

1

Old World

12:07 PM, September 8, 2070

The trash bag tore open as Robert swung it through the store owner's gas mask. The man fell as Robert kicked him in the chest before sprinting after his friend William. The pair met up by a dumpster in an alley. Once together, they bolted over piles of trash out into a street and into another alleyway.

Robert's heart was throbbing. His limbs felt like spaghetti, his chest tightening as he hyperventilated. He hadn't meant to hit the man. Casting glances behind them, Robert tried to calm his breathing and maintained a casual gait while making distance from the store.

"Fuck," Robert growled.

William looked behind them, leading them onto a sidewalk. Robert gripped the hexagonal filters on both sides of his gas mask and readjusted it.

"Shut up, we got away," William said.

"I shouldn't have hit the guy," Robert replied.

William looked at him and raised an eyebrow.

"You hit him?"

"Yeah, with a trash bag. And I kicked him."

William stopped and gestured toward Robert, shaking both hands in disbelief.

Robert raised his hands.

“I-I.... Okay, I panicked. He was chasing us!”

William shook his head.

“Robert, oh my god, you’re an idiot.”

He scratched the top of his head and groaned.

“Well, now they’ll be looking for two people who assaulted someone instead of two candy thieves. Too late now, let’s just keep walking. At least we have dinner.”

Robert tensely sighed and rubbed the back of his neck as he followed William. The pair moved along the streets and alleys. They stepped over piling trash, passed homeless people laying on the ground in herds, and crossed roads peppered with self-driving cars.

Above in the heavy smog, drones flew back and forth among buildings covered with neon signs. There were hundreds of different drones. Some were for businesses or private engagements, though some were personal drones for entertainment, photography, or other hobbies. Drone sizes depended on their use, ranging from small package carriers to large cargo carriers. A few people were riding Aero boards along the air routes, a sort of drone-like, flying skateboard, capable of supporting the weight of a human.

Robert glanced up at the people riding the Aero boards. Typically, those with Aero boards were wealthier people. They flew above the commoners, avoiding the worsening problems of modern life as if they were above the issues everyday people faced. Robert hated those wealthy pricks.

“Where are we going?” Robert asked.

“To a friend of mine’s hood. We need to get away from all the cameras around here. His gang has destroyed most of the cameras in his area, so we’ll be safer there. Plus, I have business over there today.”

Robert tilted his head.

“Business?”

“Yeah, one of the big players in the local scene wants to set up a deal. We always meet with new customers to make sure that they aren’t police before setting up drone deliveries.”

“Oh, we are doing one of those kinds of deals,” Robert grunted lowly.

“Get over it. You’re eighteen, I’m twenty-two. We need money and we need

to eat. It's not like there are any jobs around here. Have you found anything in the past six months?"

Robert shrugged and rolled his eyes.

"Nothing."

"Exactly. Damn corporations are replacing everyone with robots."

Robert shook his head as his jaw tensed.

"Fuck the rich."

"Fuck the rich," William repeated.

"Can't believe that the store owner caught you on the way out. It had to be on the day we have to do a drug deal, of course."

"Ain't the first time we got caught or the first time we steal to eat. It'll be fine; that's how we fuck the rich. We steal from them—greedy bastards."

The pair walked a few more blocks before William hastily pushed them into an alley. He gazed up toward the origin of a deep, droning sound mixed with sirens. Three police drones flew through the smog. They carried squads of officers above the city skyline. The drones flew past with lights and sirens on. The pair watched them disappear before going back out onto the soot-stained sidewalk.

"Where do you think they're going?" Robert asked.

William shrugged and spoke in a high-pitched voice.

"Probably responding to a call about an assault in the same direction we're leaving from."

Robert pursed his lips.

"Right, stupid question."

The visage of the soaring buildings around them changed as they approached gang territory. The pollution-stained buildings were tarnished by graffiti and had bars on their windows. Drug-dazed, homeless people stood outside in their shadows. Garbage piled everywhere.

William removed his gas mask and began eating the candy they had stolen. He threw each wrapper on the ground, chewing noisily as he downed chocolates and gummies. He stretched out to Robert and waved a piece of chocolate.

"Want some?" William asked.

Robert waved the chocolate away.

“No thanks, I’ll eat later when we’re inside.”

“Suit yourself.”

They crossed an intersection where sensors registered their presence and caused the automated traffic system to slow down the cars so they could cross safely. During the last few decades, manually driven cars had been replaced by AI-driven cars, resulting in almost zero traffic fatalities.

William glanced at the cars with a scowl as the pair crossed.

“Look at those rich pricks.”

“Assholes. They think that they’re so much better than us,” Robert said.

“You said it. They’ll eventually join us out here as shit continues falling apart.”

Robert adjusted his gas mask again to stop the straps from rubbing his skin.

“This new tattoo hurts.”

“Ah, get over it. You’ve been whining about it all day.”

“My mask is rubbing on it. Let me see yours. How’s it not hurting?”

William turned slightly. A black serpent coiled in a complex, knotted fashion had been tattooed into his flesh. The skin around it flushed red from irritation. Robert had the same tattoo, though his skin felt like it was burning.

“It’s hurting, I just don’t whine about it. The more you whine, the more you think about it, the more it hurts.”

While Robert was examining the black snake, William let out a long, hacking cough. His whole body quaked as he threw his head forward and spat onto the ground.

Robert laid a hand on William’s back.

“You okay?”

William grunted and cleared his throat before he spat again.

“I’m fine.”

“Put your mask back on, air’s burning your throat.”

William waved his hand, dismissing Robert’s concern.

“I don’t need a mask, I’m fine. I’m not done with my candy.”

“Can’t walk around so much without it on, bro. At least you don’t have to wear it all the time, like people in prison do.”

“I wear my mask; I just don’t like sleeping with it on. I’m breathing fine, I just choked on a bit of chocolate.”

Robert shook his head.

“Whatever.”

William threw the last of his candy wrappers onto the ground.

They arrived at a peculiar spot among the never-ending maze of skyscrapers and crowded infrastructure. An alley separated a laundromat and a general drug store. Unlike most, this alley stopped halfway between two skyscrapers. A building rose up at the far end, facing the opposite street and presenting a brick wall to the pair.

A luxury car was parked next to the sidewalk. Robert glanced at it as they passed, unsure of the car’s brand.

A woman and two tall men were waiting inside the alley. The woman was dressed in an expensive white dress with golden accents. A white mask with a golden brand logo on the side covered her face. The two men in black suits and black masks were standing with their hands crossed. The dark tint of their visors made it impossible for Robert to read their faces. In stark contrast, Robert and William wore tattered pants and multi-colored, long-sleeved shirts that covered their upper bodies. Small ribs with heating and cooling components were sewn into the clothes. Their dirty and worn gas masks had been bought used. Their shoes barely held together with duct tape and string.

The woman looked at the two of them and wrinkled her nose in contempt. Robert furrowed his brow as he saw the wealthy woman but kept quiet since William waved to her and put on a customer-friendly tone.

“Hey there, are you Mrs. Adamson?” William asked.

Robert glanced at William as he heard the phony tone.

“That is me. Are you two with Mr. Scarpello?” Mrs. Adamson asked.

“Yes, I’m one of his associates. My name is William. This is my friend Robert; he’s here as a witness for Mr. Scarpello.”

Robert kept silent.

“Well, I trust Mr. Scarpello. Let’s get this underway so I can leave this stinking rat hole.”

William smiled and bowed his head.

“As you wish, Mrs. Adamson.”

William approached the woman, pulling out a small tablet from his pocket. The woman stretched out her forearm. She rolled her sleeve back to reveal a blue, glowing line in her arm. Robert gazed at the line. It was an implant, one of the newer technologies that were replacing portable devices. The tablet read the implant and made a ping sound. It vibrated frantically for a moment before falling silent with a snap. William dropped the tablet and crushed it under his foot.

“Well, pleasure doing business with you, Mrs. Adamson.”

She followed her bodyguards to the luxury car parked on the street.

“A pleasure. Have a wonderful day.”

“You too!” William said.

He waited for the trio to drive off before walking out onto the sidewalk.

“Rich bitch. Did you hear her tone?” William asked.

“Yeah. What did you do with that tablet thing?” Robert responded.

“It just connected her information to an underground bank account so she can transfer money to it.”

Robert gestured behind them as they walked.

“Was that really a drug deal?”

“Well, it’s not just drugs. I connected her info to the guy I work for and now she can buy anything from him. Guns, drugs, stuff like that. She pays, my boss sends a drone to deliver the goods.”

Robert tilted his head.

“Won’t the police catch on?”

“They try. Most drones that people use are unregistered. Each drone is monitored when delivering goods. If the police shoot it down, then the pilot just presses a button and destroys all the information the drone has, including its destination and origin.”

The pair turned to walk down another block when William grabbed Robert and ripped him back toward the way they had come. Robert grunted as he flew around.

“What th-?” Robert blurted out.

“Shut up, shut up, just walk,” William hissed quietly.

Robert regained his footing and followed William, walking beside him as they went in the opposite direction.

“What’s wrong?” Robert whispered.

“Some cops down that way. Just act normal.”

Robert glanced behind them and noticed a trio of police officers. All three had gray armored uniforms lined with blue lights along with gas mask helmets whose black visors obscured their features. Each cop wore a belt lined with tools such as tesla batons and guns. They followed Robert and William at a stark, determined pace, heads locked in the direction of the pair.

“They’re right on us, bro,” Robert told William.

William began walking faster and turned down another street. Robert followed. A pair of officers met them at an intersection. One raised his hand to stop them.

“Hey, you two,” the officer said.

Robert and William stopped and turned. The other three police officers met up with them and surrounded the pair together with the other two officers. Robert’s stomach dropped. His heart was beating hard as his breath halted.

“Is there a problem, officers?” William asked.

“IDs?” one of the officers demanded.

“Why are we being stopped, sir?” William insisted.

“We’re looking for two suspects whose descriptions match the two of you. Give us your IDs.”

“Oh, one second, it’s in my pocket,” William said.

William reached into his pocket as the officers all rested their hands on their holstered guns. As he grabbed his wallet, he gently pushed Robert back. The push confused Robert for a moment as he watched William pull out his ID. One of the officers took the ID and scanned it while the other cops seemed to relax a bit. Without warning, William threw a fist through the mask of the officer scanning his ID. The man fell to the ground, glass raining from his visor along with drops of blood from William’s hand. William kicked another officer’s leg and turned to run.

“Robert! Run!”

Two of the officers tackled and beat William before he could run. Robert took

off. His legs felt weak, and his heart was thundering painfully. He went down streets and alleys to escape, jumped over trash piles, and weaved through crowds of pedestrians.

Soon, Robert believed he'd completely lost the cops. He felt safe after a few blocks and slowed down to catch his breath while observing his surroundings. Homeless people laid everywhere around him. His sudden flight into the street had attracted their attention. They were staring at him as he regained his breath.

"There he is!" a police officer shouted in the distance.

Robert gasped as he looked behind him. A squad of four officers came out from an alley, pointed at Robert, and started to chase after him. Robert threw himself over a garbage pile and ran across the road, narrowly missing a self-driving car.

He cut into an alley and disappeared into a maze-like network among buildings. His fingers clawed off his multi-colored shirt, which he threw into a dumpster before sprinting topless into another alley.

Robert glanced behind him again. The cops were finally out of sight.

"Oh my god, I'm screwed," he whispered.

There was nowhere he could go. He assumed that if he kept running, then the police officers would eventually find him or a camera would pick him up.

"He went this way!" an officer shouted in the distance.

Robert looked around frantically as he heard the cops approaching. He glanced out into the street before locking onto a dumpster. He approached it like a terrified raccoon and crawled inside. As he climbed in, he fell into a deep, stinking pile of filth. Raw, rotten food mixed with putrid bags of trash grazed his already irritated skin. The stench of decaying fish crawled through his mask, stinging his nostrils.

Robert let out a shuddering breath as he immersed his body in the filth, covering himself as much as he could. His body froze when he heard multiple people run past him. First, he heard the sound of feet approaching, and then it faded away. Robert's thoughts were in turmoil, every sound halting his breath as he tried to hide deeper in the trash. Polluted debris burned his skin, though he dared not move.

Time slowed. Robert laid in the filth for what he thought was an hour and waited until there were no sounds outside before he finally climbed out of the dumpster. Dirt and food stains covered his burning skin as he got up like a zombie and quickly ran away from the scene.

He flicked off muck from his body and quickly made his way to another alley full of homeless people.

“Hey! Can I sit with you guys?” he asked hastily.

A woman scowled at him.

“Why you bothering us about it? Just sit and shut up.”

Robert joined them and faced away from the street.

He had gotten away, though he was alone. He had no family or friends to run to, no place to get shelter, and no place to truly hide. But for now, he was free.

Sitting quietly among the dirt-covered derelicts, he contemplated, “What now?”