

*In the end all that matters is what we've done.*  
*-Xeno Hospes*

The room is white. It's a room and yet it's not. It was tight and enclosed while endlessly wide and frighteningly void of any other soul. The back of his head began to ache in a way it hadn't before. A noise reminiscent of static began to rise. He could hear it vibrating off the inside of his eardrum like an impending infection.

"Are you listening?"

He turned his head.

He wasn't alone.

Suddenly this felt familiar.

He had been here before.

Why couldn't he remember before?

He felt as though he were continuing something.

Everything was known yet distant.

There was someone else there.

They were talking.

"—What? Oh yeah. Sorry. What were you saying?"

"Why are you doing this?"

"I need you."

“But I think you should let me go.”

“It’s easy for you to say that.”

“Why?”

“You’re not here, you don’t have to go on.” He looked downward to a floor that wasn’t there, “You don’t have to... live.”

“But you do. Life is a privilege, not a burden.”

“That’s easy for you to say, you don’t have to live it.”

“But you do—“

“Why do you keep saying that?”

“You do.”

“Shut up! Just shut up—shut the fuck up—do you know what I would give to trade places. To be you. To just be dead.”

“You don’t want to be dead.”

“How do you know? The only reason I’m here is because I promised myself I would never do what you did.”

“It’s not fun.”

“What’s not fun?”

“Do you think I exist somewhere pleasant? Someplace horrifying? I don’t—I don’t even know where I exist. All I know is I don’t. But I’m aware of it, every single second of every moment. I am trapped. I am nothing. I think. I feel. But I am not. I don’t understand it except I know that it’s real. It’s really the only thing that I know is real.”

He awoke in a hot and cold sweat. Tense like he was about to be punched.

“I can’t leave him there.”

He had accidentally woken up his wife sleeping next to him.

“Please stop moving the bed.”

He felt bad immediately, “I’m sorry honey.” He said.

“—Are you ok?” She asked, still half asleep.

"Yes."

"Bad dream?"

"No."

"It's ok."

"I know. Don't worry about it. Sorry for waking you." He leaned in and kissed her on the forehead. "You can go back to sleep."

"Can't leave who, where? What was it about?"

"I don't even know." He put his hands in his face, took a deep sighing breath. "It just felt, so real."

*What's the point of anything if not to change  
the world?  
-Oren Cloud*

My name is Oren Cloud. I was born in the city with my mother and father. But it wasn't long before they were killed, and I'd rather not say how that happened. The point is, I'm a city kid. I grew up hopping around from place to place and sleeping on whoever's couch would have me for the night.

There was this local firehouse across the street from a place I often stayed, and those guys were really cool. They used to throw me sandwiches when I walked by and let me come in and sleep on a cot if it was really cold out; though they were always trying to get me to go sleep in a shelter—I never did.

Cops are dicks, but I understand why, I mean if I were a cop having to deal with drunken little shits every Friday night hopping turnstiles, I would be a dick too. One night, I was really hungry, and the fireman weren't there. I think they were off fighting a fire, because the truck wasn't there either. But what was there—a produce stand, with all that fruit, just sitting there—ripe for the taking. I knew it was wrong, I knew I shouldn't, but I was hungry, and whether my stomach got the better of me, or my survival instincts took over; or whether I'm making excuses for the conscious decision I made to deliberately break the law, doesn't matter. What matters is what happened. I grabbed that green apple, turned the corner, and ran. Unfortunately, or maybe not depending on how you look at it, there was a guy

being paid to guard the fruit stand overnight, and he saw me, and well, whether pride in his job, loyalty to his family, employer, or extreme boredom—he gave chase.

You might say, “It’s just an apple.” I might agree. But fresh produce had become less and less readily available as years went by, and this guy wanted his \$50 or his foot in my face for the trouble. I panicked, my blood was pumping, and I didn’t know what to do... I ran and ran, and he was behind me. Suddenly it all made sense, and without thinking too much, I took the opportunity as I rounded the next block, ducked into a doorway alcove, ripped my coat off, and threw it into a corner by my feet, pretending to ring the doorbell. The guy was running so fast to catch up that all he did was turn his head for a moment as he passed me. I guess he didn’t realize who I was. I peeked around the corner, saw him turning his head left and right at the end of the block, looking for which way I went, before picking a random direction and beginning to run again. I seized my opportunity, flipped my coat inside out so the color was different, put it back on, and threw the hood up as I walked back in the direction I had come from, making sure to keep my face hidden and my head down as I walked, eyes to the ground. When I got to the end of the block, my face bumped into something very large and bulky, another person.

“I’m sorry!” I said.

“Never apologize,” the voice was deep and crackling.

“I wasn’t looking where I was going.”

“But I was.”

“Oh... well, ok. I’m sorry,” I stepped back and turned to walk around him.

But before I got very far, he stuck his arm out to block my path.

“What did I say?” his tone was gruff and unsatisfied.

“Excuse me?” I was confused.

“That’s better.”

“What?”

“Don’t apologize.”

“Ok...”

“I saw what you did.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Without asking permission, he grabbed my coat, unzipped it, and reached into my breast pocket where he revealed a shiny green apple.

“I saw what you did.” He said.

“So? – what are you going to do about it?” I was giving him my teenage attitude.

He laughed, smiled, and said, “Teach you how to do better.”

That’s how I met Xeno Hospes. He’s my friend, my mentor, my father, my brother, and my family. He’s the only man who ever cared enough to invest an interest in me other than a bandage. I owe him everything. In the coming years I would learn how to be a true master of disguise, how to disappear without a thought, how to get what I wanted through words, and in the worst-case scenario—how to kill someone with any weapon—a gun, my bare-hands, or a ballpoint pen.

We worked undercover cases in the inner city for a while, then outsourced our private company for governmental concerns. This took us to distant and remote locations to topple local warlords, extract political refugees, and provide aid to destitute nations that a parent country couldn’t publicly acknowledge their affiliation with. We were good at it. I was good at it. But I wouldn’t be so good if I hadn’t been trained so well, by such a loving friend. If it weren’t for him, I wouldn’t be the man I am today. Hell, I probably wouldn’t even be alive. I’d probably be lying dead in a ditch somewhere. But I’ve been doing this a while, and I’m growing tired. Tired of the killing. Tired of watching the same problems happen again and again. Like the whole world is on some rinse and repeat laundry cycle and no one wants to pay attention to the truth of it all.

I met a woman. Her name is Betty. She’s great. I think I love her.

I want to get married. I want to have kids. I want to retire.

I want to get old and fat and have arguments about who’s going to take the trash out. Maybe, if I’m lucky, Betty and I can agree on making our son do it. After all, it’ll help him build character. I know it worked for me.

*There is good in every bad, and bad in every good. Every moment we are alive is a moment to learn. Each failure carries a tool. The most horrific event of our lives can teach us the most valuable lesson, and there is rarely success without consequence.*  
-Xeno Hospes

Between the square grid of a chessboard with red and white pieces a hand moves the white queen into a vulnerable position, the red bishop takes the queen and exposes it's king.

“A gamble. I should have known.”

“What?”

“You like to take chances.”

They both laugh.

“Told you I'd beat you someday.”

Hidden beneath a mixture of old brick and steel shafts at the bottom of an opening sits a small garden tucked between larger buildings. Two men sit around an old wood table with decades of nicks and scratches up and down the sides. They've been playing chess for what seems like hours. Moving their pieces without speaking to one another, anticipating moves, communicating in a different way.

The older man breaks the silence.

“This is not the defense you were taught. You'll be backing yourself into a trap.”

“That's what you think.”

“Growing bold are we?”

“Not every lesson is a teachable moment.”

“But they are.”

“Real action is not a game. Without consequences we don’t make the same choices. None of this matters.”

“Believing there are no consequences in a game can be misguided. Many games have real action. Having behavioral discipline in real situations is an asset, not a liability. This discipline comes through repetition, training, and habit forming.”

“Improvisation is harder to predict.”

The younger man smiled and castled his king to safety.

“Showy moves do not win the day,” the older man said.

Overhead a booming sound explodes red and yellow fireworks. High above the walls of their enclosure, a geometric outline of tall buildings glow as the sounds of celebration spread through the postmodern city. It’s unification day.

“Oren!” A woman shouts from the backdoor of a small house behind them.

“Honey, do we have plates?”

The younger man turns around to respond to his wife. “No honey! Please bring them when you come.” He turned back to the older man.

“So, will you be the godfather?”

“Oh, really? Wow—” The older man was surprised by the question.

“Congratulations!” He sat up in his chair. —“I’d be honored.”

The two men seemed to share a moment of affection before being interrupted by a buzzing sound in one of their pockets. The older man reached in and pulled out a communicator.

“I’m sorry,” he looked at the device. “It’s work.”

“Of course.” Oren smiled.

The older man put the communicator to his ear. Someone on the other end seemed to have stolen his attention.

“Listen, I’m sorry I can’t—Right. Ok. I understand.”

He turned to his friend.

“The office?” Oren asked.

“Yes, I’m afraid so.”



The two men smiled at each other. Oren called back to his wife that an emergency had come up at work. This wasn't something new. She didn't like it, but she was understanding. The two men got in a car and made their way outside the city to a remote office. It was an unassuming building next to a corporate parking lot. It could have been an employee locker room. Oren stood in front of a keypad lock underneath a security camera typing the access code.

"Am I going up or are you?"

"You this time."

They went inside to find a singular large room with a fluorescent tube overhang. Linoleum floors. It looked like something out of last century. Oren walked straight towards one of the lockers expecting something to be inside. It was. He removed a small pack that rattled with some equipment inside. He opened the locker immediately next to it. There were two suits hanging on the rods of each and a pair of helmets. Oren had already opened the pack and was sorting through the gear. There was a digital tablet inside with a blinking green light. The name 'Xeno Hospes' moved across the screen.

"I think this is for you." Oren said handing the device to his friend.

"It says the path has been cleared. We're good for anonymous liftoff."

"Where is she parked?"

"Under the lot."

"Oh, fun." Oren laughed.

"In and out. Tonight is our only chance."

"Gotcha."

"How do we get there?"

"Maintenance line leads to a hanger. There's an access point for the electric workers inside this building."

"How do we get out?"

"Precision takeoff through the underground ramp. We drive it through the subterranean levels and then kick off from the incline that leads to ground level."

"Are you doing this or am I?"

"We both know you're better." Xeno moved to giving the rundown. "They're keeping it in international territory. Plan is to use the opening ceremony of the

new space station as a cover to move it.”

“Gotcha.”

“We have a window of maybe thirty minutes. In-and-out. No mistakes.”

“Gotcha.”

“Oren, you listening? This is serious. If we don’t make this trade, a lot of people are going to die.”

“Where is it?”

“Intel says it’s being kept on the station itself, level five, in a secure vault.”

“Aww man... my wife is gonna kill me.”

Xeno laughed, “She’ll forgive you. She always does.”

“We better get going.” Oren’s voice had changed to a serious tone. It was time to work. He moved to the metal plate in the floor and lifted a folding handle in it’s center, pulling it up. The two climbed down into a glowing darkness of fiber optic cables. When they came up on the other side they found a small plane about the size of a twentieth century fighter jet. They climbed inside.

“So how do we actually get out?” Oren asked.

Xeno smiled. “Hand me that tablet.” Oren reached into the pack of equipment and gave Xeno the tablet he had been using earlier. “Like this.” He said pressing something on device. A few moments later the concrete wall in front of them began to slide upwards into the ceiling. There were about a dozen empty parking spaces in front of them now and a column in the distance that read “B-1”.

“What if someone tried to park here?” Oren asked. “We just roll over them?”

“Corporate parking, reserved spots. These are for nonexistent board members.”

“Clever.”

“You ready?” Xeno asked.

“Always.” Oren grinned.

Rockets fired and the plane was thrown forward up the black concrete ramp, slingshotting them towards the sky. In no time they were moving from ground, to low Earth orbit, up, toward the space station. Along the way the sun began peaking around the planets edge. It gleamed off the thin mirrored cable of the new space elevator. As they passed through the clouds it looked as though the sky had been sliced in half. Difficult to see at first, the tether glittered through the

atmosphere, almost invisible, but shining, like a silver ribbon piercing through the clouds., going down, into a black metal endoskeleton anchored at the space station.

“21 minutes and counting...”

“So how are we planning to dock without them noticing?”

“We’re not.”

“Oh?”

“You’re going to jump.”

“Oh, so it’s that kind of mission is it?”

“Get to the airlock.”

“Really?”

“20 minutes and counting.”

“Fuck.”

Oren flipped several switches, putting the ship into an autopilot cruise control. Stood up, and moved to the back compartment where he slipped an earpiece communicator into his left ear, and put his helmet on. He swung the pack of equipment over both shoulders, and climbed the ladder, exiting through the top of the ship out a small circular airlock. Once outside he pushed a button on his ankle, engaging his magnetic boots. They sucked downward, one at a time, securing him to the exterior of the ship's hull. He flipped his comm on and started talking to his partner again.

“Yo”

Still seated in his co-pilot chair, Xeno pushed a button to respond, “Yo.”

“Reading you loud and clear.”

“Nice.”

“Window is approaching in: five... four... three...”

Oren bent his knees.

“...two ...one—Go.”

Oren pushed off.

He floated across a vast black of nothingness. Speed without air. He couldn't be sure he was even moving at all. For a moment he felt as though he might be lost. Maybe he had pushed off in the wrong direction. What could he even do about it if he had? There was a sweat of anxiety.

“Be calm.” He could hear Xeno’s voice in his ear. “You’re on target.”

Oren took a deep breath, trusted his training, and closed his eyes. He swung around as if doing an underwater kick flip in a swimming race. It was a maneuver he had practiced many times before—he bent his knees, a moment later he felt the pressure of a metal plate press into his feet. The station’s hull. He engaged his magnet boots. Exhaled.

“Well done.” It was Xeno’s calm voice again.

CLICK VRRRRVOOOMSH. The sound of compressed air rung out as an airlock closed. Oren removed his helmet.

“I’m in.”

“Nice—fifteen minutes and counting.”

“Where am I?”

“Level three. I’m sending the station’s schematics and shortest route to your wrist monitor, now.”

Back on the ship Xeno was knee-deep in several computer screens and control panels while wearing a dispatcher’s headset. He was monitoring radio traffic, police bands, military bands—any and all frequencies.

Oren looked at the screen on his wrist, waited, and floor plan schematics appeared with a yellow cursor outlining the shortest route to level five.

“Why thank you!”

“You’re welcome.”

“But how can I be sure I won’t run into security?”

“Turn around.”

Oren turned while his partner typed on a computer screen.

“Look up and wave.”

Oren gazed upward where his eyes landed on a security camera in the ceiling, he waved, then gave a nice rebellious middle finger.

“I’m hoping that’s you.”

“Lucky for you, it is.”

“And security?”

“It’s on a loop—for the next ten minutes they’re looking at dead hallways and nothing else. Which is all the time you have, so I suggest you move.”

Xeno looked back to his screens. To the right of his view, outside of his main attention, there was an extra screen playing what appeared to be a news broadcast of a politician giving a speech, “The opening of this great elevator will bridge gaps and bring all of mankind together despite race, creed, or nationality. This new open door policy to any and all, will allow this new United Nations operating aboard the space station to be an international haven of democracy. Together we have the capacity to unite all of humanity under one banner.”

Xeno rolled his eyes.

Down below on the planet’s surface, the crowd was cheering. The speech began to blend with the white noise of a hundred thousand people. Somewhere in the sea of faces a young girl was sitting on her father’s shoulders, hoisted above the crowd. She was wearing a bright smile.

“Do you think I’ll be able to go up there dad?”

Her father looked up and met her eyes, “Of course Izzy. All are welcome.”

Running through a dark hallway Oren looked down to his wrist, five minutes left and counting. He’s making good time. He saw the large steel door of the vault ahead of him. He reached the end of the corridor, threw his pack down by the lock interface, and signaled to his partner.

“I’m here.”

“What does it look like?” Xeno’s voice came through the comm.

“Standard encryption keypad, tied into a manual locking mechanism... there appears to be a failsafe. If we don’t open this right, it will lock permanently.”

“Then let’s do it right.”

“Right.”

Oren got to work, he opened the pack and removed a set of tools. Something to plug into the console next to the keypad. “Giving you physical access now, you’re linked.”

“Coming online.”

Oren turned things over to his partner and leaned his ear into the cold metal door. “I think it’s a classic pin lock tied to a digital mechanism,” he spoke with casual air. Tick, tick, tick... click. He could hear the sound of metal moving inside

the vault door. The locking mechanism engaging, sliding metal, turning, then silence. A few moments later, the door began pulling back.

“Bingo, we’re in.”

Just then, a silver knife flashed across Oren’s left eye. He jumped back. Turned. There was nothing there. Only shadow and long hallways. Before he could realize what was happening he felt a hot flash strike him from behind. He rolled on the ground and pulled his gun, scanning it across the room.

“I wouldn’t use that in here.”

He was not alone.

“Who’s there?”

“No one important.”

“What do you want?”

“Same thing as you.”

“What’s that?” Oren was still scanning the room. He could see nothing and no one. Was this person wearing some sort of camouflage?

“What’s inside the vault.”

There was static inside Oren’s ear coming from his communicator. He looked to his wrist. Nothing. The screen was black. “What’s inside the vault?” He asked.

The voice in the dark replied in a grin, “Oh, do you not know?” There was laughter coming from somewhere but Oren could not tell. “I thought they would have told you.”

“What do you want?” Oren calmed himself, centering his focus on the sounds of the room, pointing his gun as an extension of his mind, ready to take aim.

“I thought I told you that you shouldn’t use that in here...”

A quick shadow flashed across Oren’s upper vision, he glanced up. Above him the ceiling of the corridor was missing, beyond it he could see a translucent bubble with stars behind it.

“...We’re in an unfinished hallway, inside of a glass dome. It’s an active construction site. The bulkheads are lined with carbon dioxide scrubbers and oxygen tanks. You could start shooting, if you really want... Just might wanna put your helmet on before you do.”

In that moment he came flying down on top of Oren, silver knife in hand. The

surprise of the fall had knocked the gun from Oren's hands and across the floor. Both of them collapsed to the ground under the weight of his attacker. Oren had barely protected himself with his forearm above his head, the only thing he could see was the grinning smile of his attacker on top of him, his weight bearing down. The man was laughing. Suddenly, he let go and began running into the vault. The door was open. Oren lifted himself to his feet. His wrist was bleeding. He gave chase. The man was still laughing. He followed the voice inside.

The vault was simplistic, long and lined with wall-to-wall rows of numbered boxes.

The other man was moving quickly. He knew what he wanted.

Oren detached his helmet from the side of his pack and threw it across the room. It hit the man in the side of the head and knocked him off balance. He turned to Oren and said, "Really?" Oren reached into the back of his suit and removed a small combat knife while running at his attacker full speed.

"Oh ok," the other man was ready for a fight. He raised his silver knife. "Let's go."

Oren hit him at full speed. Catching the momentum of his arm to swipe the knife hand away as he slammed into the man with his other shoulder. He was caught off guard and Oren flew through him as the other man fell to his back. Oren twisted around to bring the knife down on the man from above in an attempt to finish things. But he was too slow, and his wrist was caught midair just above the man's face. He could see him now, there was a large scar running diagonally across the center of his face from top to bottom. Perhaps a knife he hadn't caught in the past. The man squeezed. Oren screamed. Blood began to run down his wrist. His hand was shaking. He dropped the knife. He tried to bring his other arm in, but the other man was confident now, he caught it, pulled Oren in and kicked him in the stomach, flipping him back across the room.

The other man got up, "You did well," he said. "I might have lost. I just have a little bit more of a reason than you do."

He lifted a hand sized metal circle and placed it on one of the numbered boxes. Then stepped to the side and a small implosion left a hole where the circle had been.

"Is this what you came for?" He lifted a large black suitcase shaped object, "Don't worry, you can have it. I'm told we don't really know what this is," the outer casing was metal and seemingly alive, and in a terrifying manner it began to change shape, forming a hooded opening. "But...what we do know, is that it was designed to interface with a living being." He slammed the device down on Oren's face. It was over. Was he going to die? Who would take care of Betty? Who would raise his son? But things had only just begun. Oren tried to pull the object off. No success. A bright glow exploded from around the seals. He screamed. Images sights and sounds began to flood through his periphery as colors ideas and solutions overwhelmed his thoughts. Suddenly it all made sense. He knew what to do and how to do it. Anything seemed possible. All it took were ideas, he could see the path, actions, inevitabilities. He was understanding something universal. But there was more. Specificity of time, place, history. Knowledge he couldn't understand. Racing through his mind, passing through his grasp, the next thought came so quickly he couldn't hold onto the first. He saw them slipping like light through the end of a tunnel. Going away, out of his view.

He awoke somewhere else. He wasn't sure where. He felt momentum around him but didn't understand where it was coming from. He felt like he was moving.

"You still alive?" He could recognize the voice. It was the man who had just tried to kill him. A sudden survival instinct kicked in and he became much more alert. His eyes widened, he leaned up, tried to get a sense for his surroundings. They were in a small room, there was a window, outside something was moving. They were going down.

"We're in the elevator," the other voice said. "Not sure how you got up here, but I took the scenic route." His eyes came into focus. Oren could see him now, sitting across the floor leaning against the wall, next to him the same black suitcase from earlier.

"What did you do to me?" Oren was much more awake now and visibly concerned.

"I'm not exactly sure, we were hoping you could tell us that actually."

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

"It means we don't know what the device does exactly."



“What do you want from me?”

“To tell us what the device does, exactly. Have you been listening at all?” The man was mocking him.

“Look—“

“No, you look. You’re lucky I didn’t kill you earlier. Your lucky someone wants you alive. So keep your mouth shut and wait till we get there.”

Oren was quiet now. Waiting for the other man to speak. You could glean a lot just by listening. This was something he learned from his mentor Xeno. People tend to reveal themselves when they talk, and most people do like to talk. Even if they don’t realize it.

His attacker was moving around the room now, placing metal circles along the wall. They looked similar to what had been used in the vault. Explosive charges. Around the entire pod. He resisted the urge to ask, instead looking out the porthole window of the compartment. The sun was peaking over the planet’s horizon. Where was Xeno? Oren found himself worrying for his partner. What if he had been captured too? Earlier Oren had assumed the radio static was from solar interference. Now he was thinking something else. The interrupted comms suggested that someone had planned this.

*We had a funeral service for my father years after he disappeared. I never really met him. I was told he died in the attacks. My mother took care of me until I was fourteen years old. Then she died too.*  
-Jack Cloud

He was trying to get there in time. Running passed the people in the street. He left his house five minutes late. That was normal.

Usually it worked out ok.

He had long legs and could walk fast. He would make the train in time, it would arrive normally, he would get on, and somehow arrive ten minutes early.

Of course the days the train are delayed are always when you need to be somewhere on time. He was now running ten minutes late. If things kept going the way they were, he would surely be fifteen-to-twenty minutes late, well past the acceptable margin.

He was beginning to panic.

This was making him sweat.

He loosened the tie around his neck.

He was not accustomed to wearing one.

He couldn't remember the last time he did. At least five years he thought to himself. Must have been at a funeral or something.

He finished adjusting the tie and it didn't seem to make much of a difference.

He looked around. A little embarrassed. He slid it all the way off his neck folding it gently into his coat pocket and unbuttoned the top two buttons of his dress shirt, revealing a white v-neck shirt underneath.

The train was crowded. He had caught the tail end of the late morning commute. Most of the people didn't seem to notice him. But one woman standing a few inches away had turned her head when he stuck his elbow out to remove the tie.

Up on the other side.

Down the block.

Held up by a stoplight at the corner.

Down three more blocks.

It's on the other side of the avenue, across the four lane divider.

Under the awning.

Through the glass double doors.

Up the elevator.

Out on the twenty-third floor.

He came flying through the hallway at the fastest pace a polite walk would allow.

He reached the office suite.

Waved through the other side of the glass door.

There was no one there.

After a few moments he caught the attention of the receptionist who had stepped away from her desk to make coffee in the office kitchenette.

She gestured to him that she would be right over.

He took the moment to adjust his belt buckle and look at his reflection in the glass.

His hair had become a little lopsided from the run.

He smoothed it out.

She reached her reception desk, leaned over, and pushed a button below her desk.

The glass door in front of him buzzed and he pushed it open.

"Thank you," he said.

“No probbleghm,” she responded with a blueberry muffin in her mouth.

“Where can I find Ms Coutour’s office?”

“Down the hallway and to the left.”

“Thank you.”

He moved quickly, but tried to avoid doing it in a way that would show, and made his way down the hallway. When he arrived at the turn, he saw a door which had been left cracked slightly open. He could hear voices coming from inside. He approached it:

“Fundamentals have changed.”

“The fundamentals have not changed.”

“They’ve made no profit in the last three quarters.”

“Yes, but they’ve been closing the gap on expenditures.”

“They’re still bleeding money.”

“But they have a sound projection for profits going forward. If we give them a little more short term capital.”

“I’m tired of buying debt.”

“But if we pull out now, they’ll surely collapse, all their purchase planning is contingent on our funding.”

“It’s time to cut our losses.”

He knocked on the open door and leaned in apologetically.

“Excuse me. I’m looking for Ms. Coutour... I have a ten thirty meeting... I’m running late.”

He took a step back.

Everyone looked at him with an unhappy tension.

“Wrong room. You want the one across the hall.”

“Oh, I’m sorry.”

He tilted his head down and looked to the hallway behind him.

“Yup, right there. You can’t miss it... Please close the door on your way out.”

“Sorry,” he said again.

“Happens to the best of us!” He could hear a voice shouting as he closed the door behind him.

Directly across the hall was a dark brown wood door.

It had a slightly different sheen to it than the rest of the doors in what was otherwise a mostly uniform, if not disheveled office. Likely from various stages of maintenance done over the years between different tenants. He doubted this prop up law firm had been the original occupants.

He knocked twice on the door before turning the knob and leaning in.

“Jack Cloud. I have an appointment about the mortgage.”

“Yes of course, come in.” The voice was calm and feminine.

He entered the room. Looked around. It was a large conference room with a long table. She was sitting at the end of it with a few papers in front of her. She had long black hair and was wearing a navy blue business suit. This must be Ms. Coutour he thought to himself.

“Are we waiting for anyone else?” He motioned to the other chairs.

“Oh no, just us,” she said. “They’re cleaning my office right now, so I’m using the board room for meetings this afternoon.”

“Ok.” He said.

“How can I help you today?” She asked.

“It’s about a mortgage. My mortgage. Well, my father’s mortgage, technically, of which I am administrator.”

“I’m sorry for your loss.”

“Right. Thank you.” He looked down at the floor.

“So what can I help you with?”

“The thing is, I’m terrified something is going to go wrong with it. You see, I don’t really know much about mortgages. I never got one myself. This came to me along with his house after he died. The bank said that they would ‘leave it alone’ if I kept making the payments, and that seemed good at first. But now that more time has passed I’m not sure what to do. This thing goes on for another 24 years.”

“When you say ‘they’ who do you mean exactly? Who at the bank told you this?”

“I don’t exactly remember their name. I don’t even think they work there anymore. That’s the problem. I’m not sure I can even trust the things I’m told.”

“I can see how that can be frustrating. So what did ‘they’ tell you exactly?”

“That the bank wouldn’t force repayment of the entire loan. They seemed to imply they were doing me a favor.”

“How kind of them.” She let out a sarcastic laugh. It cheered him up a bit.

“I know, right? Well yeah they basically said that if I kept making consistent payments, they would just leave it alone.”

“Right.”

“But 24 years is a long time. A lot of things could happen between now and then.”

You’re a smart kid. That’s very true.”

“Well you see, my mortgage—”

“—Your father’s mortgage.”

“Yes. Of which I am administrator.”

“What about it?”

“I was hoping to get it refinanced. In my name.”

“Why would you want to do that?”

“So that it would be in my name.”

“Right, but you should understand that there is some advantage in having it in the estate.”

“Like what?”

“Well technically, you aren’t liable for the loan. Your father is, and his estate his. But not you. It’s illegal to make you pay his debts.”

“Except I am paying his debts.”

“Yes, as the administrator of his estate.”

“But that’s same thing. I’m the one paying it, no matter what you choose to call it.”

“Well no, technically it’s the estate that owes it, and you are paying on behalf of the estate.”

“So what if I just decide to stop paying it?”

“The bank would put a lean against the house.”

“But the house is mine.”

“Well technically the lean is against the estate, but it’s the estate that put the

house up as collateral for the loan.”

“Is this because my father didn’t have a will?”

“Yes. But the deed to the house was transferred to your name, by right of occupancy, since you had been living there so long with him.”

“So they can’t take our house from me?”

“Well, maybe. It’s hard to say. It’s such a legal mess, I think the bank would rather just leave it alone. That’s why they’re not forcing repayment of the loan.”

“No. They’re just reminding me that they could.”

“Yes.”

“So what should I do?”

“Nothing. Just keep making the monthly payments.”

“On my father’s loan? The one that I’m not legally responsible for?”

“Yes.”

“What a fun joke this has turned out to be.”

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s not your fault.” He stood up to leave. “Thank you for your time today.”

“Before you go. There is one more matter I need to discuss with you.”

He turned back. “What is it?” He asked.

“I wasn’t sure if it was appropriate to bring this up. I didn’t want to upset you, and well, we had to verify the authenticity of it.”

“What are you talking about?”

“You may want to sit down.”

He quickly sat down. “What is it?”

“Well I know after losing both your mother and father you reached out to us about help navigating estate filings and probate court. I know at the time the main concern was just keeping the family home.”

“Yes.”

“Well, something has come to light. It seems our public filings with the court system has lead to someone discovering your situation.”

“What does that mean?”

“At first we ignored it. Assuming it was a scammer. There are people who watch the public filings, the papers going through probate court, looking for

distressed properties or financial opportunities.”

“Of course. People are crazy.”

“They’re ruthless. It’s a tough city out there.”

“I’m surprised you were even willing to help me at all.”

She looked at him with sad but caring eyes. “I understand what it’s like to lose someone.” She said. “That’s what got me into this business in the first place.”

“Thank you.” He said. “I don’t know what I’d do if I had to pay those crazy high legal fees on top of everything else going on.”

“I’m happy we could help you.” She picked up an envelope that was on the table in front of them. “But this is what I wanted to speak to you about. We had to take some time to verify it first, before showing you. I didn’t want to risk—”

“What is it?” He asked.

“It’s a letter from your godfather.”

“My what?” He was stunned. “What do you mean?”

“Your father arranged for his friend to be your godfather. Your mother agreed. Of course, none of it is legally binding. But we did followup with the church they attended, where they are buried. The rector confirmed it. He was assigned to be your godfather when you were baptized.”

“What’s his name?”

“Xeno Hospes.”

“Where has he been this entire time? I’ve been completely alone for over a year.”

“He said he was traveling for work, and didn’t even know your parents had died.”

“Why should I care about this guy?”

“You don’t have to. It’s completely up to you. And as I said, none of this is legally binding. We’ve transferred the deed to the house into your name, you are the administrator of your father’s estate. There are no other children, no siblings, no heirs. There is no contest. All that’s left is you. The letter has nothing to do with it as far as I’m concerned. Whatever you decide, that is entirely up to you. I wasn’t sure I should give you this, but after thinking on it, I believe it’s my duty to deliver it.”



She handed him the letter. He took it. Turned it over in his hands. He was trying not to have expectations. This isn't what he thought would happen this morning. He said, "Thank you," as though he were a professional. He smiled. Jack was excited to read the letter, underneath it all he wanted to know what it said.

He got up, thanked the woman again for her help today, and left the office.

Outside on the street he thumbed at the back of the envelope, thinking maybe he should wait to open it. Maybe when he got home. Maybe tomorrow. Then he changed his mind and tore it open, quickly unfolding the paper inside:

--

Dear Jack,

It is with great regret that I learn about the passing of both your mother and father. I am sorry it has taken me this long to reach you. I have been out of signal range for months now while closing a deal outside the country. I don't know what words I can offer as consolation. What does one say in moments like this? There is nothing that can be said which could summarize or do justice to the lives of your parents. But it is important to honor them. So I will say to you what was once said to me in a similar circumstance—may their memory be a blessing. I know this probably isn't easy to read, nor something to particularly care to hear. But it always seemed like a piece of wise advice, and I want you to know that the person I first heard it from was your father. He always knew just what to say in difficult moments. His words have always stayed with me. I know this can't be an easy time for you. If you're up to it, I would love for you to come visit me. I'll be back in the city for a few weeks before traveling again. If and when you're ready, come by anytime before the end of the month.

With love,

-Xeno

P.S.

You can find my address on the envelope.

--

Jack turned over the envelope to find a return address on the back. He recognized the neighborhood. It was uptown.

He couldn't help himself. He didn't want to wait. Still energized from the letter he just read, Jack found his feet light as air and before he knew it he had already walked several blocks from the office building. He didn't even really know which direction he was heading in, or where particularly he was going. He thought he would just walk for a few minutes and take in the feeling of the letter. But without realizing it he had walked himself to a subway entrance. Now wondering if it was odd or inappropriate to get on the subway and head uptown to see this man so soon after reading his letter. But after a moment he realized that Xeno had no way of knowing when he had actually read the letter. So instead of heading home he decided to seize the spontaneity of the moment and go see him now.

Down in the subway things were old, worn, and dirty. Up above ground you could see the signs of the future sprouting up left and right. One super tall building, and then another, and then another. Bright billboards and dark skies. But down below things still looked as they did 50 years ago. Very little had changed. Maybe a new coat of paint every once in a while, but even that was sparing. The entire underground system was filled with rows of ancient metal girders that felt as though they had been holding up the city since long before he was born. There was something comforting about this old subway that felt like it had always been there and always would be.

A gust of wind blew across Jack's face and he turned to see the light of a train coming down the tunnel. He stepped back to wait for the doors to open, then boarded the train. He couldn't believe he was actually doing it. Standing there he began to feel foolish and considered getting out last minute and forgetting about the whole thing. But it was too late now. The doors had already closed. The train was already moving.

A short train ride later and Jack exited the subway in Xeno's uptown neighborhood. It was an upscale area. Which meant it was old. The buildings were short. Everything was classic and well-kept. Townhouses lined the streets wedged in-between old early empire buildings. Everything made of individual bricks and blocks that had been laid one-by-one long ago. The signs of the future did not exist here, except on the peripherally, noticeable in the distance over the horizon. The old money had made sure that whatever changes happened, they took place elsewhere. Jack found himself getting a little jealous. He had always dreamed of living uptown. But he was surprised his father knew someone who did. He was excited to find out why.

A few blocks up from the subway he found it. A modest 4-story brick townhouse with limestone quoins adorning the corners and a white bay window in the center with a terrace above. When he approached the door he noticed only one bell for the whole house. Xeno lived here alone. It was all his.

Jack rang the doorbell. While waiting he looked around and noticed a small security camera in the corner above the doorway. Moments later the door opened.

"Can I help you?" He was a tall and skinny man with a large scar across his face.

Jack hadn't thought this far. "Oh, I'm here to meet Xeno Hospes. He sent me this letter." Jack removed the envelope from his pocket and showed it to the man. As if this was the golden ticket that explained everything and would grant him access to this strange world.

"Let me see that."

Jack handed him the envelope.

The man looked it over.

"Wait here one moment."

Before Jack could answer, the man closed the door in his face.

Jack looked around, trying not to appear awkward. This truly was a beautiful neighborhood in the city. Largely untouched by new industry.

Less than a minute later, the door opened again.

"Right this way," said the man. He gestured with his arm for Jack to enter and pass him.

Unsure of where he was going, Jack stepped inside.

“First room on your left,” the man said. “He’ll receive you shortly.”

Jack walked through the tiled foyer past a large ornamental staircase going up one side and entered a large room on the left. The insides were covered with picture frame moulding, carved interiors, old artwork, and furniture that looked very expensive. His eye was drawn toward an old marble fireplace with a very large gold mirror directly above it going almost to the ceiling where crown moulding completed the room like an ancient king’s palace. In the middle a circular pendant adorned a glass chandelier that was dripping light from almost every angle. He couldn’t quite believe his eyes. But something about this felt right.

“Beautiful, isn’t it?” Said a deep voice from behind him.

He turned to see a man wearing a dark suit smiling at him. His hair was short and black. His face and hands were tough and tanned. He looked like a man who spent most of his time working outside. But his clothes looked as though they belonged at a cocktail party.

“Yes, it is.” Jack replied.

“Your lawyer tells me that you got yourself emancipated at 15 years old. Impressive.”

“It wasn’t a big deal. I’m surprised she told you that.”

“Well I had offered my services, as your godfather, and she was quick to dismiss it as ‘unnecessary’ which I thought was pretty amusing. Since I thought she would be begging me to act in some sort of guardian capacity.”

“She’s right. It is unnecessary.”

“Well I just wanted to say, at your age, that is pretty impressive.”

“Yeah?” Jack smiled.

“It’s not easy acting like an adult when you’re a child.”

“Right.” Jack looked away and turned towards the rest of the room. “So how exactly did you know my father?”

“That’s a much longer story. But we first met in the Marines.”

“The Marines? I thought he worked for the State Department.”

“Is that what he told you?”

“It’s what my mother told me.”

Xeno laughed. "They always say that they work for the State Department."

"What does that mean?" Jack was confused.

"It's a cover. Your father was a spy."

Jack laughed in disbelief.

Xeno took a serious tone, "I'm not joking."

"There's just no way." Jack was still unconvinced. "Mom said he was a consultant."

"Who took long trips to foreign countries often in remote areas around the world?"

"Yes, to consult on energy transitions."

"Right." Xeno smiled. "And how exactly does someone consult on energy transitions with a military junta that controls an oil field?"

Jack got the idea. "So what does that make you?" He asked.

"The guy who trained him."

"To do what?"

"A lot of things. You remind me of him y'know."

"In what way?"

"Your father was a child too when I met him."

"I'm not a child."

"He didn't think so either."

"Legally speaking, I'm an emancipated minor. For all intents and purposes, I am an adult."

"He would be proud of you."

"How do you know?"

"Everything you've done. The way you have risen to the task, taken control of your situation. He would have been happy to know that you were capable of this. He was a very self sufficient man. Rebellious when I first met him, he was young, but understood the importance of structure. In time he found a purpose. Then your mother. Then you became his purpose."

Jack took in what he was saying. This is not what he had expected. He wasn't sure what he had expected. But not this. Somehow though, it was what he had hoped to hear. But knew he never would. He had come to peace with the fact that

he was alone. Or at least he thought he had. There were times he wished he could simply talk to his family again. Have a conversation. Hear their thoughts on things. Be able to tell them what he had been up to. To know that his parents were proud of him. He did know this, on some level, but it had become hard telling himself the things he needed to hear from other people. He had begun to feel trapped in his own head.

“So what do you want from me?” Jack asked.

“Well first, to know you. I wanted to see what kind of man you were.”

“And?”

“I’m impressed.”

“So now what?”

“I want to offer you a job.”

Jack was surprised. “What kind of job?”

“Working for me.”

“Like my father?”

“Sort of. This is more of an office job for now. I’ll be in the city for the next few months working on a deal. I need someone I can trust.”

“And how do you know you can trust me?”

“A feeling.”

Jack was stunned. Nervous. “I have to be honest. I don’t even know whether I’m qualified for this job. I don’t even really know what the job is.”

“You let me worry about qualifications. I think you have something—something special. Everything else can be learned. I can teach you. But you have to trust me.”

Jack looked this man up and down. He didn’t know him. He knew there was no way he could trust him. Not really. He would be a fool to trust a stranger. But he wanted to. He wanted to believe what Xeno was telling him.

“When do I start?” He asked.

Xeno smiled. “Tomorrow morning. 9am sharp. Be at this address.” He handed him a business card and gestured toward the other room. The same man from before emerged through the doorway behind him.

“Seraph will see you home.”

Seraph led Jack through the foyer past the grand bannister railing of the main staircase to a small door behind it that gave the appearance of a storage closet. He opened the half-sized door to reveal concrete steps leading down.

“This way,” Seraph said.

For a moment Jack wondered if Xeno was a super hero. He felt as though he were being led to a secret hideout. “Where are we going?” He asked.

“To the parking garage,” Seraph replied.

When they reached the bottom Seraph switched on the light. Large tube fluorescents began to cycle on across the ceiling. Bands of light illuminating one after the other. Below them a simple black car was parked and waiting for them. Seraph walked to the backseat passenger door and opened it for Jack, gesturing for him to get inside.

“Where are we going?” Jack asked. He hesitated to get in the car.

“I’m taking you home.”

“But I haven’t told you where I live.”

“I know where your apartment is,” Seraph said. The assertion did not calm Jack’s nerves.

“How?” He asked.

“My employer told me.”

“Xeno? How does he know?”

“You’ll have to take that up with him.” Seraph gestured again for Jack to get in the car. This time he obliged.

“So how do you know Xeno?” Jack asked, “when did you start working for him?”

Seraph glanced at him through the rear view mirror, “I’ve been in his employment for many years.” They made eye contact for a brief moment. The scar across his face was a striking line through the reflection.

“You don’t like talking much, do you?” Jack said.

“I don’t mind,” Seraph said flatly. “Please buckle your seatbelt.” Jack did and Seraph started the car. He pressed a button on the dashboard and the concrete wall in front of them began to open. Daylight poured in and overpowered the

unnatural tint of the ceiling lights.



*When I was a child I saw something horrific I probably should not have seen. I lost both my parents that day. I still remember watching with my father, looking up to the sky with hopeful eyes. That was the day it happened. The day it all came crashing down.*  
-Isabella Castanova

Metal scrapes on metal as air escapes from depressurization. A steel door slides back. A man enters through the bulkhead. He's wearing a white lab coat. The room is small, cold, shadowed steel with a dim light emanating from an airlock window. Beneath it on the floor sits a young woman with synthetic green hair. She's staring out into space.

The man waits for her to acknowledge his presence.

She doesn't.

"Are you ready?" He asks.

"Yes."

She doesn't turn to face him.

Instead she looks out the porthole to a star in the distance.

He takes a step forward and leans on his front foot.

"Listen. We've talked about this."

"I know," she says.

It was as if she were talking to someone else, somewhere else.

This was not the first time she'd been asked questions.

“We have to prepare you.”

“I understand.”

The man looked to his clipboard.

“Do you know what we’re doing today?”

“Yes.”

“This is trial number six. Stress levels will be different.”

“I know.”

“This time you’ll be alone.”

She paused.

“What about Jack?”

“He was injured after trial number five. He won’t be joining you.”

She didn’t respond.

He noticed this and took note.

She was looking out the window.

He tried a different tactic.

“What day is it?”

She answered quickly, “One hundred sixty five.”

“How many sessions have we had since beginning this phase?”

“Six.”

“Do you remember your lessons?”

“Yes.”

“Protocol?”

“Yes.”

“Good. Good. That’s good,” he took a step forward into the room, “Listen. I want to switch gears a little bit. If that’s ok.”

“Yes.”

It didn’t sound like a choice.

She was still looking out the window.

He was watching her look out the window.

Trying to see what she saw through the glass.

The sun was rising around the planet’s horizon.

As it lifted around the edge, a strong light washed into the room.

Bathing her in a warm glow.

"Have you ever heard of the observer phenomenon?" He asked, "The idea that the act of observing something changes it's outcome?"

She paused, turning away from the window to face to him. "Yes, I remember."

"I know living this way has been difficult for you," he said.

She turned back towards the window.

He stood still in the doorway.

Silence filled the space between them.

"Ready to go in fifteen?" He asks.

"Yes."

Bands of white light stretch and disappear one after the other. Half conscious hands tighten, trying to move within restraints. Her eyes blink. The squeaking wheels of a hospital gurney roll down a linoleum hallway. She's tied to it. Above the sounds around her are the voices of three doctors having a discussion as if she weren't there.

"She's showing promise."

"Yes, but only in controlled trials."

"You're too strict with guidelines."

"She's a child not a machine."

"Legally she's neither."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Don't get angry at me. This wasn't my idea."

"Her parents signed the consent forms."

"And where are these stellar role models now?"

"Dead."

"Oh..."

"They were working two jobs and looking to supplement their income so they signed her up to with a modeling agency for a promotional branding campaign."

"I've heard about programs like this."

"Yes it's only supposed to be a temporary loan, for a few weeks. Childcare is fully paid for."

"Sounds like a vacation for the parents."

“Exactly.”

“Well yeah, but then two weeks into it her parents got killed in a car accident.”

“Shit.”

“Yeah so the company took her in.”

“Can they do that?”

“Legally, yes— and besides, who else is going to do it? To my understanding, there is no next of kin, no one to claim her. If you ask me the company did a service in her case.”

The wheels come to a stop and for a moment they’re quiet.

One of them looks at the other.

“We’re in room four today.”

They turn the corner and continue.

“So what’s the idea here? Brainwashing? Erasing her memory? Manchurian candidate assassin programming?”

“No. Nothing so barbaric or crude.”

“Then what?”

“If you’re intention is to lobotomize you may as well save yourself the trouble. A machine would be more responsive and consistent than a broken individual. No. What we seek to do here is strengthen subject willpower through survival. Not to break the subject, but rather slowly reinforce their ability to weather great extremes for long periods of time, manage defeat, and learn from failure— we seek not to brainwash victims but rather to condition the willing.”

“So she wants to do this?”

“Yes. It was her idea.”

Air depressurizes as the door slides back. Three men enter wheeling a gurney along with them. One of them breaks off and begins moving around the room flipping and adjusting various machinery. The second man pushes the gurney to the center of the room where he locks the wheels in place and turns the bed upright.

The woman strapped to the bed seems unfazed by all of this.

The man shines a light in her eyes.

“So, how are we feeling today?”

"Tired."

"Tired? Let's see. Let's see. What diet have we had you on..." While he said this he began flipping through pages on a clipboard.

The first man seemed to have finished powering things on, and was now wheeling auxiliary devices towards the center of the room.

The third man stood by the doorway. He hadn't moved and seemed to be the only one of the three unfamiliar with their surroundings.

The first man looked at him and asked, "Questions?"

"There will be time for all of that during my official review," he responded.

The second man laughed, "So you're a paper pusher."

"Yes, an accountant with a doctorate in behavioral psychology." He gave a little attitude.

"Strange combination."

"Yes, but I'm here to assess the viability of continuing this program."

"And you'll be doing that how exactly? A calculator?"

"In a manner of speaking, yes. I'm here to conduct interviews with all your subjects."

"Oh no I don't think so."

"Oh yes, I'm afraid so."

"You don't have clearance."

"I was given it yesterday."

"By who?"

There was a pause in the room. The air became thick with tension. They already knew the answer before having asked. Their new guest noticed this, and allowed the weight to sink around the room, before saying, "Who else?"

The two men responded quickly.

"Right."

"Right."

No one said his name.

"My apologies, sir, but I'm still required to ask—do you have authorization forms?"

"Of course."

The third man reached into his inner pocket and removed a folded piece of paper which he handed to the second man.

The second glanced at it and promptly handed it to the first, who read it thoroughly.

“It says I’m to give you access without supervision.”

The third man smiled.

“That won’t be necessary for now. You can stay.”

“Thank you, sir.”

The third man looked across the room to a silver metal industrial chair, “Mind if I?”

“No, of course not,” said the first man, gesturing for the third to make himself comfortable.

“Wonderful,” he said walking across the room where he grabbed the chair and began dragging it back to the center. It made a horrible screeching noise as it dragged, but no one said anything. No one complained.

“Now, where were we?”

The woman on the gurney just stared at him.

The man leaned back.

“Yes, I suppose an introduction is in order? My name is Seraph.”

She did not respond.

He didn’t break his stride, “Let’s see. What’re they calling you?”

Seraph lifted a name tag on the end of the gurney and then flipped through the pages of a medical clipboard, for extra emphasis.

“Serial number 065-334. Well that’s boring. Do you have another name? Says here your legal given name was Isabella Castanova.”

He put the clipboard down.

“But what do you like to be called?”

She chuckled a little and nodded at him, “Izzy. I like Izzy.”

“So how’s it going?” He asked in a playful mood.

The charm had broken her silence, but she was not having it.

She looked him in the eye and said, “What do you want?”

“Straight to the point. I like that,” he leaned forward in his chair. “I have an

assignment for you.”

This peaked her attention.

“What kind?”

“A short hop up to the space station. There’s a man there with a certain piece of equipment we need to retrieve and bring back. It’s a simple mission.”

“Then why do you need me?”

“I don’t. But I figure we should start you somewhere... low pressure.”

She was not pleased, and the look of contempt on her face was growing readily more apparent with each passing moment.

He noticed. He seemed to have been expecting this.

“Trust me. You’re going to like this one,” he said.

*Sometimes the only way to find answers from  
others is to ask questions of yourself.*  
-Zar Rohas

Deep underground a young female with synthetic green hair sneaks into a cold, dark, and sterile room. She looks like a normal woman.

She pushes a button by the door, and fluorescent ceiling lights flicker on.

She moves quickly to a wall with a row of steel doors, each one labeled.

She runs her fingers across the markings, scanning for something, until finally she lands on one which reads: "OREN CLOUD - ID#122084 FREEZE DATE: 2036"

She types in a code, buttons beeping. The sound of a snap, click, and a light turns green. She opens the compartment door and slides a frosty human-sized glass tube out of the darkness.

She wipes the fog off the glass. It's him. She grins.

"Time to wake up, sleepyhead."

She types in another code. Snap, click, another light turns green. The glass tube whooshes back, and cryogenic mist begins to seep into the room.

A noise from outside the room. Footsteps.

She snaps her head toward the door in the direction of oncoming danger.

An electronic buzz. She hears a rapid clip-clop of footfalls growing louder.

She runs to the door and throws her back against the wall. Waiting. Listening.



The sounds of approaching footsteps grow louder. Closer. Her fists tighten. Someone is outside the door. She takes a breath. Silence. The footsteps continue, fading into the distance. She breathes.

Suddenly, the sound of coughing and a voice behind her, “What the—”

She turns her attention back to the stasis pod to find the man who was inside of it now standing there, naked, with cryogenic mist rising from his muscles. He’s half awake. She stares at him for a moment.

“Shit.”

“Huh?”

She scans and moves to search the various closets and containers around the room until she finds a pair of hospital pants and throws them to him.

“Here, put these on. We need to get the fuck out of here.”

“Huh?”

Groggy and confused, Oren takes the pants from her.

“Ok. Shirt?”

“You don’t need one,” she says.

She stares and admires him for a few more moments.

He keels over and pukes glycol antifreeze all over her shoes.

“Ewww... Gross!”

Flashing lights and loud sirens; something is wrong. She looks from the stasis pod to Oren, and back. The base alarm has been tripped.

“Come on, let’s go, NOW!”

She moves quickly to the door. It won’t open. She tries the code. It doesn’t work. Red and white lights blink on and off. An alarm rings steadily in the background like a nerve-racking techno beat.

“Goddamnit.”

She grips the edge of the sliding metal security door and tries to force it open. She pulls, to no avail.

Groggy and disoriented, Oren gestures to the security panel. She rips it open, exposing a mess of multicolored wires.

She stares at the wires.

“Uhhh...”

Still disoriented, Oren begins instinctively fiddling, cutting, and crossing wires. Connection. The security code panel light changes from red to green. He smiles. She watches.

Oren flips the panel closed and gestures to the keypad. She re-enters the code. Click, the door slides open. Suddenly, the violent sparkle of an electric baton comes flying through the open doorway and hits her in the stomach. She screams. He stumbles. She's down. He's confused.

The guard makes his move; Oren remembers.

He dodges and blocks the first few blows with his right hand. He gets confident. He tries to block the next hit with his scarred left hand, and when it connects, he screams in pain. The guard lands a blow to his face. Oren spits blood.

The guard lunges at Oren, stabbing and jabbing with his baton. In one swift, instinctual movement, Oren grabs the wrist of his attacker, and pulls, using his enemy's own momentum against him as he flips him to the ground.

Oren runs to his new partner on the floor.

"C'mon. We gotta go."

Oren leads her down a steel corridor of epileptic light and sound as the alarm continues.

"What the hell is going on?" He shouts.

"We need to get to the surface." She says calmly.

"Not what I meant."

They reach the end of the hallway to find a steel elevator shaft. Oren looks up. Clicking and tapping of men moving with guns. They're in trouble. She turns to see a security force moving toward their position.

"Shit."

Oren looks up the elevator shaft, "Long way..."

She looks to him. "Get that elevator working." Then towards the oncoming danger. "I got this."

"But—"

"Be right back."

She elegantly makes her way down the hallway and engages the security force head on.

Oren opens the panel housing the elevator call buttons and pulls and cuts more wires, enabling the elevator doors to open. He goes in.

The elevator mechanism is completely different; it doesn't resemble any of the previous security panels. He sweats.

Kick, gunfire, punch, smack, whack: his new friend is kicking ass.

Oren is fiddling with the panel, trying to figure it out.

Outside, she takes a hit, and responds in kind.

Oren is flustered, the panel has no screws, no way to open.

He shouts down the hallway, "It's no good! Can't get it to work!"

She kicks a guard in the face, grabs his gun, and runs back to the elevator.

"Jeez. Do I have to do everything myself?"

She throws the gun to Oren.

"Here, keep them busy. I got this."

She readies a computer cable. Then plugs one end into the back of her head, and the other into an access port on the security panel.

Oren stares in awe, "What—"

"Just shut up. And keep them busy. I need to concentrate."

Oren lays down suppressing fire.

She concentrates as the sounds of alarms and combat begin to sink away, replaced by holographic windows of computer code that only she can see.

Oren shoots, connects, and the last remaining guard falls to the floor.

ERRR... ERRR... Beep—the alarm shuts off, the lights stop blinking. Silence. The elevator doors close, the car jerks upward, and they begin moving towards the surface.

"What the fuck is going on?! Tell me, now."

"I was hired to get you out."

"That much I understand."

"Good."

"Who are you?"

"Name's Isabella Casanova. Call me 'Izzy' if you want."

"Where are we?"

"Underground."

Light flashes and spills in from the passing floors as the elevator continues upwards.

“No shit... Last thing I remember—”

“Is irrelevant. It’s been 21 years. Things are different.”

“Excuse me?”

“You were frozen...”

“No...”

“... You’ll see.”

The elevator screeches to a halt, then jerks upward and the doors open to sand, heat, and nothing else. In the far off distance, smog can be seen rising from a black circle of industrial steel. Oren stands in awe.

“This isn’t right.”

“I told you—”

“No. This isn’t right.”

“Look—”

Oren begins to breathe heavily, panic stricken. He understands what his eyes see; but his brain won’t let him believe it.

“No. I was there. I saw it. I was supposed to—”

“Stop it?” she pauses, “Well, you didn’t. Get over it. We have things to do.”

Oren’s tone becomes cold, “Where is he?”

“Don’t worry. That’s why I came for you. We’ll get him. We’ll make him pay.”

“No.”

“No? I thought you were stronger than this. I thought you’d want—”

“No.”

“What the fuck is wrong with you? We have to—”

“No.”

“Fine. I’ll just—”

“No.” As his breathing slowed, his mind became clear, “No... You’re not listening... Where is my son? . . . Where is Jack?”

*Everyone will tell you what to do and give you  
advice but the truth is that no one knows what  
they're doing.  
-Jack Cloud*

He went down to the same swing set every day.

The first time he didn't wear any gloves.

It was too cold the second time he went, and without the sun, he had to run in circles around the playground with his hands in his pockets to keep himself warm.

Fighting against the cold.

Generating his own heat.

The third time he wore fingerless gloves and forgot to layer properly. There was cloud cover overhead and he didn't have a hood. But he walked along the ridgeline towards the park and tried to make the best of it. There were two other boys with a pair of bikes hanging out next to the playground. He stood at the top of the hill by a tree and waited for them to leave. He decided to lie on the ground and look up towards the sky. After a while the two boys left. He stood up and made his way down the hill to a set of three chainlink swings, plopping down in the middle. The swing set was his now, and he walked backwards, pushing off and lifting his legs as he began the pendulum swing. Back and forth, back and forth. He started losing heat in the swinging, back and forth, his fingers were exposed, gripping to the cold chain sides, the wind gliding through the cotton threads of his hat.

He looked up.

The sky was dark.

The sun was no longer shining.

It had disappeared. Hidden behind a cloud.

He swung for a few more minutes before deciding to call it quits for the day. It was cold enough that it wasn't fun anymore. All he could think of was the cold, and maybe how he had to use the bathroom. So he hopped off the swing and left.

The fourth time he brought a pair of thick leather gloves, and swung and swung, closing his eyes as he went up and down, the sunlight flaring against his eyelids.

That feeling, at the top of the precipice, right before you fall back down. You don't swing. For a moment, it feels like you're just... falling.

The sun set.

Out of the corner of his eye he caught a glimpse of something white.

It felt like a person, standing there behind him, watching him swing.

When he turned his head to see what it was, there was only a white metal sign on a pole, listing the hours the park was open.

But for a moment he let himself believe what he'd seen.

Turned his head back towards the sky and began pumping his legs back and forth, pushing to reach higher.

*Xeno always had an interesting way of thinking  
about things.  
-Oren Cloud*

It was years ago when I was still young and much shorter. Xeno had taken me to live in his home. Sort of like the nice uncle. Except there was more to it than that. He was tutoring me, and not just in math and science.

"Here, take this."

He passed into my small hands a large and heavy piece of metal. It was a gun. This was not the first time he had given me one.

"And what do we remember is the first thing we do?"

"Check to see if it's loaded. Make it safe."

My hands began pressing the side of the grip. A cartridge of bullets fell out.

"Good, but you aren't finished. Now what?"

I pointed the gun down to the floor, held the grip tight, and with my other hand pulled back hard on the top, causing the metal to slide back and reveal an open hole on the side of the barrel where a single bullet came flying out.

"Are you finished?" He asked.

"No." I said, remembering the lesson.

Making sure to keep the front of the gun pointed away from my mentor, and myself, I peered into the barrel hole from the open chamber on the side. To be certain there was nothing in there.

"Why do we do this?"

"Because anything is possible."

"Yes. A bullet could be lodged in the chamber from a faulty mechanism, a jam, or simply bad luck. Anything is possible, and we prepare for all possibilities."

"Yes." I placed the dismantled weapon down on the table in front of me, arranging the pieces carefully so they weren't touching.

He kept talking, he had been doing this kind of thing for a while, imparting wisdom to me through simple lessons.

"We can't stop guns from existing. We can't make the danger go away. It will always be there. Somewhere. But what we can do, is learn how to control the danger when we meet it."