

G woke up at 5:00 AM and found Novak sitting at the table playing with a rubber ball. His eyes like rifles boring into the thing, he was all hunched over, elbows on the table, leg bouncing like a piston. He was muttering to himself, prayerful and scattered, and rocking a little in the seat. He wasn't touching the ball at all.

G stood and watched for a second. Novak didn't notice G and then he did. He looked up and froze, now locking his eyes onto G's instead of the ball. He said, "I'm practicing." His nervous mouth made the words quick and stumbling.

"Practicing?"

"It's a spiritual exercise."

G thought of Andrea and her many religions. Currently she liked the New Way Forward of Jatta. She prayed often in this intense way, slipping into meditative obsession. But he had never seen her using a rubber ball as a religious object. It got quiet. The whole trailer got quiet with confusion.

Novak said: "I'm trying to manifest my energies."

G said: "What?"

Novak said: "My energies. Right now my power is latent. Like, I haven't unlocked it. I have to..."

He let his explanation die instead of finishing it.

"Okay," said G. "I'm making breakfast. We can leave after we eat."

Novak made a sound and kept playing with his ball. G made two slices of toast with the instant cricket paste powder. The powdered stuff had fewer calories and more protein than regular cricket butter, so he liked it better, even though it was more expensive. Once he mixed it with water, the paste tasted like a raw room-temperature potato. He added hot sauce on top. He ate a few chestnuts he'd roasted in the oven and then he ate a scoop of cottage cheese with spinach mixed into it. Novak wouldn't eat anything. He kept shrugging food away and G didn't like it.

"S'too early, man. I'll throw it up," Novak protested.

"Try not to," G said. He forced Novak to take a slice of bread and a chestnut. Then he took a shower and packed: 7 sets of the same black shirt and pants, toiletries, a few extra knives, a backup pistol and a few magazines. He added fresh perlite to the cricket grow out back. The little chirps made him smile.

He cleaned his Willwind. It was 6:30 AM and time to leave. He tried to get Novak out the door.

Novak said: "Leave me alone. We don't need to leave yet. Flower Hills is 2 hours away. Nobody will be ready for us yet. We're spending the night."

"I never said that."

"No, I'm saying it. I told my comrades I was coming."

"How did you get that message to them?"

"Pigeon."

"From Atlanta?"

"We have a relay network for them. I've never had issues with it."

"Smart," said G. It was a good way. The syndicate liked bike couriers, but he'd used pigeons as a guerilla kid. He was about to say something else but Novak was rocking and staring at the ball again.

The next time G tried to get Novak out the door, and it was 7:20 now, Novak wouldn't say anything at all. He was staring at the ball. G raised his voice, said "We have to go!" in this real authoritarian way, and Novak did nothing. G felt hot. He didn't like when things didn't happen at the right time. They had planned to leave an hour ago. Novak had even suggested they leave before sunrise, but now he was refusing to budge and G couldn't tolerate it. It was important to always perform the appropriate action efficiently at the appropriate time. G imagined every day as a stack of neat straight bricks. Ripping one brick out would make the whole stack collapse. The appropriate action had not yet occurred, even though it was the appropriate time. G felt hot. Failing to leave at the appropriate time made G a total failure. He imagined shooting himself in the head. He felt hot.

He lunged in and grabbed Novak's arm. Novak twisted in his vice borg grip but he couldn't get out. His feet scrabbled on the floor as G grabbed his other arm and pulled him from his chair. Suddenly Novak launched himself up. An instant sting as he bit G hard on the cheek, right next to G's mouth. G shoved him off. Novak caught himself against the trailer wall before his head could slam. They looked at each other's eyes. Novak had very large dark eyes with thick lashes.

"Don't," said Novak.

G said nothing.

"Don't interrupt me when I'm honing my energies," said Novak.

G said nothing.

"I could kill you in a second if I thought about it hard enough," said Novak.

G said: "Your energies haven't even manifested yet."

"They will soon."

"You've been staring at that ball for an hour and it hasn't moved at all."

"Why do you assume I'm trying to move it?"

"You don't have energies."

"You assume I'm trying to move the ball, but that's not a sound assumption from a philosophical standpoint. You're guessing how my energies work based on your exposure to the concept of psychokinetic powers from, like, popular culture and media, but you have no real evidence to support the idea that I was trying to move the ball. I could be heating the ball up or freezing it or rearranging its molecular structure—"

*"You don't have energies!"* G roared. It tore his throat and hurt his ears. Maybe the trailer even rattled a little.

Novak flinched. After a second of silence he muttered: "The unknown makes you angry. I understand that. It's okay."

G squeezed his synthetic right fist. His carbon-fiber skin pressed against itself. He breathed some air. His trailer smelled clean, like metal.

After the yelling happened, Novak finally packed his rubber ball into his bag. He collected the stuff he had left scattered around the trailer, changed into the motorcycle gear G had given him and slung the bag over his back. He was all neon: pink and red and white. With the matching helmet he would look more like a joyrider than a fugitive, G hoped. Novak had griped about the bike because he wanted a car, and G had pointed out that who the hell owned a car in the middle of the corn belt, and everyone was on bikes, and Novak had asked how fast the thing went, and G had said 200, and Novak had asked kilometers? And G had said no, miles, and Novak had not had anything else to say, and G assumed he was disturbed by the speed. Anyways they were taking the Catalyst and G was happy about it, an easy and uncomplicated kind of happy. He loved road trips.

Before they left he checked his display and he had a message from his brother. G had messaged yesterday to let his family know he was coming up. He read what it said, and the words hit him flat, like a wall. He was like a big steel wall. It didn't matter. He imagined writing the words down and feeding them into the shredder, teeth chewing the pulp into tiny little ribbons.

They got on the bike, finally. Novak swung his leg over the seat, his body wobbly and confused, and G felt him shift into position, pressing his chest to G's back. When G revved the engine *RRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRR* and kicked the stand up Novak threw his arms around G's thick torso and clenched. G nudged the bike into gear, pulling it slowly out the gate then down the road, over the exit and onto the long beast I-69.

The highway rolled endlessly towards the blue north horizon, cutting a razor-line through the forests and cornfields of the wide free Midwest. G loved it in the day just the same as he loved it at night. It hypnotized him. He felt like a fast machine. He was, oh yeah oh yeah oh yeah, a fast machine, oh yeah. Whipping the bike faster, his body talking to it and laughing with it, the engine vibrating the carbon and titanium of his bones, this gonna-cum feeling—at close to top speed now, gravity pulled the brittle summer trees into blurry lines. A bug exploded and died on the visor of his helmet.

Novak held his waist in a crushing, desperate hug. He was keeping good and quiet, despite the fear. This impressed G, who took Novak's silence as a show of professionalism.

North and north. The highway curved and twisted, flowing under bridges like a river, sending them past rotting farmhouses and military outposts and the odd gas station. When they came to the official checkpoints, as the neared the border of Candybar's territory, G slowed to slug speed but never stopped the bike fully, because the soldiers only ever nodded and waved him through. Both helmets had dummy chips that pushed a false identity tag to the scanners. G's name was Bradley Gresham, an identity stolen from a man he had previously assassinated. Bradley had been a nepotism hire at his father's barge company and he was very useless and stupid. G had hated tailing him and had loved pushing him off the casino roof.

They reached the battered green sign for Washington and Vincennes. A few minutes later they came to the final checkpoint, the fortified border between Candybar territory and the depleted No-Man's-Land that lay outside it. G stopped. Novak pulled tighter around his waist. G felt his body heat and imagined a little rabbit heart beating in overdrive. Two gray blocks with doors sat tall and stormy

on either side of the gap in a miles-long chain-link fence. Soldiers patrolled. A 6'1" white male gave G a sharp nod as he waved a scanner over the bike.

"Gresham and Freudenberg?" he asked. G noticed the slack face and the red eyes. Novak's fingers dug into his torso.

G nodded.

"Cool cool cool," said the soldier, and he waved them on.

As they rolled off, Novak said this into the comm system connecting their helmets: "They really do not give a shit, do they?"

"Candybar City makes most of its money on *not* controlling who passes through the border. It's a black-market economy. They want people traveling through and staying. They won't stop anyone."

"I had to fight to get out of Atlanta..." Novak said. He got quiet at the end.

"Did you kill anybody?"

Novak didn't answer, so G kept driving. It didn't matter.

No-Man's-Land had a brown dead broken look and even the sky felt pale and cold, though the sun shone just as loud over their soaring bike. G slowed down to 80. I-69 wasn't maintained outside the city's holdings. He had to weave around holes and cracks. Wooden ruins lined the road, waterlogged and meth-toothy, rotting out the mouth of the earth. In the tangled thickets on the roadside, they heard the slow-swelling *CRRRRRRRRRRRRZZZZZZZZ* of cicadas. It sounded like water crashing over itself. Black spots like ghosts played in G's periphery. Slowly they multiplied. *THWACK* as one of the cicadas slammed into his visor. It exploded and left behind a mess of guts that looked like an inkblot psych assessment.

Flower Hills was the epicenter of the swarm. As they pushed on the buzzing got louder louder louder, until they could have been driving next to a river, the peaceful, liquid sound of the creatures. In the distance G saw a low-flying drone making lazy circles over the highway. Novak went stiff behind him. G said: "That's from Flower Hills. They've upped their security. We'll see a few." G appreciated the effort, secretly. He had driven through Flower Hills a few times and the people reminded him of ants, busy and small and sweet, building their little buildings. He was glad that they cared about protecting themselves.

"This land is cursed," said Novak over the comm.

“What?”

“I said this land is cursed. The trees are like sticks. Some great evil is nesting here.”

“But you’ve been here before, right?” G pointed out. “Nothing has changed in the past few years. The landscape is just ugly.”

“I know bad energy when I see it.”

“Hey, why do you talk like a wizard?” G asked.

“Well, I— I—I...I am a wizard, essentially.” G said nothing. Novak added: “...Overexposure to wizard media, maybe.”

“Okay.” They passed under the Flower Hills drone.

Soon another neat mechanical shape pulled up beside the bike, circling back and forth, and now G tensed up—action-ready, adrenaline—because it wasn’t a Flower Hills drone. It had too new and awkward of a shape. Too pointy, too boxy, too clean. Gravitas tech. Although the company’s cybernetics worked well, some of the weapons and vehicles prioritized aesthetics over function. Markus Leach (a very stupid man) liked to design shit on napkins, G theorized, and pay smarter men to make it work.

“That’s Gravitas,” Novak said. “It looks like a little kid designed it. He’s found us.”

G squinted, tried to pick out weapons attachments on the drone, which looked like a sharp-edged stingray with danglies on the bottom. It angled and dove, swooping low and cutting across their path. “*Shit!*” G yelled, and he turned sharp over the yellow divider line to avoid it. It curved back to its original height 100 feet above them. “I don’t think this thing followed you from Atlanta,” he guessed, panting a little with exertion and nerve. “It won’t be able to fly that fast. Leach probably has them stationed over every highway he thinks you might be traveling. If we keep going, the drone might not register that it’s us.”

“But we can’t risk leading it to Flower Hills.”

“If we shoot it down, he’ll know it’s you, and he’ll know you’re driving north from Candybar City. We have to keep going north and try to lose it in Indianapolis.”

“But I have to go to *dinner*,” Novak protested.







a little twinge running up his borg spine, spreading through his borg limbs, and he set the gun down. Maybe like sympathy. Maybe it hurt him, too.

With the firefight over, G and Novak stood again in that cold No-Man's-Land highway cicada silence. The water grew louder and louder. Suddenly it washed over G totally—the bugs chirping endless, rubbing against each other into infinity and over, dying as they were born, living as they slept, and the rush got so loud it hurt his ears. He blinked. The feeling went.

Novak emerged from his hiding spot behind a thick oak. "I told you this land bears a curse. Did you feel that?"

"The—"

"Bugs." He swatted a cicada away from his cheek, a real fat tasty-looking one. "There's something wrong with the bugs. Kick the drone into the woods, and let's get out of here before the meat starts to liquefy. You don't want meat bomb liquid getting on your bike."

"Liquefy?"

"That's part of the magic of the rapid-replicating meat formula we used. It liquefies within three hours of deployment. ...ac—actually we were using the liquid as substrate to grow shiitake mushrooms. Decomposers love it."

A new gust of the smell sizzled in G's nose, and his body shuddered like a flag. He nodded. He didn't want to think about the meat turning into liquid. He heard a new popping sizzling sound, and saw a thin blister pushing out and bursting, squirting a red-yellow juice over the wall. He felt sick again. He turned his head away and went to the manta, stripped it for spare bullets. Then he took the bike off the road around the wall. Then Novak got on and G kicked off and left.

After a while the gentle cicada-sound and the endless yellow lines of the highway began to smooth G's brain into a nice trance, and he had almost forgotten that he had human flesh on his skeleton, that he did not belong to his borgs and the bike, one clean unit. He snapped out of it when they passed the sign for the first Flower Hills exit. When they came to the exit he saw a barrier of sandbags and concrete blocks and plywood and chicken wire blocking it. Hadn't been there before. Used to be a fence. A few militants slumped against the barrier, patrolling. No way through. A few exits down the barrier had a tiny door built into it. G pulled the bike up the ramp.

The guard, a 5'11" male with a ski mask, ethnicity unclear, snapped quick to attention, tipping his rifle into the palm of his hand, jabbing it at G's visor. Novak, immediately: "We're from Atlanta. Cora and Crabtree are expecting us." And he nodded sharply, pulled a talk out of a metallic Faraday bag, pushed the button, muttered something, static, *over*.

"Okay," he said. "You're in. Ride on through. Someone will meet you at the second checkpoint. Turn left at that stop sign and follow the road down." He undid the gate set into the middle of the barrier. G gave him a thumbs-up and shifted the bike into gear again. They passed through, into Flower Hills, and the world felt warmer, like a simulated reality rewarding them for having reached their destination.