

On the east side the city was quieter. Cicadas swelled. Big brood this summer. They loved the city, like everyone else. The city had lots of food and people and trash. What did cicadas eat? Probably trash. This kind of diet would lock them into a perfect symbiosis with the humans of Candybar City. G reached the strip mall that contained the market. He needed to buy dinner. Like most buildings, it was a big long box. He deposited his motorcycle next to a large wheeled panel that flashed blue and red at regular intervals. Outside, head lolling against the tan-brick wall, an old woman clawing an aerosol can. A teenager with a grubby marshmallow kind of face looked up at him and smiled with bright green fangs. G skipped them both over. He went inside. He was going to buy meat.

As he passed through the grid of stalls, he reached into his bag and slid the wad of plasticky breadbills between his fingers. He placed it in his pocket. He found his usual meat vendor against the far left wall, lazily spinning an office chair, ringed by a neat nest of counters and industrial freezers.

Dash (5'10", white, male, 50-70 years) nodded at him and went to pack his usual order. Dash was wiry and bent like a coat hanger. The blue-green glow of the evening news from a TV in a wire cage on top of the freezers: *...a group calling itself VATS has alleged responsibility for the deployment of what's being called a "meat bomb" at an industrial conference in Atlanta earlier this evening... authorities believe the bomb's technology relies on an ultra-light supernutrient compound that forms a coating around each cell, allowing cellmeat to propagate without a traditional substrate, as if appearing from thin air... in conjunction with the bombing, authorities report multiple shots were fired at Gravitax head Markus Leach...* And buzzing over that, the soft speech of the other market-goers, their tired haggling, the lullaby of their consumption. The whine of electricity feeding the big dirty panels of green-yellow light flickering over them.

Dash hefted an ice-packed styrofoam crate onto the buffet counter at the front of his station. From the freezer he grabbed a mottled red hockey-puck chunk of meat, pawing it over with his pickle-skin hands. G held out a hand before Dash could set the meat in the cooler.

"This is cellmeat."

"It's venison."

"I only buy fresh-kill."

The old man sighed. "I have cellmeat. Can't get past the wall. With all the dead cops, it's going to be hell making it to the outcity vendors for a while..."

Bullshit, G thought. His head flared, his neck flared, the flesh hand pricked with sweat. He needed killmeat. Andrea said it was better. He needed to rip it apart with his hard horsey teeth and feel the fibers tearing, the bloody juice squirting against the back of his mouth. Andrea wanted that for him. Andrea said his body was a temple, just like the flying Temple of Jatta: a vessel for care, for reverence, for things that cost money. He squeezed his fist. He pulsed all over.

"Let me look through the freezers."

"I can't—"

"Let me look through the freezers," G repeated. Dash looked up at the source of the bassy, distorted voice, the face half-hidden behind a heavy black mask. His mouth squeezed itself.

"Actually," he said flatly, "I think I have a few cuts of kill left."

"Okay," said G.

Dash put the hideous cellmeat back and replaced it with a smooth dark-blood slab marbled with white fat. He stacked three of these in the crate. "Honest to God, man, that's all my freshkill venison."

"What else do you have fresh?"

"Boar. Snake. Some livers, gizzards and things. Fried cicada."

"Boar, liver and cicada."

Dash nodded. He packed the boar and liver with the venison, and scooped a pound of crispy golden-brown cicadas from the counter into a paper carton. "Is this deep-fried?" G asked.

"Sure is. All nymphal, too. Straight from the farm."

G clenched his fist again. He watched the sides of the carton darken with grease.

He paid with 22 breadbills, leaving 28 for everything else. Safer to use hard money for the market, since he bought the same things every week. He bought his weekly allotment of two loaves of seedbread and a jar of persimmon pulp, which he was allowed to spread on the bread once a day. He bought a large bag of kelp noodles and a crate of all the vegetables Andrea, his doctor, wanted him to have—squash, broccoli, mushrooms, peas. He stopped at the cricket stand. He stood behind an argument for five minutes. The person in front of him dropped a

handful of yellow vials on the counter, voice pleading, a stubbed-toe sound, begging to pay in plasma, but the cricket seller didn't accept it. When they left G bought a huge fat tub of crunchy cricket butter (no sodium added!) and a new bag of glassy perlite chunks for his own cricket cultivation setup. He bought a jar of boiled ant chutney and a jug of powdered chestnut mash and a cardboard box packed full of frozen spinach, which had been rare at the market recently, and then he got eggs, even though they cost six breadbills, because Andrea had been adamant about eggs for him, and then he got a few boxes of nutrient paste from the paste stall, and even looking over it all wobbled his head. As he packed it into the wide trunk of his Catalyst Starbeam S-70 motorcycle he remembered the cicadas and their trash. He thought it would be lovely to go along shoveling food waste into his mouth.

A plump jewelly cicada touched on the handle of the bike. He snapped the new hand at it, got it in a flash with the exquisite fingers. He popped it into his mouth and chomped. Buttery juice burst over his tongue. She was female; he could taste her eggs, her sweet fat flesh.

Then he got on the bike and went out of Candybar City. At the wall they let him through without asking any questions.

He cut down the neat line of I-69 and the night danced around him, cold and happy and pregnant with bugs. He pushed the Catalyst faster until the stars started to slide like scratches on black ice. The sky turned into a grid; the trees made deep fuzzy rows, black caterpillars. The wind loved his skin. The bike buoyed him ahead bullet-straight, the legs gripping its sides, tendons tense, every atom working in exact concert, all together now, and G felt complete, like a fresh knife. Streetlamps passed as flashes. He tensed all over against the urge to lift off the bike into the night, the air shoving him back. He was totally strained, alive. He thought about being a child and learning to run. He thought about clean, a word he liked.

He reached the hidden gravel turn-off that took him up to the warehouse. The long low box of it sat on a hill that swept up next to the highway, across from a thinner, sharper hill that held up a tiny white church. G liked to sit at the edge of the hilltop, just where it started to get steep, and watch the sun come up over the church's skinny spire.

He brought his bike behind the warehouse to the trailer the syndicate had bought for him. A single tall light scattered triangles of shadow across the gravel parking lot. A glass jar sat next to his doorstep. He didn't know who had left it there. He stomped on it. When he was done it looked like stars.

He lived in a box. Inside it was divided into three boxes in a neat row. Inside the three boxes he had stuff. He had lots of good expensive stuff. He had a jasmine plant with white hopeful flowers growing in the window of his living room. Andrea had given it to him, said it would prevent him from being unhappy. He sat his bags down and tried to look at the plant for a while. How did it work? Maybe it was magic. It didn't matter. The plant's long fingers yellowed and curled at the ends. He had forgotten to water it. Sometimes Andrea came and watered it, because he always forgot, and she would click her tongue at him in a way that made him feel special, or something. Andrea also cleaned his fridge. He stopped looking at the plant and went to the kitchen. He did not water the plant. Instead he finally made that sandwich—cricket butter, a pale nutty fishy flavor, with a hunk of spinach and a smear of pulpy fruit spread. You could see the crickets' little faces milled into the butter. Crunchy. It tasted good. G had a very good life. He made lots of money and he did not want for anything.

*Bang bang bang bang bang.*

G turned to the door, about 7 feet away, which had just been knocked on. People did not knock on his door. The people working in the warehouse did not knock on his door. They knew he did not like surprises. The people in the syndicate did not knock on his door. They waited for him to show up at the bar. Andrea knocked on his door but she always called ahead. Because the person knocking on his door could not be anyone important—such as a warehouse employee, a syndicate man, or Andrea—G decided to ignore the knocking until it went away. He finished his sandwich and washed his plates in the sink.

*Bang bang bang bang bang* and now G was nervous, his one remaining flesh-and-blood palm clamming up. He rubbed it on his borg hand to wipe off the sweat. He put his mask on again and he unholstered the Willwind X-Series 3 double-action pistol at his hip. He moved to the bedroom and clicked on the display that showed him all the cameras from the warehouse. All still inside, everyone had gone home. He switched to the outdoor cameras and if you turned the back left cam just right you could catch the front edge of his trailer, zoom in, someone was standing there at his door. His trailer was 17 feet high with the cinderblocks and the knocker came up short against it. A small, skinny man in a ski mask. G couldn't tell about weapons. *Bang bang bang bang bang bang bang bang bang bang bang bang*

so he went to the door and found a gun in his face. G returned the favor, pointing the Willwind straight at the fucker, strong and ready and hard. "I don't like surprises," he said, the mask crunching his voice out as a deep, pants-pissing

bass. He saw the knocker's gun shake in a clumsy grip. This smoothed G's nerves out, made him feel big.

The knocker spoke, his soft, young voice harsh and forced. "I have a job offer for you and I can pay you three million cred on chips, clean. Half up front and half upon completion."

G said: "I don't know what you're talking about. I'm a security guard." He had never had to use the cover the syndicate had given him before, and it came out funny-sounding because he hadn't practiced saying it.

"No you aren't."

G did not know how to keep lying. He suspected it would've made him look stupid anyways, so he said: "I'm not a freelancer either. You'll have to contact my employers."

"I can't."

"You can go right over there, to the church. There's a bar inside. Ask for Choke." He thumbed in the direction of the highway.

"Fuck, man," the knocker said, voice shivering, "you never take side jobs?"

Not often, but he did. G considered. His options included shooting this kid immediately, hearing him out before shooting him, and leading him to the church (where the syndicate might shoot him immediately or hear him out and then shoot him.) G did not delight over carnage, wasn't like that, but the kid seemed to know who G was—a huge problem—and besides he had ignored the large red-and-white-sign on the fence which read *PRIVATE PROPERTY TRESPASSERS WILL BE SHOT*.

"Is there anyone with you?" G asked. The kid shook his head. Stupid. He should have lied. "Okay. Okay. Hand me your gun and come inside."

The kid moved slow. G could tell he wasn't used to this and that he wasn't going to try and shoot. His shaky hands dropped the gun in a jittery arc, and G knew what fear looked like, saw this kid vibrating with it under the dirty white spotlight blooming over his front porch. He got the gun from the kid's hand and holstered his own. Like this he learned the kid was desperate. The kid came inside and set his heavy black backpack down. G closed and locked the door behind him.

"Take the ski mask off," G ordered. The kid did it immediately. He was 5' 8" or so, Black or possibly mixed, and between the ages of 18 and 25. He had a wide-eyed twitchy staring face and he reminded G of a small cat. He looked very easy to pick up. "Sit." He did, at the table with the jasmine plant. His eyes locked onto the plant, and he ran a thumb over the petal of one of its white flowers, fidgeting.

"I need you to take me to the North Shore Free Society," he said.

G got hot and clenched his teeth. "Don't talk to me like that. I haven't agreed to anything. Do you want a sandwich?"

The kid looked up. "Are you serious?"

"Yes. Are you allergic to anything?"

The kid shook his head.

G was moving on autopilot. He always fed Andrea when she came over and he'd never had another guest. He liked cooking and he liked arranging pretty rainbows of food on a plate. It was funny, also, because he was still possibly going to shoot this kid in the head later. He had red sad eyes and the way he was fidgeting in the chair G bet he was starving, must have been a while, G thought, as he smeared persimmon pulp and cricket butter on his beautiful sourdough bread.

The kid did not speak or move from his seat while G fixed his toasted sandwich, which he paired with a broccoli-cranberry salad he had in the fridge and a handful of spicy almonds. He looked at the plate and then back at G. "Shit," he said, "this is a full-ass meal." He ate like a coyote. He chewed with his mouth open. G could not tolerate this.

He said "Close your fucking mouth when you chew," and then the kid did and then he finished his food and G took his plate and washed it and put it in the drying rack and took the dry plate out of the drying rack and put in in the cabinet.

He sat at the table. He looked at the kid.

"What can I call you?" he asked.

The kid took a second. He came out with "Novak."

"Novak," G said. "Novak. Okay. How do you know who I am?"

"Let's talk about the job first."

"I'm in charge of this conversation. When I ask you a question, answer it."

Novak stared at the floor, at the table, and at G's jasmine plant. He took slow shaky breaths like he was thinking about the mechanism of breathing. He opened his mouth a little bit, making a small crescent of black between his lips, and then closed it. He started tapping his foot on the floor, erratic and fast.

"I got your address from my friend," Novak answered softly.

"Who's your friend? How do they know me?"

"I can't tell you that."

"I'll shoot you if you don't."

A pause. "She's... an activist. She's good with computers."

"An activist for what?"

"...Anarchism, generally speaking."

"Does she live in the North Shore Free Society?"

Novak nodded, tilting his chin carefully.

"How does she know who I am?"

"The information is out there if you know where to look. People will talk to you if you know who to ask."

G noticed the way Novak spoke—quiet, and even though he was terrified, practiced, like he had run through these lines in a mirror. He sounded like a radio announcer. Calming, almost, in a way that G found himself enjoying.

"What does she know about me? What are these people saying?"

"You're called G. You're a mercenary or something like that. You're over half machine and impossible to kill." Novak idly ripped a petal off the jasmine plant. G wrinkled his nose. "I don't know how we found your address. Turn said it was a defector from your syndicate most likely."

"Her name is Turn?"

"She has a lot."

"Okay." G thought for a moment. "Why did you choose me, out of anyone? You're terrified of me. You've never dealt with the industry before. I know that because you don't know how this works."

Novak lifted his hands. He turned his open palms to G and placed them on the table. "People are after me and I'm out of options. Everyone else is dead. And you were on the way to where I'm going."

"Who is 'everyone else?'"

Novak left them in another long silence, face turned now to the black window, the trees crowding the hill beyond the warehouse. Finally: "I just drove nine hours from Atlanta. There were five of us when we left. They picked everyone else off on the road."

G understood.

"You tried to kill Markus Leach this morning," he said. "You set off that meat bomb."

Novak nodded.

Attempting to assassinate the head of Gravititas was a bad idea. G wouldn't have accepted any amount of money to do it. The syndicate would never entertain that kind of contract. And for this VATS group to have taken responsibility afterwards...that was the act of people who wanted to martyr themselves. It surprised G that Novak cared about being alive. Hellbent on finishing the job, he assumed.

"The syndicate won't let me help you if Markus Leach is involved. He's not a good enemy to have."

"I'm offering you 3 million cred, man. Come on."

"I earn enough."

"You would never have to work again. Living down here? I mean, this is the middle of nowhere. What's the cost of living in fucking Candybar City?"

"The syndicate wouldn't like it if I quit."

"You're just a fucking drone, aren't you? Do you have to ask the syndicate permission to shit?"





his vocal cords rattling. His chest vibrated all the way down to his belly. The sound ricocheted from the walls, trapping him in a big box full of his own echoing screams, and he scrunched his face up as hard as it would go, feeling the blood beating under his skin. Andrea was saying *breathe deep, honey* in his head. He began to whisper it. "Breathe deep, honey. Breathe deep, honey." Thinking of her voice calmed him. Andrea was a 5'6" white woman between the ages of 30 and 40. She had very white teeth. G liked her because she spoke to him like a pet dog. He pictured her too-white teeth and her not-quite-right face, the way she looked more like an inanimate object than a human being, and he managed a few deep breaths. He rolled onto his back and squeezed himself, imagining that he was holding Andrea, who was his doctor.

"Okay," he said to himself, "okay, I'm going back."

As he stood at the trailer door to unlock it, another fat emerald of a cicada landed on his hand, and he tried to swipe at it, pop it in his mouth, but it escaped.

Inside he opened the bathroom door. Novak was sitting on the edge of the tub with his shoulders rounded forward. G said: "I'm sorry. I have behavioral problems. I'm working on it." He had learned this formula in elementary school.

In a high, tight voice, Novak said: "It's okay. I have issues too. I get it."

"Okay."

G was supposed to think carefully about his emotions and he was supposed to identify what had upset him when he had fits. He sat back down at the table, sweeping the starry remnants of the ceramic pot and the wet dark dirt aside with his foot. The disturbed jasmine plant wept in the corner. He let Novak come back to the table.

G had a very good life. He had many good and expensive things. Some of the good and expensive things were part of his body, such as his carbon-fiber shock-absorbent spine, his three borg limbs and borg shoulder, his synthetic lungs. He had a stable job with the syndicate. He worked very hard and they would never fire him or have him drowned in the river. He had a friend who was also his doctor, Andrea, and sometimes they ate meals together, or she came to his trailer to check on his borgs and bring him plants. Andrea was teaching him to meditate. She also gave him drugs. So when Novak had said *You're just a fucking drone, aren't you?* G had gotten angry because it wasn't true. The syndicate gave him everything, even his trailer, even his body, even Andrea, and he owed them

his life in return. He worked very hard and he loved his family, the syndicate. He could not have asked for anything more out of life at all.

Earlier, though, when Novak had mentioned the North Shore Free Society, he had thought of his mother in C-Complex only a few hours away. It had been a while. He never had the time. His time was very important and he spent it on important things, like assassinating enemies of the syndicate for instance, and so he didn't have time to drive to Rochester and there would always be time later even though it had been a few years now he still had time and he noticed that this thought had been spinning around in his head for a while, scraping cruel marks into the inside of his skull, writing his pain in the enamel of his bone. And it upset him. He took another deep breath, honey.

"Give me the first chip now," G ordered.

"You're taking me, then? Say you'll take me."

"I won't agree to anything until I can check the chip."

"You could just take the chip and kill me."

"I could've taken the chip and killed you already. Give it here."

Novak did. G took it to his display and opened it up to check the contents, saw the *1500000.crr* file hiding inside, ran it through his currency software to find the credits clean with randomly generated and innocuous use-histories. He nodded and peered around the doorframe at Novak. "I won't ask where you got it, but this is a lot."

"No shit it's a lot." He started to fidget with a braid by his temple. "I won't need it where I'm going." They bartered for everything up there, G remembered.

He was thinking of 1.5 million credits, usable in any Associated Free Market city or territory, and he was thinking of his mother in C-Complex. Riding up to the hospital on the Catalyst and holding her tiny bonehands in his, the texture of her skin like fresh paper, like pulp. That texture made him sick. His body shivered. He could at least do *this*, he thought. If Mama only had enough money, everything would be alright, and G wouldn't have to think about her anymore. How much had his lungs cost? 1.5 million credits was an easy fix.

Novak nodded, his cat-face smooth and grim. "We'll leave tomorrow as soon as the sun starts to come up."

"No we won't."

"We have to. Driving my car off the highway only bought me so much time. They're still looking for me. If you're worried about supplies, I have friends in Flower Hills Common Home, and we're gonna pass through on the way up."

"You walked here?"

"Crashed off the side of 69. Not on purpose, but it ended up being convenient. A deer jumped out. I went the rest of the way through the woods. I've been walking a few hours."

"Did you kill it?" G asked.

Novak pushed the end of his braid into his mouth, sucked on it, and pushed it out with his tongue. "Dead on impact."

G wondered what it looked like.

After a minute he said: "We can't leave tomorrow because I've got to ask off first. I'll tell them I'm visiting my mom. I'll say she's dying. I've never lied to them before, so they won't pick up on it."

"They're still following me. I can't—"

"You'll stay in here. The windows are bulletproof, and I have food. I need to go into the city."

Novak opened his mouth and said nothing, then closed his mouth, then started sucking on the braid again.

G had a bedtime. It was 11:00 PM now, and he should've been fast asleep already, since he woke up at 7:00 AM every morning after a solid 8 hours of sleep. G enjoyed sleeping and looked forward to it. He took pills. He had very vivid dreams, and he liked to tell Andrea about them. Once Andrea had told him that the dreams surprised her. "I haven't ever thought of you as the type of person who dreams," she had said. "I guess it's never occurred to me that you have an inner life."

"Okay," G had said.

Novak didn't want to sleep on the floor, so they shared the bed. G sometimes shared a bed with Andrea, so it didn't bother him. He slept on his back with his hands folded over his chest, the neatness of a foot between them. He had a dream that he was driving a large green bus while a horse chased him down the highway.