

EMPLANT

Mal I on Khan

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For Sabrina.

1. 1 REDWI RE

Here's how it works. You walk into an Emplant dealer, like Redwire. You speak with a member of our friendly staff, like Daniel. He knows the difficult decision you came here to make and he's ready to help you through it.

Like all of our team members, Daniel is fit, well mannered, and inviting. You may even feel a sense of sincere compassion behind his words. This is more than a sales technique. He is demonstrating part of the product. If you are a nonuser, you begin to understand what Emplant can do for you just by speaking with a user. He is calm and focused, in a constant state of Zen. At first, you shyly tell him you are just looking, a dead giveaway for a nonuser.

You've seen the ads or you know someone who has one. Everyone is talking about it. In the last five years, you watched as it went from crazy fad to the hottest thing since television. You've seen the world around you change so quickly and it's all because of this one invention. You also know what you must do to have it.

You come in frightened but curious. There is so much to see. The showroom is huge and usually crowded. Along the black walls and ceilings, slim panels of full-spectrum light create a crisp yet soothing atmosphere. Monitors and speakers arch above the central path, suspended from the ceiling by mechanical arms. Promos play on a loop.

This one begins with a man standing on a busy city street corner. The world around him swells chaotic, yet he remains calm and relaxed.

A soothing, feminine voice whispers the slogan, *“Enhance your life.”*

The camera zooms into the man’s eye. We race past cells, neurons, and synapses into a storm of lightning and galactic explosions. The special effects are quite amazing. If you’ve never seen the inside of your brain, it looks just like this.

We fly through what looks like a valley of clouds surging with electricity, toward a beacon of light shining through the storm like a lighthouse in the distance. The light emanates from the center of a giant tapered structure nestled snugly between the valley’s walls. At the top of the structure electricity corrals into what seems like rows of long lightning rods.

The camera spins and dives into the pulsing light. The image morphs into a simple red and black symbol, a triangle arching over a crescent moon, the same symbol that’s all over the showroom.

Infomercials also play on a loop, thousands of testimonials from real Emplant users. They speak directly into the camera. The screens and speakers point at you. The advanced acoustics sound system makes it seem as though they’re speaking into your ear.

“Emplant is more than just a product, it’s a companion.”

“I’ve lost 38 pounds with Emplant.”

“It is the key to unlocking your hidden potential.”

“Emplant saved my life.”

“It is the guide for exploring a new world of experiences.”

“It’s the perfect invention.”

There are twenty interactive stations flocking the main path and twenty more along the walls. If you’d like to use one, there is usually a five to ten minute wait.

That’s when you meet Daniel again. He points you to the nearest open station and invites you to navigate the Emplant

Informational Database. The screen comes to life as you approach, as if it sensed your presence. He points you to the Virtual Emplant Visors sitting below the screen. In the EID, you can learn about, construct, price, and even take a virtual tour of your Emplant.

“What could be more natural than shopping for your lifestyle,” says the gentle, seductive voice.

Every Emplant comes with a basic operating system, Relm 4.0, and a few standard applications. You can customize your Emplant with upgrades from our extensive list of enhancements. New enhancements are coming every month.

“The technology is blossoming limited only by our imaginations. What do you want to do now?”

Every Emplant owner will have a SOL Vitals' Monitor and the latest version of PERSN. The program that started it all, the Systemic Operations LOGRAM has been improving and saving lives for over half a decade. Now with the Personal Emergency Response System Navigator, you can link your Emplant's SOL to a 24-hour Life Protection Center in your area. If you are having a medical emergency, Emplant can automatically send for help, even if you are unable.

“Emplant is watching out for you.”

Whether you want to keep in touch with your loved ones or just jot down some notes, you're going to use Thought-To-Text. A classic Emplant feature; T2T has revolutionized the way we communicate. Turn your thoughts directly into text messages and send them anywhere within the network, instantly. Tell someone how you're feeling *when* you're feeling it. We call it 'thinkting'.

“Enhance your communication with Emplant.”

Of course, your Emplant also comes with a spot on the Emplant intranet “The RHODE” and unlimited access to groundbreaking resources you can't find anywhere else. Create your own personal profile and link up with friends and family, near or far. It's the fastest growing social

network around. Right now over 300 million users are connecting in a giant virtual neighborhood unlike anything you've ever seen before. This will be your new address.

Every user on the network has access to the Bank of Knowledge. A compendium of human accomplishment with real-time annotation, the BOK is a living document, and the most reliable and concise encyclopedia ever. Enhancements are available to expand the generic volume to include in-depth knowledge of whatever subject interests you, be it sports, the arts, or your particular profession.

“Enhance your knowledge, harness your power.”

Daniel comes back to check up on you. You've gotten so caught up in creating your personalized Emplant, you forgot about your fears. What about the price? While this might seem like a lavish personal gift, a toy even, it's really more like a common investment, like buying a home appliance or a security system. Many companies will also share the cost of Emplant with their employees. If you pick one of our pre-made package deals, you can get even deeper discounts. We also have convenient monthly payment plans. There is a package to fit everyone's situation. Did we mention this purchase is tax deductible? You wonder how Lunica makes any money on these.

“Wow! That's a lot cheaper than I thought it was going to be,” you say.

Now you've picked out your enhancements and gasped at the low price, but you're still hesitant. Daniel knows why. It's the thing that has kept you away this long, what you must do to make all this possible. For some, this is not a difficult decision but for others, letting down their guard is not as easy. They say the initial rejection is a natural response.

Daniel is your guide. He's already on the other side but understands your concerns. Was the procedure painful? Will it leave a scar? Do I have to shave my head?

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Don't let those Lunica fanboys fool you. Their moon-shaped haircuts are strictly a personal choice. Daniel turns and lifts his long dreadlocks. On the back of his scalp, you can barely make out a tiny red dot.

He tells you the procedure was painless and he was in and out in less than half an hour, with no recovery time. Check-ups and upgrades are even simpler. You may have heard a similar story from your sister or seen that same dot on a friend's scalp.

Daniel answers all your questions concisely. He never fumbles or stutters. You watch his eyes as he speaks, searching for any sign, something that could back up this bad feeling in your gut. Soon, the feeling is gone.

When he feels he may have you, Daniel turns the tables. Before you can begin enjoying the benefits of Emplant, he must first see if you are qualified for one. Applicants must be between the current legal age of 21-75 and must be of stable health and sound mind.

Licensed Emplant Maintenance Technicians (EMMT) will visit your home in a few days to run some tests. If you pass, they will set your "fitting" date. It's usually a 2-3 week waiting period.

In the meantime, you can read over the information packet. It has everything you need to know about using your Emplant, including a few practice games you can play to prepare your mind.

Still worried about the installation? It's a simple, non-invasive procedure handled by an Emplant Installer/Retractor (EMIR). Hundreds of millions of people have been "fit" with no complications, not a single case of malpractice.

Lunica will not share your personal information with any third parties without your consent. Your files can only be accessed by your Emplant, and because your Emplant is made just for your brain, that makes it completely hacker-proof.

As you leave, you feel like a fool for being afraid in the first place. Soon you will no longer be a nonuser. You can now join your friends, family, and coworkers in enjoying a new life with Emplant. After a while, you'll wonder how you ever lived without it.

1. 2 DOUBTING TOMAS

It's nighttime and I'm standing in the middle of the road. Walls of four-family homes and parked cars flank the narrow street on this ordinary urban residential block. It seems familiar to me but I'm sure I haven't been here before. It's one of those streets; a mix of a few places not one in particular.

There is a cigarette in my hand so I take a drag. I'm watching a figure at the far end of the block. It's a burly man in sweats out for a late night jog. He is running in place at the crosswalk. There is something strange about him, the way he moves. He looks awkward. There are no drivers on the road and he has the light, yet he hesitates to cross. What is he waiting for?

He steps cautiously off the curb and slowly makes his way out into the street before stopping halfway. Still jogging in place, he looks back and forth down the avenue as if he's searching for something. When he looks down the street in my direction and sees me, he stops jogging.

I hear my name and turn to find a woman grabbing my arm and pulling me in the other direction. She's looking away from me so I can't see her face, only a head of long, golden hair. I ask her who she is but she doesn't respond. She runs, tugging at me and I try to keep up. When I look behind us, I realize why. The jogger is running quickly up the street towards us.

He gives chase, letting out a few demonic barks. I can hear his footsteps outpacing ours, getting louder. My legs feel like lead; every step gets harder and I'm losing my grip on the woman's hand. I don't want to slow her down so I let go. The jogger grabs me and spins me around, opening his mouth, as if to take a bite. Instead, an unnatural sound comes out, like a siren. Suddenly, I know what is happening.

I've slapped my alarm clock several times before I realize the buzzing sound is coming from the intercom. It's so dark I can't tell if my eyes are open. I reach blindly for the nightstand, knocking over all sorts of things, in a futile attempt to find the room control. The intercom buzzes again and a tiny red light flashes. I stumble in the darkness towards it.

A screen lights up and I squint at the blinding, fisheye image of two large men in dark coveralls standing in the lobby vestibule. They have with them three large cases. Shit, I totally forgot.

"Hello," I groan.

The man on the left holds an ID card up to the camera. The badge has the Lunica logo on it.

"Good morning, this is EMMT Stern, am I reaching Unit D-78?"

I hold down the second button and wheeze, "Yes."

"And am I speaking with Mr. Tomás Tale?" asks the short one, mispronouncing my name, as most people do.

"It's pronounced 'Tomas'," I correct them.

They shoot each other a confused look.

"Yes. This is he," I groan.

"Sir, you have a 5:15 appointment."

The men look at each other again.

"Uh, right, please come in," I say.

I buzz them in. Is it the third already? I am not prepared to deal with Empties right now. In the light of the intercom screen, I notice the house remote on the floor in front of the

nightstand. I grab it and hit the "Day" button. The lights come up and the wallscreen clicks on to the morning news.

I'm supposed to give them a signed release form. Who knows where I left that. Look at this place. I can't even keep a one-room studio in order. I check myself in the mirror. I'm barely forty but "old" is the word I'd use to describe myself. It doesn't matter. These guys won't care what I look like.

I'm rummaging through a pile of papers on my desk when I hear someone on the wallscreen mention Emplant. I instinctively stop and listen to the newscaster.

"The bill will be reviewed by two committees and six subcommittees, a total of twenty experts will be speaking, a far cry from the two hundred speakers present during the E2 hearings over five years ago."

The doorbell rings and I hit mute. The two men enter and, after a few scripted pleasantries and fingerprint ID verification, begin unpacking the large cases. Users are typically in good shape but these guys are big, like body builders. The three of us barely fit into my apartment. They move quickly and quietly, removing shiny white devices from the foam padded cases. The short guy hands me one of the devices, a handheld with a stylus. It prompts me to solve a few simple puzzles.

"Excuse me, I've done this one already," I tell him.

He just looks at me, eyes dulled.

"I took this same test two months ago," I add.

He gives me this long-winded response. I still have to do it. They need to make sure my mind isn't slipping. I complete all five levels before they finish unpacking.

A few minutes later, they've covered me with electrodes and strapped what looks like a large bedpan on my head. It's sealed uncomfortably tight all around from my elbows to my eyebrows. It vibrates so hard my teeth chatter. Every minute or so it makes a loud snapping noise that startles me. On the front, the embossed letters "KITN." I

remember when a CAT scan machine used to take up a whole room.

The short guy watches the machines while the other stares off at nothing. These aren't the same guys from last time, though I can't be sure. They all have the same detached expression. They take blood and urine samples. The machines do all the work. Bi-monthly physicals are part of my employee benefits and with insurance rates the way they are, who am I to turn down free check-ups, even if performed by glorified cable guys.

When they finish, I shamefully admit I've misplaced my release form. The short guy takes a minute to access the proper scripted answer. While he stares at me vacantly, the other continues to pack up as if we were not there. In this silent moment, I have enough time to look back and forth between the two of them, as if watching them from another dimension.

The short one reanimates and reads a generic response to my forehead. I rephrase my question to ask for the specific form. He robotically chants instructions to obtain a new form from my supervisor and file it with the head office within two days. Before I can respond, he blurts out some more scripted pleasantries and they promptly show themselves out.

I take a seat at the edge of the bed. It's 6 AM and I don't need to be at work for another three hours. I didn't get to sleep until around two so I could use a nap, but I'm sure I won't be able to wake up in time.

On the wallscreen, two people are arguing via satellite. I don't need to turn on the sound to know what they're discussing, but I do. Though I'm sick of hearing about it, the argument does well to keep me awake until it's time to leave.

Every day the trains swell with more people, every face unfamiliar. I am but one in a sea of millions. They don't see

me and they don't see each other. The book I'm struggling to read hits me in the face as new passengers squeeze in.

Aside from the muffled rumble of the tracks below, there is an eerie silence in this crowded car. No conversation, no blaring headphones, not even the rustling of newspapers snapped into shape. I've noticed this happening a lot lately.

There are three women sitting in front of me, each a different age and race. Their eyes are all closed but I know they are not asleep. They are sitting straight up, stiff as boards, gently swaying with the motion of the car. Behind their eyelids, I can see pupils dancing. They look like three plants, not awake or asleep, just swaying. From where I am standing, I can see a half dozen other people in the same state.

In midtown, the streets are bustling as usual. The sidewalks surge with working people, merchants, and tourists. They are all doing something, headed somewhere. If you look closely, you can pick them out, just like on the train. Users, perfect posture, quick but even pace, they float among the crowd like ghosts.

I hear a familiar electronic purr behind me as a ONE passes, the world's first electric, single-occupancy vehicle. It looks like a bullet on three wheels. You don't see many down here. This part of town is always busy during the day but at night, it's a different story. All the terms used to describe the underside of a perfect world apply here.

I weave through the crowds of tourists standing idle in the square. Every day it's a new bunch doing the same thing. They are all staring up at the sky, mouths agape. Above, a beautiful blue sky bathes the square in crisp, soothing light. There is a sun in the sky but you can stare at it all you want and never go blind. Every few seconds, an advertisement will appear like a neon message from the Gods.

It's called a skyscreen. Made of a flexible fabric, it has the same full-spectrum light technology that my home

wallscreen has, only 500 times bigger. There are randomly generated clouds passing by that seem to shrink into the distance and the sun moves across in coordination with the time of day, complete with sunrise and sunsets. It doesn't fool me. No matter how good the picture quality, I still feel like I'm in a giant domed warehouse.

I work for Redwire, at the city's flagship location. The showroom is in the building on the west side of the square, in a mall above the Midtown Terminal. With an estimated 4.7 million people passing through here each day, it's a prime retail spot. When I began working for Redwire, it was a struggling run-of-the-mill electronics chain. Now we are a high-end name. The Lunica Corporation bought out the company a little over a year ago. We used to sell all kinds of high-tech electronics. Now we're an exclusive retailer of Lunica products.

I'm late again. Luckily, the morning meeting hasn't started yet. The team members assemble in the break room, all of us in sleek red polo shirts. I quietly take a seat and put on my nametag. No one acknowledges me.

A group of young team members is standing by the M-water cooler to my left. I can hear their conversation but it doesn't make sense. They are talking to each other in partial sentences. They laugh in unison. I don't get the joke. I must have missed something.

Ben the store manager enters trumpeting, "Good morning everyone, let's get right to it."

He's extra chipper today, must have gone to the gym before work, as his arms look bigger than they were yesterday.

"I'm sure you all heard the announcement in the news," he continues. "Lunica expects it'll be a week until the E5 launch. I know it's been a little slow lately but we expect a huge surge of new clientele next week so consider this some downtime." He takes a breath. "So, I just received the first spec sheets for one of the next generation enhancements..."

A few team members hoot in approval.

“Pay attention. These are ‘read only’ specs. Legally we cannot upload these until the E5 bill passes. I’m sending you all a copy to review. They are tagged and encrypted so don’t leak them, or you will go to jail. Also, get your release forms ready, they will be taking volunteers for enhancement next week.”

Ben tosses me a printout of the spec sheet. It is several pages long, pretty large for a single enhancement. The title on the front page reads “RECOG1.0.” I’m flipping through it when I notice the room has fallen silent. Everyone is frozen, motionless, like a room full of mannequins. It lasts for a few moments and I am the only one who feels awkward.

Ben finishes the meeting with a quick pep talk then dismisses us. We only have them twice a week now and I notice they’ve been getting shorter. As we leave the break room, Ben says nothing to me. He’s been keeping his distance lately. Lunica has a zero tolerance policy on lateness, so it doesn’t look good when he continually allows an assistant manager to break the rule. Ben knows I’m only human.

Several hours later, I’m in my usual spot, hiding in the corner. I should be at the door greeting customers but I’m too tired to fake enthusiasm. Ben might be watching me on the security cameras so I’ve been pretending to memorize the information in the spec sheet. I’m hoping he doesn’t notice I’ve been on the same page for an hour.

Not far from me, Daniel is huddling two girls together. He has just come back from an enhancement weekend with a tan and the latest upgrades. Lunica owes much of their success to people like him. Ben says the team is like a group of pioneers, paving the way for the rest of society. More like Guinea pigs.

“Ok, just stand there and don’t move,” Daniel says, playfully wagging a finger.

He's positioned them under a purposefully directed set of lights. With his thumbs and index fingers, he makes frame around them. The two girls giggle and exchange some words in another language.

"Ok, now just relax and smile," he says comfortingly.

The girls pose with their heads cocked at an angle, bearing insecure smiles. Daniel peeks through the frame and winks.

"Beautiful," he exclaims, suddenly coming to life.

He takes them over to a one of the interactive stations, a slim black pedestal. He presses his thumb on the touch screen. As he connects with the kiosk, Daniel's body freezes.

I'm standing next to them now, the girls acknowledge me with a smile. Although I'm watching him, Daniel doesn't notice me. He stares unblinking at the screen, a smile on his frozen face.

The girls gasp in awe when the image of them finally loads.

"It looks so real," one of them says.

As they revel in the marvel that is the HD enhancement for the Optical Camera enhancement, Daniel finally notices me and flashes a shit-eating grin. I'm betting he's already hit his targets for the week.

I look down at the dog-eared spec sheet in my hand. I could memorize all twenty pages but it would make no difference. I haven't sold anything in months.

I notice Daniel is staring at me again, looking lifeless. As soon as he reanimates, we look to the screen to find a high definition high definition image of me. Crow's feet frame the longing in my eyes; two bloodshot orbs lost in the deep black chasms of my eye sockets. My skin looks like leather. I have the posture of a wilting flower. Thinning hair, gaunt face, protuberant belly, I look like the living dead. I look beaten. I look old.

"You want me to print it for you," asks Daniel.

I still haven't gotten used to the new shop floor. A lot has changed since last year. There used to be a wall of shelves here, filled with all sorts of electronic toys and gadgets. There was a tear in the rug there, right behind where the registers used to be. I had just gotten used to not tripping over it. Now it is all gone. Lunica came in, ripped everything out, and replaced it with a sleek new showroom.

It's like an arcade of sorts, a hub for the users. We are just a dealer. We sell mostly the software and order the hardware. We don't actually keep any merchandise in the store, except for the one display model sitting in a bulletproof glass box at the shop entrance.

Every time I pass, I can't help but stare. It's hard not to. With the lights shining on it from all sides, it twinkles like a tiny diamond. Even close up to the display case you can barely make it out. Thin metal loops with cameras circle the device like electrons around an atom. The HD footage plays on monitors surrounding the case. When you first enter, this is what you see; Emplant magnified twenty-five times.

It's not exactly a pyramid as the advertising suggests. It has more of a sleek curve to it. In action, it resembles more of a squid. On the bottom, there are six tiny ports, three on each side. These are where the hair-like nanotubes retract.

In the center of each of the three sides, in a depression in its pruned and milky skin, a microscopic shard of crystal glows red. That is the machine's optical processor. In the logo, it's the iris. On screen, it looks more like a sparkle inside a tiny asshole.

The detail is incredible for something so small. You can't help but admire its strange beauty. Some people see a beautiful work of art. Some people see a sleek new car. Some see a frightening alien creature. It's ironic that once you get it, you will never see it again.

A knock at the front door startles me. A young man with his hand on the glass is staring at me. He's fruitlessly trying to find my signal so he can thinx me something.

After a few seconds, he gives up and mouths “Are you open?”

I shake my head. He blinks and walks away. That’s why the door is locked, moron.

Even when the showroom lights are off and the front gate is down, the cameras are always circling, the display lights always shining. Those passing by see the brilliantly lit display, and its tiny diamond shining inside, all year long.

It’s been another long day. The shifts are 10 hours now and I hear Lunica is considering keeping the shop open 24 hours. The rest of the team is all for it. The base salary isn’t spectacular, but with business so good, the commission alone makes this one of the most sought after positions.

Technically my title is Visual Merchandise Manager but, as I said, there isn’t much merchandise to manage. I got a case of pocket mirrors last week, receiving them was the most useful thing I did this month. Ben likes to handle most of the managerial duties himself. I spend my days helping where I can, even if it’s just changing the M-Water cooler.

I pass by his office on the way out. He’s sitting frozen at his desk. He’s always the first to arrive, last to leave. I’ve known him for a long time but never could I have imagined I’d see him this dedicated to his job, or anything for that matter. I don’t bother saying goodnight.

To get home I have to go down to ground level but instead I’m across level 8, standing right by the front doors that exit to the garden mezzanine. Beyond the glass, a spacious landscaped park with a café and fountain invite. This is the “perfect world” I mentioned earlier. This park is directly above the giant billboard that domes the congested dark square eight stories below. To use this exit you must have the proper security clearance, which I do, but that’s not why I am here.

I enter the trendy supermarket nearby. The food at Fresh Foods is overpriced and not much fresher than what I would find outside the city. I don’t come here for the food. At the

checkout, a bubbly young woman greets me with a big smile. Her name is Anabel.

At this point, I can pick out a user just by their mannerisms. They phase in and out of reality, as if daydreaming. You could be right in front of them and they'll be far off in another world. Anabel isn't a user. When she looks at you, she looks at you. When she smiles, it's not a smirk or polite grin; it's a beautiful beaming smile.

We've exchanged a few words here and there but if not for our nametags, I doubt we'd even know each other's name. It's pathetic, I know. She's too young for me but just being in her presence for a few moments temporarily lifts my spirits. I usually stop in to buy a pack of gum just so I can see her. I don't even like gum.

1. 3 THE DEAD AND DYI NG

Today is Wednesday, which means I must head north. My destination is a little lower class residential neighborhood just over the bridge. There are two reasons I come here. The convenience store on this particular street is the only one in the city that still carries my brand of cigarettes and the ancient stone building across from it is where I meet with my group. Yeah, I have a group.

I exchange a nod with the convenience store clerk and he immediately reaches under the counter for my cigs. I think he stocks them just for me. Quitting is on my list but for now, it's keeping me from losing my mind. I have one outside before heading across the street to the church.

The paint is cracked and chipping off the door handle. Inside, the air is warm and stale. Everything is dusty, from the pews to the candles at the altar. The stairs creak as I make my way down to the basement. At the bottom of the stairs, a short hallway leads to the boiler room. To my immediate left, a heavy metal door opens to my destination.

The classroom doubles as a bomb shelter. Mostly it's a meeting room for various groups and classes. Yesterday was a speed-dating night. Tomorrow is a drawing class for seniors. Tonight, it's the meeting of 'The Noble Savages.' The name wasn't my idea.

A single light shines down on ten chairs arranged in a semi-circle, most of them empty. A caramel-colored hand extends across the circle and I reach to it, grabbing the

fingers, and shaking them once. The hand belongs to Mr. Radames Soto. He sits as he always does, well postured for his age; hands piled one on the other and resting on top of his cane. The old man gives me a warm smile as I sit down next to him.

Across from me, a pale man with thick-framed glasses rises from his chair. This is Steve and he more or less runs this group. He started it a few years ago after his wife overdosed on sleeping pills. He also came up with the name.

“Well, it looks like this is going be all of us tonight. So I’ll just go ahead and begin if that’s ok,” he drones. “How has everyone’s week been?”

The group lets out a collective groan. Should I tell them I think my boss is going to fire me? Should I mention I still haven’t quit smoking yet? Should I admit I’m in the middle of an existential crisis that threatens to dismantle everything I am and destroy all the ideals I’ve come to hold dear?

“Same shit, different day,” Radames says with a smile.

“Yeah, same shit,” I add.

“Thank you all for joining us again. It’s nice to see some familiar faces. As you all know, last week we shared some of our feelings about the proposed Emplant Version 5.0 bill. If it’s ok, I was hoping we could maybe talk about the recent spike in solar coronal mass ejections. Has anyone heard of this?”

No one replies.

“Well I just happen to have a printout here of Monday’s article in the Times.”

He pulls a piece of paper from his jacket pocket and nervously unfolds it. Clearing his throat, he musters the courage to play out what he must have rehearsed more than once. Before he can utter the first syllable, the woman sitting to his right interrupts.

“Steve, can I just say something really quickly?”

Steve stammers a bit before the woman cuts him off again.

“Thank you, Steve.”

This is Bernice, an attractive thirty-something mother of two originally from somewhere in the southwest. Her husband works international sales for Lunica. Apparently, they grew apart.

“I know you all must be as happy as I am that the E5 bill is still in litigation. It just goes to show what a little prayer can accomplish. Each member of my charter spent over 50 hours last week meditating to help sway the opinion of the collective. Gamma spectrum field reports show we made an ionic sphere of over 15 rings in our region alone,” she exclaims, clapping loudly.

The thin dark-skinned young man sitting across from me mumbles and shakes his head. Darrell is the youngest of us. He’s an angst-driven lad with alternative tastes.

Bernice continues, “While some of you may not understand our methods, like you, we want a better world. Our lives and the lives of our children depend on our faith in what we know in our hearts to be the truth and the strength we have inside us to let it be known to all.”

Bernice is a follower of an infamous modern theology. The religion has no name, but some of the followers refer to themselves as ‘The Unbroken Society’, a nod to the title of their bible. You see them in the train stations handing out free copies or in the park meditating in groups. Essentially, they are the new hippies.

With her hand on her heart, she says, “Darrell, even you have a say in what we do as a species but you must let your voice be heard throughout the conscious unconscious by vibrating the rings of influence with us!”

Darrell raises an eyebrow and retorts, “Bernice, that cult is warping your damn mind.”

Bernice rolls her eyes, “I told you, UBS is not a cult! Have you even read any of Cilium's essays? Ugh, anyway, we're planning a peaceful rally in the park this Saturday.”

She reaches into her handmade shoulder bag and pulls out a stack of yellow papers.

"I brought some flyers. Give some to your friends. We need as many people as we can to beat the majority."

She hands each of us a stack. Scrawled in black on homemade paper are a date, a location, and the stamped image of a bearded man. Each of the flyers is handwritten. There are at least fifty of them. Darrel puts his stack under his chair. I do the same.

"Let's stop number five in its tracks," she exclaims.

She's talking about the "five signs" from the writings of Unbroken Society prophet, Cilium Genus. The myth goes: he was a famous actor around the turn of the century but became a social outcast in the later part of his life. After his death, an anonymous author published the writings Genus amassed in his twenty-five year seclusion. The Unbroken Society believe the bitter ramblings of this semi-mythical pariah to be a cryptic charter outlining a return to a natural state of being, along with a poetically generalized prophecy for the end of times if we don't.

None of the charters can agree on what the five signs actually are. Genus' descriptions are vague. Some believe it refers to the five ages of technological advancement. Some think they are five inventions, fire making, the wheel, writing, machines, or computers. By most accounts, we should have been dead long ago. People like Bernice think Emplant is the fifth and final sign. The E5 is just too much of a coincidence for her. Meditating in groups in the park appears to be the fifth and final sign of desperation for these folks.

Of course, no cult is complete without the usual promises of happiness and an end to your personal suffering. This takes the cake for promising mind powers as well. It was people like Bernice, stumbling into the big city, looking for something new yet familiar to keep them anchored. A smile from a stranger with a book gave her a

new light to follow, one that would quell her fears and doubts, give her a new purpose, something to focus her hate on.

Steve stands, "Thank you Bernice. We will all have to check our schedules. Now if it's ok, I'd like to get back to our discussion on the solar flares."

While he pats his pockets searching for the article, Darrell takes the opportunity to chime back in.

"Steve, can I just say something in response to Bernice?" he asks, without waiting for a response. "There is no way the E5 is 'stuck in litigation'. That's just marketing to hype up the release. They are only dragging it through the legislative branch for the anti-integration crowd, to make it seem like they're considering all the possibilities. The truth is they've already made the choice. The E5 is coming out. There isn't anything you can do about it."

"Darrell that is not how the judicial system works," she condescends. "Besides, if you truly believe that, it will happen. This is why you need to believe it won't!"

Darrell sits up in his seat. "Bernice, I *believe* this government favors economically viable business. In fact, I know it does. They are all in this together. There are so many secret deals going on."

"Oh Darrell, even if your conspiracy theory is true, isn't it all the more reason to take action?"

"*Sitting in the park trying to change things with your mind* is not action. You have to go out there and talk to the people, show them the truth behind the lies." He starts to rap, "Expose the illuminati code. Excel, expel the endless intel..."

Occasionally Darrell will freestyle about government conspiracies.

Bernice, determined, retorts, "Darrell, at least you and I can agree that evil corporation is the real enemy. No offense, Tomas."

I pump a fist in the air in support.

Darrell responds, "That's just the people trying to fill the void left behind from eliminating God from their lives."

"God doesn't have anything to do this," Bernice shakes her head.

"God has everything to do with everything," he yells, throwing his hands in the air.

Darrell refers to himself as an anarchist-shaman-hacker-monk and only brings up God when the argument becomes desperate. Steve finally rises to break up the debate.

I've been meeting with these people every week for over a year now and this is how our evening usually goes. The fact is the only thing we truly share in common is none of us has an Emplant. Bernice's religion vilifies it. Radames was over the age of compatibility from the start and Steve would live in the 19th century if he could.

Darrell came to me a few months ago for an E4 but failed the physical. He says it's a conspiracy because they didn't like his 'anti-establishment' answers. I never told him but I saw his psych evaluation. Lunica deemed him a paranoid schizophrenic.

"Tomas, can you please explain to Darrell that Emplant cannot raise your body temperature and make you warmer," says Bernice.

"Uh, yeah that's right. It just monitors your core temperature," I reply.

"Yes that's what it does now, but you wait until the E6," Darrell warns.

He may be right. Every year the technology advances, offering more possibilities, but this means building a closer connection with your brain. With every version of Emplant, we must draft new laws to govern the new technology, as per the will of the people. The government even created a national committee to oversee Lunica. As of now, they have yet to uncover any illegalities.

I used to keep track of these Emplant bills, searching for atrocities to call out. I was a bit of a conspiracy theorist myself. After the E4 passed last year, I stopped keeping track. Version 4 made Emplant a household name. I realized this is what the people want.

The E5 bill draws new lines; exactly how much of the brain Emplant can access. This includes amendments to some of the proposals enacted by the E4 bill. This part scares people like Bernice and Darrell the most. In truth, the government *is* involved with Lunica. It's not a secret. Darrell would know that too if he read the user agreements.

Every user has a unique RFID-enabled biometric passport complete with 10-digit number. Lunica has towers all over the country managed by the servers at the Lunica head office downtown. The user maintains his or her own files but Emplant anonymizes certain data and shares the information with governmental agencies in exchange for the rights to exclusivity. It's legal and very common.

The government isn't controlling minds as Darrell might say. Part of delivering the service means the service provider must know where you are. It only becomes a problem when you do something to warrant the government using the information against you.

They did the same thing with the Internet, cell phones, and credit cards. They make these laws so the people feel safe while they enjoy all the new advancements. Its baby steps towards something greater. All the people really care about is taking pictures with their eyes or thinxting their friends.

I'm sitting here defending the product like some brainwashed company man, in my own unfit head nonetheless. I glance at my watch and decide to kill ten minutes smoking in the restroom.

After the meeting, I walk with Radames to his house. As usual, he recalls the events of the evening, offering his

opinion of the exchanges. I'm only half-listening. I'm enjoying another cigarette and thinking about how badly I don't want to go to work tomorrow.

"...And the husband is never around, probably separated. She's stuck with these kids and gets a check every month instead of half of everything. So what does she do? She can't go home, but she has to stay sane. She goes into denial. She goes home 'in her head', back to that small town. Only she has to do it differently. Same wolf, new clothing. But the will is strong. Let me tell you I can feel it. She has heart, she's just batting for team loco, you know. And the husband, he works for the company. Oh Mary, It's classic stuff really."

I have known Radames since I was 7 years old. I used to live in this neighborhood, just a few blocks from the church. Back then, he was Father Soto to me. My dad died when I was twelve and Radames quickly stepped in as a surrogate father. Though he was a priest, he never really pushed religion on me, just practical stuff, things my mother did not. He left the priesthood while I was at college. We kept in touch via email. It was then he asked me to call him by his first name.

"So, I noticed you were extra quiet tonight," he notes.

"Eh, just tired and I'm sick of hearing those guys argue."

"Like night and day those two," he chuckles, "They're a lot of fun though."

"And Steve, poor guy just wants to talk about something else."

"Not everyone is into solar flares."

"Bernice has some abandonment issues but Darrell can be kind of a hypocrite sometimes. I mean he pretends to be middle-of-the-road but he's only bitter because he can't have one."

"One what?"

"An Emplant."

"Oh. What about checkout girl, you ask her out yet?"

“Now is not a good time. Redwire is going to get busy.”

“You used that excuse already. How is work?”

“You know, the same, I fucking hate it.”

“Have you been looking for another job?”

“Not really. I’ve been feeling kind of unmotivated lately.”

He looks hard at me and shakes his head, “I don’t know how you do it, Tomas. Every day, surrounded by it, learning it inside and out, and yet you manage to avoid it. You’d think the curiosity alone would get you.”

In the corner of my eye, I can see him studying my expression.

“You said yourself, Radames, It’s not what you know that gets you; it’s what you don’t know.”

“True, but you gotta be the most informed individual I know when it comes to this stuff. It’s taken much less to convince others. How is Benny by the way?”

Two little boys race past us. They laugh and howl in the night.

“He’s fine.”

When we get to his house, Radames stands in his doorway. He was the age I am now when I first met him and even back then he looked younger than he was. I think I’ll never live as long as he has and a part of me hopes I never do.

As usual, he leaves me with a little advice, “You can’t move forward until you choose the path. Then you gotta stick with it. Otherwise, you’re gonna walk around in circles all your life.”

He winks and shuts the door.

I’m on the bus headed home. From the elevated highway, I can see Lunica City shining over the south bay. It’s taken several years to build but it’s almost complete. A few floating skyscrapers seem caught in the six thousand foot pyramid-shaped web of trusses that make up the main

structure, with Lunica's main headquarters located in the apex. It will eventually house over half a million people and create hundreds of thousands of new jobs. Like the skyscreen, it is also a major tourist attraction. I heard the waiting list for luxury apartments is five years long.

Walking from the bus stop, my apartment complex ahead looks like a prison. Four hundred fifty units per square block, the apartments in the center, some of them are only one room, many with no windows. Guess where I live? I remember the virtual tours and advertisements that sold me. The architectural drawing showed a tree-lined path of red bricks leading to a grand steel and concrete structure shining in the sun.

As I walk that very path, the trees around me are just brown skeletons, the walkway is blackened and uneven, and the drab building looks colder than the night air. In the courtyard, two young men in hooded sweatshirts chat and smoke in a dark corner, as they often do. I'm almost certain the one on the right is a drug dealer.

The elevator still isn't working. After climbing seven flights, I stare at the door keypad for a moment, too exhausted to remember the code. When the door opens, I am relieved to find the air system is working.

Two ceiling vents pump purified air into the unit, while exhaust-fans circulate it. They said the air in these rooms is cleaner than outside. Considering the airport traffic on the highway next door, they may be right. It's not bad until the system breaks down. Then the smells from the other units mix and this awful funk creeps in through the vents. If the fans in my unit stop working, I have to go outside and smoke otherwise the fire alarms go off.

So why would I live in a tiny room with no windows? It's close to the city, moderately priced (for a prison cell) and there is a general store in the lobby. Each room comes with a kitchenette, two closets, (one that is supposed to be a bathroom) and a queen-sized convertible bed (mattress not

included). The 90" high definition multimedia screen built into one of the walls may have swayed my opinion a bit.

The PIP allows you to watch TV and surf the Internet at the same time, although, I rarely use it. You can set it to one of the 24/7 high definition nature channels and pretend it's a window to a sun-drenched forest. It's a better view than what is really out here, cars, smog, and all the droppings of civilization.

I undress and add another unopened pack of gum to the collection building on my desk. It's almost midnight and I have to open the store tomorrow morning. Ben will probably be in early so I can't be late. I microwave a soy burrito and pour a glass of carrot juice. I'll choke down most of the burrito and drink only half the bitter juice before retiring to bed.

For a couple of hours I lay in bed staring at the ceiling, tonight's events repeating in my head. I remember when Radames first told me about the savages, I was a bit reluctant, but I figured it couldn't hurt. The group was bigger back then, we had over a dozen members.

At first, I was amazed to meet so many intelligent people with the same questions, successful people like doctors and teachers from different religions and cultures, talking about all the great mysteries of the world. We didn't just talk about God and religion. We talked about philosophy, politics, evolution, healthy living, consciousness; you name it. As I recall, we actually had some good conversations back then. It was not what I expected. Early on, it felt like I was experiencing some real spiritual growth. I felt like a foundation set in. I felt stronger, like I might be okay.

Now it's just the five of us. All the interesting people have stopped coming, I suspect because they found a better form of support. Are we really the sane ones? Are we enlightened? Are we misguided? Are we fooling ourselves?

I want to sleep so badly but I am still awake and it's nearly 3 AM. Pills or warm milk won't do it. There is only one thing that does the trick. I don't know if it's routine or some sort of psychological attachment. I load the video on the wallscreen and light another cigarette. It's a promotional video for the E4. I've watched it so many times I know all the lines.

From the wireless headset, a familiar voice fills my ears. They call her EMA, the voice of Emplant. It's her voice in all the commercials. She's the one who tells you when you have a message or when your blood sugar is too low.

It used to be you could identify any user easily by the little red wireless earpiece. That was how you heard EMA. The E4 changed that. Now you don't really *hear* her. Emplant sends a signal to a specific part of your brain and you interpret it as sound. It's embarrassing but just hearing her voice is already relaxing me. I can't imagine what it would be like to hear in my mind.

Figuring out how to code the sound into electric signals was the easy part. The Lunica team spent years researching the psychological effect of certain tones and pitches. EMA is actually a composite of multiple computerized voices mixed into one soothing cadence. *She* isn't even a she. There is the option to adjust the volume or replace her with unique sounds that you wouldn't hear in normal life. Most users just stick with EMA.

The infomercial begins with user testimonials. I remember when I first watched this I was convinced they were paid actors. They speak as if reading from a script, no stuttering or pauses. Turns out, that's what happens to most users.

The first testimonial is from Charles the compulsive eater. He talks about how his SOL Vitals Monitor helped him keep on track to a healthier lifestyle.

"I lost 260 pounds because of Emplant. Two hundred sixty, that's almost two people!"

I can't watch this one anymore, all I see is his neck skin jiggling as he talks. It's true. There are hundreds of thousands of cases of dramatic weight loss and improved lifestyle. Emplant users are less depressed and more productive. I've seen it myself. They come to us hunched over, tired and bitter. A few weeks later when they come back for an upgrade, it's as if they've been on vacation. Whatever was broken got fixed.

My head rests back against the pillow and I close my eyes. The promo music becomes a lulling drone in the background as I imagine myself in another world. I am healthy and strong. I have a house, a beautiful wife, and a son. We're sitting at the dinner table all frozen and smiling like a utopian advertisement. My wife spouts Emplant bylines in EMA's voice, batting seductive eyes as she passes me the homemade tofu rolls. After dinner, I tuck my boy into bed, never once seeing his face.

I retire to the master bedroom to find my beautiful wife, a woman who looks a lot like Anabel, naked on the bed. She has EMA's voice, describing the amenities of the Emprint enhancement while beckoning me to her spreading legs.

"Express yourself in a unique and exciting new way. Don't just take a picture, Emprint it. It will last longer. It's more than picture, it's an experience."

As I embrace her in my dream, in real life I masturbate and fall asleep with the wallscreen on.

1. 4 LATE

I slept through my alarm again. If I skip showering, I might be able to make it in on time. I can't be late three times in a row. I dress quickly and grab a granola bar on the way out. Walking to the train station, I realize I forgot my handheld. Too late can't go back. Not a big deal, no one calls me anyway.

All through the train ride, I am tense. I missed the first train because I was stuck on the staircase behind a fat woman with a cane. I had to wait another five minutes for the next one. When the train stops for a moment in the tunnel, I groan audibly. A few people stare at me and I look down at my shoes. I wish I knew how long I have. Without my handheld, I can't tell what time it is. I need to start wearing a watch, maybe a nice analog piece.

In midtown, as I'm jogging across the square, I glance up at the time app in the skyscreen. I might just make it. When I finally get to the mall entrance, I encounter another obstacle.

He's wearing a knitted cap over his stringy gray hair and a long ratty coat stained with dirt and paint. A homeless person, one of many who hang out in this neighborhood, I heard some of the team members call him Jack.

He has a thing for Lunica. We've had to kick him out of the store a few times for harassing customers. Right now, he is at the mall entrance preaching his usual anti-Lunica dogma in a surprisingly eloquent English accent.

"Do not be fooled by the soft music and shiny objects. Behind these doors lies a den of silent horror, an abattoir for your soul. Lunica will have you believe they are enhancing your consciousness. Beware the pied-pipers song! This is no hospital. It is a hospice."

When he's looking away, I rush to the door. He notices.

"Here's one of them now," he says blocking the door. "Hello, good doctor. Going to spread the virus?"

"No. I'm just trying to make rent. Excuse me," I say without looking up.

"Working for the devil pays well doesn't it," he goads.

"Actually, it doesn't. Please, I'm running late."

A peculiar look appears on his face. He leans in close and stares into my eyes as if peering inside.

He whispers, "Are you still alive in there?"

We study each other for a moment. I have never seen him up close. He's older than I thought.

A burly mall security guard knocks on the glass door from the other side, startling us both. Jack lets go of the door and wags a finger at me.

"Don't do it," he warns, backing away.

I thank the guard and hustle in, immediately putting the event out of my mind.

I arrive at Redwire only a few minutes late and head to the break room. I'm surprised to find it empty. For a few minutes, I sit alone until finally Daniel stops in to refill his M-Water bottle at the cooler.

"Good morning, Daniel," I say in my most authoritative voice.

He looks up to see me sitting in my usual spot.

With a sigh he says, "What's up, Tomas?" as if he'd stepped in shit.

"Have you seen Ben?" I ask, trying to look as cool and calm as possible; the opposite of what I am.

He blinks slowly, gulping down the blue liquid for several seconds before answering.

“Don't you remember what Ben said yesterday,” he asks, screwing the top back on his bottle.

“Oh yeah, of course,” I lie, searching his face, hoping desperately for a hint.

“EMPresent?”

“Right,” I say slowly, as if it's a question, not a statement, as I intended.

“He's using EMPresent to give remote morning meetings.”

“...remote morning meetings,” I say with him, scowling and nodding as if I knew all along. “Yeah, right I just was saying I haven't seen him yet.” I'm worried I might be visibly trembling.

“Well, he's here, been here since seven, just like always,” he says on the way out.

I look down at my clipboard and stare at the unmarked, blue-lined paper of the attached legal pad, contemplating my next move.

Ben peeks in, “Tom, can I see you in my office for a second?”

Right now, I am sitting across from Ben. Shortly after I got to the office, he excused himself to take an urgent call. He's sitting there frozen, vacant gaze aimed at nothing. His skin is tan from his recent enhancement weekend in the Tropics. Hard to believe just a year ago he was a pasty, overweight stoner.

A curious red folder sits on the desk between us. I think about opening it but instead my eyes wander around the room. The metal desk has no drawers and the matching shelving units have barely anything on them. There are no pens, paper, or filing cabinets, no computer. The few items there seem to be for show.

On one top shelf, there is an antique framed photograph, taken many years ago. It's dusty but I can tell it's a picture of

Ben's father holding a fish. Standing next to him is my father and Radames. They are all smiling, big toothy grins.

Ben suddenly comes back to life, "Whoa sorry about that, Tom. I had to exchange a few with a big client."

"What client," I ask, trying to sound interested.

He flashes me a sly smirk, "That was the regional director of VitaLab. They want us to fit their entire west coast office; over eight hundred fittings!"

"Wow."

"Isn't that amazing?"

"Yeah, wow."

"That's more units-per-capita than the Empire Bell installation. They want a six-class package scheme, with maintenance, upgradable for three generations. They haven't given me the exact totals per class yet. She said there could be up to 22 Executive Pro 5 packages, happy fucking holiday!"

"Wow, congratulations."

"Well not just yet. We have to wait for the E5 to pass of course. We need to debug the network hierarchy and file for the RF spots. They haven't begun collecting applications yet. It's a pharmaceutical company so I don't think health issues will come up. We'll say three percent, plus seven percent for resistant numbers, minus fifteen—"

There is an awkward pause, an old-fashioned one. That's right, Ben. I'm still here.

"Wow that sounds really fantastic," I say, trying to sound at ease.

Suddenly his eyebrows drop. His smile turns to a serious pout and he brings his hands together in front of him.

"So, Tom, how are you," he asks quite concernedly.

"Can't complain."

There is another pause. I can't tell if he's watching me intently or taking another message.

I'm about to speak when he cuts me off, "You look tired."

"I had a late night. Radames says hello."

“Are you still going to that group?”

“Only once a week.”

He pauses again, takes a deep breath, and leans in close.

“Tom, Let me get straight to the point. I’m not going to try to talk you into anything. We’ve been through that already. I understand you have your reasons. You know, by law, Lunica cannot make you have the procedure. Nevertheless, you need to understand my position here. Forget how it looks to the staff, you coming in late all the time. Forget that I have Rosaline from the Lunica head office asking about you every two weeks. Honestly, I’m having trouble finding things for you to do around here.”

“What are you saying?”

“It’s easier for me to just send the staff their schedules on RhodeMail. Bookkeeping, account lists, employee files, they’re all right here,” he points to his head, “and frankly I don’t have time to make print-outs of everything for you.”

“Are you firing me?”

“No, Tom. I’m trying to help you.”

“You’re giving me an ultimatum.”

He leans back in his chair and looks at me hard.

“I have the test results from your last check-up here,” he says, opening the folder. “Do you want to take a look?”

“Why, am I sick?”

“Well, you’re not in the best of health. I see you’re still smoking. Blood pressure is a little high, otherwise nothing to be worried about. The real issue is your declining logistics scores.”

“What are you talking about? I ace those little quizzes every time.”

“See for yourself.”

He turns the folder towards me. On the report, above the picture of my brain there is a graph of my test scores from the past twelve months. The jagged line slopes downward. The last test, the one I took twice, I scored a 72% the first time and a 67% the second time.

"It happens to a lot of people our age," he continues. "Your brain isn't getting the exercise it needs. You will start to forget things. Your mind will play tricks on you. The worst part is you don't realize it."

"Those guys come at five in the morning, Ben. I'm barely awake while I'm answering those questions. OK, what then, I'm getting old, is that your point? Am I becoming incapable of doing my tasks?"

"And what exactly are those tasks, Tom?"

Shit, he's going there.

"But let's not go there. I don't need an assistant manager. I could use another team member. With the commission alone you could finally move out of that closet you live in."

"It's a studio."

"As I recall you were pretty good at sales. You used to like technology. Heck, you were a tech junkie. You know your stuff and the customers can see that."

"Ben, what do you want me to do?"

"I want you to take some time off."

"But the E5 kicks off next week."

"I can handle things here. You need to take care of yourself. Go get some rest. You must have some money saved up. Take a vacation somewhere nice. You can start today. I promise your job will be here when you get back."

He walks me to the door and pulls something from his pocket.

"By the way, I want you to take a look at this. No one is supposed to see this yet."

In his hand is a slim black flash drive.

"From the EID, converted to 2D, I had this specially made for you," he says, handing it to me.

On the side of the stick is the Lunica logo.

"Just take a look at it, OK? I'll see you in a couple of weeks," he says, patting my back so hard I nearly topple over. "Oh, and one more thing, Tom," he moves in close,

almost whispering, "I heard a few of the staff members joking at your expense. I reprimanded them of course but their accusations aren't unfounded. It would explain why you're having trouble connecting with them."

"Huh?"

"As your friend, I think you should consider switching to a stronger deodorant."

I walk out the front door watching my feet the entire time. I can feel the staff's eyes on me. I bet they're thinking about me now.

"The smelly old guy got fired."

"Bon Voyage, smokestack!"

I can't believe I turned out to be the old creepy guy. When did that happen? Thanks a lot, Ben. Some friend you are. I'm not connecting with the staff because I don't have compatible hardware.

Imaginary arguments stream through my head and I catch myself mumbling angrily like some frenzied gnome. I didn't even realize my body unconsciously led me to the Fresh Foods. I can easily pick out Anabel's golden blonde head in the crowd; right in front, on the left hand side, at the cashier lane six. Perhaps I should stop in for some gum. I pinch my Redwire shirt under my shoulder and pull it to meet my nose. Maybe not today.

The train is empty this late in the morning. I walk from car to car until I find one with enough nonusers to make me feel comfortable. Two teenage boys are chatting loudly at the other end of the car. They should be in school right now. The way they look, their clothes, their posture, you can tell they are rebels, rebelling for the sake of rebellion.

What happened to you, Ben? When this all started you were more against it than I was. It was your idea to join the E3 protest, even after what we saw on the news; what happened two years before. Somehow, you convinced me.

You've always convinced me, ever since we were kids. In middle school, you gave me my first cigarette. In high school, you made me cut class with you. I remember we were at your Uncle Ray's cabin and we found his stash. I got so paranoid I ended up calling my mother to pick me up. She banned you from the house after that. She hated you so much.

When you tried to talk me out of going to college, I finally stood my ground. The whole summer, right up until the day I went away, you tried to convince me it was going to be a waste of time.

By then my mother had drilled it into my head, "He's a just a fat loser who'll never amount to anything and if you hang around him you'll end up the same." Fact is I went away because I believed it was the obvious choice and I pitied you for not seeing that.

The next time I saw you it was ten years later. I walked into a Redwire looking for some new headphones and there you were. We had a short conversation but I remember actually being impressed. You knew all this technical information about the products. Somehow, you were a manager. You were still fat and still a pothead but you had your own place and were doing ok. I still lived in my mother's house. College turned out to be a waste of time and I'd been jumping from job to job trying to figure out what I wanted to do. Next thing I know I'm working for Redwire and we were hanging out together just like old times. The years passed quickly. I was doing ok until "it" came along.

It was about seven years ago, on the day of my mother's funeral. The stroke came so suddenly, she was gone so quickly, and it still had not hit me. I just felt numb. I remember walking aimlessly through the old neighborhood thinking about nothing and everything. I stopped instinctively in front of an electronics store.

As I peered into the window at the new gadgets, the first hint of emotion returned. It was guilt. I felt guilty for not crying over my mother's death. It was so fitting a testimonial that I actually began to cry and laugh at the same time. It didn't register at first, I only made the connection later, but in that shop window was the first time I saw the familiar black and red logo of Lunica.

When I first read about it, I didn't think it would catch on. Lunica's plan was to have "an Emplant in every head" in ten years. I thought it was too out there for mass commercial retail and too expensive. Nevertheless, the SOL technology sold itself. Those who could afford it could not afford to miss out.

The first version of Emplant was around for almost half a decade before version 2 came out. Since then, new versions have been arriving almost annually. At first, Emplant was just a Vitals Monitor and you needed a computer with the proper software to communicate with it. Version 2 was to be the first to have internal communication between Emplant and its host.

The T2T technology would reintroduce Emplant as a telecommunications device. This meant the user would need to join a network and become a traceable signal. It used the same GP chips people put in their cars and their pets. Now they were buying it for themselves.

It was Ben who first warned, "Emplant is a 'New World Order' microchip that will invade our lives and take away our privacy," long before I met Darrell.

Initially, there was a strong opposition to it, enough to warrant legislation to determine the limitations of the technology. Half a million people stood before the capitol building during the weeklong congressional hearings. They sat on the grass over the hill. They sang songs and danced. Their chants roared throughout the capitol city. Those opposed taunted the few first generation users who came out in support.

When the verdict came 'product approved for distribution', a ripple went through the crowd. Shock and disbelief turned to anger and mayhem. Three people died in the riots that year, two of them were users. Lunica's defense team would use their deaths at the hands of nonusers as an example of the ill-tempered nation we had become. To quell the masses, the Committee of Ethical Technologic Advances (CETA) continually investigates Lunica's dealings.

Then the E3 came along with its new atrocity, the optical camera, further invading the peoples' privacy. Again, the backlash began.

Two years ago, you told me, "If that bill passes it's going to directly affect our lives, put us out of a job. We need to show this government what they are doing is wrong."

I was scared. I thought the E3 protest was going to be worse than the E2, but I went along anyway because I felt like I was doing something important. I probably felt the way Bernice does now. When we arrived, there were only a few thousand people, more police than protestors. When the bill passed, we all just turned and went home. It was like a job. We were herded in, held our pickets, dropped our two cents, then were herded out.

Last year only people like Bernice showed up. They sat on the grass and meditated then shrugged their shoulders and said, "We'll get them next time." Maybe it's like what Darrell says about the delay; maybe it's all just part of the show.

In just a few years, it was everywhere. Redwire and others attempted to strike up distribution deals but Lunica had exclusive rights to the technology and they were not sharing. A class action lawsuit filed by a collection of consumer electronics companies accused Lunica of setting up a monopoly. The courts ruled in favor of Lunica, claiming the Emplant technology was "too sensitive for unregulated companies to produce." That was the deal. Lunica was the company of choice.

EMPLANT

Of course, the smaller businesses started suffering. If Lunica didn't swallow them up, they switched to toys or electronics for children and nonusers. In less than two years, Redwire's profits dropped thirty percent. There were so many people coming in and asking for Emplant we had to have a sign made.

When rumors started circulating that the store was going out of business, Ben and I made an agreement. Ben said he was going to be an artist. I said I was going to be a writer. It wasn't too late. We could still save ourselves.

By the time E4 was out, sales had dropped nearly fifty percent. Redwire was one of the only stores still carrying electronics not compatible with Emplant. Everywhere else, you could get a TV that Emplant could turn on or a remote adapter for your house control. No one wanted outdated incompatible electronics.

When Lunica offered to buy out Redwire, you panicked. When they offered you the management position, you gave in. In just a few months, you went against our pact. You gave up. You knew it too, that's why you offered me the assistant manager position. That's why you've been covering for me this past year, because you felt guilty.

Now you've lost the weight, kicked your bad habits, got your shit together, and you say you have Emplant to thank for it. The guilt is gone, replaced by pity. I guess I deserve it. I still remember the day you got fit. I remember because, for me, it was the last time I saw my best friend.

When I get home, I will take long shower then sleep for 14 hours.

1. 5 VACATI ON

It is mid-afternoon when I finally wake up and the wallscreen is still on. It's been playing episodes of *The Twilight Zone* on a loop. Right now, Rod Serling is onscreen introducing the latest victim of circumstance. This is the one where a young woman is avoiding a common plastic surgery that would help her fit the present ideal of beauty. She feels she is fine the way she is but in the end, she gets the procedure and ultimately feels better. I grab the remote and turn the screen off. That's when I notice the flash drive on the nightstand.

I don't want to sit here depressed. I want to be more proactive about fixing my life. There are books I want to read, places I want to go. I don't remember the last time I went to an art gallery or heard live music. I can't recall what grass feels like on my bare feet.

Under the flash drive is the book I have been reading for the last few months, *War and Peace*. I pick it up and open to the bookmark. Six sentences in, I reach a word I don't recognize. Where is my dictionary?

For the next four hours, I search through my bookshelves and drawers. Piles of junk previously packed neatly away now surround me. I've riffled through milk crates of old electronic devices and stacks of magazines, unearthing all sorts of relics. I could have easily looked for the answer on the Internet long ago but somehow I convinced myself this is cleaning.

Among the artifacts is a folder of stories I wrote when I was in grade school. As I read the first sentence, it all comes back. This one is a story about toy robots for kids that secretly lay eggs in the children while they are asleep. When the baby grows up the egg hatches and an alien takes over the person's mind. I wrote this when I was eleven. My English teacher showed it to the guidance

counselor, who showed it to my mother, who made me see a therapist. This was right after my father died and I guess my mother just didn't know how to deal with it.

I've been glancing over at the flash drive as if it's suddenly going to disappear. The E5 bill hasn't even passed yet and already there's a promo. Many rumors have been circulating about these new "game-changing" enhancements. I have to admit, I'm morbidly curious. I'll just skim through it. I load up the promo, light a cigarette, and take a seat on the edge of the bed.

The wallscreen goes black. An ominous tone fills the room. A tiny red dot appears in the center of the screen. It grows larger, as if approaching. It's a triangle; they've changed the logo graphic. The silhouette of a white eye opens inside the triangle, revealing its black crescent iris. The iris rolls forward, settling into a kind of menacing stare. The name 'Lunica' appears under it. EMA gives a quick overview of the basic Emplant structure, boasts about its unrivaled success, and then introduces the latest features.

In a suburban living room, a few middle-aged men watch a football game. Two of the men begin arguing about a particular players scoring average from the previous season. One of them looks straight into the camera.

"Hey, you've got the latest Sports Stats enhancement for Emplant 5 don't you? Can you settle this argument for us," he asks me.

A semi-transparent image pops up, a football player's face and a set of numbers. They've really streamlined the interface. EMA recalls the correct information and the answer scrolls across the screen. The whole process takes seconds.

One of the men shakes his head, "I've got to get me that upgrade!"

"Enhance your knowledge, with Emplant," says EMA.

I'm not a sports fan so this does nothing for me.

Next up, is the latest version of Emprint. I've heard Ben is quite the Emprintist. I wouldn't know. I've never really seen one. It's not something that translates well between dimensions. You need to see it in your mind.

A thin man with a long goatee speaks at a recent event. His name is Fabian Elias, a world-renowned Emprint artist. I don't believe this interview has aired yet.

"Armand Lunica is my personal Jesus," raves Elias. "Technology has always played a role in art trends and style but never in a fundamental way. Armand has not just given us a new medium; he has unearthed the forgotten core of artistic expression. Emprinting is more than just 'using emotions as paint.' It's about communicating not only *what* the artist sees, but also *how* the artist sees. When you experience one of these kaleidoscopic images, you are tapping into the artist's thought pattern. Its beyond just subject, form, or color, it is the very essence of beauty. I believe the E5 brings us one step closer to understanding divine design."

What a joke. People like Elias think he is capturing the essence of cognition but it's actually just a glitch. It was an early attempt at the Optical Camera. They recorded the neural firings from the hypothalamus but could not decode the information properly. When they asked the subject to look at an apple or a sunset, all they got was this jumbled mess of color. They found the image would change, becoming more complex, depending on the viewers level of focus. Moods dictated colors. It was safe and looked cool so they packaged it as an art program with the E3. Still, many say it's more than just improperly decoded data. They think it is a depiction of thoughts themselves.

I know where this is going. In a future version, an artist will be able to create an entire detailed world for another user to experience.

EMA introduces the next upgrade. The name "RECOG" flashes. The spec sheet I read was unorganized and technical. An employee enhancement organizes it into files accessed by keyword. I didn't get all the details, but I've heard about this for a while. EMA sums it up.

"The human brain records every waking moment of your life. Disorders, degeneration, and a selective consciousness limit how well we recall those memories. What if you could remember that information in vivid accurate detail, as clear as the moment you experienced it. Lunica presents RECOG for Emplant version five. Record and remember the sights and sounds of your experiences and store them safely in remote terabyte hard drives. Remember and share moments on the fly without the need of video equipment. What you see is what you remember, exactly as you remember it."

Darrell was telling me about this. He thinks there are proposals in the E5 bill that could eventually allow Emplant RECOG data to be admissible as evidence in a court of law. The controversy with this enhancement is whether the information used to prosecute is as reliable as video. Unlike a video camera, RECOG doesn't record what happens; it records your perception of what happens, as you experienced it. Though it captures your subconscious data, it is still just your fallible perception of the event.

Darrell suggested a scenario where the "video" excluded some information like an object in the room or the exact hue of something. It also records in very low resolution considering what's out there so accuracy could be suspect. Darrell thinks people will treat the machines susceptible testimony as undeniable proof.

"People see things that aren't there all the time. Is RECOG going to record what's there, or what people think is there?" he recently asked me. I could not find an answer in the spec sheets.

I didn't fully understand all the implications of this program until now. Soon everyone will be walking security cameras. Whatever they see they can record in an instant. I can feel the crime rate dropping. Then again, it'll probably be more like millions of would-be filmmakers will be sharing every single inane moment of their simple little lives with the rest of the world.

I see a young man sitting on the corner of his bed. He's watching himself play guitar in the mirror. He gazes into the eyes of his reflection. He's singing to himself as if he were singing to his lover. The Emplant is reading the information from the frontal lobe and RECOG is recording it. He's directed and starred in his own music video. He'll make one for each of his songs and post them on the RHODE. Even though he's an amateur, someone will watch him. They will all be spying on each other, living vicariously through one another.

EMA gives a brief preview of future versions of Emplant. They are working on enhanced media players for version six. Right now, there are movies and music made specifically in E3D format. They plan to add other senses to RECOG like smell and taste. Maybe by version 7 you'll be able to Emfuck someone on the other side of the world.

There is a man talking into the camera. He looks like he's in his forties but he's much older than that. Long white hair slicks back into a neat ponytail hanging over the left shoulder of his slim black

suit. He was the first person to have an Emplant inside of him because, after he designed and built it, he used himself as a test subject. This is Armand Lunica, president and founder of Lunica Corporation.

“Emplant is a new beginning,” he says with a hint of a Romanian accent, “A light in the distance. We at Lunica envision a world where everyone can interact with the most advanced technology available and reap the full benefits of human accomplishment. Imagine a future without sickness or despair, without conflict or confusion, a world where we can truly live as one. Emplant version five brings us closer to fully realizing that dream for us all.”

There was a time when a speech like that would have inspired several conspiracy theories. This time when I hear his words, I am not sensing arrogance. As I look into his relaxed hazel eyes, part of me actually believes him.

A woman in a lab coat and a big man in red coveralls join him onscreen. The camera pulls away revealing more Lunica employees behind him, including Redwire team members. Hundreds of people fill the screen, each shrinking to the size of dots. Beams of light appear between the dots, illuminating them, and forming what looks like a constellation. The final image is of a night sky with a crescent moon within a starry triangle.

I rewind it and watch his speech again. I will watch the promo ten more times before the day is through.

1. 6 SUBMITTED FOR YOUR APPROVAL

I'm on the floor surrounded by piles of junk. A wave of nausea washes over as I sit up. The clock reads eight o'clock but I can't tell if it's AM or PM. I stumble to the fridge for something to settle my stomach but all I have is organic peanut butter and pickles. I grab both jars.

After some difficulty, I open the pickle jar and fish one out. The experience of biting into this particular pickle at this particular moment fills me with such intense excitement I start to whimper.

Is this a dream? I feel drunk and I'm having trouble concentrating. I must have passed out. Last thing I remember, I ran out of wine and went down to the general store to get more. The guys in the hoodies were out front. I recall I propositioned them with the tact and swagger of an old blues musician. God knows what I really looked like. Luckily, I was right; one of them was a dealer.

"I didn't peg you for a head," says the young man as he hands me the baggie of weed.

"I've been cutting back," I reply. Then for reasons I cannot currently comprehend, I asked, "Do you have anything stronger?"

He thinks for a moment and responds, "I've got some shrooms."

Reality hits me like a bullet in the chest and the squirming begins. It's starting to kick in. I throw my body in the direction of the bed; grab the remote and mash buttons until I hear sounds.

Ok something familiar. This is a famous Twilight Zone episode. A bookworm is the only survivor of an atomic bomb but just as he thinks he has all the time in the world to read, he accidentally breaks his glasses.

I'm eating peanut butter now. It's the chunky kind. The peanut pieces suddenly feel like a mistake, as if someone left them in there by accident. I start to gag. I feel like I'm 99% peanut butter. There's a glass of wine nearby so I grab it and gulp it down as if it was water. All the nerves in my body slowly turn white hot and I fall back on the mattress for what feels like several minutes. The ceiling is spinning so I shut my eyes.

Rod Serling introduces the next episode, "The world was going on a journey, and when it came time for the ship to leave, Tomas Tale missed the boat."

Did he just say my name? I look up at the screen to see him standing in a room similar to mine. Behind him, someone is sleeping on the bed. Is that me?

"Submitted for your approval, this is the story of a man left behind."

Ben appears on the wallscreen. The image is still in black and white except for his pupils, a piercing blue.

"Tomas, did you hear," he asks, excited, "The E5 passed. Business is booming!"

My stomach twists.

His tone becomes serious, "I need to speak with you, it's very important. It's about your job, I--oh, excuse me one moment. I have to take this."

He freezes in place, smiling at nothing, as if posed for a photo. I grab the remote and change the channel.

My parents appear onscreen, posed side by side like a frumpy American Gothic. My father's eyes look vacant, as if he was waiting for the moment to end. My mother speaks to me through her hellish glare. She is appalled at the state of my room, disgusted. I feel her nausea and change the channel again.

In a nightclub, a deadlocked man is dirty dancing with a sexy blonde-haired woman. It's Daniel and Anabel.

He speaks to me in an uncharacteristic Jamaican accent, "Tomas, mon, what da hell wrong wit you? You need to get up on dis, mon."

Anabel smiles at me sweetly while grinding her ass into Daniels crotch. "Mm cash or credit," she asks, licking her lips.

I mash more buttons. The E5 promo begins. Armand Lunica appears. He tells me Emplant can help improve sexual performance by 67% and nods at my boxers. Embarrassed, I cover myself.

EMPLANT

Armand enters a familiar room, my room. A man and woman are having sex on the bed behind him, my bed. I think its Daniel and Anabel, my Anabel. Daniel is really giving it to her.

"Emplant also increases the intensity of orgasm by 58%," notes Armand.

Anabel howls in ecstasy.

The sports fan from the Emplant promo appears on the screen and exclaims, "I've got to get me that upgrade!"

Rod Serling is standing in the corner watching the couple and licking his lips. I can't watch anymore. I mash buttons on the remote until the screen shuts off, plunging me into total darkness. After listening to my own panting for several seconds, I turn the light back on.

I'm on the train. I don't know which train it is. I ask someone, a man sitting by the door. He has his eyes closed and doesn't respond. I realize everyone in the car is fit and online. I scream, "Someone please tell me what train this is!" They all just ignore me.

I get off at the next stop and realize I'm at work but I'm an hour late. Next thing I know I'm in Ben's office. He's sitting across from me scowling, hands clasped together before him.

"Tom, let me get straight to the point," he broods, "There's just nothing more I can do. I'm sorry, but I'm going to have to leave you behind."

I plead with him to let me stay. I tell him, "I promise to come in on time from now on!"

He isn't listening. He's off somewhere else, talking to someone far away while I'm in the room with him. I take a deep breath and sink back into the chair.

"Ok, I'll get fit," I mumble.

He doesn't hear me so I say it aloud, "Did you hear me Ben? I'll get the Emplant."

He still doesn't respond so I stand up to yell it in his face. That's when I hear a strange noise, like a scratching. I'm looking around when I hear it again. It's coming from Ben. The muscle in his jaw flexes. Is he grinding his teeth? I lean in close. His face flushes. His head shakes and his jowls bulge.

"Ben, are you alright?" I ask.

His looks at me with teary eyes and unclenches his jaw. Strings of saliva seem to hold the rows of his teeth together, bending and bowing with his heavy breaths.

I hear a loud snap and something wet sprays in my eyes. I recoil and wipe them. My palms now smeared with red, I look up to find blood pouring down Ben's gray face. It's oozing out of a hole in his scalp along with skull fragments and brain matter.

I leap back, horrified. From the hole, something is emerging. Four wiry tentacles shoot out, flicking blood on the walls. They clasp onto Ben's face and the rest of the thing erupts like a newborn chick. The sound of cracking skull fills the room.

The pyramidal body is about the size of an egg. Propped up on its four spidery legs, the creature crawls across Ben's face mounting his head. Pink clumps of brain fall off its pruned and blood-caked facade as it surveys the environment. From the center of its body, beams of red light shoot out, twirling like a laser show.

A red dot crosses my chest and stops over my heart. I can't move, my legs frozen in fear. It looks at me cockeyed like a chicken. The beam is on my face, the red glare in my eyes.

Ben's body twitches. His mouth is still hanging open as his eyes roll back into his head. He jumps straight up from his seat and begins to take awkward, jerky steps around the desk. I realize two of the Emplant's six legs are still inside Ben's head. It's controlling him. Finally, I turn and run.

I burst from his office and run down the hall to the break room. There are a few team members there. Wheezing and choking, I tell them Ben's Emplant has burst out of his head and come alive. They all just stare back, unbelieving.

"Listen to me, I'm not kidding. I just saw it happen. Look," I say showing my hands.

Suddenly there's no blood on them. I wipe my face and return only the sweat from my forehead and not a drop of red. I flip my hands around and back, completely confused. They all just shake their heads and turn away.

"I'm not crazy," I tell myself as I turn to head back to Ben's office.

When I hear a succession of loud cracks, I turn back around. A dozen red lights flash across my body. All the staff members, now drenched in blood, have dripping Emplants on their shoulders. They lunge at me, hands awkwardly clawing the air, each Emplant

with two nanotube hands on the wheel. I stumble back into the hall. The blood on my hands has returned and, out of the corner of my eye, I see Ben slowly approaching. I escape down the hall and open the door to the showroom. What I see takes the breath out of me.

The team members, driven by bloody Emplants, are strangling customers. Daniel has a young man in a headlock. He twists his head until the customer suddenly stops struggling. Another team member has both her hands wrapped around the neck of a woman who can only stare back, gasping in wide-eyed confusion as she loses consciousness. All the while, the faces of the team members are blood-splattered and expressionless. They remain stoic and calm like focused factory workers. I start dry heaving.

A few red lights shine my way. Some of the team members let go of their pale-faced victims and march awkwardly towards me. Behind me, I can hear Ben and the other staff members coming up the hall. I am trapped. I want to scream but I think I'm going to puke. Someone grabs my shirt and I finally let out a nightmarish howl.

I wake up in bed, drenched in sweat and out of breath. A sharp pain in my stomach jerks my body up and I reject the contents of my stomach in the process. The smell of vomit, peanuts, and pickle juice fills the room. After a few more retches, I pass out again.

1. 7 I N T E R V I E W W I T H A V A M P / E M I R

Everything is covered in peanut butter; me, my phone, my remote, it's smeared into the bed sheets. The fans are on again but the funk of smoke, pickles, and puke have combined and set into all the fabrics. The result is what I imagine a mummy would smell like.

It has taken me almost a day to recover but I'm finally ready to leave the bed. My trip did not end with pickle vomit, it continued into a deep introspection and cathartic revelations that I am still trying to soak-in. I managed to make an appointment to see Dr. Wen, a former member of the Noble Savages. He was nice enough to see me today.

After a shower and shave, I put on the cleanest thing I have, an old suit. No one wears suits anymore. Everyone dresses as if planning to run a marathon between business meetings. The suit is a little retro but so am I.

A short bus ride later, I am in the commercial district just beyond my neighborhood. There are several banks, restaurants, and a strip mall every mile or so. Across the street is a small gray building. Next to the entrance is the red and black Lunica logo. This is an Emplant clinic.

Inside are the offices of an EMIR. I like to call them "Vamps" because they're the ones that sink their teeth into you and make you one of them. Shame, Dr. Wen used to be neurologist. Now he's a glorified riveter.

A moment later, I am entering the packed waiting room. The decor is drab and aged. Paintings of landscapes and fishing boats hang on the walls. I peek through the reception window. A young and attractive assistant is sitting behind the counter. She's stiff, with her hands folded before her, looking down at nothing on her

desk. I politely wait for her attention, bending my knees to try to catch her line of sight. She doesn't flinch. I'm wondering if I should take a seat when suddenly she looks up and greets me.

"Hello there, how can I help you," she says.

"Hi, my name is Tomas Tale," I say reaching for my wallet. "I have a 1:15 appointment. I'm sorry I'm late, I-"

"Excuse me one moment, sir."

I stand there with my wallet in my hand as she freezes again. By the window, there is a sign that reads, "Please be patient."

"Thank you for waiting, Mr. Tale. May I see a picture ID?"

I hand her my Redwire ID. She looks at it a little puzzled.

"I'm a friend," I say.

She lays the card on the desk and leans in close to it. Inside her head, a file appears with a timestamp of 1:25 PM. Then it shoots out into space to be stored in Lunica's database, another example of tardiness for my record.

"Ok, Mr. Tale, please have a seat."

I stuff my ID in my pocket, look for an empty seat. Immediately I identify the nonusers in the room. In the corner there is a young man wearing sunglasses, looking through an old car magazine. He flips through the pages while tapping his leg nervously. As I sit down, the older woman across from me smiles and nods. She's in her late forties and looks like she may own several cats. She's got her arms folded in front of her, one hand fidgeting with her beaded necklace.

All the rest are users, including the man sitting beside me. Eyes closed, head leaning against the wall, he looks like a corpse propped up. His coat is puffy so I can't tell if he's breathing but on his salt and pepper mustache, I can see hairs shivering then still. Shiver then still.

The older woman is staring at me. I realize it's because I'm about six inches from the man's face. I withdraw quickly. She says something to me.

"I'm sorry, what was that," I ask.

"I said 'congratulations'," she coos with a smile.

"For what?"

"Don't worry; the pre-screening is a snap, almost easier than the actual procedure. Don't believe that *old dog, new tricks* theory. Just do the training exercises and you'll be fine. Believe me, I was

40 when I had it done and I picked it up no problem. Of course I was always very adept at learning new things.”

“Oh no, I’m not having any procedures done,” I tell her.

She cocks her head and furrows her brow “Oh?”

“I-I just had- I’m here to ask the EMIR some questions.”

“Questions,” she says, horrified, before retorting gleefully, “You should take one of the virtual tours! They are very realistic.”

“Yes they are. But I have more... technical questions.”

“Oh?”

She recoils and plants her chin in her palm, utterly confused. I grab a magazine from the table next to me and open it up. It’s a golfing periodical. I stare at the pages and try to look invested.

The door next to the receptionist opens. An assistant stands inside the doorway, waiting. I think she’s looking at me so I rise up and point at my chest. However, the man sitting next to me has already gotten up and is walking to the door. I sit back down, embarrassed.

Suddenly the cat lady takes the seat next to me. I look back at the magazine. There is a full-page ad for the Golf Pro package enhancement for the Emplant.

“Why don’t you ask *me* some questions,” she’s suggests, nearly jumping out of her seat. “I know a lot about the Emplant. Actually, I know a lot about many things. I browse the BOK all the time.”

“What happened to your...” I ask, pointing to her head.

She stops fidgeting with the necklace and reaches up to the top of her head.

“Oh, I had an accident,” she says quietly, smoothing the hair on the back of her neck.

I nod. Her face grimaces a bit. She looks like she’s about to cry. Her eyes wander as if she’s recalling something. How should I react?

“It was a car accident, actually,” she says matter-of-factly. “I was thixting my sister about my nephew who got caught with an illegal fit. He’s 17, with a pirated E4! All of a sudden this guy comes out of nowhere and smack!”

Her left hand flies into the right like a speeding car. The clap is loud. A couple of people look up.

“Turns out that guy had an illegal fit too and was driving the car himself, off-satellite. Can you believe how reckless some people can be?” Her eyes pierce through and beyond me.

"Wow," I say, not in response to the statement but to the intensity of this woman.

"It hasn't been working right since," she continues. "A few days ago, it just stopped working completely. I guess things got rattled a bit. I am just upside down without it. I must have so many messages. My friends must think I'm dead," she says with a nervous laugh. Again, she fidgets with the beaded necklace while her eyes well with tears.

The door opens again. This time the nurse says a name aloud; Ms. Fulmer. The cat lady jumps up and scurries over. Later, when she leaves, smiling, she'll walk calmly through the door without acknowledging me.

Soon, they call my name and the assistant brings me to the installation room. The walls look new and freshly painted, the shiny black-tiled floor, also immaculate. Aside from the sleek cupboards and various diagrams on the wall, the only other thing in the room is an extravagant looking chair. Before she leaves, the assistant says Dr. Wen will be in shortly and I should have a seat.

At first glance, the polished silver chair seems luxurious with its smooth red leather seat. Another look and the two folded mechanical arms looming over the headrest seem like fangs, the chair a mouth of a hissing cobra. One arm has a precision laser at the end, the other a giant needle. The EMIR numbs a spot on your scalp and the laser zaps a hole in your skull just deep enough so it doesn't break the blood-brain barrier. The needle permeates the outer membrane and injects the Emplant inside, then cauterizes the hole with its heated tip when removed. The injector then fills the hole in your skull with a hardening silicone that is dissolvable for future access. The installation happens in a matter of seconds and it happens in this chair.

Have a seat? This is the only seat here, so I climb on and place my feet into the stirrups. My butt sinks into the soft leather and I relax a little. It's quite comfortable. Then I notice the restraints on the armrests. Suddenly I feel like my head is in the center of a bull's-eye.

"Tomas Tale," says the old man entering the room.

Dr. Wen's new sparkling teeth and glossy complexion make him look much younger. His Chinese accent is still just as strong but there is an added exuberance in his voice.

"It's good to see you, how long has it been," he asks, obviously astonished by how terrible I look.

"Just a few months but it does feel like longer."

"When you called, I was so happy to hear the savages were still getting together. How is everybody?"

"As good as can be expected."

"That's great. You're still with Lunica I see."

"Yeah," I say, sighing heavily.

Another old-fashioned pause, I made it weird already.

He breaks the silence, "You mentioned on the phone you wanted to ask me some questions..."

"Yes. When you stopped coming to the group... I guess I just wanted to know what happened to you."

"My apologies, I just got so immersed in training for this position. As you know, I was a medical doctor but my practice just could not stay afloat in this economy. I thought for sure you would have been fit by now."

His eyes keep shifting back and forth. He's probably reading the results from my physical. This was such a stupid idea.

He lays it out, "You're of age, you have no debilitating diseases, and you made the mental requirements. Looks to me like you're ready. You would think it a necessity for an Emplant dealer."

"Technically it's not a job requirement because I already worked for Redwire and Lunica can't legally make anyone get fit, as per article 43b section 2 of the--"

"Yes, I know it. I was given that option as well," Dr. Wen politely interrupts. "So what's stopping you?"

I struggle to come up with an answer.

"Why does this chair have restraints," I ask, pointing to the armrest.

"Those aren't restraints, they're BP monitors."

"Oh."

Should I ask him if he has ever seen an Emplant bust out of a user's head, and drive them around like cars?

"This chair is pretty comfortable," is all I can think to say.

"Cut to the chase, Tomas. What do you want to know?"

"Ever seen anything strange?"

"Like what?"

"Like anything out of the ordinary; problems or malfunctions?"

"It's a computer, malfunctions are to be expected. If the hardware fails, you can just come in and we'll fix it or get you a brand new one. You're a Lunica employee, you get free lifetime maintenance."

"I know. What about the users, have you noticed any odd behavior?"

"I'm not sure I understand."

"I met this woman in the waiting room. She got into a car accident and broke hers."

"Yes, Mrs. Fulmer. It was a minor issue; the odometer had to be recalibrated."

"Well, she seemed overly emotional without it."

"Of course, she's still recovering from an accident. Wouldn't you be upset if you lost your spouse?"

"Spouse? She didn't mention that."

"Tomas, the users that come to us are a little inconvenienced, unorganized at most. Imagine how you'd feel if your computer crashed, or you lost your phone or your date book."

"Or your soul," I mumble under my breath.

"I'm sure you know there have been no reported cases of anyone being harmed in any way by an Emplant. Quite the opposite, it has saved hundreds of thousands of lives since its creation. My life included."

He takes a breath and lowers his voice before continuing, "I never told the group this but I had a horrible sex addiction that was destroying my marriage. With all my medical knowledge and spirituality, I couldn't see it was a simple zinc imbalance was the cause of this unwanted behavior. Even as a doctor, you don't really get a clear picture of your health until it is staring you in the face every morning. Tomas, I know everything there is to know about Emplant, how they make it, and how it works. I assure you, there is no way it can harm to you."

"What about what you don't know?"

He looks at me hard before sighing gently, "It's been nice seeing you Tomas, but I'm afraid I have other clients to see."

A few minutes later, as I am walking out of the building, I realize I was very rude to Dr. Wen. I shouldn't have expected him to help. He's a Vamp now, company man through and through.

My stomach growls, I haven't eaten in hours but there's nothing but fast food restaurants around here. This is one of those

moments where I have the choice of doing something practical; like going home, ordering some food, cleaning my apartment, and enjoying the rest of my vacation. Or I can do something pathetic; like go thirty minutes out of my way, to the one part of town I shouldn't be, to buy overpriced food I don't like, just so I can see the girl I am obsessed with. For me, the choice is obvious.

1. 8 VERSI ON 5

On the train ride to midtown, there is a user couple sitting together. Holding hands, fingers intertwined, they look like they're sharing a casket. Most likely, they are on the Rhode somewhere chatting with friends or even with each other. In real life, their bodies sit there like a wedding cake topper until EMA tells them they have reached their destination. There are a few other people in the car as well, also daydreaming.

When I step out of the train station, I immediately notice something is different about the square. Everything has a slight red tint to it. Another exiting subway passenger looks up and notices it too. On the skyscreen, there is a giant red triangle with a black and white eye. It looks like a red-faced lunatic is peeking through a triangular peephole in the sky, gawking at the passing people. It appears that only I find this disturbing. The E5 bill must have passed while I was holed-up. No wonder Wen's office was so packed. I bet Redwire is too.

At Fresh Foods, I can see Anabel in her usual spot. I grab a basket and head down the aisles unconsciously picking up the usual things, organic gluten-free pasta, vitamin-fortified vanilla soymilk, and other healthy food I force myself to eat. I am thinking of what I should say to her. Should I just ask her out? Is she going to think I am some creepy old loser?

By the florist, I almost step on a tiny daisy lying on the ground. It's about the size of a penny with a long thin stem. An idea forms in my head and I rush over to the produce section.

At the checkout, there are two people ahead of me. I carefully wrap the flower around the stem of an organic gala apple. In a few moments, Anabel will take the apple from the basket and see the flower.

Then she'll ask, "Where did this come from?"

To this I will say, "I don't know but it's yours now."

The man in front of me steps up. The guy, a user, is her age and good-looking. He gives Anabel a little smile and she smiles back, blushing a bit. Are they flirting?

Someone taps me on the shoulder. It's the man behind me. He points over at the next lane. I look over and realize the cashier is signaling for me to come over. I shake my head and invite the man behind me to step up. He shrugs and wheels his cart over. The man ahead of me barks something at Anabel.

"Sorry, the Emplant scanner is being upgraded," she replies.

He scoffs, "You should put a sign up or something. What kind of place is this? I have to use a credit card now."

"Sorry for the inconvenience, sir," she says, blushing again.

"That's fine, I'm sure ringing up groceries is very difficult. I can see how it can get confusing," he says with a smirk.

What an asshole. Anabel avoids eye contact as she bags his items. He swipes his card and shoots her another confident grin before walking off. I step up and smile at her but she's not looking at me. She's scanning the items faster than I can take them from the basket.

"That guy was a real jerk," I say.

"Yes he was," she responds with a sigh.

I have left the apple for last but as she scans the other items, I feel like I should make some conversation. She scans jars of peanut butter and pickles and my mind slips into autopilot.

"Pickles and peanut butter," I blurt out with raised eyebrows.

"Excuse me?" she asks, perplexed.

"It's an acquired taste but not half bad. Although, go with a white wine instead of red."

She cracks a confused little smile and quickly bags the rest of my stuff without noticing the flower. I keep my mouth shut until the end of the transaction, nod, and flash a tight-lipped smile before scurrying off.

Smooth, Tomas, real smooth. Pickles and peanut butter? What an ass. Who eats that besides pregnant women? That look she gave me... It was that asshole meathead user. I had it all worked out and he screwed it up. He got her all upset.

I'm so angry I'm instinctively walking towards Redwire. Should I stop in and say hello? The crowd gathered by the entrance draws me. It's a line of people leading to the locked front door.

Through the glass storefront, I see the lights and monitors are on but the staff is gone. The sign on the door is hand written. It has today's date and says the shop will reopen in an hour. Why would Ben close the shop on the busiest week of the year?

A man in line laughs and nods at his friend. His lips say, "That's right buddy, back of the line." What he doesn't know is I have the keys to the store. I slowly retrieve them from my jacket pocket and open the door like a detective entering a crime scene.

There is no one on the sales floor. On the big LED is the testimonial of a former heroin addict.

"Every morning I would wake up and EMA was giving me my SOL Vitals readout and basically telling me 'you're that much closer to dying.'"

The sound system makes it seem like he is whispering into my ear and the moving screens assure his gaze points in my direction. Signaled by the ID in my pocket, the screens move aside revealing a door marked 'employees only'. I enter and follow the sounds coming from the conference room down the hall. Someone is speaking and I instantly recognize the voice.

"Time and time again, a fractal pattern would emerge. So, we created a team to study the phenomena. Here are the findings so far."

I peek in to make sure. The entire staff sits at the conference table, facing the wallscreen on the opposite end of the room, their backs to the door. A dark figure steps in front of the screen confirming the voice is not a recording. He is really in there! I duck back from sight and listen.

"This is a twenty block radius of residential housing, mixed classes, five kilometers to the southeast, over six hundred subscribers."

I peek again. They are looking a satellite map of the city stippled with red dots. I bet the screen is E3D enabled, otherwise why would they bother. He must be in there giving a presentation.

"We mapped a 12% drop in serotonin levels between surveys nine and ten. In just fifteen days the comparative data looked like this."

More dots litter the map, now in various colors across the spectrum but concentrated into pockets of one color or another. I guess one end of the spectrum represents happy people, the other my type.

“Now you can see again, the fractal pattern emerging. When you add the endorphin and hormonal readouts, you can see all the phantom energies at play.”

Waves of green, yellow, blue, and purple fill the map, each in their own unique snowflake pattern. It looks like a mess of scribbles, similar to an Emprint. I suppose it would look more amazing in E3D but I can almost visualize it. It's like stacked layers of fine lace web. The places where the patterns cross, more complex patterns appear.

I dip back into the hall when I hear the sound of shuffling chairs. I think someone saw me. I should run but I don't want to make a sound. My eyes are fixated on the frenetic shadows framed in light on the wall across from the doorway. They disappear and it's silent. I hear my heart beating and I can't hold my breath any longer. Just as I exhale, a sudden blow to the chest knocks the remaining wind out of me. A big meaty hand grabs me by the chest hairs and pulls me into the room.

When my eyes adjust, I see a gun in my face. It's the guy from the Fresh Foods, the asshole at the checkout. He has half my shirt in his fist and a gun pointed to my head. Two other large men grab me by the elbows. Between their bulging biceps, I can see Ben running over.

“It's OK, he's an employee,” says Ben.

The asshole growls, “He hasn't been cleared. Where's his RF?”

“He's not fit,” Ben clarifies.

“Then he must be very good at his job,” says the voice from the back of the room.

It is, as I suspected, Armand Lunica. He looks just as he does in the commercials, with his neat long hair and slim black suit. For a moment, I imagine him wearing robes and walking on water. He signals the other man to let go of me.

“He'll still need to sign a waiver,” the asshole barks, finally releasing me.

I pull my arms free and smooth out the wrinkles in my shirt.

“And who might you be?” Armand asks me.

“That's Tomas Tale, visual manager,” offers Ben.

"Oh?" Armand says, delighted. "The showroom does look very nice."

He's right. They must have cleaned it while I was gone.

He continues, "So, Tomas, why were you unable to attend our meeting until now?"

Ben again answers on my behalf, "He was out sick."

Armand shoots Ben a puzzled look, "What, he cannot speak? Is this his illness?"

"No," I answer.

"Well, are you feeling better then?"

All the employees are looking at me. I can see Ben's eyes are about to pop out of his skull.

"Not quite, sir," I say.

I know while we stand here, Armand, the guy from the Fresh Foods, and the other Lunica men are all reading my file and all thinking the same thing; unfit, low sales numbers, why does he still work for Lunica. They may have the notes from my checkup, my forgetfulness, my lateness, and my inability to urinate on command. They all know my life story and I don't know any of them.

"So what is it then?" he asks.

1. 9 LEAPS AND BOUNDS

The scene keeps repeating in my head. Every time I remember it, I come up with something better I could have said. I had the full attention of one of the richest, most powerful men in the world and I pulled another "pickles and peanut butter."

I guess "religious reasons" is somewhat true but now the entire staff thinks I'm a smelly, smoking, religious nut. I'll have to quit my job for sure now. I can't go back there. To make matters worse, I left so quickly I forgot my groceries in the hallway.

Another gurgle from my stomach reminds me I need to eat. I'll probably never set foot in this mall again, so I might as well go to the food court. Most of it is greasy fast food but there is a decent sushi spot. I have just enough cash for an eel roll and some sashimi.

I'm so hungry I gobble up 2 pieces almost at once. I don't want to hang around here too long. The people to the right of me are having fried chicken and biscuits, their lips covered in grease. I dip the third piece into the sauce, chewing quickly to make room for it. I'm thinking of more things I could have said to Armand but they all seem like lies. The people on my left are having sausage and pepperoni pizza with extra cheese.

Out of nowhere, Anabel appears and sits down across from me. I am so surprised I stop chewing. Am I imagining this?

"Hi there," she says.

I drop the piece of eel into the soy sauce and it splashes on my jacket. Ok this is real. She looks down at the tray in front of her, pretending not to notice.

"Hi. Hello. How are you," I greet her three times.

“Great, mind if I join you,” she asks, already unwrapping her sandwich.

“Yes, I mean no, of course,” I nod like a bobble head.

On her tray is a cheeseburger with fries and a soda. I blot my jacket with some bottled water and watch as she takes a gigantic bite of the burger.

With her mouth full she mumbles, “Srrr uhm sho hungrh.”

I smile and casually reach for another piece. The ends of the chopsticks tremble in hands. Instead, I go for sip water. This will keep my hands and mouth busy.

Loud and bubbly as usual, she says, “It’s so funny we’ve worked here so long and I’ve never seen you down here.”

“I usually bag lunch,” like a schoolboy. “Sometimes I go out to the square too,” like a big boy.

“I bet you guys are super busy what with the E5 and all. Is that why you’re all dressed up like that?” she asks, stabbing my heart with her kind eyes.

“Yeah.”

She’s wearing a cotton t-shirt, not one of those form fitting stretchy tops everyone wears. On it, colorful cartoon ponies dance under a rainbow. I realize I’m staring at her chest.

I blurt out; “Anabel is a nice name,” something a 5-year-old child would say.

“Yeah, but call me Ana. Only my mom calls me Anabel,” twisting her mouth in a cutesy way.

Her mother is probably my age.

“You’re Tomás, right?”

“Yeah, well actually, it’s pronounced ‘Thomas’. My mother felt the ‘H’ was unnecessary,” I’m already talking about my mother.

She laughs, “Oh listen to me; here I just assumed it was all exotic or something.”

Something about her voice, the tone, the pitch, I find it both nurturing and seductive.

“How long have you worked here, Tomas?”

“I started about a year before you.”

“You remember when I started?”

“Well not the exact date.”

Three years, four months, and thirty-six days ago.

“Ugh, I’ve been here way too long but I need the health insurance. You must get good benefits working for Lunica.”

“Yeah, good medical.”

“Dental?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Discount?”

“40%.”

The way she’s looking at me, I want to kiss her so bad. Now would be the perfect opportunity to lean in say, “Let’s get out here,” or some similar romantic line. I won’t get the chance.

She leans in and whispers, “Do you think you can hook me up with a discount on an E5?”

The woman across the aisle from me is falling asleep. There are only a few other people on this bus and they are all somewhere else. At first, I pegged her a user, but she keeps leaning forward and bobbing her head. Users don’t have trouble sleeping. An apathetic witness, I’ve been watching her struggle to stay conscious. When she gets dangerously close to smashing head on the seat in front of her, she awakens with a deep breath. I look away before our eyes can meet. I want to save her the embarrassment.

The bus is crawling through traffic. It hasn’t even reached the highway yet. Through the front windshield, I can see police ONEs not too far ahead. An accident, you don’t get too many of those nowadays. The rubbernecking is worse than ever. I can just imagine all those drivers looking out their windows, RECOG ready to document the tragedy.

I’m going home, taking the airport shuttle bus to avoid the packed rush hour trains. I sent Radames a text from my handheld, informing him I won’t be attending tonight’s meeting. After today, I couldn’t stand the idea of being with the savages. It would just be another night of complaints and no answers followed by a speech from Radames about how I need to get my life together. It would only impair the resolve I’ve been building.

When it became clear Anabel just wanted my discount, I realized I don’t know her at all. Everything I thought I knew about her, I made up. I took her number down any way. I might as well help her get fit.

I need to figure out what to do about my job. I can’t go back there, not that Ben would have me back after what happened. I embarrassed him in front of Armand Lunica. Still, the thought of

looking for a new job after 10 years, it just doesn't seem like an option. Who's going to hire an unfit, smelly old man?

A sleeping user near the front wakes. He looks around, probably wondering why he has not reached his destination yet. Seeing the traffic up ahead, he relaxes and opens the bag on his lap, retrieving a bottle of M-Water. After recharging with a few gulps of the blue liquid, he slips back into his daydreaming. He went from agitated to content in just a few seconds.

What did his SOL tell him? Was he low on B12? Maybe he logged on to a local traffic website and got a bird's eye perspective on things. Whatever curiosity he had was sated. He assessed the situation, accepted his reality, and returned to his state of Zen. Now he's sitting there with a little smile on his face. His rigid body sways with the start-and-stop motion of the bus. If I had somewhere to be, I would be cursing under my breath while having a mild anxiety attack.

I'm afraid. I'm a frightened individual. It's not just Emplant. My stomach is rumbling; I'm still hungry because I'm afraid of heart and liver disease, of getting fat. I wasn't brave enough to tell Armand Lunica or Anabel how I really felt. I'm stuck, static, frozen in a snapshot of my life. Was it a year, five, ten years ago? When did I stop growing?

The bus is approaching an accident. I can see a sedan sitting perpendicular on the road and a smaller car on the curb beside it. Neither looks badly damaged. There is a small group of cops standing between the cars. As the bus creeps by, another passenger and I crane our necks to get a better view of what appears to be a body lying on the ground. The bus driver looks as well.

An officer opens the driver side door of the sedan. There is a woman slumped over the steering wheel. The cop gently leans her back into her seat. Just before the bus pulls away, I get a view of her face. She was an older woman, maybe in her late fifties or early sixties. She may have been a nonuser.

Was it my mother's fault? Did she make me this way? I have this memory from my childhood that pretty much sums it up. I'm eight years old and at the beach, sobbing by the surf, aimlessly digging a stick into the sand. The surf washes over my feet and fills up the hole but I keep digging.

My parents are somewhere nearby. Yes, I see them behind me sitting on lounge chairs beneath a big umbrella. My father is on his laptop as I always remember him. My mother is wrapped in a blanket and wearing sunglasses. She doesn't look happy.

I begged my father all summer long to take us. When he finally got the time off, my mother complained, it was too cloudy and chilly for the beach. I cried and cried until they eventually gave in. So we get to the beach and we're the only ones there. My mother tells me not to go in the water because it's too choppy.

"But that's the whole point!" I cried.

Here I am sobbing my eyes out and digging a hole for no reason, when I come across a glossy pink shell. Something about it piques my interest. For a moment, I forget about my woes and begin searching for more shells. I notice a colorful sprinkling just beside the rock jetty. My mother had already yelled at me once not to go near it.

I glance over at them while pretending to dig. His eyes remain fixed on the screen and she is reaching out from under the umbrella, checking for rain. I dig furiously, sniffing and licking away the snot and tears dripping down my lips. I'm waiting for the right moment. I'm stealthy. I have a plan. Finally, she gets up and puts on her jacket. She has her cell phone in her hand and a cigarette pressed between her lips. As she runs up to the car, I make my move.

There are good shells to choose from by the rocks but now I see more valuable treasures lay *between* them. I glance back at my father. His eyes are unblinking, transfixed. My mother is nowhere in sight. I step boldly onto the jetty. The rocks are surprisingly slippery but I'm fearless. I inspect the spaces in between each, climbing further and further out, so brave. I notice something bright shining from deep between two huge slabs of stone. It calls to me. My footing is sure so I reach out for it. I remember seeing it glisten just beyond my fingertips.

I don't remember what it was or if I ever got to it. Last thing I recall was hearing my mother screaming my name. I don't remember slipping or hitting my head on the rock, or my father carrying me across the sand to the health station.

The next thing I know I'm on a cot and my mother is yelling at me. We went to the hospital to get x-rays and spent the rest of the

day in the waiting room. I did not have a concussion but my mother would never let me forget this day.

"That's what happens when you don't listen," she'd say.

I haven't thought about that since she was alive, she wasn't around to remind me. For the first time, I feel like maybe it wasn't my fault. My footing was sure. She startled me and I fell. I see that now. I know she was just trying to protect me, but she ended up sabotaging me. She did that over and over until I started second-guessing everything I did to a stutter. She took that bold, curious boy and made him a worrisome pessimistic old man.

Listen to me. I'm blaming my dead mother for my problems. Now that I think about it, maybe I fell before she called my name. It was a long time ago.

The bus picks up speed as we climb the on-ramp to UA East. You always get the same feeling when entering the Upper Avenue. It's a feeling of relief, of safety. A satellite is controlling every car here. To use this expressway, you must have something called an SS built in your vehicle. The Serpent System monitors each car's proximity sensors, adjusting speed accordingly while the satellite reorganizes traffic in real time based on GPS destination. The result is a smooth flow of cars. We reach the top of the ramp and merge seamlessly into traffic without losing speed.

All this made possible by the car manufacturer Xerro. They make the ONEs and invested in both the UA and SS. Like Lunica, this mega-corporation is building a new world right on top of the old. Eight stories below, the poor and unfit are choking on fumes and crashing into each other.

So, Tomas, what's it going to be? Will you assimilate or become obsolete? It makes no sense to lie to myself. I want it, if not for my own curiosity, then for the betterment of my life. This is not just a piece of equipment, not just a computer. It is a requirement for a new paradigm and I won't survive in this world much longer without it. That settles it then. I am going to get one. I'm going to get an Emplant. Tomorrow I'll call Ben and tell him to set me up with a standard employee package. He'll call Dr. Wen and set up an appointment for next week.

The bus interior suddenly darkens. The weather has turned. Dark clouds are churning overhead. The window

begins to stipple with raindrops. An omen? No, likely just a passing storm. I can't let that illogical thinking rule over me anymore. Soon I will be an enhanced person, Tomas 2.0. I wonder if I can still sign up for the next enhancement weekend.

The bus is very quiet. The users are silently daydreaming. Soon I will be joining them. I lean back into my seat and let out a great sigh. I didn't realize how tense I was.

The woman across the aisle, the nonuser, is still fighting to stay awake. Her head falls to the side and she nearly topples over. I lean my head against the bus window and watch her pitiful struggle as the week's worth of lost sleep catches up with me. I am in harmony with her, battling unconsciousness. My eyelids sink and rise with the nodding of her head. Not even the thought of seeing her finally hit her head can keep me awake. I resolve to close my eyes and, just before I drift away, I hear a loud metallic thud.

2. 0

The first thing I am conscious of is my breathing, slow consistent breath. Immediately after, I feel the warmth on my skin. Ever so subtly, the din follows, the sound of the wind and ocean waves gently crashing on a nearby shore. A cool breeze brushes my face; a gentle nudge intended to rouse me. My vision registers the pink insides of my eyelids and I know I am about to awake into daytime.

A trapezoid of light runs vertically along the ceiling. I can feel that light falling upon me, illuminating my eyelashes. It's still warm. The ocean is gone but the breeze remains. It feels like the afternoon.

I sit up. The wallscreen is a picture window to a peaceful meadow. Sunlight pours in from an unseen sun. In the distance, a tree on a hilltop, its branches sway in the wind. I sit and listen to the wind, taking a deep breath before waking EMA.

"Good morning, Tomas."

The wind dies and the meadow fades away, replaced by a view from high above the city. The house lights come up illuminating my new spacious and pristine apartment.

The date, time, and temperature flash before my eyes. A blue envelope with a red number 4 flashes in my upper right peripheral.

"Would you like to see your SOL Vitals?" asks EMA.

A little ritual I have developed in the mornings; after a glass of M-water, I stretch my arms and fall forward onto my

palms. I've timed it so the data pops up right as I hit the ground for the first push up. I scan my blood content, BMI, and cell count. With each disappointing statistic, I do five extra pushups.

"Tomas, do you have a moment to take a brief survey about your Awakescape experience?"

I might as well get this out of the way now. I sit on the bed.

"Employee enhancement feedback, you are about to be recorded."

I relax and affirm internally.

"Begin. How would you rate your overall Awakescape experience?"

There is no need for scales or a star-based rating system. I cannot lie to EMA. When she asks me the questions, I react instantly and the reaction is my answer. She'll ask me questions only when I stop thinking about it.

"What about the Awakescape experience did you enjoy the most?"

The sensations were realistic and the transitions were smooth and subtle. Still, I was fully aware of the experience from the start.

"Thank you, Tomas. Survey over, recording ended."

The morning news is on the wallscreen as I make my way to the bathroom. I pass the full-length mirror and check out my progress. On the mirror frame, I've hung the picture Daniel took of me not too long ago. The wilting, saggy-eyed corpse is but a stranger to the bronzed, chiseled human reflecting back at me.

I check my messages as I brush my teeth, shower, and shave. Meeting confirmations, lunch with Ana, and an enhancement seminar fill my calendar. After a quick breakfast, I take the express elevator to the parking garage and get in my silver ONE. Soon I am on the UAE. It's a cloudy, damp day and the sun has not risen yet.

When the serpent system kicks in, my windshield darkens and I move my RELM browser to fill it. Checking the feeds, I scan a few headlines. I wonder about yesterday's sales reports. Seconds later, the stats appear on the screen. Looks like Morales missed his quota again.

A green phone icon flashes, signaling an incoming message. It's from Ben. I take his call and send it to the windshield. A 3D avatar of his face appears.

We've been testing this new enhancement out called Evatar. A digital puppet only I can see, this 3D avatar reflects whatever Ben expresses in real life. He is also looking at a rendering of my face; both based on the facial scans we took a few weekends ago. Once this hits the market, Lunica will be installing a face scanner in the store.

"I was just about to call you," I tell him.

"You're on your way in?"

"Yes I'm meeting with the lighting specialist. I was going over the sales from yesterday."

"So was I. I think it's time to get rid of that Morales kid."

"I was thinking the same thing."

"Get it done. I'll see you at the gym."

"Will do, see you then."

The call ends and I reflect for a moment. Perhaps the Evatar could use some hands like in Emprint. EMA takes note.

"Do you have a moment to-?"

EMA stops as she registers my negative reaction. No surveys now. How much time do we have?

"22 minutes until arrival."

I take a deep breath and imagine the paintbrush icon. It flashes as the enhancement loads. I close my eyes. From the blackness the interface appears. I can create and manipulate matter along three axes inside a space of theoretically unlimited size. The person with the right brain and enough time could theoretically create an entire universe. Many are

trying. I think of the piece I want work on, entitled “Past Discretions.”

A window opens up. From straight ahead it seems like a simple colorful, abstract image. As I imagine myself moving around to the side of the picture, I can see the fullness of the multidimensional scene I have constructed. I sweep my hands to resize and it expands to a room. I am now inside my image, inside the cavernous nowhere of some imagined space.

I reach out and see my disembodied digital hands touch the sculpture. The texture feels like clay on my fingertips. When I want it to be more resistant, it instantly feels more like wet sand. I let go and it seems to turn to stone. Switching to the color tool, I highlight the area and think of firing Morales later. The green surface turns red.

Like all of my Emprints, I am not sure what I’m making but the process is so cathartic and enjoyable I suppose it really doesn’t matter. The next 20 minutes fly by.

The morning is typical. I stand by half-watching the idle bodies of the employees as Ben gives a remote meeting. He’s up for a promotion and has been at the main office a lot more lately. That means soon I might be running the store.

We have a few new-hires among the group. When Ben is finished, I single them out and ask them to line up in front of me. Like a drill sergeant, I pace before them, visibly sizing each up.

“Congratulations, you’ve all made it. You have the most sought-after position in the industry, working for the biggest company in the world. This product sells itself. So, if you miss your quotas, we will replace you. There are literally hundreds of people lined up to take your place.”

One of the new-hires bites her lip.

“You are more than team members, or Lunica employees. You are pioneers, brave explorers returning from

the edge possibility. Give them this gift. Don't just share it with them," I pause for emphasis, "show it to them!"

The team's faces are alight with smiles as I open the front doors. The people waiting outside quickly flock in around me.

I take Morales aside and tell him to empty his locker. He cries so I give him a few moments to collect himself before escorting him out. Outside the sun begins to rise.

It's a quarter past noon. In the café on the garden mezzanine, the passing observer might notice an attractive middle-aged man sitting at a table for two alone. His body sits upright, eyes closed. Inside, a brooding artist sits in his internal studio gently nudging a sphere into position.

I think about Ana.

"The user you are looking for is not currently signed in."

A new message.

"Recipient?"

Ana.

"Subject?"

"At the cafe," in white text floats in the blackness before me as I think it.

"Ready."

The thint, "Where are you?" appears.

I attempt to send it but nothing happens. Ana's lateness has me stumbling on an old problem. Some psychological kink in me causes this particular task to be a little difficult if I am not in the right headspace. The trick I use is to imagine myself putting a letter in the mailbox. It works.

I open my eyes and take a sip of M-Water. The waiter takes advantage of my conscious state to approach and ask if I would like to order.

"Let's give her five more minutes," I tell him.

There is a commotion on the other side of the garden. The waiter and I look over to the center lawn and see a man in a long ratty coat harassing a couple on a bench. How did

Jack get out here? He looks over in my direction and I quickly look away. In the corner of my eye, I can see him walking across the lawn towards me.

"My friend!" he yells, almost incomprehensible.

I brace myself for a minor irritation.

"Friend, my spy in the eye, gonna take the behemoth down from the inside," he slurs, obviously drunk. "Trojan Man!" he sings, in a baritone voice.

I avoid eye contact and hold one hand up, "Don't come any closer, you are walking pollution."

"Oh yeah, and when exactly did your shit start smelling like butterscotch?"

I can already see the guards approaching from the mall entrance. I continue to ignore him but can tell he's studying my face. He knows I've been fit.

"Oh no, it's too late. Oh God it's too late," he laments, backing away.

As the mall guards approach, he takes off in the other direction. I look over in time to see him climbing the safety divider at the edge of the garden. He is very nimble for an old man. For some reason, I get up and follow them. I make my way through the crowd to the safety divider. The old man has made it to middle of the adjacent girder. A wide gap is between us, the streets of the city several stories below.

"Sir, please calm down. Nobody is going to hurt you," one of the guards yells to him.

He yells back, "Don't you see what's happened here? They're all dead. You're all dead!" he points in my direction.

He's looking at something behind me. All I can see is the UA; parallel roads lined with smooth sailing traffic under a cloudless blue sky. Everything looks peaceful and normal, as usual.

Looking down at the street, almost whispering Jack says, "It's too late. It's just me now."

Tears drip from his eyes as he looks directly at me. My heart skips a beat. That's not Jack. The old man is Radames. I hadn't looked him directly in the face until this moment.

Before I can scream out, Radames leaps from the girder. I watch him fall eight stories to the pavement below. People around me exchange exclamations; many of them are no doubt recording the event. The guards scurry off to deal with the mess below. A wave of something invisible washes over me. Paralyzed and numbed, for several seconds I don't breathe or blink. I can only stare at his tiny fractured body in a growing pool of blood.

After a deep breath, I return to my seat and order lunch.

At the gym, when I break the news to Ben, he stops cycling for only a moment.

"Wow," he feigns surprise. "When did you last speak to him?"

"It's been a while," as I say it, I wonder if the sudden change in our dynamic could have affected Radames negatively. I hadn't heard from him since I left the savages. I didn't tell any of them I was getting fit, just stopped showing up. I just wrote them all off.

"How you taking it," Ben asks, searching my face.

I take in a breath and let it out quickly, scowling in faux contemplation. "I'm shocked, and a little sad. I guess I'm more confused than anything."

We peddle on; our minds convinced we are riding through a hilly French countryside.

Back in my office, I find a bouquet of roses waiting on my desk, no doubt from Ana.

The card reads, "Sorry about lunch, meeting ran late. See you tonight?"

Why she feels I would appreciate floral corpses is beyond me. I suppose it's the thought that counts. I pick up one of the roses and smell it. The scent registers in my mind as a

rose, but otherwise I have no reaction to it, positive or negative.

"Tomas, you have been injured."

EMA has detected a change in my blood fluidity. I look at my hands. A thorn has pricked my left index finger. I didn't notice.

"It is recommended you disinfect and bandage the wound."

I watch the blood run down my finger. A drop hits the floor and I stare at the splash pattern. Radames' dead body flashes in my mind's eye.

Before we leave for the evening, two detectives stop in to ask some questions. They only spoke with Ben for a couple of minutes; they were mostly interested in me. I told them the truth. I've known the man my whole life but when I first saw him today, I barely recognized him. I get the feeling from them that this is a common occurrence with nonusers.

It's after ten and I find myself in Emprint once again nudging a sphere from one position to another. My stare changes it quickly from grey to red. I wanted purple. My focus is elsewhere. Dissatisfied with the piece, I decide to abandon it. The structure shatters around me like a glass house. I open my eyes and think of Ana.

"The user you are looking for is not currently signed in."

I sit on the bed wondering what to do next.

"Tomas, do you have a moment to take a brief survey about your Emotant enhancement."

I respond positively before realizing I don't know what enhancement that is.

"Emotant is a two way enhancement plug-in for communication between the frontal cortex and the amygdale. It improves cognitive awareness and emotional output."

Emotional Output?

"The enhancement compensates for the effects of SOL emotional regulation. It is a new standard feature."

Settings.

"There are no user settings."

I sit there calmly considering the ramifications of this discovery, that Emplant regulates my emotions, not just once, but twice. Logically I understand it, but of course, this revelation is devoid of any substantial emotional impact.

"Ana is now online."

I hold my breath for a moment and consider contacting her, the blue phone icon flashes in my peripheral. Instead, I decide to wait for her to call me.

"Error."

What error, EMA?

"Would you like to contact this user?"

No.

"Error."

I do not want to call Ana, I assert as strongly as I can.

"Tomas, your breathing has become irregular. Do you need assistance?"

"No thank you, EMA. Goodnight," I say the prompt aloud.

The Lunica logo flashes, the eye closes and the triangle blinks out.

"Goodnight."

A warm bell rings in my mind, the default sound that tells me I've received a message. It's from Ana.

"Hey, just left the office. So tired. Let's reschedule."

"Ok, have a good night," I thinx, mentally placing the envelope in the mailbox. As it chimes, I decide to send her another.

"Thanks for the roses," I add, picturing a happy face. Just before I can think to send, I notice T2T has produced a sad face instead. I focus on it, picturing the smiley, but it doesn't change. That's strange. I haven't seen a mistake like this since my first week as a user. I decide not to send it. The thinx disappears with a reverberating warm blip.

My gaze drifts over to the wallscreen, prompting the icon to bounce in my peripheral. Sometimes I wonder if Emplant is too helpful. It's kind of like an assistant that never clocks out. I decide to do something I haven't done since I got fit, initiate a full Emplant shutdown. A key icon flashes.

The on/off password is a series of unique, unconnected memories I must recollect in a specific order. If the Emplant reads the correct corresponding neural patterns, it will turn off. This is a security precaution so people don't accidentally shut it off. My password was set at my fitting using strong memories from that time. I imagine the hole in the rug at the old Redwire and then my mother's condescending laugh. Finally, I picture Ana's face.

The key icon flashes red indicating the password was incorrect. I try it again but get the same error. I am sure this is the correct sequence. I can feel a dull sensation wash over me again. My cheeks warm while I calmly assess the probabilities.

Suddenly it dawns on me. This is a case of user error. When I established the password, I was thinking of the Ana when she used to work for Fresh Foods. She changed her appearance since then. We all do.

When I really think about it, I can barely remember what she looks like now. I haven't seen her in a while, in-person. She's thinner, with shorter hair but I just can't picture it. I still see her round smiling face from the Fresh Foods.

I decide to wake EMA for help.

"Hello, Tomas. What can I help you with?"

I initialize an image search for recent photos of Ana.

"No records were found that match your inquiry."

I'm sure EMA registers my puzzlement at the response. I distinctly remember taking dozens upon dozens of Optics and RECOGs of Ana. The hazy memories flash through my mind, outings with a faceless woman in non-descript locations.

"File not found"

Search all images. Ana?

"No records were found that match your inquiry."

I collapse back into my seat. This is impossible. How can there be no record of my girlfriend? Obviously, EMA can't access my data, probably a corruption in the file system. I'll need to make an appointment with Wen and get it serviced.

"Tomas, I'm concerned about your well-being"

I feel fine. Why are you concerned?

"It is possible that recent trauma has induced a state of emotional imbalance that is disturbing your cognitive ability. This would explain the system instability you are experiencing."

She's telling me this is more user error.

"If present patterns persist, this unit alone will not be sufficient to maintain positive homeostasis. This can lead to further system instability."

Something is disrupting my ability to use the Emplant. This sounds like a probable explanation to me so I ask for solutions.

"Would you like to talk about Radames?"

I see Radames' teary-eyed face again in my mind's eye. Why would she ask that?

"There are multiple neural connections in your brain associated with Radames Soto. Your conscious mind is attempting to suppress the emotional data."

It occurs to me what she is saying could be part of the possible hardware malfunction. I ask her about the pictures of Ana.

"I strongly recommend you immediately seek the services of a trained professional neurologist. Would you like for me to schedule you an appointment?"

This is getting ridiculous, now I'm just insulted. "Goodnight, EMA," I say, shutting her down.

A springy hiss echoes in my brain signaling a negative reply.

"For your own safety I have contacted a local Emergency Response Center to visit you for a checkup. I will remain activated until an EMMT arrives."

This is ridiculous. This malfunction is going to show up on my record. I think of calling Ben.

"For your financial security I have disabled contact options until the EMMT arrives. It is unsafe to contact your employer in your current condition. You may say something you will regret."

My palms are moist. For a user this is the equivalent of a full-blown panic attack. She must sense that I am irritated but can't factor the hardware malfunction into her assessment. I lay down on the bed to calm myself.

Ben is a friend; he can help me feel better.

"According to the Lunica Employee Code 12-45b 'Once employed by Lunica, all pre-existing designations with existing Lunica employees are immediately reassigned according to role in corporate hierarchy.'"

No matter how long I have known Ben, Emplant will always consider him just my boss. An idea forms in my head.

"Request to terminate employment with Redwire is temporarily denied."

The assistant now has me under her control. I am a prisoner in my own mind. An idea pops in my head. If I draft a resignation and deliver it to myself, maybe I can trick the system. EMA doesn't stop me.

"Error."

The hack works. I am off the Lunica system and the option to call Ben is selectable. In a few moments, his Evatar appears before me.

"Tomas, what's up? I just got a message saying you quit."

"My hard drive is malfunctioning, EMA called EMMTs on me and I can't even turn her off. Can you do something to help me remotely?"

“Hmm, I’ll have to contact someone from the head office. We’ll try a remote reset. Are you OK?” he asks, looking concerned.

“Oh I’m fine it’s just a nuisance that’s all.”

“You look like you’re crying.”

“Must be part of the hardware malfunction,” I say, touching my face. When I look at my fingers, I am surprised to find them wet.

“Hold on a moment, Tom. Let me contact someone.”

I run into the bathroom and look in the mirror. There are tears streaming down my face. I’m crying and didn’t even notice. Even now, as I look at the anguished face in the mirror I cannot connect it to my own. I feel nothing.

“Ben I think we better skip the reset and just do a full shutdown. I’m starting to get worried.”

“I’m waiting for a reply from ops right now. Tom, of course you know there is nothing to be worried about, right?”

“Yes it's just doing some very strange things right now. It’s kind of messing with my head.”

“Understood. Ok, confirmed. We can do a remote shutdown if you like and I’ll set you up to see EMIR Wen tomorrow. You still have your handheld. Contact me if there are any further problems.”

“Thanks, Ben, will do.”

His image disappears. I take a deep breath and rub my face.

“Tomas, I highly recommend you do not shut me down. Ben does not have access to the real time data I do.”

EMA you are broken and we need to fix you. The system malfunction is not user error; it’s you. Why am I reasoning with a broken computer?

“Tomas, without the proper passkey you may not be able to access this hardware again. I recommend you seek a professional-“

Her voice stops short as the Emplant shuts down. I look into the mirror and wait. So far, I feel the same. I try a test. I peek out into the main room and look to the wallscreen. No icon flashes in my peripheral. I feel a slight jolt of excitement. It really is off.

Back in the bathroom, I splash my face a few times. The sensation is especially intense, almost arousing. I grab a towel and pat my cheeks. The softness brings with it an overwhelming sense of security. I rub it gingerly into my cheeks, breathing heavily. I think I'm getting an erection.

My mood quickly changes when I notice a red spot on the towel. I look up to see red dripping from my nose. Of course, Radames' dead body flashes in my mind. The wave hits me again, this time I feel its full force. I cry as I've never cried before.

My face twists in anguish and beads of sweat ooze from my wrinkled forehead. Some part of me is still logically aware of what is happening but my body is helpless against the intense sensations. My knees give way and I grab hold of the sink. More blood drips from my nose.

I look again at my reflection and the face is not my own. It looks like me, but another version of me, an older version. It's the man from the old photo. He never went away but was merely disguised by a tan and white teeth.

The emotions are so strong now my ears start to ring. I double over the sink, drooling and weeping like an infant. A stinging pain shoots through my head and I start to feel woozy. I'm wincing now, tears are pouring from my eyes. Spots of blood rain into sink. I can taste the salty mix of blood and snot running from my nose. The pain in my head is now an intense stabbing. My body is shaking. My legs have gone limp, only the sink and my elbows are holding me up.

Then a loud crack echoes through the room. I jerk forward violently, hitting my head on the faucet, and face-plant into the sink. Through blurred vision, I can see the sink quickly filling with blood. I feel it pouring down the back of

my ears and neck. My forehead is now stinging and there's a burning sensation in the back of my head. I raise myself up to look at my reflection.

My face is now drenched in blood. It's dripping down my shoulders and onto my chest. Fragments of something pink and white stipple the wall behind me. With all my strength, I hold myself up on one arm and reach for the back of my skull, gagging when I feel the soft, wet hole there. I collapse again into the sink, panting heavily. I need to get to the phone.

Something whips me in the face. A gleaming red thread lashes my cheek, hooking its end into my nostril before snapping taught. Another crosses my forehead piercing into my eyebrow. They lead to the back of head where I can feel something erupting from my skull. Bone cracks, my body spasms. The pain is unreal. As the grayness forms in my peripheral vision, I suddenly feel cold. My face has turned blue. I'm dying.

Somehow, I am still standing. Somehow, I can witness the birdlike pyramid rise up upon its thin tentacles, my blood and brains dripping from it. I watch the life fade from my face as the Emplant takes control. Then, I feel nothing.

11 NI GHTMARES

The first thing I can see through my half-open eyes is a shattered window. I'm on the floor, surrounded by chunks of glass. I lift myself up. More blood rushes to my already pounding head. I reach for the back of my skull, relieved to feel only my dry hair. It was just a dream.

The relief doesn't last as I look around. I'm still on the bus, only, the bus is now sideways. It must have crashed. I take another moment to orient myself before getting up. There is an open window towards the front so I head towards it. On the way, I see two legs sticking out from under a pile of smashed seats. The woman, the sleepy nonuser, I touch her leg and its cold. There are a few more bodies, equally pale and motionless. The driver hangs from his seat, impaled by a long shard of metal protruding through the windshield. I start to feel nauseous and scramble to pull myself out of the window.

I smell fire and smoke in the wind. Atop the bus, I boldly rise to my feet, shielding my eyes from the light of the late day sun. The sky is unreal, cloudless, and colorful like I've never seen before, with odd hints of purple and green. Under it, the UA stretches off in each direction, devastated. I look back and forth, breathless and dumbfounded. There is wreckage as far as I can see. Every car on the highway has crashed. I suddenly want to go back to the nightmare.

On the ground, I snake through the flaming wrecks looking for signs of life. Every car is a pile of mangled metal with body parts crushed between the folds. Everywhere I look, there are pieces of humans, severed limbs, hair, skin, and teeth are scattered across the road. I quicken my pace but the horrors are endless. I'm running now, frantically searching for anyone still alive. There is nowhere to look without seeing blood-splattered glass and metal. Gassed, I stop and grab my knees, panting.

It's eerily quiet. There are no car alarms. Where are the fire trucks? Where are the cops? There are no planes in the sky. Did the serpent system go down? I approach the divider and look upon the rooftops across the city. Scattered fires billow towers of black smoke from various locations stretching off into the horizon. Something has gone terribly wrong.

Is everyone dead? Am I the only person left? My hand has unconsciously slipped into my jacket pocket and produced the card with Ana's number written on it. I remember her face; see it clear as day in my mind. I can imagine her alone and frightened in the city.

My handheld is dead, won't turn on. If I walk in one direction, I can maybe make it home, or I can head back to the city and try to find Ana. I can see plumes of smoke rising between the skyscrapers in the distance.

Is this really happening to me? Maybe this is another dream. The thought stops me in my tracks. This is a dream. I'm at home sleeping. All I need to do is wake myself up.

After gathering the courage, I slap myself in the face. Still here, I slap myself again, hard, and nearly topple over.

"Why are you doing that?" says a voice behind me.

I spin around to find a little boy standing on the opposite road. There is a five-foot gap between us. The ground is a rooftop thirty feet below. The boy couldn't be more than eight years old. There are scrapes on his hands

and knees but otherwise he seems to be in one piece. Judging by his clothing, he just had soccer practice.

"Hi there, are you OK?" I ask him.

He just stares at me with a strangely calm expression on his face. Maybe he's been desensitized by virtual game violence. Kid's probably played the Armageddon scenario more than once on his home console.

"Where is your mother?" I ask.

He points to a nearby car. The vehicle looks badly damaged. I can see a figure slumped over the steering wheel.

"What about your Dad?"

He points to the city.

A strange urge overtakes me and I can feel the adrenaline pumping through my veins. I must help this kid. I climb over the divider at the edge of the highway. The gap looks a lot wider than I thought.

"What are you doing?" he asks with a tone of condescension.

"I'm going to come over to your side so I can help you."

"Help me do what?"

After considering, I say, "I don't know, to protect you," the words sound ridiculous as they leave my mouth.

"But you're a stranger and you were just hitting yourself."

"I was just making sure this wasn't- OK, my name is Tomas. What's yours?"

"Josh."

"OK, we know each other. Now take a step back."

"You're not gonna make it."

He obliges anyway, ready to watch me leap to my death. My knee stings from when I jumped off the bus. In my mind, the image from my dream flashes, Radames holding on to the edge of the divider.

"How about we just walk to the next exit," I yell to him.

We're nearing the midtown terminal. Josh is still on the other road walking parallel to me. We have yet to run into anyone else. I figured it would be safer to meet there rather than downtown. I wouldn't go on those streets even if this weren't a post-apocalypse scenario.

We've been talking. Coincidentally his father works in the same mall as I do. I figure I'll help him find his Dad and see if I can't locate Ana or Ben. He says he'd rather go to his grandparents' house but they live on an island off the coast.

Last thing he remembers before the crash was a bright light. He says he woke up and his mother was asleep. I asked him if he saw anyone else.

"Just the two men that went through my mom's pockets," he says while skipping across the top of a car.

Looters. That means there are people still alive. I must have been out cold on the bus for at least an hour. I check my wallet but realize I had nothing of value in there to begin with. Sure enough, the various old business cards, my ID, and picture of my mother are intact.

"Wow! Look at that," he exclaims.

We've made it to the off ramp already but a mountain of smashed cars is blocking the way. I've never heard of a car pile-up this devastating. For whatever reason the serpent system must have went off line and all the people not in control of their cars must have just...

"How are we going to get down?" Josh asks.

I peek down at the off-ramp. It's destroyed and inaccessible. I know the garden mezzanine is just beyond the pile. If we can get over it, maybe we can use a maintenance ladder to get to the garden.

"We gotta climb," I say nodding upward.

Using fenders, side-view mirrors and other protruding car parts, we both manage to get up the rubble. With every pull up, I can hear squeaks and wretches reminding me what a bad idea this is. I can see into some of these car interiors.

The mangled flesh inside no longer resembles anything human.

As I climb over what appears to be a mix of a ONE and a Taxi, I hear someone moan. I peer through the shattered and bloodstained glass. There is a woman moving inside. Her arms and legs appear to be pinned under the taxi's transmission. She looks at me, her eyes glassy, and starts panting.

I yell to her, "There was an accident. I'm going to help, OK?"

The woman nods. Her face is pale and tear-stained. I ask her if she has a phone. The poor thing looks desperately around her car interior, at the spot where her glove box used to be, where half a spare tire now is.

"Emplant, do you have Emplant?" I say, making a triangle with my thumbs and index fingers.

She shakes her head and sobs.

"I-I have to help this little boy," I say. "We are going to find help, right nearby. We will come back for you."

I put my hand on the glass. She nods her head trying to contain herself. I nod and continue to climb.

On the other side of the mountain, I see Josh climbing down below me. The cars seem to have made a bridge over the gap. He is crossing it, over to my side. I think to yell at him but he makes it over the gap before I can say anything. I climb down to meet him. Jumping from the trunk of a car, I land hard on the roof of another. I struggle to catch my breath and share with him my new plan.

I wheeze, "We need to come back for-"

A loud metallic creak, like old rusted machinery shifting gears, interrupts me. The cars under our feet rumble. I look at Josh and our eyes confirm each other's fear.

From the top of the pile, a single red ONE tumbles down, headed straight for the bridge of cars over the gap. Sure enough, it smashes a hole in the wreckage and a

cascade ensues. The surrounding cars slip into the gap and crash to the street below. The mountain shifts and sags.

The kid and I share one last look before taking off. The screeching crash of metal and glass is so loud we both cover our ears as we run. I feel tiny fragments of glass pellet my back and large chunks of twisted metal spill to either side of me.

We leap to the road and head towards the service ladder. We make it up to the maintenance walkway before stopping to look back. The mountain caves in on itself. Smoke rises up from the gap, from new fires on the street below.

Breathless, Josh asks, "What did you say we had to do?"

"Never mind," I say wiping the sweat from my lip.

I was expecting to find people in the garden or find it empty. I didn't expect to find both. A slew of motionless bodies litter the ground. In the café, a man appears to have passed out in his soufflé. Another man has fallen out of his chair, still clutching a fork loaded with a morsel of meat. All over, dozens of people appear to have just collapsed in the middle of their routines.

"Are they dead?" Josh asks.

I check the pulse of a woman slumped in her chair, a half-eaten slice of cheesecake curdling before her.

"They're alive," I confirm, genuinely relieved.

I notice Daniel is lying on the ground near a bench. I sit him up and lightly tap his jaw to try to rouse him. He doesn't react. I check his pulse. Slow and steady, as if he's in a deep sleep. I look deeply into his peaceful face, summoning all my jealousy, and smack him hard across the cheek. The slap startles Josh but does nothing to wake Daniel. He's out cold.

Josh tugs at my sleeve, "There are people in there."

He's pointing to the mall entrance. The doors are open; a few users passed out in the doorway. I can see three

figures coming out of the shoe store. They ignore us and disappear into the darkened mall.

Inside, it's the same, bodies everywhere. People sleeping, fallen in place, heads cracked on the floor. It is dim inside except for the fading sun from the skylights. Power must be out. I can see the three people with shoeboxes hopscotching their way to the escalators.

From the Fresh Foods, a man strolls out holding two bags of groceries. He smiles when he sees us. Seems like one of Bernice's types.

"You better hurry up, there's not much left," he yells, casually stepping around the bodies.

"What happened?" I ask, trying not to scream.

The man looks around, "Oh, I don't know, man. There was a blackout then and all these people just passed out. Crazy, man! If you wanna join us, we've got a group together down in the square, we're gonna try to figure this shit out."

"Thanks, that sounds good," I say.

Josh tugs at my sleeve, "I'm hungry."

His father is probably with the group in the square but he doesn't seem to be in a rush to get back to him. Could Ana still be here?

"We'll be right down," I say to the man.

He shrugs and heads for the escalators.

In the Fresh Foods, Josh teaches me just how selective the palette of an 8-year-old boy can be. After some debate, I let him open a box of graham crackers with the exception that he also eats an apple.

"You have to wash it first," he insists.

He follows me to the rear of the store to find some water. The shelves are empty. Maybe there is more in the back. We venture further into the darken store and I reach for the door marked 'employees only'. The next few moments are a bit fuzzy. I won't recall the mop handle hitting me.

12 BEARINGS

When I come to, I find Ana and Josh standing over me eating graham crackers.

“Tomas, I’m so sorry! I thought you were another thief,” says Ana, sounding as sincere as she can with crackers in her mouth.

“It’s alright, I guess we sort of are,” I say, looking at Josh. “Although I thought given the circumstances...” I groan like an old man as I lift myself up from the couch. There are lit candles placed around what must be the Fresh Foods break room.

“I know. Fuck, I’m sorry. I just don’t know what to do right now,” she says, stepping aside to reveal the bodies of four people lying on the floor.

“Did you knock all these people out?” I ask only half-serious.

“When the blackout hit, everyone just collapsed! All my other co-workers left but I just couldn’t leave them here.”

She cradles the head of one of the unconscious men. He’s young and attractive. Judging by the shirt, he must be a manager here. She strokes his hair affectionately. I immediately spring from the couch and ask where the bathroom is.

“Down the hall and to the left, bring a candle,” she says handing me one.

“No flashlights?” I ask with an eyebrow raised.

"We have a couple but they don't work," she removes two slim flashlights from a drawer by the sink.

I take them both and the candle. "Phones?"

"Everything is dead, including mine," she informs, producing the useless gadget from her pocket.

In the bathroom, I wash my face and hands and fix my hair. Even at a time like this, basic human stuff like vanity will remain. At least I have a chance to get to know Ana.

It takes a few minutes to find the isle with batteries. I locate the correct size and replace the dead ones in both flashlights. They still do not work. I try another pack but get the same result. The ops manager in this place needs a reprimand. I see a cheap flashlight key chain hanging on the display, grab it, and test it. It doesn't work either. I try a few more before heading back to the break room.

"Josh told me about the UAE," Ana says. "What's going on out there? Is this all because of the blackout?"

"This is not just a blackout," I say, checking the heads of the people on the floor. Sure enough, all of them have the crescent shaped scar in the usual spot.

"What are you doing?" she asks.

"The batteries have been drained. I think there must have been some kind of electromagnetic storm. I'm not sure how or why but it appears that everyone with an Emplant has been affected."

"Affected?" Ana asks. She looks down at the manager and then at me. "Why haven't you been affected?"

I look her in the eyes and flash a tight-lipped smile, "I'm not fit."

"My dad has an Emplant," says Josh, munching on his apple.

The three of us stand in silence for a moment, absorbing the situation. I realize they may be waiting for me to take the lead.

“There is a group in the square. We can join them and figure out what to do from there,” I suggest. The least amount of time I am making decisions for others, the better.

We grab some more candles and matches before heading down to ground level. As we descend, it gets dimmer. The sun is almost completely gone. The bodies seem endless. On the main floor, an orange glow pours through the front doors no doubt from unseen fires outside. We notice signs of life, people walking on the sidewalk. As we approach, I can hear the long forgotten din of a large crowd. We open the doors to the hectic rabble of a few hundred people gathered in the center of the square.

The user’s unconscious bodies have been mostly cleared from the area and carefully lined up on the sidewalk. I can see a few teams carrying bodies over from various areas. Cars with useless batteries sit abandoned, some with users slumped in the driver’s seat.

Other smaller groups are huddled around barrel fires, cognizant of the blackening sky. There are many children. Looking around I see mostly low income, young or very old. I’m sure there are many mentally unfit as well.

A man in the center of the crowd is yelling. He’s saying something about the army. Nearby a couple of sketchy characters are eyeing us, more opportunists no doubt. I instinctively take both Ana and Josh’s hands and head for the crowd. They squeeze my fingers and draw close.

Another person is addressing the crowd now. The three of us slow our approach as a scuffle breaks out, a shoving match between the two speakers. Someone nearby speaks to us.

“They’ve been doing that for over an hour now,” says a man sitting on the trunk of a parked car. “Arguing and fighting, ‘let’s do this, no, let’s do that.’ Don’t waste your time, bunch of kids and idiots.”

It's Jack. I study his face to be sure. He seems rather relaxed, scribbling in a small notebook while observing the mayhem from a spot tucked away from the fray.

"How long has it been?" I ask him.

"About four hours. I suspect it will take a few more to get everything back online, not that it will help."

I ask him to elaborate. He spins on his seat into a half-lotus, resting his hands on his thighs.

"They ignored the warnings. They tried to play God. Now God has responded. Check. Those who resisted the temptation, will be spared this harsh lesson, but have a harsher one to learn."

"Right, well, it was nice seeing you," I say ushering my confused companions away with me.

Jack yells to me as I leave, "If you want to get out of here alive, let me know."

"What should we do?" Ana asks, looking shaken.

I look to Josh, "Where does your Dad work?"

He shrugs. It's getting dark now. The people in the square are still shouting at each other. It wouldn't be wise to travel anywhere, not that any trains or cars would be working.

"I don't want to go back to the Fresh Foods," says Ana. "I feel like I'm hanging out by the cheese in a rat trap over there."

Without thinking, I reach into my pocket and pull out the keys to Redwire.

As expected, a few dozen employees and customers are scattered across the showroom and hallway. Luckily, the conference room door is still open. Other doors, including Ben's office, are inaccessible, the electronic locks useless.

We stopped at a craft store on the way up and found some more candles and a novelty lantern. Ana insisted we pay for it and placed some cash in the hand of the unconscious user behind the counter.

Josh has fallen asleep on the conference room couch. The kid is surprisingly self-sufficient. I've lit a few of the candles

and thrown packing blankets on the table for Ana and me to lie on, head to head. She returns from the bathroom and looks over the candlelit setting with a skeptical eye.

"Romantic," she jokes, before taking a sip from a cup of M-Water she's poured herself.

I point to the cup, "You sure you want to drink that?"

She looks into the cup, smacking her lips, "Why?"

"You do know what's in that, right?"

Swirling the blue liquid, "Electrolytes?" she guesses.

"Not the liquid, the other stuff."

"What, the bubbles?"

"M-Water is not carbonated."

She still looks confused.

"Those aren't bubbles," I tell her, "they're called swimmers, nanomachines that flow through your blood stream collecting data for the Emplant."

A look of horror grows on her face but I ease her concern by informing her that, because she is unfit, they will just sit dormant and eventually pass through her system.

"So that's why it's so expensive?" she gasps.

"Why did you think it costs so much?"

"I thought it was just chic," she says setting the cup down.

She sits down in one of the comfortable conference chairs and sighs. I sit in the chair across from her. The candles and beds I prepared are on the table between us.

"Great job, this looks really comfortable," she lies. "Do you really think we'll be here all night?"

"I'm not sure. But until we can get a better idea of what's happening I think the safest bet is to stay here and wait for the power to come back on."

"What if it doesn't come back on?"

"Well then I guess we'll have the day off tomorrow. Wanna get drunk?" I joke, producing a bottle of wine from my groceries.

She smiles and nods.

Soon we are lying on the table, head to head, snacking on pickles and peanut butter, and drinking wine. We've been talking. Mostly, she's been talking. In some ways, she is as I imagined, a little naive, perhaps even vapid, but ultimately kind-hearted and well intending. I didn't expect her to be so foul-mouthed.

"So I said 'fuck it' to the choir. I tried playing with a band for a while but musicians are fucking assholes. Lately I've been doing voiceover gigs part-time, but work is hard to find. Check this out," she rolls over onto her stomach. "Enhance your life with Emplant," she says in an impeccable EMA voice.

Her impression stirs something deep in me. I look at her with wide eyes, "That's a really great EMA impression!"

"Hello, Tomas. What would you like to do today?"

"OK stop that's really freaking me out now," I admit.

She laughs, oddly amused by my discomfort. I stare at the ceiling trying to remain in the present.

"What's this," she says, taking something from my grocery bag, the daisy I found on the floor.

I sigh and state matter-of-factly, "It's for you."

She smiles and sticks it behind her ear. I can feel her studying my face. If the world is ending, and this is the last night, I'm not going to ruin it.

"Why didn't you get one?" she asks, lightly tapping my forehead.

I think for a moment and try to muster the courage to say the truth, "I was afraid."

"That this would happen?"

"I never could have imagined this but yeah I guess I left room for the possibility."

"You know, I need to confess something. I was only flirting with you today to get a discount."

"I figured as much, I'm an older guy and-"

"But I'm glad we talked. You're a good guy, Tomas. Thanks for coming back for me."

She kisses me on the forehead before lying back down. I savor the last bits of her scent in the air above me. Best end of the world ever.

13 CYCLE POWER

A loud bang wakes me. Ana and I flip onto our bellies and, breathless, stare into each other's big eyes. When the lights flicker on, she claps. They flicker out and her smile turns back to a pout. Then we hear the loud bang again. It's coming from one of the offices down the hall. We tumble off the table.

I whisper, "The power must be coming back on."

"But what was is that banging?"

"I don't know." I say putting on my jacket. "Sounds like a hammer."

"Where's Josh?" she asks.

The couch is bare. Lantern in hand, we open the conference room door. The hallway is quiet and dark.

Ana points to the bare floor, "Where did all the bodies go?"

We venture down the hall. The lights flicker again and I hold my finger up, anticipating the bang. I spin around to face the door to Ben's office. It's open.

I take the lantern from Ana and lead the way in. His office is dark but even from here I can see a figure slumped in his chair. There is another, smaller figure standing before the desk.

"Josh?" I whisper.

He notices us but seems more interested in Ben. In the light of the lantern, I can see Ben's head resting face-first on

the desk, breathing bubbles into a splattered puddle. Suddenly the light turns on and Josh takes a step back.

Ben raises his head. His face is clear as day under the LED lighting. Blood covers his swollen face and crushed nose. His eyes are watery and lifeless.

"Ben? Are you OK? Can you hear me?"

His gaze focuses on me and his bottom lip begins to quiver. As he struggles to speak, the lights flicker out again.

"Goodnight!" he suddenly shouts before dropping his head onto the table. His blood splatters on us. Ana screams and storms out of the office. I grab Josh and follow her, looking back at my old friend once more.

"Goodnight, Ben," I say before leaving.

Ana is using her shirt to wipe Ben's blood from her face.

"What the fuck?" she screams. "It's like he was turning on and off with the lights."

I shake my head, "That doesn't make sense. The lights are on a city power grid. Emplant is powered by the host."

"I don't fucking know, you're the expert, I'm just saying what I saw."

"He was talking," informs Josh. "He kept saying 'Happy Holiday' but with the F-word."

The lights flicker on again and we all hold our breath. Then the air system kicks in. I can hear machines and consoles powering on in the distance.

"I think its back on," I say.

Ana marches towards the exit, "Thank God, I just want to go home."

I try to slow her down, "Wait, Ana. I don't know that it's safe to go just yet. There is some weird stuff happening. Something doesn't seem right."

"No fucking duh, Tomas! Everything stopped working, half the population is asleep, or whatever you call that," she points to Ben's office. "I'm pretty sure shit couldn't get any weirder than that!"

As she says it, she opens the door to the sales floor and stops dead in her tracks. Of course, things have gotten weirder.

The showroom is in full swing. Team members are up and interacting with users. The infomercials and testimonials are running. There are people using the EIDs, even people waiting in line. It's almost as if we stepped onto the floor in the middle of a typical day at Redwire.

"Everything is back to normal," says Ana, unsure.

I get close to one of the team members. She's giving her pitch to a user about the same age. The team member's cadence is normal but she's only spouting random keywords and incomplete sentences.

"Easy, fun, enjoyable" she says with a smile.

"Yes, exciting! Happy!" says the user, clapping her hands like a gleeful chimpanzee.

I see another user interacting with a touch screen. He seems to be just tapping buttons aimlessly. He scowls at me, gripping the screen as if he owns it.

"Mine!" he says like an angry child.

I hear a scuffle and notice Daniel has returned from the garden and is shoving another team member. They seem to be arguing over a customer, a young woman.

Daniel pulls the woman towards him and beats his chest, "First!"

The other member, Andre, grabs the woman's other wrist and pulls her to him, asserting, "Mine!" He points to Daniel, "You, too much," whipping his hand across in dismissal.

A few of the other team members and some customers gather around.

"That's unfair!" says a thin man in glasses.

"Shut up, all of you!" barks a burly woman.

"Kill him!" screams a young meathead.

The team members now both have a hold of the woman and she starts to yelp. The crowd whips into a frenzy of rage and I find myself joining in.

“Let her go!” I scream.

The team members stop and look at me. I am technically their boss. For a moment, the room falls silent. Daniel kills the silence with a laugh. Soon the other team members join the ridicule. The tug of war starts up again and so does the frenzy.

The woman’s yelps turn into horrid cries as the men pull her arms with all their might. Ana and Josh huddle in close as we watch the inevitable happen. There is a terrible, twisted sound of bone, meat, and tearing fabric accompanied by a blood-curdling scream.

Andre falls on his back. In his hands, a severed arm, torn at the shoulder, gushes blood. Daniel and a few other team members gather around the dazed woman, howling over their victory. Instead of devouring her like the pack wild dogs they seem to be, the group quickly disperses. Daniel returns to his pitch in a calm casual voice, his eyes deader than ever.

“Newer. More efficient,” he tells the dying customer.

The woman wobbles before him, the blood running from her face and pouring from the pulp where her arm once was. Daniel continues through a fragmented version of the executive pro package pitch until the woman finally collapses. Then he shrugs and looks for another customer. Surprisingly, someone else approaches him, an older woman. They exchange some broken sentences. The woman, looking moderately curious, points to the blood all over Daniel’s hands. Daniel responds by waving his hand dismissively and pointing to the young woman dead on the floor. The other customer, satisfied, nods and the pitch continues. Ana, Josh, and I finally scurry out of the front door.

The mall is bustling. The lights, shops, and music are all up and running. Again, the signs appear that something is

very wrong. The users who aren't badly injured seem to have returned to whatever they were doing before the blackout. A speed-walking executive passes; a gaping wound on his forehead. Two women emerge from an ice cream shop licking cones. They step around the dead users, oblivious to the cracked skulls and puddles of blood. We head for the escalators.

Most of the users seem to be in a daze. They stand by idly staring off at nothing. Their faces show signs of an epic internal struggle. Many have also lost their inner monologue, the mall music drowned out by a discordant chorus of random exclamations and screams. We see more fights breaking out and crowds gathering around them. Someone on the escalator behind us screams for us to move faster. We oblige the lunatic.

Our trio huddles together, like a family passing through a bad neighborhood at night. On the ground level, a female user is sitting on the floor, sobbing, surrounded by the contents of her purse. Another user is screaming at an ATM. Spit is flying from his mouth as he calls the machine a worthless whore. In the time since we left Redwire, I have seen four fully naked people. One is sitting on a bench masturbating. He yells something at Ana but it's more of an excited yelp. We jog to the exit.

The square is now a battlefield. The skyscreen is back on, the giant frozen Lunica logo casting a red tint on the surging crowd beneath. The rows of sleeping users previously lined up in the square are awake and fighting. Like a war amongst barbarians, users and nonusers alike are literally ripping each other to pieces.

I can tell who is who from the look on their faces. The nonusers look terrified, like they are fighting for their lives. The users look intent, unrelenting, and deranged. Some of them clutch pieces of humans, unsure of what to do with the pulps.

All around us, people are screaming. In the deadlocked traffic, irate drivers struggle to start their dead cars. Fires have spilt onto the sidewalks. The awning of a store nearby is ablaze. Two oblivious users smile and point at the window, to the burning mannequins inside.

Josh yells out, "That's my Dad!"

He runs towards a dead-eyed user nearby. I follow with Ana in tow. The man, a muscled security guard, studies the boy. A glimmer in his eye hints that he may recognize his son. He quickly loses interest when he notices us. His countenance turns fiendish as he leers at Ana, licking his lips.

Josh looks puzzled, "Dad?"

The man shoves the boy aside and lunges at Ana. He laughs manically and licks the side of her face. Before I realize it, I've pulled him off her and tossed him to the ground. The adrenaline drains when he looks at me, seething. He rises and moves towards us.

Suddenly, I hear the familiar but out-of-place sound of a ringing bell. Something sweeps passed me. Josh's Dad falls to the ground. I look over to see Jack on a bicycle swinging a baseball bat.

"Are you kids ready to get out of here?" he yells, gliding away.

Josh is on the ground crying. I scoop him up and follow Ana as she chases Jack. We weave through the crowds. The faster we run, the angrier some of the users get. I feel clawing hands pull at my clothing. An officer drunkenly screams for us to slow down. His uniform is soaked in blood, the look on his face, inhuman. He swings a nightstick, indiscriminately bashing the skulls of users and nonusers alike.

Jack leads us out of the square to the avenue. He zips across the street into a dark alley. Ana chases and I struggle to keep up, my legs and arms burning and heavy. Josh is squeezing my neck, his nails dig into my skin. As we cross the street, I catch a glimpse of the canyon of devastation

stretching downtown. Screams echo down the valley of high rises and I can see multiple horrors unfolding under the streetlights, accentuated by burning cars and buildings.

The alley leads to a secluded back lot. Jack is nowhere in sight, only his abandoned bicycle remains. Unable to continue further, I put Josh down to catch my breath. The screams and chaos sound distant now.

"Holy shit," Ana whispers between panting. "What the fuck?"

I shake my head, hoping to wake up in the conference room, "I don't know."

"Emplant did all this?"

"I don't know. I don't know!"

"Who else would know?"

"I would," says a voice from the darkness.

Jack returns. Before I can ask him to explain, he produces a pair of bolt cutters. I instinctively move Ana and Josh behind me as he approaches. He stops and cocks his head to the side, smirking.

"Get out of the way," he says, jutting his thumb over his shoulder.

We relax as he walks passed us, to the rack of bicycles not too far away. He inspects the locks.

"What do you mean 'you would know'?" I ask him.

He shoots me a smile, "Tomás is it? Aren't you going to introduce us?"

Ana looks surprised, "You know each other?"

"No," I tell her and correct Jack, "And it's pronounced 'Thomas'."

Ana waves, "I'm Ana and this is Josh. Thanks for helping us."

Jack takes off his knitted cap and bows gracefully to them.

I sigh, "Guys, this is Jack."

He smiles at me again as he snaps one of the chains. I ask him why he's stealing the bike.

"It's for you," he says, swinging his arm aside in offering. He looks to Ana and asks, "Purple or green?" pointing to two of the remaining bicycles.

"Green," Ana chirps.

"Do I get a bike too?" Josh finally speaks.

"Of course, squire," he replies. "Let's see if they have one your size."

"What do we need bikes for?" I ask.

"We should stay mobile," he suggests, putting the cutters into position.

"And go where?" I ask, raising my voice a little.

He snaps the cable and lets out a sigh, "Well that's a good question, *Tomas*," he emphasizes the correct pronunciation. "We could go to my place but it's in a sewer."

Ana squeezes her eyes shut, disgusted, "We can go to my place downtown."

"Downtown is worse than here," says Jack.

Ana looks to me, "Tomas, what about your place?"

An image of the current state of my room flashes in my mind.

"Where is the sewer exactly?" I ask.

"We have to get out of the city," says Jack, mounting his bicycle.

A gaggle of rowdy users enters the alley. As they draw close, I suddenly realize where we need to go.

"Follow me!" I get on my bike and lead them down the opposite alley.

We cycle swiftly through the back streets, encountering a few more users who we easily avoid. The angry ones now seem more annoying than dangerous. The sad ones really get to me. I see more than one lying on the sidewalk in the fetal position, some of them sucking their thumbs. To think these are people I once would have envied. Look at them now.

We manage to get to the bridge without an accident and take the bike path. Halfway across Jack stops and points

down the river. The black silhouette of Lunica City is dotted with lights signaling someone is home.

“If we really want to know what’s going on, that’s where we need to be,” Jack says before peddling off.

We’ll have to wait until morning. I hope by then the government will have a solution. For now, we’ll go to the safest place I can think of.

14 SAFE AND SAVAGE

Once again, I feel that strange wave of disbelief, the depersonalization that constantly makes me question whether I am dreaming. I experienced it again after struggling to add up the cards in my hand. Not hours ago I was fighting for my life now I am fighting to stay conscious during this game of blackjack.

"Hit me," Steve says.

Radames obliges and deals him a four of clubs.

"Bust," says Steve, solemnly packing his cards into a neat pile.

"Hit me," chirps Ana, after checking the card under her ten of clubs.

Radames deals her an ace of hearts. She peeks again, brow furrowed.

"What are the face cards worth again?" she asks innocently.

Josh smirks and sips his hot chocolate.

"Those are worth ten," Radames gently informs.

"OK," she peeks again. "And what's the ace worth again?"

Radames smiles, I can tell he likes her.

"That's the most valuable card," he says. "It can be either a one or an eleven, whichever you need. That means," he turns her cards over, revealing the queen of spades; "you've got twenty-one!"

"Oh right, I'm sorry it's been so long since I played cards," she says, blushing and giggling.

It's nice to see her smile again. Considering all that has happened, I don't know how she can still conjure a bubbly exuberance. I'm beginning to realize she isn't as dumb as I initially thought, just pragmatic and blunt.

Josh hasn't said much since his father rejected him but he seems to be taking it well. Turns out his parents were divorced when he was young and the man wasn't a big part of his life. He seems to accept all that is happening, opting to adapt rather than ask for an explanation like the rest of us. The admirable stoicism in his eyes tells me he's going to be OK.

Radames was happy to see me but he will never know just how relieved I was to see him. He and Steve had no idea how bad it was. This neighborhood is mostly poor and the few users here most likely work in the city. I didn't go into detail when I recounted the events. The idea that Emplant users have become homicidal lunatics was enough to chew on.

The Internet is still down and it appears no one is competent enough to broadcast the news. We have the TV on anyway. It's hanging from the wall in the corner, showing only static. The gentle hum has been helping to lull me to sleep.

I realize it's my turn and tap on my cards. Radames places a king of diamonds on top of my jack of clubs. I flip my cards over revealing my twenty-one.

"No, Tomas. You had blackjack," says Radames, removing the king of diamonds. He couples the remaining two cards, the jack of clubs and my first card, the ace of spades.

Ana snickers, "You counted it as one when you should have counted it as eleven. You suck worse than me, man."

Jack laughs from his spot in the corner. He's been there since we arrived, scribbling in his notebook. I toss my cards

into the pile and join him. This is a good opportunity to learn more about our mysterious hobo.

"What are you writing?" I nod to the book in his hand.

"I'm trying to figure out what happened," he replies, concentrating hard.

I come close enough to peek at the page before he snaps the book shut. I catch a glimpse of a few doodles of naked women.

"You're going to figure it out by drawing naked ladies," I quip.

"No. Drawing naked ladies helps me think," he puts the book aside and turns his full attention to me. "You asked me before how I could help. I used to work for Lunica. I was on the design team that made the Version 2 prototype."

The others stop their card game and listen as Jack continues.

"I can't say I know exactly what has happened or if it's reversible. Obviously most of it isn't. What I do know is Armand Lunica is to blame for all the deaths that have occurred."

"And the sun," Steve adds. After studying our confused faces, he elaborates, "There was a massive solar flare this morning. It must have triggered the electromagnetic storm. That's the only thing that makes sense."

"Yes, but how would that affect people's brains?" I ask.

Ana chimes in, "Maybe the storm, like, overloaded the Emplants or whatever and the people's brains got shocked or something."

Jack shakes his head pouting, "Impossible. It is not a strong enough conductor. If the hardware failed, the users would be just like the rest of us. What we are seeing is unprecedented."

"Could the Emplants be on and controlling the people?" I ask recognizing how foolish it sounds.

Jack raises an eyebrow and shakes his head.

“Who would be controlling them? Why would they want people to kill each other?” Ana asks sincerely.

Radames replies, “If their motives are like any of the tyrants of history, probably for a really stupid reason.”

Jack denies it, “Based on what I know about the earlier designs, it is impossible for the Emplant to control a user.”

The ringing doorbell interrupts us. I follow Radames upstairs to the front door. It's Darrell. He immediately asks about Bernice. No one has seen or heard from her. We head down to get him acquainted with the others.

Darrell shares with us his take on the events, “We are under attack. The internet kill-switch has been engaged. This is advanced class warfare, ya'll. This is a culling disguised as a ‘malfunction’ from a ‘blackout,’” he flashes the quote signs. “The users are taking over and killing all of the nonusers.”

I correct him, “We saw users killing other users too. They didn't seem focused on one thing or another. It was more like moment-to-moment.”

“Like animals,” Ana adds.

“They've been turned into mindless killing machines. OK, maybe it didn't work out the way they wanted. Maybe they got it wrong.”

“Someone definitely screwed up,” Radames interjects.

“Do you have a land line here?” Darrell asks Steve.

“Sure,” Steve nods.

“We might be able to dial-up access, see if there is any info on the web,” Darrell postulates.

Soon Darrell and Steve return from down the hall with a dusty technological fossil. The CPU is the size of a toaster oven. It's been years since I last saw a computer mouse. Although Darrell has already begun, I feel compelled to point out the unlikelihood of any dial-up connections existing. He just laughs.

“Of course there are. No matter how advanced shit gets, code will always be the language of the Internet. For that, all

you need is text on a screen, my man. There is a whole dial-up underground.”

The screen lights up and, miraculously, an ancient operating system loads.

“Oh this OS is a classic! We might be able to bring up a skycam,” Darrell coos like a fanboy.

“If you can get online,” I retort.

“If the internet is even up,” Steve adds.

Darrell turns away from the screen to face us, “Guys, I got this. But it’s gonna take a while.”

We take the hint and disperse. The others return to their card game and I take a walk through the church. Jack is upstairs sitting on a pew, staring at the dusty crucified Jesus above the altar. I take a seat beside him.

“I’m surprised there aren’t more people here,” I say.

He nods, “The church was once a refuge during times like these. Now we have Life Centers for that.”

“I think people just consider this a museum. If it weren’t for Steve petitioning for landmark status, this building would probably be a strip mall by now.”

I stare at the dusty Jesus hanging on the cross and realize I don’t know anyone who believes this man was the son of God. Perhaps maybe my mother was the last person I know who truly prayed to Jesus.

“You know, I’m not entirely convinced of your story,” I admit. “You haven’t really told us anything I don’t already know.”

He sighs, “The kind of answers you are looking for are the same that elude me. As for my credentials, get me inside Lunica City and I’ll show you my credentials.”

“Lunica City? It must be swarming with users.”

“You talk about them like they aren’t human anymore.”

“Are they? You saw it. They were killing each other.”

“Maybe they are more human than ever before. Regardless, if there is a solution to this problem, that’s

where it will be found. But I guess we can just wait here and pray for one."

He lies down on the pew and covers his face with his hat.

I consider his words and look again at the dusty Jesus. I press my palms together and close my eyes. Immediately I feel like a fool. Instead, I give Jesus the thumbs up. Thanks for trying, man.

15 COUP D' EMLANT

The noise that wakes me is so bizarre it takes me a moment to orient myself. I fell asleep on the pew. Jack is gone. The windows are still dark, not long has passed. I pinch my hand to assure I'm not dreaming before heading downstairs. The noise is faint yet distinctive. Once I reach the meeting room, I realize what it is. It's almost indescribable, a digital roar, with a distinctive medley of distorted tones. I'm no geek but even I recognize the sound of a 56K modem connecting to the Internet.

Ana and Josh are also wiping the sleep from her eyes as we all gather around the computer. Onscreen, the browser flashes a green light signaling we are online. Steve and Darrell celebrate with a high five.

"Where should we go?" Darrell asks.

"Try Lunica's website," I suggest.

He types the address into the clunky keyboard and hits enter. The cursor turns into a spinning hourglass and the window goes white. We wait and watch in rapt silence as it loads. It continues to load. After several minutes, a tiny black sliver appears along the top of the browser window. The whole group lets out a collective sigh.

"Who wants breakfast," Radames asks aloud.

We all answer affirmatively and disperse. Ana and Josh join Radames upstairs in the living quarters. Breakfast will most likely be what dinner was, oatmeal and dried fruit, Radames' diet of choice. He swears by it.

"I got something!" Darrell yells.

Jack and I run to the screen to investigate.

"It's a bulletin board," says Darrell. "This is all the internet was back in the day."

Reading the comments, we are surprised to find out it was a group of civilian nonusers, mostly members of The Unbroken Society, Bernice's people, who got the power station running again.

"The Luddites are restoring our technology," Jack remarks. "Painfully ironic, isn't it?"

"I found an active Lunica IRC," Darrell says. "There's someone in there."

"Emplant1: Care to watch the sunrise with me?" reads the text on the screen.

Darrell types his reply, "MonkeeHaqs: Sure. Where you at?"

Emplant1: No need to travel, we can both watch it from where we are.

"Who is this?"

"Just a :(looking for friends to :)"

"Do you know what happened?"

There is no answer. I tell Darrell to ask them what we can do to help.

"Live!" is the reply.

A sudden burst of noise startles us. Grainy video feed appears on the TV. Finally, someone is broadcasting. The footage shows a casually dressed teenage boy gripping a microphone. He and the camera operator are walking quickly somewhere outside.

Radames and the rest of the group return clutching steaming bowls of oatmeal and are immediately transfixed. The computer makes a door closing noise signifying Emplant1 has signed off.

The nervous young journalist speaks to the camera, "Ok. Uh, we're live. Are we live? We are live. Sorry we're just

getting this up. Are you making this out?" he asks, pressing an earphone to his ear.

He points the camera at the large group marching arms-locked behind them. The camera turns again to show their destination up ahead, the gates of Lunica City.

"Holy shit, that's downtown," Darrell exclaims correctly.

The reporter continues, "My name is William and my little brother Mike is on camera."

The younger brother says hello, his voice is thin and high-pitched. He's probably not even a teenager yet.

William takes a breath, "If there's anyone watching, we're not sure what happened. As of now, everyone is saying that there was a blackout and everyone with an Emplant is like... Well, you know, they're basically..."

"They're zombies!" yells little Mike.

"They're messed up," William clarifies. "We have a pretty big group here. I would say, uh, a few hundred. We're marching to Lunica City to, uh, to, you know, to figure out what's going on. To find out what they're doing to fix the problem."

The camera pans across the mass of people cheering and chanting as they cross the bridge to the LC entrance. Ana has come to stand beside me. She puts her arm around my waist and smiles. It's kind of a relief to see other nonusers. For the first time in a long time, I feel like I'm witnessing history on TV.

Mike circles behind the group to show the large black gate. Two people approach the guard booth next to it.

"They've got the right idea," Jack says from behind me.

The camera makes his way through the crowd. They are an odd mix of teens and old people with many new agers and Unbroken Society members.

"Bernice!" exclaims Steve.

Sure enough, at the front of the crowd, Bernice is there holding hands with two young boys. Darrell's eyes grow wide.

"Good gravy, it is her!" Radames says squinting at the screen.

"Those must be her kids." I say.

"Who is Bernice?" Josh asks, shoveling oatmeal into his mouth.

William returns, "OK we don't have a response just yet so we're going to stay right here."

As he says this, someone behind him is motioning for the crowd to sit down. The crowd obliges and, in a wave, all descend. Bernice is in a full lotus, already meditating. A few other protestors join her. Her two boys mimic her posture but with one bewildered eye open.

"Oh no, they're doing the mind thing again," Darrell says with a face-palm.

William strains to hear the incoming transmission in his ear. He focuses the camera on himself.

"Ok I'm getting a message from the station; they say someone from the army has released a message... I'm going to repeat the official statement from the military... Quote...This is the new united underground militia. We are working in conjunction with various syndics nationwide to regain control of all bases and federal buildings. Until further notice, we recommend evacuation from all the major cities and urban areas. Anywhere there are users. Whatever you do, avoid users at all costs."

William pauses to reflect on the warning. Something moves behind him and soon the camera focuses on the black gate shifting in the background.

"The gates are opening!" William yells.

The camera zooms out to reveal the black gate sliding along its motorized track, unveiling a line of heavily armed guards. It's Lunica's specially trained, elite security unit. Dressed in black riot gear, these aren't typical guards; they

are combat machines. As with everything, Lunica takes it to a new extreme. They march out in lockstep with a tank-like armored vehicle following.

"This doesn't look good," notes Darrell.

One guard seems to be leading them. He yells something into a megaphone and they all stop in a hard line right at the gate entrance. His cadence is that of a drill sergeant but his exact words are unclear. The rest of the guards respond by aiming their guns at the crowd.

"Oh my god, are they going to shoot?" William asks aloud.

The camera pans back and forth between the guards and the crowd. A few protestors get up and run away. The head guard yells again, something two syllables. The guards lift their guns.

Mike films William as he boldly approaches the guard and yells, "Don't shoot. No one here is armed! Please, we just want to-"

The lead guard responds by hitting William with the megaphone.

Ana gasps and covers Josh's eyes. The rest of us watch, unblinking, as the inevitable happens. After the final shout from the head guard, the rest open fire. As unexpected as this all was, none of us expected to see flames spew forth from the guns rather than bullets.

We all let out a collective gasp as fire engulfs the crowd. The TV speakers distort from the sound of hundreds of people screaming out in agony. As if the fire weren't enough, the military vehicle rams into the crowd running over dozens and sending burning bodies flying into the river. William and Mike scream out as fire fills the screen. Finally, the feed cuts to a soft static.

Ana sobs and convulses in my arms, her tears soaking into my chest. I notice now Josh is peeking out from between her fingers. He probably saw it all.

Darrell turns around, tears streaming from his eyes, "Those motherfuckers. Those fucking assholes!"

He kicks a nearby chair.

"How could they do that?" mumbles Ana woefully.

"Maybe they have no choice," I offer, gently rubbing her back.

"Of course they don't. They're puppets!" Darrell shouts.

Steve puts a hand on Darrell's shoulder, "Darrell, please calm down.

He shrugs Steve's hand off, "Fuck calm. Fuck calm. I've been calm all my life. I was calm and I just let shit like this happen!"

"Bernice and I," he falls into a chair, tears flowing.

Suddenly their tumultuous relationship makes more sense.

He continues, voice cracking, "All I did was criticize her, and in the end she had the balls to bring it to Lunica. She's fucking dead now and I'm hiding in a fucking church!"

"He's right, we need to go out there," Jack chimes in.

"Are you kidding?" Ana asks, honestly surprised. "Why would you want to go there?"

"She's right," I add, "It's the worst place to be right now. We don't know what's going on in there."

"Isn't it obvious, Tomas?" Darrell asks. "Whoever is controlling those guards is behind this. They've been planning something like this for over a century! All the working class people, they're all killing each other while the elite are safe, tucked away, unharmed. The bankers, the politicians, the CEOs, they're all probably living it up in Lunica City as we speak!"

Radames attempts to calm him, "Alright, alright, if that's true, what would be the point of going there?"

Jack responds, "There is someone there who can tell us exactly what's going on," Jack says, putting his coat on.

A name pops into my head, "You don't mean?"

"Who," Ana asks.

I look into Jack's eyes and say it, "Armand Lunica."

"Wait, wouldn't he be a zombie too?" asks Ana.

"They're not zombies," Josh corrects. "Zombies are dead people who have come back to life."

"Yeah, but, they act like zombies," Ana notes.

"I think we should refrain from using that word," I suggest. "They are still people."

Jack nods, "I think the problem is in the network. This would explain why the users woke up when the power came on. Someone rebooted the servers. It must have been Armand. He has an autonomous prototype; it's different from the rest."

I ask, "You think he may be unaffected?"

"He might be the one controlling all those fools," Darrell suggests.

Jack insists, "We need to get into Lunica City and shut down the network."

Ana looks confused, "Don't you think it would be wiser to evacuate the city like the army dudes said?"

Radames disagrees, "I don't know that it's a better idea to go with the militia, my dear."

Darrell scoffs, "We can't stay here and eat oatmeal forever!"

I ask Jack, "Even if we did go there, how do we get in without getting fried?"

"The docks," he responds confidently. "It might be easier to slip in through the back."

"What about the guards?" Ana asks.

Darrell lifts his shirt and points to the 9mm sticking out of his belt. "You let me handle the guards."

Steve throws his hands in the air, "I think we need to slow down a bit and really think about wha—"

Darrell interrupts, "You don't understand, Steve. I'm going there now. I want to know who's coming with me."

Jack steps forward, "I'll go."

Darrell nods and studies the rest of our faces. Our desires to stay are evident.

"I understand," he says. "Good luck to all of you. I hope we all get through this alive."

"Wait," I say. "Take my security pass. It might help you get in," and offer Darrell my Redwire ID.

Ana looks unsure, "You're encouraging this? How are they even going to get to the docks?"

"We'll have to steal a boat," Jack answers, already walking out.

"I've got a boat." Radames says quietly.

Jack and Darrell freeze in their tracks and turn to him. He slips another spoonful of oatmeal into his mouth and chews slowly.

16 HACKING THE HIVE

It's not yet sunrise as our boat speeds down the river. It's a simple fishing boat, the one Radames used to take Ben and me out in. We would fish for trout or swim while Radames played music over the loudspeaker. Hanging in the cabin is a faded photograph of us on one of our outings. We look so happy. Poor Ben, right now, he's probably wandering around the mall with a broken nose.

The marina was only a few blocks from the church so we made it there without a problem. Steve decided to stay behind in case refugees came by. I sincerely hope I see him again as I don't think I ever made a real effort to get to know him.

Josh convinced the others to go. The island his grandparents live on seemed like a good destination for us all. We would take Darrell and Jack downtown and then Radames, Ana, and I would take Josh to his family. A simple plan, yet, I feel like I'm on a roller coaster and we are approaching the top of the first drop.

As Jack suspected, the docks look clear. We approach slowly with the lights off. There are cameras everywhere. If I'm right, then any guard watching the monitors may not be coherent enough to react. If Darrell is right, they could already be on their way. He's unconsciously stroking the gun in his belt.

We get to the dock and Jack quickly climbs off to survey the area. He returns, noting there is a single guard behind a

desk in the loading bay. I think for a moment before exiting to join him.

Ana grabs my arm, "Where are you going?"

"I'm just going to help them get in the back door. I'll be right back," I assure her. The look she gives me makes my heart swell.

Josh hugs my waist and warns, "Be careful."

I hug him back and take a deep breath, trying not to cry.

Darrel, Jack, and I tiptoe over to the loading bay. There is indeed someone sitting behind a console. Unlike the others, this guard isn't wearing riot gear. Jack guessed correctly, they've focused all their forces on the front. The guard notices us approaching but doesn't react, only stares, his mouth hanging open. Beyond his desk, locked double doors beckon us inside.

I speak before the guard can, "Hi. I work for Lunica," I say, raising my badge.

He looks at it, puzzled. I offer it to him but he jumps back. I place the ID on the desk slowly and back away with my hands raised. The guard cautiously picks up the card and stares at it, cross-eyed. After some seconds, he steps over to his console and mindlessly mashes the keypad. I can't decide what he seems more like, a baby, or someone on heroin.

"This is pointless," Darrell says, pulling out his gun and pointing it at the guard. "Open the goddamn door, bitch!"

The guard's eyes get big. He drops my ID and, like a bolt of lightning, lunges towards Darrell. Jack tackles the guard and they roll across the floor struggling. The guard tears at Jack's coat, ready to rip him limb from limb.

"Shoot!" shouts Jack, trying to kick him off.

Darrell stands there frozen, pointing the gun but unable to pull the trigger. I finally grab it from his hand and hit the guard in the head with the butt. The guard's body goes limp. I put the gun back in Darrell's still outstretched hand and he snaps out of his daze.

Jack gets up and catches his breath. "If you're not going to use this," he says, snatching the gun from Darrell's hand.

He tucks the weapon in his coat and hits a button behind the console. The double doors swing open. I grab my badge from the floor and hand it to Jack. As he takes it, he realizes it's my turn to leave them.

"Thanks for seeing us in, Tomas" he says grabbing my hand and shaking it. "Good to meet you. Glad you didn't get fit."

"Me too. Are you sure you don't want us to wait for you?" I ask.

Darrell looks shaken but determined, "Get the others out of here while you can. We got this."

He hugs me before disappearing into the building with Jack. I sneak back to the boat and tell the others what happened. We sit quietly for a moment reflecting before Radames finally starts up the boat. The island is only a few hours away. We should be there before lunch.

As we are backing away from the dock, we hear gunfire coming from the loading bay. Sure enough, Darrell and Jack run out and quickly hide behind a large shipping container. Seconds later three black-clad guards emerge, guns drawn. From where we are, we can see both parties but they cannot see each other or us. We are far enough away to remain sufficiently cloaked in the dwindling darkness. The searching guards close in on Darrell and Jack's position.

"We got to do something!" Ana whispers.

"We can turn on the light," Radames suggests.

"But that will draw attention to us," I say.

An idea hits me. It's so insane and improbable I almost don't say it until Radames notices the look on my face.

"What is it, Tomas?" he asks.

I reach for the radio and flip the switch for the loud speaker. I look at them both, asking for their trust with my eyes.

"Ana, I want you to do your EMA impression," I say, offering the radio receiver.

"What?" she gasps.

"Remember that impression you did in the conference room? Tell the guards to turn around and go back inside but do it in the EMA voice," I implore.

The guards are now steps away from Jack and Darrell. I press the button on the receiver and the speaker hums.

Ana, unsure, begins to speak, "Uh hey..."

The sound instantly attracts everyone's attention. The guards change course for our direction. Ana closes her eyes and gets into character.

"Please stop what you are doing," she says convincingly.

Surprisingly the guards obey.

"I suggest you throw your guns into the water." Her eyes light up as the guards do as she commands.

"Turn around and return to your posts," she's gotten the cadence just right this time.

The guards snap to attention, turn, and march back towards the dock. We all look at each other in disbelief.

"Stop," she commands. When they obey, she adds, "Touch your toes." Again, they do so, uniformly, without hesitation.

Grinning, she tells them, "Take off your clothes, go to the locker room, and squeeze each other's balls."

I let go of the button just in time so the loudspeaker doesn't pick up Radames' laugh. Jack and Darrell watch with us as the guards march back inside, stripping off their clothes.

"That was pretty awesome," remarks Josh.

Jack and Darrell jog over to meet us. We are all in awe of Ana's miraculous new gift.

"How did you know that would work?" Darrell asks.

"She does a really good EMA impression," I say.

"I think I finally found my calling," Ana says with a smirk. "I wish all men were that easy to control."

"They aren't?" Radames jests.

I ask them what happened inside.

Darrell shakes his head, "The mezzanine is swarming with guards. We'll never make it through."

Another idea forms in my head and I turn to Radames, "Stay here with Josh. I think I know how we can get rid of all of the guards at once," I say, looking to Ana.

Moments later, our group is entering the loading dock. The guard I hit is conscious again and drunkenly orders us to halt.

"Stop," Ana tells him. "It is suggested that you lie down and take a long rest."

The guard looks at her, his ears twitching to comprehend.

"Go to sleep," she commands.

He drops to the floor and huddles into a ball, instantly out like a light.

"I could really get used to this," she coos.

Darrell sits behind the console and studies the phone. It only takes a few moments for him to figure out the PA system.

"OK, this is the group-call extension. It should reach all departments," he says, handing the phone receiver to Ana.

Her words echo through the entire city, "All guards, please report to the locker room and squeeze each other's balls."

Darrell shakes his head, "That's so cold."

Jack enters the double doors once more and quickly returns to confirm the trick worked, the coast is clear. We follow him inside. A winding, narrow corridor eventually leads to another set of double doors. Jack uses my badge to open them and we enter the sprawling ground mezzanine.

A giant atrium littered with lush foliage, the air in here seems different, crisper, and cleaner. I spin around gazing

upward at the network of trusses that create the frame of the city. My admiration of the architecture ends with a familiar sight. A body, riddled with bullet holes, lies in a pool of blood just beside the path. We pass another, bloodied and beaten to a pulp under a tree.

"Where is everyone?" Ana asks.

"I think the guards killed them," I guess.

Instead of the elite celebrating as Darrell predicted, the victims here are the same as everywhere else, a mix of workers, business types, Empties, and Vamps. In an attempt to keep Lunica City safe, the guards left no one alive.

We take a transport car up to the Lunica head offices. In the lobby, a long shaft ascends into the blackness above. Jack says the elevator leads to the penthouse offices. I swipe my card and the light flashes red in rejection.

"What now?" I ask Jack.

He shakes his head, looking unsure for the first time.

"Great we came all this way for nothing?" Darrell laments.

Suddenly, the elevator doors open. We get in and Jack hits the top button.

17 REVELATIONS

The doors open to Armand Lunica's office. The room is large, three times the size of my apartment, and tastefully decorated, with a big picture window overlooking the city.

"Welcome," says someone to our left.

At the bar in the corner of the office, Armand Lunica is pouring himself a glass of whiskey. The glow has faded from his skin. With his disheveled hair and clothes, he almost looks like one of us.

"Holy shit it's really him," Ana whispers.

"I'm so glad you decided to visit," he says. "I haven't had many visitors lately, as you can imagine. Can I offer anyone a drink?"

When no one takes his offer, he saunters over to his desk and plops into his cushy chair. I wonder if he's affected, but quickly realize he's just a little drunk.

"He must have been Emplant1," Darrell whispers, pointing to the computer on his desk.

"I must thank you for dispatching the guards," Armand says, "I was afraid they would never let me leave."

"Why did they kill everyone?" Darrell demands.

"They were trained to protect me. I'm afraid they were just doing their job, only this time without restraint or rational thought, maybe even devoid of compassion."

"You made them like that," says Darrell.

Armand sighs, "Actually, it was a glitch."

"A glitch?" shouts Darrell. He points to the smoldering city outside, "You call all this death and chaos 'a glitch'?"

Armand smiles coyly, "No. That is the result of a glitch. I didn't get your name." He turns to me, "I remember your name. Tomas, right? It appears your spirituality has served you well."

"Do you remember my name?" Jack asks, stepping forward.

Armand's face turns pale. He rises from his chair and approaches Jack.

"Of course I do, Jacque, my old friend," Armand says looking into his eyes.

"Wait, your name is Jacque?" I blurt out.

"Jacque Emmanuel Lefevre," Armand informs. "Didn't you tell them who you are, Jacque?"

"Who are you?" Ana asks.

Armand trumpets, "This is the most brilliant nanotech scientist on the planet. This is the true inventor of Emplant."

Ana looks at Jacque, genuinely shocked, "Why do you live in a sewer?"

"That's an excellent question, young lady," says Armand, grinning.

"I told you this would happen," Jacque growls.

Armand raises his voice, "You told me nothing! You offered only unsubstantiated fear. If it were up to you, we would still be beta-testing."

"If it were up to me, these people wouldn't be the way they are! Tell them, Armand. Tell them about the gold."

Armand sighs, "Jacque wants you to believe all this is my fault."

"It is your fault. You saw what happened during those tests."

"You would have bankrupted us from the start with your diamond dust!"

"What tests? What are you talking about?" I ask.

Jacque explains, "The Emplant circuitry was mean to be carbon-plated. But Armand felt the material was too expensive."

Armand defends himself, "If we hadn't switched to gold, no one would have been able to afford it."

Jacque continues, "We experimented with nanoparticles, gold stripped down to just bare atoms. But things that small will sometimes bend the laws of physics. We found the gold plating would become very unstable when bombarded with high levels of radiation. Sometimes it would disappear, phase out of our reality. It caused an irreparable system failure every time. That is what has happened. The solar flare burned away part of Earth's atmosphere allowing ionizing radiation inside. That's what damaged all the Emplants and their hosts."

Armand laughs, "Jacque, you are overlooking the most important fact. We never could have anticipated what happened to the users. It flies in the face of everything we know about consciousness."

Ana interrupts with an astute question, "What exactly did happen to them?"

Darrell agrees, "Yeah, cut to the chase, man. What the fuck is going on?"

Armand sighs, "The situation is this; the people you see out there, the users, they are split between two worlds. The beings you see roaming the streets are only partly human. They are bereft of their higher brain functions, acting solely upon instinct, emotion, and habit. Haunted by their memories and trapped in their routines, they are now incapable of growth or further information retention."

"What happened to their higher brain functions?" I ask.

"They're online," Jacque guesses.

Armand nods, "When the power came back up, I rebooted the system. Suddenly all the Emplants came back online and, to my surprise, they returned to interacting. They are still doing so."

Armand turns his computer screen to show us the real-time statistics.

"Oh my God, you mean they're all still..." Ana says struggling to find the words.

Armand nods, "While the users bodies roam the city, their conscious personality is trapped in the Emplant network. It is likely they are oblivious to the separation. Time and space do not exist where they are. To their minds, the world they are experiencing is just the same as this one. Only now, our world seems like a hazy dream to them. Exactly how this separation occurred, I don't know. It's a mystery I promise to spend the rest of my life trying to solve."

"This is bullshit," Darrell says, "Don't pretend this isn't you and your cronies, so you can control everything. I'm supposed to believe this was all an accident, just a fucking mistake?"

Armand laughs, "The cronies of whom you speak already run everything. Besides, they are in far worse shape at this moment so consider yourself part of the new elite. Believe me when I say, none of this was intended."

Jacque speaks up, "Maybe not intended, but it was definitely coming."

Armand retorts, "How can you discount everything this company has accomplished because of one setback?"

"You gave people an illusion. Technology was meant to help man, not live his life for him. They trusted you with their consciousness and you recklessly squandered it. Thousands of people are dead, millions more in a state of stupor. This is not a setback, Armand, it is a tragic disaster."

Ana yells out, "Ok, enough fighting, guys. How do we fix it?"

We all look to Armand.

"There is nothing I can do from here. If I shut down the system, they all go back to sleep and eventually die. The solution is now in each of the minds of the users. The only

way to get them back to reality is to try and reach them one by one."

I try to comprehend, "Wait, you're saying we need to give each user intense, one-on-one therapy?"

"Hypothetically, maybe, but more than likely you will not be able to get through to any of them. It would be more humane to put them out of their misery."

"Kill them all?" Ana scoffs.

I shake my head, "There has to be another way."

Jacque, somber, nods, "He's right. This can't be fixed."

"What?" Astounded, I reply, "You were all about finding solutions earlier. Now you want to give up?"

"I've known all this time there is nothing we can do," Jacque admits.

I ask the obvious, "If you knew all this time, why did you drag us all the way here?"

"To do this..."

Before anyone can react, Jacque pulls out Darrell's gun and shoots Armand in the chest. Armand falls on his back and Jacque fires a few more shots point-blank. Armand squirms and gasps like an infant as his blood drains out onto the marble floor. His eyes glaze over as his breaths become shorter.

Jacque hands Darrell the gun and enters the elevator. Flabbergasted, we all follow him in for an uncomfortable ride back down. No one says a word.

Outside, the sun has finally risen. It greets us when we reach the dock, along with Radames and Josh waving from the boat. Jack splinters from the rest of us and makes his way down the dock. I jog to catch up with him.

"You didn't have to kill him," I say.

Jacque shakes his head, "Men like Armand never learn. They have no respect for the unquantifiable. They know only greed and glory. If I'd let him live he would have done it again."

"Did you really invent Emplant?" I ask.

Jacque nods, "Armand was my partner. The actual technology was my design. He was just good at marketing. When I refused to approve designs that compromised my ethics, he kicked me out of the project, even tried to have me killed. I had to drop off the grid, go into hiding. Armand didn't understand what was at stake. He moved too fast and didn't consider all the variables. He thought he had a one but it was really an eleven."

I repeat Radames' words, "It's not what you know that gets you; it's what you don't know. What will you do now?"

He shrugs, "Take a nap." He laughs and cocks his head, "Maybe I'll go fall in love."

I slow my pace as he rounds the corner. He's probably heading for the front entrance, going back to the city, despite the unsettling reality of our situation. I let him go and return to the others.

Josh gives me a hug when I get in the boat. Never thought I would be someone's hero. How things have changed. Darrell tosses his gun into the water. I think the revelation that there was no insidious plot shook his belief system to the core. He'll recover. Ana seems as present and resilient as always. Judging by her smile, she's already put the previous events out her mind. Radames, eager to leave, starts the boat and asks about Jack.

"His name was Jacque," I say. "He's going home."

"Well, he forgot his book," replies Radames, pointing to the notebook sitting in the cabin.

I pick it up and skim through. Mixed in with the occasional masterful sketches of nude women are hundreds of notes and equations. All his work, did he purposefully leave it with us? The last entry was written just hours ago. A few lines of poetry from a man named Charles Buxton Going, dated 1909.

Art thou, then, king, and did I make thee lord,
Clothe thee in mail and gird thee with the sword,

EMPLANT

Give thee the plough, the ax, the whirring wheel--
To every subtle craft its tools of steel?

Look! We have slain the forests, thou and I--
Soiled the bright streams and murked the very sky;
Crushed the glad hills and shocked the quiet stars
With roaring factories and clanging cars!

Thou builder of machines, who dost not see!
That which thou mad'st to drive, is driving thee--
Ravening, tireless, pitiless its strain
For thy last ounce of work from hand and brain.

Are thy sons princes? Hard-wrung serfs! They give
Toil's utmost dregs for the bare chance to live;
They dig and delve and strive with sweat-cursed brow
In forge and shop. Master? Nay! Thrall art thou!

Fool! Serving, I have slaved thee. Master Fool!
To forge the sword, nor know the sword should rule;
To make the engine, blind that it must lead
Fast and yet faster on the race of greed.

I guess this is how the world is now. Don't know how far
the problem has spread but we'll find out soon enough. Ana
laughs as she snuggles up to me.

"What's funny?" I ask.

She smiles, "Just thinking about all those guards in the
locker room."

The thought makes me smile. She's right, things could be
worse. I don't know what the future will hold but I guess my
present is not so bad. For the first time in a long while, I'm
not worried. I feel oddly at ease. I haven't even craved a
cigarette in hours. The maze of modern life simplified into a
single path; survive. I think I can do this.

Mallon Khan

I close my eyes and surrender to sleep. As I drift off, part of me wonders if I will ever wake up from this dream.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mallon Khan is an independent writer, artist, and musician. Emplant is his first novel. He lives in New York City with his wife and cats where he dreams of dying in warmer climates.