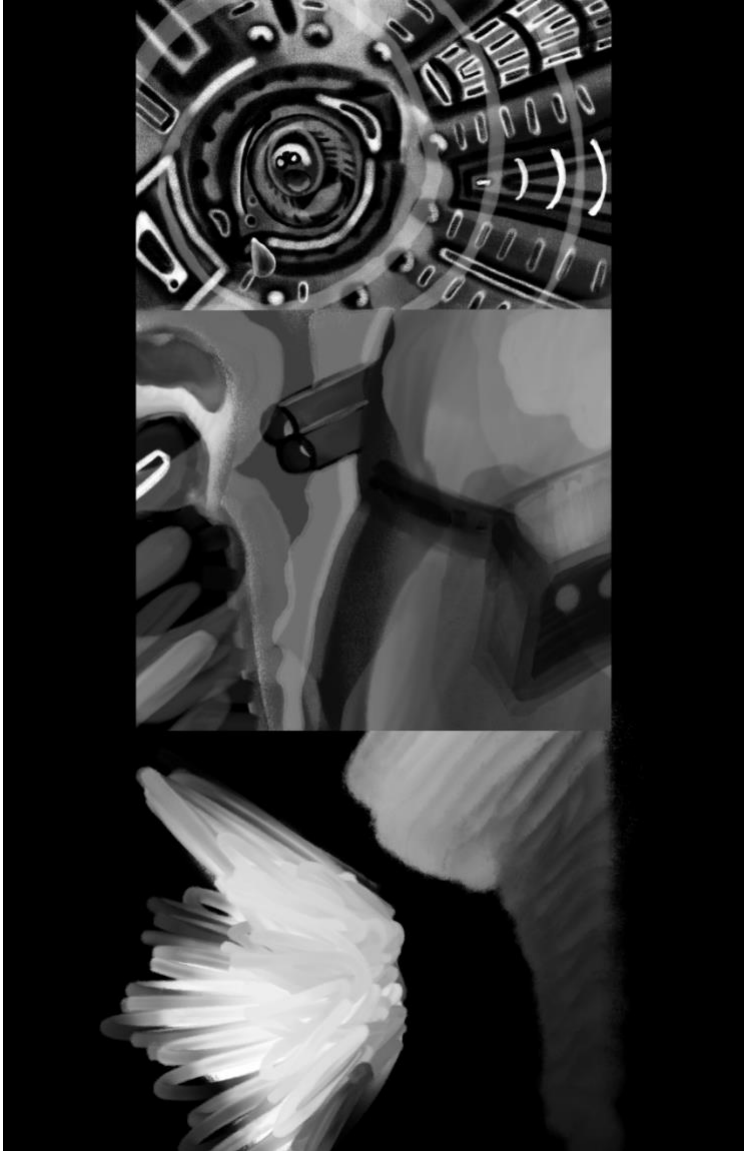
“Shoot high, aim low,” I passed along to Zed.

He didn’t have time to react as the door slammed off of its hinges, staggering Zed for just long enough for the last synthetic—carrying something under their arm, to run down the hallway, He was a younger model, and though the first door came off easily, the second door—the one we came in, stopped them.

They turned around and began to bring up what they had been holding to shield their body, leaving their legs completely exposed. The child’s screams couldn’t be heard over the ringing in my ears.

Zed scowled at him, cocked his shotgun, and blew both legs of the synth out from under them both. The look of surprise on their face, momentarily let loose the screaming biological, our target, who was likely deafened semi-permanently as the synth flew against the door and

slumped to the ground. Zed walked up to him, who appeared to be a teenage model themselves and was scared out of their mind, pulled his shotgun up against the bridge of his nose, and pulled the trigger. The indent in the door behind left no loss of the imagination to the strength of his rounds. I swept the screaming child up after stashing my piece. Zed went off to do a parameter check and a few minutes later came back grinning.



“Looks like we got them all,” said Zed, “easy peasy.”

“Can you scan the kid to make sure they’re alright?”, I asked.

He nodded and checked over the still screaming child.

“A couple of burst ear drums but they’ll be home to get it fixed up soon enough,” said Zed.

I smiled.

“Let’s get out of here,” I said.

We shoved the now defeated synthetics to clear a path to the corner of the hallway and stepped over as much of the mess as we could. They bled just as much as any biological.

Once we were back in the car, I wrapped the child in the blanket, more to keep him muffled than for their comfort and off we went to find our drop point, as Zed guided the car.

From across the street, a building that had a single semi covered window closed its curtain. Soon a black car hit the road, heading for parts unknown.

CHAPTER 2 — HOMERUN

We made our way uptown, and westward—to where the richer folk lived, ate more than perfunctory proteins in the morning, and didn't have much to worry about—as far as I could figure anyhow.

The house that we pulled up to was surrounded by a wrought iron fence wrapped with wire that was once used to keep livestock in place. Now it was a great home defense system from synthetic to biological alike. The first time we had been brought in Zed had mentioned how it wouldn't do much to stop most things that could jump over the fencing completely. That it was a fallacy to feel safer for those locked within the binding metal stakes.

I had to ask him to be quiet at that point, and he just gave me a wry smile and winked.

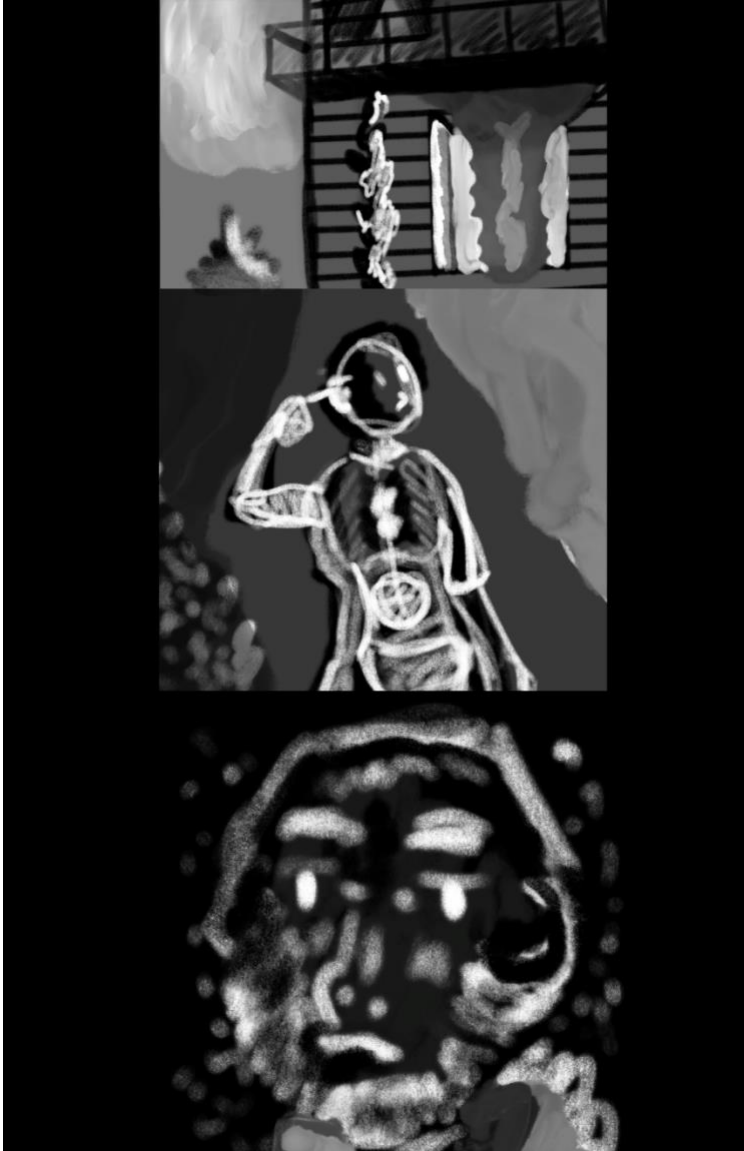
This time was much easier, as we had already contacted them ahead of our arrival and the guard was ready to let us in. Except that when I pulled up to their booth, there was no one to be seen. The gate was open, so perhaps they had gone in to the building to tell the family the good news. Zed stared at the booth while I drove us through, and for a moment, his brow furrowed.

I was on edge as it was. The ringing in my ears had taken twenty minutes to stop, and it had immediately been replaced with the constant crying of the child, who was honestly likely in a lot of pain.

We parked the car away from the main door. Something that my mentor had told me to do once in case others got boxed in, it gave us a better chance of getting out of a bad situation. I had been doing it for years at this point, out of habit.

I gathered the miserable child from the back of the car, and Zed went ahead of us to speak to those inside. He was inside well before I closed our sides door, my back to him. An explosion rocked through the air. Faster than I thought possible, the shockwave hit us, and I almost smothered the child against the hot metal door. I turned around in time to see Zed walking out of the house, his clothes missing, and his metal plating singed where his clothes had contacted the explosive.

“Whew!”, yipped Zed, all smiles.



What the fuck was going on? I pulled my gun from inside my jacket pocket, as Zed ran to the trunk of the car and pulled out a few of his own. He swung his hostlers around him and clipped them into place in record time, and I readied to guard the child if anyone came at me.

From inside the house yelling could be heard.

At least someone survived.

We readied ourselves as we had done less than an hour ago, and into the breach we went once more.

As we came into the atrium of the building, smoke drifted from the room on the left up towards the second floor. We double checked our blind spots and head for the room.

Zed peeked around the corner of the open doorway and nodded.

I walked in.

At least two beings were dead, and the man who had been yelling was sitting in a chair covered in blood, apparently caused by the loss of most of the front of his legs from where the explosion had reached him. He was staring at the bloody gristle around the room, and somehow focusing on cleaning his nails unaware that he had bare bone showing from one leg, and shattered bone protruding from the other.

Dazed, he looked up at me and smiled.

“Good news I hope?”, he asked, before collapsing and slumping out of his chair and on to his face on the floor.

I went over to the man and checked to see if he had any life left in him. Unfortunately, those were his last words. As he continued to bleed out on the area rug, I took a moment to check the two other bodies. One was the security guard gathered from the remains of his clothing. The

other I didn't know. A female, I think. Unrecognizable now. Perhaps a maid or concerned family member. The mother of the child had died in childbirth, which was rare in this day and age.

We should get a move on, I thought to Zed, who was standing by the door. His smile faltered momentarily and then it was back to a determined look and a curt nod.

“Can you take photos of the bodies quickly, while I go check the rest of the house?”, I asked.

He nodded, and gave him the child to look after while I went and checked from room to room of the large house.

It was quick work. There were no survivors that I could find.

I came back down to Zed who was making faces at the child in an attempt to normalize the situation.

“Let's get out of here and figure out our next step,” I said.

Zed nodded once more, and taking the child with us we headed out to the car. I pulled out quickly and we made our way out of the gates as quickly and as safely as possible.

My hands gripped the steering wheel tightly as we made our way down the street. This was all wrong. It was to be a simple operation; save the child, get the reward.

Zed looked at me puzzled.

“Do you want me to check the personal files of the family to see if there are any living relatives left to take him?”, Zed asked.

I nodded.

“May as well, or we're going to have to drop him off at the local hospital to get those ears looked at,” I said.

He nodded and began to mentally check his logs for what he could find.

As I attempted to maintain keeping the car on the road, my body began to shake—tremors from

the adrenaline of being near an explosion. A feeling that I had experienced before in a previous life more often than I cared to think of. I pushed the memories aside and focused on the markers on the road, They appeared to be moving in slow motion. I checked the speedometer of the car and found that I was doing nearly double the speed limit for this area, and taking a breath, slowed down to safe speeds. We didn't have a chair for the child as it was, and I really didn't need to see him go through the windshield because of my error.

“Let's head back to the yard and gather ourselves, can you treat him while we do that?’, I asked.

Zed nodded, still going through the logs. He was an adept multitasker.

“There are at least a thousand people with the last name Winston within the city limits,” Zed said.

I ground my teeth.

That won't work. We'll have to drop him off at the nearest hospital for his ears then. I thought.

Zed nodded and pointed a free finger to the right, letting me know to turn down the upcoming street.

As we headed down toward the roadway a black car turned down behind us.

CHAPTER 3 — NUNS AND GUNS.

We reached the small religious hospital, a clinic really, and pulled the car over so that Zed could place the child into the adoption basket left all over the city. As he turned back to head on back to the car, a flash went off, and the black car that had been following us zipped by before I had time to react.



Shit, who the hell was that? I thought.

Zed slammed the door shut, “I have no fucking clue. Should we follow them?”, he asked.

I shook my head. I needed time to think.

“We should head back to the yard and get rid of the vehicle as quickly as possible,” I said.

Zed led on.

CHAPTER 4 — I MENTIONED NUNS, DIDN'T I?

We pulled into one of the side entrances of the stockyard and made our way through to the crushing rig. A large magnetic claw tower, automated from below, and the crushing wheel press itself, which was twice my height and only able to be run during the day due to city sound ordinances.

There had been times when we had to use it on synthetics, and I tried to see if Zed showed any change in emotion as they were released into the rig but could find none.

He would refer to them as the nameless before their deaths, and kept it that way once the job had run its course.

He slammed the door open, bending it slightly beyond its originally intended reach, and headed over to the large hose wrapped on a spool by the outbuilding. I moved in the opposite direction as he moved, as what he was about to spray could remove my skin with little effort. It was another of his chemical reactions. As he let the liquid flow, soaking into the car from top to bottom with—it's paint, both fresh and old, ran from the metal until it was almost completely stripped. It took only a few minutes. As Zed walked back with the hose and began to wrap it up again, I started the crushing mechanism. It moved over the car and lowered a ferrous plate, electrified it, and pulled the car over towards the crusher.

Zed came around from the other side of the building riding in a bulldozer with a full scoop of gravel mixed with another of his concoctions—this time spreading the mix over the liquid slurry that had pooled under the car as the paint ran. Soon enough it was evaporating into the air, semi-harmlessly to either of us.

The car crushed, I took a moment to wipe the sweat off my brow, taking off my hat to wipe what remained of my hair when I saw them.

Helicopters coming in our direction. Close enough to see that there were beings hanging out from the sides. Their bodies glinting in the sun.

At first I thought that we were lucky when they flew by, only for my relief to turn to dismay as they rounded back, slowing this time and in apparent descent.

Guarded by a synthetic wielding a machine gun, a smock draped shape dropped down from the helicopter, and made their way to around the out building to come up behind Zed. She held a shotgun up to Zed's body, and as he turned around it dawned on him that she was in fact a nun of the gun toting variety—and let me know they were headed inside. From behind the crushing device, I watched as they walked towards to the out building and went inside. Who this person could be I had no clue, but I knew that if I didn't figure out a way inside Zed may be done for.



Watching the helicopters as they dusted the ground, in a final landing configuration, and as they touched down with minute grace—I stared at the large guns that each synthetic had pointed towards the out building, and realized there was no way to get to the door that get me to Zed. Suddenly his voice chimed in my head. “Connecting visual and sound systems, is this okay?”, asked the implants interface. I nodded and a small digitalized pane of information came through into my consciousness. Within it was a live video feed of the shapeless woman in her nunnery getup, a large silver shotgun aimed mostly at Zed sitting on her lap, and the sound of Zed’s ambient noises as well as her breathing patterns. Useful for needing to know when people are lying or scared. She was neither. Small even breaths throughout and a small smile on her lips belied any true intention on her part, other than the gun, which Zed was focusing on at the moment intently.

She looked at him for a moment, and then down at her shotgun and her smile widened. “You don’t need to worry about this. I’m sure you’ll be fine. Please let your friend know that he may as well come in here since we’ve been able to see him since swinging around the lot twenty minutes ago.

Fuck, I thought, and with raised hands—came out in front of the helicopters where the synthetics laughed at me and motioned for me to come inside.

A few moments later I was standing in front of the door of the out building and knocked.

“Please come in, dear,” said the unknown voice.

I opened the door and checked Zed to see if he noticed me coming in. He nodded minutely. Her smile faltered for a moment, before raising again.



“No need for theatrics. If anything happens to me or anyone outside, you’ll be razed from the ground before you can think of what to do next,” the Nun said.

I pointed at her garb with a questioning look.

“Oh this—yes, I’m in fact a Nun, as you may have already guessed, but as this little fella points out, perhaps not your normal non violent type. We’re going to have a small chat and then if everything is copacetic, I’ll be on my way and you’ll have a much easier day ahead of you. If

not, you come with us, and we'll be done by lunch," She said.

My lips pursed, I thought for a moment and sat down in a chair next to Zed.

"Is this about this morning?," I asked after a few minutes of silence had passed.

She nodded.

"I would like to think so," She said.

"May we have your—or a, name please Sister?," I asked.

Again she nodded. "You may call me Eleanor."

Good, somewhere to start, if we made it through the interview process of course.

Sister Eleanor swung her gun towards me, and Zed tightened reflexively.

"Don't worry about telling me your information, we have all we need and more from this morning," Eleanor said.

I nodded slowly. "And—the car this morning. That was a camera wasn't it?," I asked.

Her smile widened. "In one." She wagged a finger on her free hand at us, as though we needed a mild scolding for getting it so quickly.

"We saved the child, a little worse for wear but living regardless," I said.

Sister Eleanor laughed. It was not a happy noise, perfunctory at best.

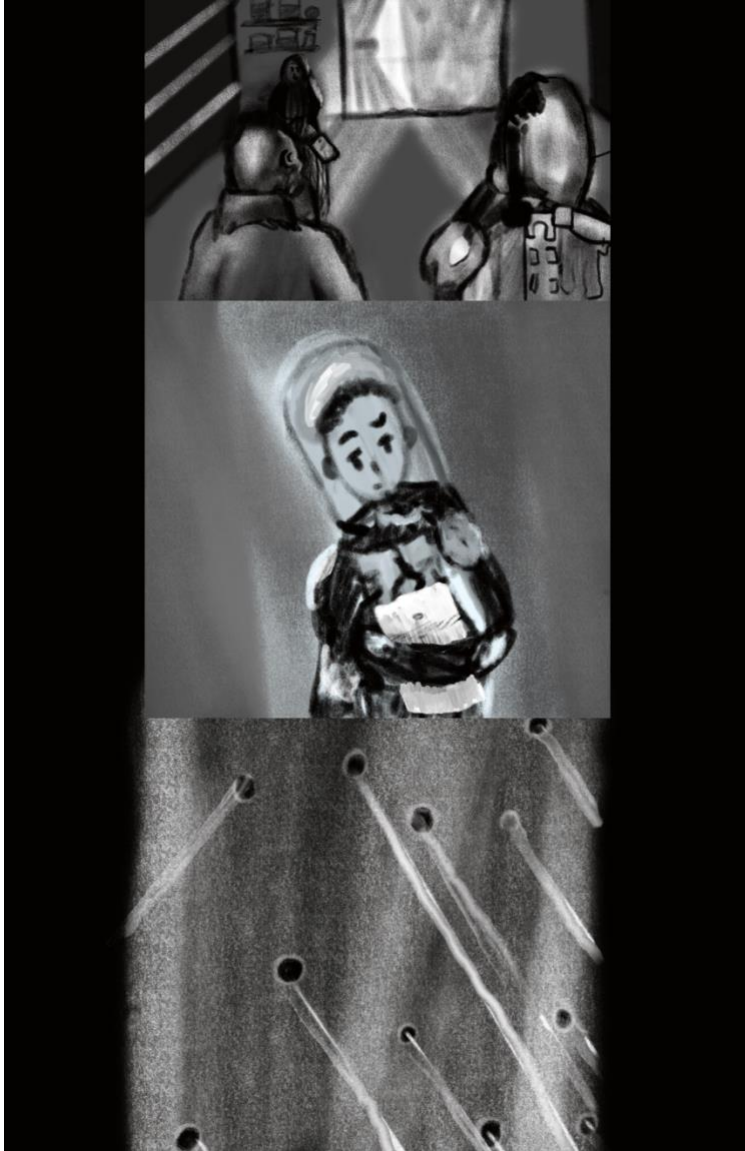
"There you are correct, but it's not the child that I'm here about unfortunately—whose name is Samuel in case you didn't read that line in your logs. Your type are always like that—get the job done, then worry about optics. I fear this time it's done you no good in any way," Sister Eleanor said.

She reached into her tunic and pulled out an old manila envelope.

Zed went and gathered it from her. He came back to our side of the room and looked down at me in a quizzical manner, unsure of what to do with himself.

I sent him a message through the implant. “Relax, what could happen?”.

Bullets came through the windowed wall where the Sister Eleanor sat. She looked at Zed, and fell from her chair. The sound of helicopters could be heard leaving the grounds quickly, as I ran through the room and out the door. They were definitely leaving without her.



That is the story so far. This is going to be a long format project I think, done for fun when time permits. Much pleasure,

-J.

Welcome back.

THE END