

He Who Seeks

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Chapter 1

The wind howled outside the broken down building and through the cracks in its stone walls. It kicked up dust and light brown sand from the ground and created a veil that clouded everything.

Boot up initialized.

Inside the building a low hum started to overpower the sound of the wind. Where it came from was difficult to tell as everything was covered in fine sand and dust that turned statues as well as the run down furniture into nothing more than shapeless lumps.

Belfest Corporation Cybernetics Division.

Model 404.

Kernel version 7.2.14

Brain-to-machine interface version 3.07b

Initialize system.

Underneath one of the larger lumps, hidden away in a nook formed by two walls, a blue glow began to shine through the fine grained sand that had accumulated over what ever was underneath it.

Systems check.

Memory system... [OK]

Neural connections... [OK]

Mission database... [FAIL]

Personality Adjustment Chip.. [ERROR]

A cloud of dust was kicked up as the door underneath it all opened. As the wind blew the cloud away, a capsule was revealed with a humanoid figure laying inside it. It was covered in a dark grey suit that revealed much of its muscle structure and the vein like wires that ran underneath it.

Start up complete.

The figure sat up and opened its eyes. A faint blue glow emanated from them. It took a moment to move its arms and brush off some of the dust that had gathered on its short, black hair. It looked around, the cross-hair in its field of

vision jumping from object to object within the ruins, identifying and categorizing them all.

Current mission: ..#%□T!#□&□!"#&/%/#"%#□.

It frowned.

"Define current mission," it said in a soft voice. It was the voice of a man.

Unable to comply. Mission database corrupted.

The text flashed in his field of vision. The frown deepened.

He looked around once more before pushing himself from the capsule and setting his feet on the ground. As he stood up, his feet sank deep in the loose sand and dust that made up much of the floor. A strong gust of wind sent in a cloud of sand from the outside and made the torn down tapestries rustle like dry leaves.

"Define me," he said with an emotionless voice.

Model 404 mk. 2. Assigned to the Jinx Project.

Nickname: Hermes.

"Hermes." The name was familiar. He remembered the voice that had given that name to him. Vague emotions were raised by it and he was certain he had once lived with the same name.

"Define Jinx Project."

Unable to comply. Unexpected error.

"Memory check." There was a hint of worry in his voice now.

Checking memory...

Anomalies found.

"Fix anomalies."

Unable to comply.

Hermes walked over to the crumbled wall and looked outside. As far as he could see there were nothing but ruined buildings barely sticking out of the sand covered landscape. Here and there there were taller ruins that had stood the test of time better than the rest. They rose up from the sand like the fingers of a skeleton and cast long shadows in the light of the setting sun.

"Location."

Searching..

Location: Unknown.

The shadow of a smile passed his lips. He had the face of a twenty year old man; clean shaven, rounded jaw, cheeks that looked like they'd have dimples if he smiled and a nose that looked more pointed than was natural.

He walked back to the capsule and searched through it. There was nothing to be found and the ruins he had woken up in proved to be equally useless in determining where he was or offering any more clues to help find out.

He surveyed the surroundings in the hopes of finding a structure that had weathered the years better than the one he was in. A few hundred meters north he spotted what looked to be a promising shelter and headed there. The loose sand made it slow progress and a few banks had him struggling for balance, but he made it there.

Hermes walked through the bare doorway and over the remains of what used to be the door. Sand had accumulated inside the building, but to a much lesser degree than where he had woken up. The walls were largely intact, save for the windows which the wind and sand had eaten away a long time ago. The roof had holes in it, but there were full sections of it that still remained in place and looked solid enough not to fall even if a strong gust of wind hit it.

What he found inside was broken furniture in the four rooms that made up the building. The largest one – straight to the right from the entrance way – had a single chair and a table that had, somehow, survived and looked to be in working order. From there, a door led to what looked to be a kitchen. The remains of a sink hung from the wall with rusted bolts. Hermes noted that it looked like someone had gathered cans of food there, many of them empty, but some still unopened.

He returned to the larger room and entered the corridor with the two remaining doorways. It was then that he heard the sound; a low growl that spoke of hostile intent. Hermes turned around to the doorway leading outside to find the source of the noise.

It stood on two legs and was covered in thick fur. Its red eyes glowed behind the wolf like snout. Thick, muscular arms ending in claws were gripping both

sides of the doorway, leaving its wide chest bare. Its legs ended in large paws after an almost unnatural looking bend at the knees.

Personality Adjustment Chip error.

Encounter settings reset.

Rebuilding behavioural tree.

Default settings activated.

“Greetings,” said Hermes in the friendliest and most non-threatening voice ever heard.

The creature lunged forward and crashed into him, its claws scraping against the suit that did a remarkable job of protecting Hermes. Both of them fell to the ground in a cloud of dust. They struggled and rolled around on the floor, eventually crashing through the weakened wall and landing in the large room Hermes came from.

Danger. Physical harm being inflicted.

Self-defence mode activated.

The creature snarled and raised its clawed hand. Hermes caught the hand as it came down and began to squeeze at the wrist. The creature let out a yelp as bones were crushed under the merciless pressure of his squeeze. Desperately, the creature snapped its jaw around the arm that was causing it so much pain and bit down, but the suit withstood it.

Warnings flashed in Hermes's field of vision.

He yanked his arm away, ripping with it the clawed hand of the creature along with a few teeth. Red blood spilled out and moistened the dry sand underneath the two brawlers. The creature took some distance to the man who had injured it so, but it did not look like it was about to give up. Hermes scrambled to his feet and faced off the monster with its severed arm in one hand.

The creature let out a roar mixed with pain and anger and attacked once more. Hermes stood his ground and hit the advancing monstrosity with its own claws, spilling more blood. The creature halted and took a hesitant step backwards, but Hermes advanced and hit it again, this time with his own hand. It sent the creature tumbling backwards and he followed it closely, continuing to hit it with his clenched fists. It huddled down in a corner, yelping like a beaten dog,

but the attack from Hermes was relentless and he did not stop hitting until it was difficult to tell from the mass of flesh what it had originally been.

Threat neutralized.

Self-defence mode deactivated.

Behavioural tree rebuilt.

Hermes took a step back and inspected his handy work. It was then that he felt something jump on his back and sink its teeth in his neck. He glanced down and saw the sandy brown hair of a young boy as he gnawed at his neck.

“Boy, what are you doing?”

Blue eyes looked up at him before the boy let go and jumped off him. Hermes turned to face him.

“I was trying to suck your blood,” said the boy. “On the account that I forgot my knife.”

Hermes tilted his head slightly. “Why?”

“Because I'm a vampire!” announced the boy proudly and flashed his white fangs, though the effect of it was considerably lessened by one of them being broken, and the fact his hair looked like it had been cut by a barber with nary any motor skills; there were spots where the hair was long and others where the boy was almost bald.

“Define vampire.”

Vampire. Subclass of the undead. Mythical creature that was once dead, but lives on by feeding on the blood of humans.

“You don't know what a vampire is?” asked the boy and examined Hermes with a look of disbelief.

“I do now,” replied Hermes and gave the boy an equally examining look, though his was considerably more thorough. He noted the boys heart was still beating, his body temperature was normal and everything else told that he was very much alive in all senses of the word, albeit he was skinny and dirty enough that it was hard to tell his actual age. “And you are not one.”

Mission update.

Target 1 located.

New mission.

Protect Target 1. Locate Target 2.

“How do you know?” demanded the boy. “I have the teeth!” He grinned and pointed to his fangs, only then realizing one of them was broken. Hastily, he took out the mouthpiece and frowned at it. “You broke my fangs!” He flung the piece of plastic at Hermes.

“Why do you pretend to be one?” asked Hermes, ignoring the question of how he knew the boy was not one as it was evident by now that it had not been that hard to deduce.

“The fangs seem to scare the wolf creatures. At least enough to give you a chance to run away,” said the boy and pointed at the lump of flesh in the corner. “They're vicious, but about as bright as a rock.”

“Are you here alone?” asked Hermes.

“My parents were here, but they died some time ago,” said the boy. He wiped his hand on his trousers that offered little in the way of cleanliness. Hermes had to wonder whether his hands actually got dirtier from it. The loose shirt he had on did not offer anything but brown stains on top of each other.

“What's your name?” asked Hermes.

“What's with all the questions?” demanded the boy. “You're the one who barged into *my* hideout.”

“I'm the one who killed that thing,” reminded Hermes.

The boy considered it for a moment. “Why did you do that? The sane thing would have been to run away.”

“Why did you try and bite me?” asked Hermes in return.

“I had to protect my hideout,” replied the boy.

“And I had to protect my life,” said Hermes.

The two stared at each other.

“My name is Travis,” said the boy finally.

“Update mission. Define Target 1 as Travis.”

Mission update successful.

“I am Hermes.”

“Why do you do that?”

“Do what?”

“Say Define something.”

“It is part of my programming to ensure any commands I give to my machine part can be verified by those near me.”

Tarvis took a long look at him at that point, even went so far as to walk around Hermes so he could see him from all angles. He poked at the suit covering his body and finally came to stare up at his glowing eyes. “You're not like me, are you?”

“No, I am not,” admitted Hermes.

“Why are you here?” asked the boy.

“My mission is to protect you and locate another target,” replied Hermes.

“What target?”

“Define Target 2.”

Unable to comply. Target unknown.

“I do not know,” admitted Hermes as the text flashed in his field of vision.

“But you knew me?” the boy pressed on.

“Only after I saw you,” answered Hermes.

“Doesn't that make your mission a bit difficult?”

“It would seem my memory has suffered some..damage,” replied Hermes with no small amount of worry in his voice.

“You're not dangerous, are you?” asked the boy and took a step back.

“Not to you, Travis,” assured Hermes.

The boy looked a bit suspicious, but then he glanced at the pile of meat and blood in the corner and came to the conclusion that if the man – if it could be called that – before him had wanted him dead that would have already happened.

“Well then, it seems we will be friends,” said Travis and smiled. He whisked past Hermes and into the kitchen from where he returned with knife and metal can in hand and went to the pile of meat in the corner. With great enthusiasm he began cutting up strips of meat and gathered them in the can.

“What are you doing?” asked Hermes.

“I'm hungry and it's good meat. No reason to let it go to waste. Good food is hard to come by these days,” replied the boy. Having filled the can he offered it to

Hermes.

"I do not eat," the man replied and handed the can back.

Travis shrugged his shoulders. He took a moment to lift up the chair and table that had been knocked down during the fight and took a seat by it. "More for me then." He took out a thin strip of red meat from the metal container and chewed on it with a satisfied smile and slurps that sounded as if he were enjoying the finest meal in the world.

"What do you usually eat?" asked Hermes.

"In the ruins, underneath the sand, there's a large hall with shelves filled with stuff. Most of it has gone bad and is inedible, but if you look hard enough you can still find cans of stuff that is good." The boy broke his explanation to chew on another strip of bloody meat. He was starting to look like a real vampire with the blood that trickled down from the corner of his mouth. "Though lately I've been having bad luck finding stuff."

"What sort of stuff is there in the hall?" asked Hermes, hoping there would be something he could use.

Travis shrugged his shoulders. "All sorts of things. Tools, knives. There are places I haven't explored."

"Why is that?"

"I'm not the only one here," replied Travis.

"But you said you were alone here," reminded Hermes.

"I am," said the boy as he started chewing on another strip of meat. He leaned back comfortably in his chair. "I don't really feel like mingling with these and the other monsters that roam the ruins." He pointed to the lump of flesh in the corner.

"There are more of those?"

"Sure. They're all around, Hermes. And there are worse things out there too," said the boy happily.

"I should take a look at this hall," said Hermes after considering what the boy had told him. Keeping him safe here, amongst buildings that barely stood up, would not be easy. It would be best to move on and find some place safer.

"It'll be dark soon and you don't want to be going there when it's dark

outside,” warned the boy and stood up. He made a visit to the kitchen and came back with a bottle of water. He gulped down half of it in one go.

“First thing in the morning then,” replied Hermes.

Travis nodded.

“Do you know what happened?” asked Hermes. The look Travis gave him told him the question meant nothing to the boy. “How did the world become like this?”

The boy shrugged his shoulders and took his seat and started to enjoy the meat once more. “It was like this when I was born.”

“Didn't your parents tell you anything about how it used to be?”

“It was like this when they were born as well,” replied the boy, clearly not too interested in the past.

“I see,” said Hermes quietly. “Do you know what year it is?”

“Year? What's that?”

“You do not keep track of the passage of time?” asked Hermes, greatly surprised by this.

“I have better things to do,” replied the boy and struggled with a tough piece of meat. It seemed to stretch endlessly before snapping in two as he pulled it with his hands and bit down hard on the other end. “The sun will rise regardless whether I worry about it or not.”

“Then you do not know how old you are?”

“As long as I'm alive, does something like that matter?” asked the boy and gave the still standing man a curious look.

Hermes crouched down and examined the boy. Despite all the dirt and his skinny stature, he did look healthy and clearly his mind worked – albeit the vampire fantasy had raised some concerns whether he was completely sane. Being that he had been alone in the ruins, in the middle of monsters, it would not have been surprising if his mind had slipped a bit towards the insane. “No, Travis, I suppose it does not matter,” he said.

“Where did you learn about vampires?” asked Hermes after a long moment of silence that was filled only by the sounds the boy made while eating.

“There are some pictures of them in the hall,” he replied. “And my parents

told me about them when I asked. I used to have a black cape as well, but I lost it once when escaping from one of these Wolves.”

“I see,” said Hermes.

“They're not werewolves, you know,” the boy continued. “You'd need silver to kill them if they were, but these die just like anything else. A sharp knife in the right place and they go down like anything else.”

“How many have you killed?”

The boy laughed. “None. I'm not brave enough to try something like that.”

“You were brave enough to try and bite me,” reminded Hermes.

“That's different. You killed the wolf thing so you couldn't have been bad,” the boy said. “The monsters don't fight each other. At least not often. And never in my hideout.”

“I see.”

“For someone who asks so many questions, you claim to see a lot,” pointed out Travis.

Hermes chuckled and gave the boy a small smile. He looked out the window behind the boy and noticed it had gotten quite dark outside. “Will we be safe here tonight?”

“We should be all right,” replied Travis and finished the last piece of meat he had cut for himself. “The smell of this will keep the other monsters away.”

Much of the remaining evening the two spent talking about Hermes and where he had come from. While a lot of his memory seemed inaccessible and the details of his mission were gone, he did have a lot of information about how the world had been the last time he had been awake. There had been no ruins, no monsters, and cities full of humans had ruled over the surface of the earth. What had happened to wipe all of that out and bring forth the nightmare that it was in the present was something he did not have an answer for, nor did Travis.

On the side the boy continued cutting thin strips of meat from the wolf creatures remains. He fetched some sticks from the kitchen and set up a rack on which he laid out the strips of meat in the hopes that the desert air would dry them so it would not spoil as quickly. He even scrounged up a blanket to keep the worst of the sand and dust from tarnishing the precious food.

As the darkness fell Travis led Hermes to the kitchen and revealed his greatest secret; a well hidden hatch in the corner that covered a hole in the floor and led to the cellar where he slept. Hermes climbed down the ladders and noted the crude bed that was made up of a tattered mattress and a blanket. There was not much room there, but clearly it was a safe place for the boy had survived there for a long time, all by himself.

Travis climbed down and closed the hatch. He pulled a rope and Hermes could hear sand dropping down on the hatch. To top it all off the boy had a latch that would hold the hatch closed from the inside so he'd have ample warning if anyone noticed it from under the sand cover.

"Safe place you've got here," said Hermes as Travis lit up an oil lamp and placed it on a wooden crate that served as a table.

"It's home," the boy said and laid down on the mattress. Hermes sat down near the ladders and the hatch. He wanted to be there as the first one to be encountered should something try and enter the hideout. They spent a few more moment chatting before Travis let out a long yawn and blew out the lamp.

"Hermes?" the boy asked after tossing around on the mattress for a while.

"Yes, Travis?"

"You don't need to sleep?"

"That is correct."

"Could you at least close your eyes?" there was irritation in the boys voice.

"Why?"

"That blue glow is making it impossible to sleep."

"I'm sorry."

Hermes closed his eyes, bringing total darkness to the room. Even in the hideout he could hear the noises during the night; the flap of great, big wings, screeches and other animal noises. He was certain that at some point he even heard footsteps coming from above, but he kept his eyes closed, not wanting the light from his eyes giving away that there was something underneath all the sand and wood.

The steady breathing of the boy was the most calming thing during the entire night.

Chapter 2

Hermes opened his eyes and the blue light lit the small hideout. Travis was still fast asleep with a string of drool running down from the corner of his mouth. It was as if he were a normal boy in the world Hermes had come from.

He stood up and climbed the ladder. The latch let out a small metallic noise as he unlocked it and pushed open the hatch. Sand and dust poured over him and forced him to take a moment to wipe it all off from himself. He was pleased to see it was already light outside and that the temperature was starting to get comfortable once more. During the night, even in the hideout, it had gotten a bit cold.

The footsteps he had heard during the night were clearly visible in the sand in the kitchen and the larger room following. It was like a large bird had hopped around with its three digit feet leaving impressions in the sand. It had however not touched the meat strips Travis had hung to dry, but rather it had scattered the remains from the corner all around the floor and made a mess.

So much for the smell of the corpse keeping monsters away.

Hermes crouched down to get a better look at the print the creature had left behind. By the size of them it had to have been as large as the wolf creature.

“Vulture, eh?” came the voice of Travis from behind him. “Did not think one of those would come inside a building. Must have been really hungry.”

“What are they?” asked Hermes as he stood up. The boy made his way to his rack of meat and took a piece from it. It looked to be quite moist still, but the boy took a bite and let out an delighted noise at the taste of it.

“Large birds,” said Travis and took another bite from the meat. “They're not really dangerous. Mostly they scavenge for already dead things. Just don't try to take food from them. They've got a beak that will kill you with a single peck.”

“I'll keep that in mind,” replied Hermes.

Information saved.

“You ready to take me to the hall you mentioned yesterday?”

“Just let me take a pee and we can go,” said the boy and stepped outside.

Hermes gave the kitchen a quick glance. On his way up Travis had made certain everything looked like it was supposed to; there was no indication that there was a hatch in the corner nor that anyone was actually living there.

“You coming?” asked the boy and peeked inside from the doorway. Hermes noted he had stashed the knife under his belt and that a bottle of water was sticking out from one of his pockets.

The sun shone brightly from a clear sky as he stepped to the outside. The heat was building up and Travis dug out a rag from his other pocket and wrapped it around his head.

At least the boy knew how to survive in the desert that surrounded them.

“Which way do we go?”

“You see that tall building in the horizon?” asked the boy and pointed towards it. Hermes could barely make it out.

“That's a long walk.”

The boy nodded. “That's one of the reasons why it was better to wait until morning. It'll take an hour or two, depending on how the wind has shifted the sands.”

“Is it like this everywhere?” asked Hermes as the two walked. They stuck to the shadows of the ruined buildings as much as they could, but much of the time they had to make their way in the full blown sunlight.

“I don't know. This is the only place I've been to,” replied Travis.

“You haven't tried to leave? Find a better place?”

The boy laughed. “Where would I go? Look around you. It's nothing but sand where ever you look. I'd be dead if I'd tried to go anywhere.”

Hermes had to admit that as he looked around there was not much in the way of hope of something better being out there. The boy had food and shelter here and evidently dodging the monsters was not too difficult. He could have easily ended in a worse place, but then he probably would have been dead by now.

The sand made their progress slow and the walking feel like they'd ran a marathon. That was no problem for Hermes, but the boy needed a few breaks to

catch his breath and drink some water. The sun was merciless in its heat projection and made the air wavy and deceptive in assessing distances. Regardless, they pushed on and after a gruelling walk they entered the shade of the tall ruins that was their goal.

It was a large building, much larger than the one where Travis had his hideout. Hermes figured it must have been a skyscraper back when it had been intact. While time had eroded much of it, the concrete and steel had held up well in places and the structure looked stable enough. Most of the holes on its outside were the result of broken windows and doors.

“Come on, it's this way,” said Travis enthusiastically and led Hermes around a corner and to a large door followed by a ramp leading downwards. They soon got out of the heat of the sunlight and into the cool air of the underground. The eyes of Hermes illuminated the darkness sufficiently enough for the two to make their way downwards on the ramp and eventually through a red metal door. The boy grabbed an oil lamp from the wall and lit it with the lighter he dug from his pocket.

“Best not to carry anything unnecessary when you head out,” said the boy to answer the unasked question that was lingering in the mind of Hermes. The yellow light revealed a portion of the hall the boy had been talking about. Gray metal shelves followed one another with all sorts of goods loaded up on them; canned food, lamp oil, bottles of water, tools ranging from hammers and saws to power-tools, ready cut pieces of wood, metal rods and everything in between.

And that was only what they could see after going through three rows of shelves in the meagre light the lamp provided.

“Are there any monsters here?” asked Hermes.

The boy shrugged his shoulders. “There might be. Best be as quiet as possible and get out with what you need as quickly as you can.”

Objective: Explore and create an inventory.

Seek suitable materials for building a transport.

“Can you take care of yourself if I take a closer look around?”

“I've managed so far,” replied Travis pointedly. The care his new found friend was showing was something he was not used to.

“Yell if something happens. I’ll come right over,” said Hermes before starting down a row of shelves. He missed the tongue the boy showed his back.

In the blue glow it was slightly more difficult to make out everything, but the cursor kept jumping from object to object, clearly identifying them for him. It highlighted the most interesting bits, such as the box of engine parts and the piles of hollow pipes that were stacked up on one of the shelves.

By the time he had reached the fifth row of shelves he had seen enough parts to make up a plan on how they would get out of the desert. It would take days of work and there were still a few problems he needed to solve, but all in all it was looking like he’d have a solid plan by the end of his survey.

Convincing the boy to go with the plan would probably be the hardest part.

Objective complete.

Plans for transport selected.

He had not actually dared to venture that far into the line of shelves. He wanted to keep the wall in view and stay as close to Travis as possible while exploring. From between the shelves he could see the occasional sliver of light from the boy’s lamp.

Hermes returned to the end of the shelves and decided to check the start of one more row. It was much like all the other rows he had seen so far except that much of the stuff there was less practical and more geared towards entertainment; there were boxes filled with books and posters, costumes and toys and all sorts of other things.

It was in one such box that he found the costume wrapped in clear plastic. It had a black cape inside along with a mouth piece of similar fangs that Travis had had. Hermes grabbed it and decided it was time to go back to him.

The light from his lamp guided Hermes to the boy. He had ventured between shelves and was busy going through cans of stuff. Several he had discarded because the lid was bulging out – a tell tale sign that something had gone horribly wrong with the food inside.

“Here, I found this,” said Hermes and handed the costume to the boy. The boy’s face lit up and he quickly ripped off the plastic and pulled out the cape. It had a red lining to it and Travis wasted no time tying it around his neck and

putting on the plastic fangs. He grinned at Hermes and ran a few rounds around him, his new cape fluttering behind him.

“Thanks. I've been looking for a set of these,” said the boy as he stopped in front of Hermes.

“You're welcome,” replied Hermes.

“So, what do you think?” asked the boy and gave the dimly lit shelves a questioning look.

“There are a lot of things here I could use to build a transport for us,” replied Hermes.

“A transport?”

“Something to take us away from here.”

“Why?”

“Do you think you can survive here forever?” asked Hermes in a serious tone.

“I've done fine so far,” replied the boy.

“Don't you want to find other humans?”

“I've got you now.”

“I'm not human,” replied Hermes. The blue glow from his eyes should have been hint enough that he was different from Travis as night was from day.

A distant squeak interrupted their back and forth. The look on the boys face was enough to tell Hermes the noise was something to be feared.

“What is it?”

“Rats,” replied the boy in a hushed tone. “We better get out of here.”

“Define rat.”

A small rodent that thrives in conditions where waste is not properly disposed.

“They don't sound that dangerous,” said Hermes.

Travis was quickly chugging cans of food in a makeshift bag he had whisked up from a piece of canvas. “What ever that thing told you about rats, it's probably wrong. They're about my size here.”

A squeak sounded closer. Hermes could hear the small footsteps against the cold concrete floor and the screech of nails dragging against the metal frames of

the shelves.

“Oh.”

“Come on. We've got to get out of here now,” said Travis, now with near panic in his voice as he hoisted the bag over his shoulder and took out his knife in the other.

Hermes grabbed the lamp as they started back towards the door. The noises of feet against concrete came ever closer and the squeaky noises became ever more intensified as the creatures got closer and smelled their prey. Hermes glanced back and saw red eyes flash between one of the shelves and a dark figure of the boys size trot along.

Hermes stopped as the boy running before him did so as well. He soon saw the reason for it despite the door to safety being mere steps away. There was a rat standing in front of them, blocking the way.

The kid had been right about them being something entirely different than what the definition had implied. When on its hind legs it stood as tall as Travis, reaching Hermes slightly below the chest. The yellow, chisel like front teeth looked lethal enough and the fidgeting nose did nothing to make it look less lethal. It eyed the pair with its black eyes, almost looking uncertain as to what to do.

Hermes took a few steps forward to put himself between the creature and the boy. The cursor in his field of vision highlighted the creature and made some calculations.

Threat identified.

Mission reminder: Protect Travis.

Defence mode activated.

The rat had reached its decision and lowered down to four feet and took a few steps forward. That was all Hermes needed to take a step forward himself and land a solid kick on the creatures head. There was enough strength in the kick to send the rat flying through the air and land a few feet back, dazed. The squeak it let out as it flew through the air echoed in the hall and the corridors between the shelves.

It received many responses from all around.

“Hurry!” encouraged Travis and jumped forward to take the few steps that separated him from the door.

Hermes followed and kicked the rat once more as he passed it. Never hurt to be certain they wouldn't be followed or that there would at least be one less of them.

The red metal door felt encouragingly strong as Hermes slammed it shut and locked it. It did little to calm down the boy who still insisted that they should hurry outside. At the very least it looked like it would slow down any pursuers considerably as they'd need to find an alternate route outside. There was bound to be a few of those, of that Hermes was certain.

Only once they'd walked up the ramp into the sunlight did Travis calm down and put down his sack of food. He took out the fangs and stashed them in a pocket.

“Now you see what I have to deal with,” the boy said as he caught his breath.
Defence mode deactivated.

New mission objective: build transport.

“Yes,” admitted Hermes as he looked around to ensure none of the rats had followed them. He was curious as to what had happened to make the small creatures into nearly man sized beasts. At the same time he had to wonder whether the wolf creature he had killed the previous night had gone through the same sort of transformation from its original species.

“We should head back to the shelter,” said Travis and grabbed his sack of food stuff. He did not bother removing the black cape that flapped behind him in the small breeze that seemed ever present in the sandy wasteland.

Hermes simply nodded.

The two started the long trek back. It was just as tiresome as before and eventually Travis conceded that it would be better if Hermes carried his sack.

“Do you like it here, Travis?” asked Hermes as they entered the shadow of a ruined building. They walked past a crumbled down window and Hermes noted the white bones sticking out of the sand that had accumulated inside the room beyond it. Of what manner of an creatures they were, he did not even try to guess.

The boy gave Hermes a curious look. "I suppose so. There's shelter, food, water, and the monsters aren't *that* bad. It could be a lot worse."

"How would you feel about moving on?"

Travis took a moment to ponder the question. He had never known anything but the ruined buildings in the middle of a desert. He had been born there and he had never seriously considered moving away, though now that he thought about it perhaps that would be the wiser move. Maybe there were places that had more than sand and monsters. What he knew for certain was that if he stayed put and continued on as he had until now – even with Hermes around – the monsters would eventually get him. His parents had been careful and skilled, but even they had eventually slipped and been surprised.

"How would we get out of here?" the boy finally asked, not giving his full answer just yet.

"Have you heard of a Strandbeest?"

Travis shook his head.

"A long time ago a man called Theo Jansen built them out of pipes, wood and wing-like sails. He put them on a beach where they lived like herds of animals. The wind powered them and they could walk, detect when they entered water and even store the wind so they could move when there was none."

Hermes glanced at the boy walking next to him. He could tell he had aroused his interest. He continued, "Of course, we need something more durable and slightly more complex than that, but that shouldn't be a problem for us. A few modifications to the basic design – more durable pipes, some extra power generation via batteries and so on – and we can have us our own Strandbeest that will carry us over these sand dunes be it night or day without us having to lift a finger."

The boy furrowed his brows. "That sounds overly complicated."

"It's the design I was presented with after seeing what there was in the storage room," replied Hermes. "If there had been wheels, we might have had something better to work with."

"Do you think it'll work?"

"I'm confident it will."

They walked on in silence.

“I think we should leave this place,” Travis finally said. There was determination in his voice that left no room for doubts. “If we stay here, we’ll eventually run out of food or the monsters will get us. Maybe there are better places out there beyond the sand.”

The boy looked determined yet frightened at the same time. Agreeing to go into the unknown with someone he had only met yesterday was a decision he might easily live to regret for the last minutes of his life, though he was certain he’d regret it more if they stayed in place. Even at his young age he realized there was very little waiting for him in the ruins besides death.

“Then we will start gathering the materials tomorrow,” said Hermes, hoping the quick pace would lighten the boys mood. “We’ll need to make several trips to that storage room to get everything we need.”

“What about the rats?” asked Travis. “By the sound of it they’ve made that place part of their territory. They’re not going to let us go undisturbed if we visit the place every day.”

Mission: Protect Travis.

The text flashed in Hermes’s field of vision, reminding him that putting the boy in danger would not be acceptable.

“I’ll gather the materials we need,” the man finally said. “The rats can do very little to me.”

“Are you sure?” the boy asked. “There’s bound to be an awful lot of them. I once sneaked into a building and saw a group of thirty of them. They’d killed a wolf beast and were eating it.”

New parameters entered.

Re-calculating risk factor...

Adjusting threat level...

New threat level: 10

When facing an level 10 threat, a hand-to-hand combat weapon is recommended to avoid sustaining critical damage.

“I should be all right even if that many swarm me,” replied Hermes. “I just

need some sort of a weapon.”

“You can have my knife,” the boy offered and took out the small blade. It would not offer much more reach for Hermes, though the sharp blade might have offered some benefit.

“Better you keep it,” replied Hermes. He did not want to rob the boy of his only defence. After all, he'd have to leave him alone if he was to get the needed parts so Travis still needed to have something to keep himself safe with. “I'll just grab one of the pipes when I return to the storage tomorrow.”

“Suit yourself,” replied Travis and in a burst of energy grabbed the corners of his black cape and ran ahead. He made a few dangerous looking jumps down some larger sand banks and on the last one he ended up rolling down like a ball. Still, he popped right back up with a wide grin on his face and continued on ahead.

It was starting to get dark when they finally arrived at the hideout. They'd taken a detour to explore one of the ruins and they'd found an usable chair there that Hermes carried along. While sitting on the sandy floor was not that uncomfortable – not that Hermes could really experience discomfort – a chair was still a chair.

Travis quickly unpacked his sack of goods in the underground room. It was relatively cool down there so the bottles of water he had brought would cool to a more enjoyable temperature down there. Other than that they didn't really have much to do, so they went to sleep early so they could get an early start the next day. Travis would need to help with the building even if he stayed behind while Hermes went to gather the needed parts.

Travis closed the hatch as he had the previous night and took his place at the single mattress. Hermes was happy he now had a chair to sit on, though he still did not require sleep. He closed his eyes to let the boy sleep and waited for the sun to rise.

The night did not offer anything exciting. There were no strange noises – it was eerily silent and that made Hermes worry even more. It was unnatural to have so few noises in the night, though one did have to consider that they were in the middle of a desert which would not be exactly teeming with life.

Morning came more quickly and the two emerged from their shelter to perform their morning rituals. For Travis that meant chewing on the dried meat that he had left over and gulping down some of the relatively cool water from a bottle he grabbed from his store. He went behind a corner to take his morning piss.

Hermes had no such needs so he left for the storage hall after he was satisfied that the boy had everything in order. He did take a bag like canvas with him to possibly help carry more stuff with him in one go. Not having the boy along allowed him to make much faster progress and the sun had barely moved by the time he arrived at the ruined building.

He found the red door closed just like they had left it the previous day. He carefully opened it and listened for any signs of the rats. Satisfied that they were not active at that moment, he stepped inside and began to gather things. The first thing he went for were the pipes and he made sure to grab himself a piece that was a bit over a meter in length.

It felt solid in his hands and a few swings made him feel comfortable handling it. Any rat that got in his way would quickly find itself with a broken skull.

He piled a bunch of the pipes onto the canvas he had brought with him along with a metal saw and other tools he would need in building their transport. Satisfied that he had gathered as much as he could carry in one go, he started back towards their shelter. The rats had left him alone, though a few times he had hear their noises in the distant other end of the vast storage room.

The equipment slowed him down and dragging the canvas in the sand made walking awkward. His return trips took almost twice as long as his trip the other way, but as he got back to the shelter there was still time for another run.

Travis was a great help in unloading everything Hermes had brought with him. He unloaded most of the stuff outside the ruined building and left the boy to move it inside so it wouldn't all be laying out in the open for the vultures to come and scatter all around. He had brought nothing too heavy with him this time so it was not much of a strain on even Travis to move the stuff – as long as he didn't try to move too many pieces of pipe at the same time.

The second trip did not go without incident. When Hermes entered the storage room the rats were there seemingly waiting for him. One jumped him from behind while another attacked from the front. His only saviour was the fact he had the piece of pipe in hand.

Danger.

Defence mode activated.

He swatted away the rat attacking from the front. It slumped to the side with a bone crunching sound and remained motionless. Reaching behind him, he grabbed the fur of the rat clinging to his back and threw it to the ground in front of him. He raised the pipe in his hand and landed an overhead strike that left the rat slumped on the ground, blood spilling from its head.

He looked around and saw red eyes glowing in the darkness. The chatter of the rats filled the air and made even Hermes feel nervous. He was starting to doubt the threat rating his system had come up with even though he had disposed of the two attackers with little trouble.

Figures emerged from the darkness, but none of them came too close to him. Hermes turned to look around and backed himself against the wall. Getting attacked from behind was not something he wanted to experience again. He lifted the pipe in front of him and took a ready stance that would allow him to react quickly if the rats advanced any further.

But they did not do so.

They spent a moment examining their fallen kin and several stood in front of Hermes on their hind legs, keeping a close eye on him. Their noses twitched as they continuously sniffed the air. Hermes was certain they would attack any moment, but to his surprise they started to drag the two dead rats away and the rest of the swarm retreated while keeping an eye on the man that had killed two of their kind.

Hermes waited for a long while after the last of the creatures had disappeared back into the darkness before allowing himself to move from his defensive position. The cursor jumped around wildly in his field of vision as he scanned the area, looking for any sign of foul play by the rats.

He saw nothing to indicate there was anything to worry about.

Threat neutralized.

Defence mode deactivated.

Relaxing his arm, he let the pipe come down to rest against his thigh. Taking a final look around he continued on with his equipment gathering. The rats did not bother him any more even when he returned the following day, and the day after that, and the day after that.

It took him a long time to gather everything he needed before even starting construction of their transport.

Chapter 3

The wind seemed to never stop. Even in the night it howled through the cracks of their ruined shelter and piled new sand on top of the old. On the one hand it was a good thing as the transport Hermes had planned for them would take most of its power from the wind.

It had taken Hermes the better part of a week to gather all the things he needed to start building the transport he had planned. From there things had started to progress quite nicely and he had completed the first row of joints for their transport. It had involved a lot of cutting, exact measurements and fine tuning to get it all working, but once he had the first working model the others followed quickly behind.

Travis was a great help in bringing him the right tools as well as keeping an eye out for any monsters that might stumble on their little construction yard, but it looked to be rare for one to stumble around during the day. Most of them seemed to prefer the night and even those that moved by day seemed to prefer doing so inside the larger ruined buildings instead of venturing out into the scorching sun.

Hermes was using the large room of their hideout to make the individual pieces, but the final assembly would have to be done outside due to the size of the construct. It would be big enough to transport him and Travis comfortably along with enough food and water to keep them both going for several weeks. Of course, seeing as Hermes did not need water nor food, the stock would last much longer as it only needed to feed Travis.

The boy had just brought in a new set of pipes for Hermes to cut. He sat down and leaned against the inner wall of the building and watched in silence as Hermes worked.

“You haven't been here for that long, have you?” the boy finally asked.

“I have been active for a little over a week,” replied Hermes, not taking his eyes from the work he was doing.

“What were you before then?”

“I was asleep.”

“For how long?” asked Travis.

Error. Internal clock can not update itself to the correct date.

“I do not know,” replied Hermes. The best he could figure was that he had been in that capsule for far longer than had been intended. Certainly it had to have been centuries, perhaps even a millennia, for the world to have gone through such a drastic change.

Travis dug out a water bottle from his pocket and took a sip from it. “Do you know what the world used to be like?”

“I do.”

The boy frowned at Hermes when it became apparent he was not about to say anything more on it. “Well, what was it like?”

Warning!

Information about the Jinx Project is restricted.

Warning!

Detected anomalies in memory. Some parts may be inaccessible.

“These ruins that we're at. When I was last active there was probably a city here filled with people. There would have to have been shops where you could just walk in and buy food and drinks, clothes, entertainment – anything you could have wished for.”

“Were there monsters?” asked the boy. The abundance of goods and the ease with which they had been available back then did not seem to be of interest to him.

“Only the human kind,” replied Hermes. Newspaper articles flashed in a small window in his field of vision with headlines ranging from mothers killing their children to kidnapped children being found twenty years later in the basement of some deviant who had been using them as sex slaves for all that time. Entire villages being massacred only because the people there happened to believe in another god than the ones in the next one.

He decided it would be better not to mention those things to the boy.

“But I'm human, aren't I? I'm not a monster, am I?” the boy asked with worry in his voice.

“No, you're not a monster,” assured Hermes as he grabbed the saw and began cutting a piece of pipe. “The humans back then, they were different. They had nothing left to fear but themselves. I suppose you could say they became victims of their own success and having no more external threats left they turned on themselves. There were no wolf creatures to cull their numbers nor were diseases a threat to them any more.”

“So why are they now gone, then?” asked Travis. He seemed to have an uncanny knack for asking questions that were more intelligent and to the point than someone his age should have been asking. He put people older than him to shame.

Error.

Memory corrupted.

Warning!

Access restricted. Level 5 clearance needed for Jinx Project details.

“I wish I knew the answer,” replied Hermes and continued his work. The flashing warnings frustrated him. If only his memory was intact then at least he'd know what had happened. Sharing it with the boy might have been out of the question, but at least he wouldn't have felt like a broken machine. He tried to poke at the section of his memory that had demanded greater clearance levels, but he was unable to locate it again. He figured it must have been something the memory corruption had erroneously dug up.

“How many people were there back then?” asked Travis.

“Billions.”

“How many is that?”

“Too many,” replied Hermes and reached down to grab both of his hands full of sand. He let it drip down in a slow stream. “How many grains of sand do you think fit into my hands?”

The look he got from the boy in return was one of uncertainty.

“You know how small each grain is?”

“Of course. I've spent my entire life watching the stuff.”

“In my hands there were probably around a billion grains of sand,” explained Hermes. “From afar you do not see it, but if you take each individual grain and

start to count them, that is the number you might end up with.”

“That's a lot of work,” muttered the boy, clearly stumped by the number.

“Then you begin to understand how many people there were back then,” said Hermes and returned to the piece of pipe he had been working on.

Travis sat in silence for a good while, trying to come to terms with the number he had been presented with. During his life he had only ever known three people – that was if you counted Hermes and calling him a human was a bit of a stretch. To think there had been so many in the past was hard to swallow when now it looked almost like there were no others besides him.

“Do you think there are others still alive?” Travis finally asked and looked up at the working man.

“I'm certain there are,” assured Hermes while taking another piece of pipe under work. “There were far too many of them for all of them to have died. Far too spread out, far too smart, far too adaptable.”

“Not that many can survive in a desert like this,” muttered the boy, feeling gloomy over the subject.

“There have always been deserts,” reminded Hermes. “They've never been infinite. There has always been areas with plant life, water, and other things needed for life to prosper.”

“If that were true, why would my parents have come to this place?” Even to the boy it made no sense if there had been some better place to stay in.

“Humans can be irrational and cruel beings,” said Hermes, carefully considering what to say next. “There are many reasons why your parents might have left a better place. Maybe the community they lived with exiled them. Perhaps there were those who did not want them to be together. Maybe they wanted to protect you from something.”

“That's a lot of maybes,” the boy pointed out.

Hermes shrugged his shoulders. “I can only guess because I lack information. Perhaps we will find some answers when we get out of here.” He could only hope that would be the case. As it stood he had no idea where to even start with finding the second target. He needed more information about everything; what had happened to the world, what the Jinx Project actually was,

were there even other humans left alive.

“What if there is nothing out there?” asked the boy.

“Then we will deal with that if we find that to be the case,” replied Hermes. It was not something he wanted to think about too much. The fact was that Travis would die if there was nothing out there. The only difference would be that he'd die sooner rather than later. Staying in place would do little to change things. It was the sad fact of the situation and Hermes had to concede that there was a good possibility that he'd fail in his mission if the risk he was taking did not pay off.

“What if we find other humans and a better place to live?” The boy's questions shifted as quickly as the sands in a strong wind.

“Then our lives will be better off, won't they?” said Hermes in the same patient voice that he always used. If they found some human settlements, some safe area, he'd have some more time to try and come up with some plan to accomplish his mission, even if there were parts to it that he did not know.

He had to trust that his creators had given him everything he needed and that the damage that had been inflicted on him was not enough to undo that all.

“What if they are monsters, like the ones you knew in the past?” the boy asked, making Hermes curse in his mind for mentioning even as much as he had. The worry on the young boy's face was evidence enough that he had scared him with his words.

“I told you I would protect you,” reminded Hermes. “That won't ever change, no matter what the threat is.” He lifted the piece of pipe he had cut and started to attach it to another. “We might encounter humans that don't have our best interest at heart, but that wouldn't change our situation that much, would it? Instead of wolf creatures and rats and vultures, we'd just have another threat.”

“But they'd be humans,” the boy pointed out.

“Does that matter if all they want to do is harm you?” asked Hermes.

Travis looked thoughtful as he leaned against the wall and wrapped his arms around his legs. He pressed his head against his knees that were closely pulled against his chest. “I suppose they'd be no different from the other monsters in that case,” he finally admitted, though his voice revealed the doubts that were

raging in his mind.

“There is also the possibility we might find some good people,” reminded Hermes as he continued assembling another joint for their transport. “That's the attitude we should depart with: we're going to find good people who will welcome us, we'll find others of your age to keep you company so that you won't be alone any more.”

The expression on the boy brightened up. “That would be nice, even though I've never had much company. I don't know how I'd deal with having others around me.”

That could be a problem, even Hermes had to admit that. The boy had grown largely on his own in a hostile environment so he had no concept of how to deal with other people. Would he be able to get along with more than a single person?

“I don't think that's anything to worry about,” he lied to the boy fluently. “You've treated me well so far. No matter how many people are around you, if you remember that they are not your enemies and treat them like you have me, then there won't be any problems.”

The boy fell in silence after that and Hermes continued his work in silence. Hermes had nothing against the boys questions, but he appreciated the moment of silence. It allowed him to fully focus on what he was doing and that meant things got done faster. If he was allowed to continue at the pace he was going, it would not be that long until he'd have the transport ready for trials.



Hermes and Travis both stood there and watched with a certain degree of awe at what they had constructed. On the front and back it had a row of joints and limbs which almost made it look like a combine harvester of days old and on the sides there were a few smaller rows of similar limbs that would allow the construct to move sideways. In the middle of it there was a large platform that was raised from the ground to give ample room below it – it was raised enough that there was a ladder to help you climb aboard.

That platform housed the accommodations for the two travellers as well as

their food and water store.

Each corner of it had a windmill that rotated slowly in the desert breeze. A butterfly wing like sail ran across both sets of feet and flapped in the wind like a breaking wave.

It looked complex and fragile, but Hermes was confident it would survive anything the desert threw at it.

“Do you think it'll work?” asked Travis as he stood there and examined the end result of their work. His black cape fluttered in the wind and he was wearing the fake fangs, which made his speech slightly slurred.

“Only one way to find out,” replied Hermes and started towards the transport. He squeezed through on the side and climbed the retractable ladder up to the pad. There was a canvas tent there that was fastened securely on the metal frame. To the front there were some controls that allowed them to change direction as well as the anchoring system that would hold the transport in place if they stopped.

Hermes pulled a few levers and the sound of air rushing through the hollow pipes filled the air. Slowly, but surely, the first joints started to move along with the limbs raising and taking the first steps. All the time it gained momentum and soon the thing was walking across the open sand at a brisk pace. The small sand banks it encountered proved no problem for it and the ride was surprisingly smooth.

Travis looked on in awe as the thing moved across the sand. He had had his doubts about the feasibility of it, but it seemed Hermes had known what he was talking about. They could cover a lot of ground if it kept moving at the pace it did, day and night. Getting to another place did not seem like such a wild dream any more.

Hermes changed the direction and the legs started to move in another direction, taking him back to where he had started from. He lowered the anchors and left the wind to gather into the many storage tanks that had been put there for it.

He was met by a very excited Travis as he climbed down and emerged from under the platform.

“That was amazing!” the boy said with bright eyes.

“It seems to work as planned,” admitted Hermes with a small smile.

“When do we leave?” asked Travis, sounding excited and eager to get under way.

“Best we wait for tomorrow,” replied Hermes and looked to the horizon where the sun was starting to edge into hiding. “It would not be good if we encountered a problem on our first day and it was already dark outside.”

Travis looked around himself and at the ruins he had spent his entire life rummaging through. The thought of leaving suddenly felt very painful. Even he had to admit it was not much of a place to live in, but it was still his home and taking the leap into the unknown was not something he was fully comfortable with.

A sigh escaped his lips.

Hermes put his hand on the boy's shoulder and gave it an encouraging squeeze. “There's nothing wrong with wanting to stay, but you know we have to go. That doesn't mean you have to forget about this place. Always keep it in your heart and remember the lessons it has taught you. Pull strength from it and when you're in a place you think is worse than this, remember what it was like here.”

The boy nodded and fought to keep tears away from his eyes. It was silly and he knew it. He should have been happy to get away from the ruins and the monsters that roamed them. A worse place was hard to imagine and it was likely they'd actually run across something better. So why was he feeling like he did?

“It's still hard to leave,” he muttered and looked up at Hermes. The blue glow of his eyes gave him an unsympathetic and cold look.

“It's the hard things in life that make you stronger,” the man replied and turned to give the boy an encouraging smile. “Though I suppose that doesn't make them any easier.”

“So we leave tomorrow?” asked Travis and nudged at his cape in an effort to distract himself from the feeling churning inside him.

“First thing in the morning,” said Hermes. He wanted to get an early start so any problems they might encounter with their transport could be solved in

daylight. He also wanted some distance between them and the ruins so the monsters that came out during the night would not bother them. At least he hoped they would be able to put enough distance between them so they'd be safe. He doubted the empty desert would be home to anything too dangerous since there was nothing to eat there. The ruins were what had allowed them to concentrate in the area and eating each other and what ever could be found in the buildings was what kept them there and alive.

“How long do you think we'll have to travel?” asked Travis. It was not the first time he asked the question and Hermes had yet to give him a satisfying answer. The truth was he had no idea how long they would have to travel to get somewhere.

“It will take as long as it takes,” replied Hermes, giving the boy the best answer he could. The sun was dipping dangerously below the horizon. “Come on, let's get things ready for the night and go to sleep.”

“Okay,” said Travis and jogged off to the other side of their transport.

Hermes made sure it was properly anchored down and everything was secured so the wind would not be able to move it during the night. Having done that, he grabbed the large canvas that was fastened underneath the square slate in the middle, unfolded it, and threw one corner over to the side where Travis was. The boy grabbed his end of it and together they covered their transport with the sand coloured protection.

Simply leaving the construct at the mercy of the vultures and other monsters that crawled the night could have easily left them finding their transport broken in the morning. Covering it up gave it at least some chance of surviving and it had proven successful during the nights the unfinished construct had to spend outside.

They secured the canvas in place with large rocks and a few metal poles that were struck through metal laden holes in its corners. It would take an extremely strong gust of wind to send it flying into the night or a very determined snooper.

“That should do it,” said Hermes as Travis rolled in place the last rock. In the dimming light the exotic transport looked like nothing more than a large lump of sand. They had been lucky in finding the canvas that had been clearly

designed to hide things in a desert.

“Will we have to do this every night when we travel?” asked the boy and walked over to Hermes. His face was flushed over the effort of moving the rocks.

“I doubt we'll be stopping during nights. I don't need to sleep and we have those battery powered lights so we can see where we're going.”

“What if there's no wind?” the boy asked.

“Then we'll go as far as our reserves allow and wait for the wind to pick-up,” replied Hermes. He was aware that the wind seemed to die down on occasion during the night, rare as it was. It was the very reason why he had built in tanks where air could be stored under pressure and released to move the joints and limbs. It wouldn't offer them much range, but at least it would keep them moving fairly consistent even if the wind took short breaks. “Come on, let's go inside.”

Travis nodded and the two took the short walk to their shelter. The rooms were no longer empty as many had ready made packs that were only waiting to be transferred aboard their transport. It was not wise to leave them outside for the night – even with the cover in place – so they would have to do the final stocking up in the morning, before departing.

They hid in the usual hideout and Hermes took his now familiar seat by the stairway as Travis curled up on his mattress. The boy had trouble falling asleep. It was hard to believe that it was the last night he would ever spend in the place. The years he had spent there weighed heavily on him and kept his mind busy and awake. Still, the day had been full of work and eventually the tired mind had to drop the thoughts and turn off the lights.

For Hermes the night went by much like the others had. He was pleased that there did not seem to be any disturbances inside their shelter nor did it sound like anything made moves outside either.

The only notable thing to happen was the electronic noise that pierced Hermes's ears in the middle of the night. It was distorted and made him wince.

“What is that noise?” he whispered to himself, careful not to speak loudly enough to rouse Travis, though judging by the way the boy was drooling he would not wake up that easily.

Analysing...

Sound coming in over secure radio channel.

Channel 9: Reserved for Jinx project.

Source of transmission: Unknown.

Transmission encrypted or distorted beyond repair.

“Decode transmission using standard tools.” There was a glimmer of hope within Hermes. The fact something was trying to broadcast on a frequency reserved for the Jinx project suggested there might be someone alive or at the very least some automated system that might be able to offer him more information and answers to the many questions he had.

Attempting to decode transmission..

Decode failed.

“Record transmission.” If he couldn't decode it now, at the very least he'd be able to store it for later. Maybe it was merely distorted and needed some touching up that could not be done on the fly.

Recording.

The noise went on for five more minutes before stopping.

“Stop recording.”

Recording stopped.

File 'Audio0002.aaf' saved.

Hermes frowned. It should have been the first audio file he'd recorded. Was it his corrupted memory playing tricks again?

“Play file Audio0001.”

Searching..

He glanced at Travis as the boy rolled over to another side, but did not wake up. Hermes was starting to think this whole business of him having to voice all commands out loud was getting cumbersome. It was not exactly the most discreet way of getting things done and in the present circumstances stealth was something to be valued over possible objections of the humans around him.

File 'Audio0001.aaf' found.

Length: 4m 44s

Playback starting.

“Hermes, this is important so make sure you record this,” sounded the voice

of a man in his ears. There was static noise and artefacts that made popping sounds, making it hard to hear what was being said at times. It almost drowned out his own voice that came in reply to the man.

“Yes, professor. Recording has been active since the beginning of this conversation.”

“Good. Now, when you wake up, there are things you need to know, things that I can't put in your normal memory, things that..” the static got so bad it washed away the man's voice. It seemed the memory corruption had done its deeds on the sound file.

“..the Jinx project will succeed,” the voice continued as the distortions faded. “You will play no small part in it. A lot rests on you when you wake up. You need to know..” the recording skipped ahead from there, as if a portion of it had gone missing entirely. “..kill them if need be. You must be vigilant. You must survive. Do not let anything get in your way.”

“Will you be there?” Hermes heard his own voice asking on the recording.

“Probably not,” replied the professor with a hint of sadness in his voice. “I suspect most of us working here will be dead. What we are doing is not exactly sanctioned by the government and they will find out what we have done..eventually. But they will not find this place.”

There were sounds in the background – other voices talking and sounds of metal hitting metal. There were animal noises mixed in.

The professor continued talking, apparently reacting to something a sound recording could not have told. “No, no, don't worry about us. We've undertaken this knowing full well the price we might have to pay for it. The future generations will judge whether we did the right thing or not.”

“Professor! We're ready to free the samples,” came a third voice from the background. It was female and sounded quite stressed.

“Good, good,” replied the professor. It sounded like he had turned away and was talking in another direction. His voice sounded distant and Hermes could barely make out what he had said.

“Hermes, remember what I have told you here,” the professors voice returned stronger. “Listen to this recording when you wake up and accomplish your

mission. You and you alone carry the future with you. You can stop recording now.”

There was a moment of static and then the recording stopped.

For a long time Hermes sat in his chair trying to make sense of what he had heard.

“Can the recording be fully restored?” he asked quietly. All the important bits seemed to have gone missing from it and what was left only raised more questions and answered few questions.

Analysing..

File can not be repaired.

“Shit.” Hermes didn't really know where the word popped up, but it seemed appropriate. He tried to make sense of the recording and listened to it a few more times, but there was not much there to grab on to. He was fairly certain the man who was referred to as professor was called James Fandergeld, but the corrupted memory prevented him from making certain of it.

Who the woman on the tape was and what the samples were that she talked about was as much a mystery as what had happened to the world during his sleep.

In the end Hermes gave up trying to solve the mystery and continued on with the night as if nothing had happened. There was little he could do to change the situation so he thought it best to leave it be and return to it at some point in the future with a fresh set of eyes and maybe a little more information.

The morning came more quickly that he had anticipated and he was shaking Travis to get up as soon as the first rays of sunlight shot over the horizon. The boy mumbled in his sleep before snapping awake.

“Morning,” he said and rubbed his eyes.

“Good morning Travis. We better start getting ready.”

The boy nodded and scampered towards his water storage. He grabbed a bottle and gulped down half of it before stashing the rest in his trouser pocket. He never seemed to go anywhere without having at least some water with him. Habits of a desert rat.

Hermes climbed the ladder and opened the hatch.

He was pleased to note there was nothing amiss in the rooms of their shelter. All the supplies they had gathered were where they had placed them and as he peaked outside there was nothing amiss with their canvas covered transport.

When he turned back around the first thing he saw was Travis with his fake vampire teeth, grinning and arms raised, trying to be as scary as he could be. He had even taken a small box so he was on eye level with Hermes and crept close enough that he was almost walked into and shoved off his perch.

“You forgot your cape,” Hermes pointed out in his usual unflinching manner.

The boy let out a frustrated sigh. “Nothing gets to you, does it?”

“No,” the man admitted. “We better start loading stuff up.”

“Fine,” replied the boy in the sort of surly voice any child would use after being told to do something by their parents instead of getting to play.

It took them a few hours to get everything up on the living and storage space in the middle of the rows of legs. Hermes did most of the transferring as Travis could only move smaller items and there were not that many of those. Once everything was on-board and they'd made a final check to make sure they had forgotten nothing, Hermes went around to remove the anchors and climbed aboard to take the controls.

The boy had already made himself comfortable under the shelter provided by the tent they had built out of canvas, but he came out into the sunlight as Hermes climbed aboard and went for the controls.

He stood next to Hermes as the air hissed and the joints started to move. The boy gave his long time hideout one last look before their transport nudged forward and began its steady journey across the desert.

Chapter 4

The sound of creaking joints and countless little foot like rubber pieces shifting sand quickly became a noise both of them grew accustomed to. After three days they didn't even notice it nor the hum the windmills on each corner of their transport made.

The first night they had travelled through had been the most difficult. Travis barely got any sleep because of the constant movements the sandbanks forced on them, and being away from the safety of his long time underground shelter left him nervous of running into any monsters.

For Hermes the first night posed different problems. The transmission that had caught his attention during the night re-occurred. It was a garbled as it had been before, but he managed to get a general direction from where the signal was coming from. He immediately changed course that way. It seemed like the most likely place to find someone else, but failing that, at least they'd be headed towards something. Even if it was just an automated signal they still might find something there, some information about what had happened and whether there were others still alive.

Then there was his light system that did not work the way he had expected. There were some wires he needed to rerun and doing that in the darkness while on the move was difficult for even him, but he managed it somehow. Once the lights were operational he had no problem seeing where they were going and dodge the worst inclines and declines.

The day that followed was a dull one. There was not much to do besides stare at the endless sand that stretched all around them. Travis spent much of the day under the shelter, away from the sun. He prepared a meal for himself and took a piss over the side. Those were the most exciting things to brighten up his day.

Hermes on the other hand didn't get bored. His mind was busy trying to get something out of the transmission that had occurred that night. He did everything he could, ran every algorithm and filter he could come up with. It was

time consuming and all through the day he got notices of failure and those continued well into the night as more and more tasks completed.

He also occupied his mind with the audio recording he had found. He tried to access memories related to anything he could decipher from it, but all he got was some general knowledge and very little that mattered. The memory corruptions prevented a lot of his searches while others were safely tucked behind higher clearance codes than he had.

The two didn't talk much with each other during those days. Travis mostly tried to sleep and rest even during the day, though at times he came out to stretch his legs.

"Not much to see, is there?" the boy noted on one of his outings. He shaded his eyes with his hand and peered into the distance.

Hermes glanced at the boy standing next to him. "No."

"At least there are no monsters."

"True. Haven't seen any even during the night."

"How much further do you think we'll have to go?"

"I don't know," replied Hermes. It was a honest answer.

And that was it for the day. The rest of it went by in silence until the next one when they exchanged a few more words.

On the morning of the tenth day of their travel they arrived at the top of an especially large bank of sand. It did not have steep slopes so it was no problem for their transport, but it rose high above anything else around them. From atop of it they could see far out into the horizon, especially with the keen eyes of Hermes. Though the heat from the sun created waves in the air that made it difficult to be certain you were really seeing what was there, Hermes had no doubt that he was right.

There were trees in the distance. A whole green sea of them.

Even Travis could see there was something ahead of them and as they got closer he got all the more excited. He gazed, speechless, at the first tree they passed. It was barely as tall as their transport and looked shrivelled up, but it was a tree none the less.

The closer they got the more trees they saw and the more green and alive

they were. They started to tower over their heads and the sand turned into grass covered ground. Soon the forest thickened so that their transport could no longer fit through.

Still, it was an encouraging sight. They could hear birds singing and other animals making noises. The fact there were trees meant there would be fresh water, if not on the ground, then at least some would come down from the sky at some point.

“They're not monsters, are they?” asked Travis after admiring the tall trees in silence for a moment. Some of the noises coming from the forest were dangerous sounding if not outright eerie, especially for someone who had lived his entire life in an environment where the sound of the wind was about the only thing you heard.

Analysing sounds..

Three species of birds identified.

Two species of primates identified.

Seven species of insects identified.

“No. They're normal animals,” replied Hermes. “We can probably hunt them for food.”

“You mean we're going in there?” The boy looked at the forest with some concern. He had lived out in the open for so long that entering the surprisingly dark looking woods made him feel uncomfortable.

“We can't go any further with our transport. Returning to the desert would be foolish after running into something like this.”

“Can't we just skirt its edges?”

“We could, but I don't see why we should do that.” There was a reason Hermes was reluctant to change course. The signal had come straight ahead and if they started skirting the forest it would take them off course. He pondered whether it was time to tell Travis about the signal, but decided not to. The boy did not need to worry about it.

“There's nothing dangerous in the forest,” he assured the boy.

“How do you know that?” demanded Travis.

“All right. You're right. I don't know for certain, but surely what ever may lie

ahead is preferable to returning to the desert to die of thirst or hunger.”

Travis looked torn between the options. He glanced at the forest as if it had appeared with the sole purpose of annoying him. He then turned to the desert and glared at it like an old enemy. He then turned to look at Hermes.

“I hate this,” the boy muttered.

“The choices we make are not always pleasant.”

“Fine. We’ll do it your way.” The choice did not seem to sit well with the boy, but Hermes knew well enough that once Travis agreed to something he stuck to it.

It took them a fair while to gather what supplies they could carry. After that they spent a lot of time hiding their transport under leaves and other plants they could gather. If they had to turn back and return they did not want to find their vehicle ravaged by any possible monsters that might have stumbled upon it.

By the time they had done all that the sunlight was fading quickly and they decided it would be better to camp by the forest instead of venturing inside it in darkness. Hermes gathered some dry wood from nearby and started a fire to keep Travis warm. It was a risk, but the wind and temperature forced them to do it.

Even with the fire the boy huddled close by and wrapped himself in blankets. The difference between the hot day and cold night was severe enough to make it feel worse than it was.

The noises from the forest kept Travis awake for a long time. Hermes stood guard and was relieved when the boy finally fell asleep. He quickly ensured the signal was still coming from the direction he had calculated. The wait was not long as the signal seemed to repeat every night and he was pleased to see they were still on course.

The night went by without incident. No monsters showed interest in their little camp, despite the fire. Hermes hoped it was a sign that there were none around and that the desert he had woken up in had been an exception rather than the rule on how the world was.

After a quick breakfast by Travis – for the first time in a long time he ate a warm meal – the pair made a final check to ensure nothing had gone out of place during the night and that their transport was still safely tucked away in its

hideout.

Hermes hoisted up the heaviest bags over his shoulders while Travis carried some of the lighter ones. They had plenty of food for the boy as well as water and other supplies, most important being the long, sharpened blade Hermes had, which he used to cut the worst of the undergrowth from their path.

Travis eyed around nervously as they entered the forest. Every sound made him jump and raise the small knife he carried. He inched closer to Hermes without even realizing it.

“Don't be afraid boy,” the man said as he noticed it. “Most of the animals here are more scared of us than we could ever be of them.”

“I'm not afraid,” Travis assured him despite clutching his knife so hard his knuckles were turning white. There were things to distract him from the noises, such as all the plants he had not seen before. He was used to living in a world where there were no colours besides grey and various shades of brown. There were flowers of violet and red that especially intrigued him, but touching them or even getting close to them was something he did not feel quite up to. They were too strange.

The going was slow due to the undergrowth and the fact the branches above blocked the sun most of the time. It made it difficult to keep track of their position and meant they had to stop several times for Hermes to get his bearings. At times there were fallen tree trunks that were twice as thick as Hermes was tall. They were forced to make detours and at other times climb the fallen trunks, which was no easy task because of the slippery moss that seemed to cover all of them.

An additional hindrance were the bugs and other small animals that made Travis weary of touching anything. The snakes were the worst and it was more than once that Travis was saved from being bitten only by the quick reactions that his life in the desert had honed.

“We should have stayed in the desert,” the boy muttered as they stopped for a quick rest under a large tree that had killed all others of its kind by blocking sunlight from them. Even the undergrowth maintained a respectable distance to it, leaving the ground nothing but dirt and dead leaves.

"It's not that bad. At least there's fresh water here," pointed out Hermes, referring to the small creek they had passed by. The water had tasted as good as anything they had with them and they had filled several containers from it.

Travis had to concede that much and he gave Hermes a glare as he dug out some quick snacking from his bag. "There may not be monsters, but these bugs and snakes are perhaps worse than they are." He slapped at his neck and killed a small bug that had bitten him.

The bugs did not bother Hermes. He wasn't fully human after all. There was no body heat or blood for them to draw, and even if there was, few places on his body were weak enough to let them get at it. Back in the old days there had been all sorts of sprays to keep such annoyances away, but they had no such luxury now.

"Wrap yourself in as much cloth as you can," he suggested to the boy and tore him some suitable pieces to wrap around his head, neck, and other vulnerable places. The boy did as he was told, though he grumbled about it being too hot to be covered up in cloth. Heat was no new foe for him, but the moisture of the forest made it seem ten times worse than the dry desert air.

Having covered himself as much as he could, Travis continued his quick meal while sitting on a fallen tree trunk. The moss covering it oozed moisture and wet the back of his trousers, but he didn't mind. Feeling such abundance of water around was still new to him and he enjoyed the cold and refreshing feel of it.

He swatted away a few bugs that ventured close to his face, but found that the pieces of cloth had actually helped. At least he didn't notice the bugs any more if they got to his hands or other places. How anyone could live in such a place was beyond him. The desert had its downsides, but at least you didn't get eaten to death by thousands of tiny mouths.

"You really think someone would live here?" asked Travis and eyed his companion.

"Why not?" Hermes put down the stick he had been poking the ground with.

"All these bugs would drive anyone crazy."

"If someone lives here, I'm certain they have found a way to deal with them."

Just like you found ways to deal with the desert.”

Travis grunted something in response and wolfed down the last of his snack. He washed it down with a generous gulp of water. He found that even after such a short time the abundance of water had turned him from a sparing user to one that drank more than his fill.

They continued their trek through the forest until it started to get dark and setting up camp became a priority. They found a sheltered location that had a small creek nearby. While Hermes set up the tents and started a fire, Travis did something he had not a chance to do before.

He bathed in the small creek.

In the desert all he could do was wipe himself with a damp piece of cloth. Here, he could strip naked and have actual flowing water run all over himself. The water was pleasantly warm and clear so he spent a generous amount of time scrubbing himself clean and just enjoying the feel of water on his skin. By the time he returned to camp Hermes had a good fire going and the tents were set up.

He did not stay up long after that as the trek through the forest had taken much of his energy. After a quick supper he crawled into his tent and fell asleep. The noises of the forest did not keep him awake this time.

Hermes spent the night as usual: keeping watch and ensuring the signal was still there as well as trying to dig up memories from his banks. He met little success in uncovering anything new from within himself, but it did make the night go by faster.

The most excitement the night had to offer was an unfortunate snake that tried to bite Hermes after mistakenly venturing close to the warmth of the fire. It lost its head quicker than it could bite and Hermes hung it on a stick he planted solidly on the ground. By morning all the blood had dripped out and after a bit of pondering Travis had gathered enough courage to cook it. To his surprise he found the meat not to be that bad.

After the boy had enjoyed his unusual breakfast they broke camp and continued the journey through the forest. It looked like the day would be much like the previous one until they stumbled on a clearing. It was an unexpected sight.

There were buildings there, much like the ones where Travis had spent most of his life, only instead of being half covered in sand they were covered in thick vegetation. A large, round dish was mounted on top of one of the structures and it pointed straight towards the direction the pair had come from.

“Do you think it's wise to go inside?” asked Travis and eyed the empty, black window holes with reluctance. He knew full well that places like that were the kind where monsters would be found if there were any around.

Assessing structure..

Possible communication station.

Relation to the Jinx project: Secret.

“We should see if there's anything useful inside,” replied Hermes and started to take off the stuff he was carrying. Going inside with all of that would have served no purpose. Best to go in as lightly burdened as possible. “Maybe there are people living here.”

Travis looked around. He saw no sign of anyone living there. Nothing seemed disturbed, there were no clear paths that told of frequent use. Then again, all of those things would have been avoided if the ones staying there wanted to remain hidden. “If there are, they're doing a good job of hiding it.”

“So did you,” reminded Hermes and Travis could not deny that. Announcing your presence was not wise if there were monsters around. You'd never be able to sleep without worrying if you did.

“I still wouldn't go in there,” the boy said and glanced around the clearing once more.

“You can stay out here if you want,” said Hermes and dug out a lamp. While the windows would likely offer plenty of light, he was certain there would be places shrouded in darkness inside. He was as certain of the fact that there was something in there that he needed to find and see. Perhaps the source of the signal, perhaps something else, none the less something that drew him to it.

“If you're going in then I'm coming with you,” said Travis in a surprisingly firm tone. He began dropping his bags as well.

“All right.” Hermes did not feel like there was a point in arguing against it. This way he'd have the boy where he could keep an eye on him. He wasn't too

worried about any monsters. If they were like the rats and wolves they wouldn't pose much of a threat.

Having hidden their belongings and taken with them what they thought might be needed inside, the two ventured through the nearest doorway into the building.

The damp smell of rotting vegetation was strong and the plants around the windows blocked a surprising amount of light from getting in. The floor was covered in moss and dead leaves, which made it slippery and hard to find a steady foothold. The mix of it all was enough to make Travis sneeze loudly. The sound did not echo as much as expected.

Hermes dug out the lamp and lit it to give them some extra light in the darkest spots. Directly opposite to them was a staircase that had paths leading both up and down. Before even considering taking either way they explored the floor they were currently on. All they found were the remains of furniture and some books that were so mouldy you could barely tell what they had been. One room had what looked like the remnants of a map painted on one wall, but it was so deteriorated it was impossible to tell much more than it had been a map of some kind.

“Up or down?” asked Travis as they returned to the stairway.

“Down,” replied Hermes. If there was anything of worth upstairs it would have been ruined in the same manner as everything on the ground floor. The basement on the other hand could well have a bunker of some sort or some other kind of sealed off area that had survived all the years of neglect.

Carefully, he stepped onto the stairs. They were made of concrete, but he still took care to inspect every step thoroughly before putting full weight on it. Even concrete would crumble over time, especially with plants growing all over it. Their roots would dig through it and make the whole structure less solid. Travis followed him, looking impatient at how careful he was.

The darkness was complete on the floor they arrived at. The lamp shone its light and cast shadows on the walls from the roots that hung from the ceiling. A narrow corridor led to the left and to the right. Hermes chose to go to the left without even asking Travis. The boy followed him obediently, though he did

glance around and behind himself. The other end of the corridor looked just the sort of place that would have a monster charging at their backs.

The corridor ended in a small room with a solid looking metal door on the opposite side of it. Embedded in the wall next to it was a panel that still had light on underneath all the roots that covered it. Hermes quickly made his way to it and cleared the roots to get a better view of it.

“What is it?” asked Travis as he tried to peer at it from under his arms.

“It's used to open the door.” Hermes ran his fingers across the numbered keypad and the display that was still functioning. On the display the word 'Welcome' was spelled out in green. He couldn't find any slot where to put the usual key-card such devices tended to work with. As he examined it a bit more he realized it worked by scanning the persons eye for identification.

He pressed the enter key on the keypad.

“Please place your right eye in front of the scanner,” a computer voice came from under the keypad.

Travis jumped at hearing it and peered around. “Where did that come from?”

“Don't worry. It's part of the door system,” assured Hermes as he punched in a number sequence from somewhere deep within his memory and placed his right eye where the scanner could see it.

“Model 404, Hermes. Welcome,” came the computer voice after a moment, closely followed by the sounds of locks opening and machinery running as the heavy metal door started to open.

Travis took some steps back. “How did it know you?”

“It must be part of the project I was part of,” replied Hermes. “Still, I'm amazed it's working.”

“Well, you're working too,” the boy pointed out.

“Good point,” admitted Hermes. Some things humans could build well, to last for decades if not centuries, while others were built to break down and be replaced. At that moment Hermes was glad he belonged to the first category, along with the facility they were in.

The metal door opened to the outside and revealed behind it a staircase leading downwards.

“Are you sure it's a good idea to go down there?” asked Travis. The thought of being sealed in a foreign place behind such a sturdy door did not sit well with him.

“It's the first sign of life we've seen. I think we should investigate it.” What's more, it might offer us some more answers on what had happened, thought Hermes.

“What if the door slams shut?”

“Then we open it from the inside.” Hermes peered inside the doorway and either side of it. There were no roots there so he easily spotted the button that would open the door. “There's a button for it right here,” he pointed it out to the boy. He found another button and pressed it. Lights embedded in the ceiling began to flicker on, though some remained dark.

Travis still looked hesitant, but followed Hermes inside. They went down the stairs and half way down they could hear the door start closing. There was no bend in the stairs, just a straight descent down. At the end of it there was another metal door that opened without problems or identification. Beyond it was a large room that remained well lit despite some of the lights having failed. There were large displays mounted on the walls with control stations underneath them. Long tables sectioned off areas into their own little islands and there were microscopes, test tubes and all sort of other equipment on them.

For Travis all of that was enough to have him looking around with his mouth gaping open, but for Hermes it was familiar. What did catch his attention was the capsule at the back of the room. He quickly made his way to it and wiped the dust from the see-through cover.

Mission update.

Target 2 found.

Chapter 5

Hermes peered through the stained cover of the capsule and examined the thing inside. The mission update still flashed in his field of vision. It was not exactly what he had expected, but given what the first target had been, it shouldn't have come as a surprise.

Inside the capsule laid a girl. Not a little one, but one in her mid teens. Long black hair, a delicate face and a small nose, dressed in a grey shirt and trousers. Hermes glanced at Travis. Was he ready for it?

He shook his head. There was only one way to find out.

It took him a moment to go through what the capsules systems were telling him. It was not designed to preserve pure humans, not for a long period of time anyway. It could hold them for some time, slow their body functions, keep them from ageing as rapidly, but it couldn't keep that going forever.

He was pleased to find her vitals were normal and that there did not seem to be any problems with waking her up. That did raise the question why she was in the capsule. Normal humans didn't get put in them unless there was some medical problem that couldn't be solved right at that moment or to prevent a disease from spreading too quickly before treatment could be rendered.

Hermes found no mention of anything like that in the capsules informations.

“Travis, stop gawking around and come here.”

The boy withdrew his finger that was just about to push a button. He trotted over to where Hermes was and peered inside the capsule. His eyes widened. “Who is she? Is she dead? Why is she in there?” The questions shot out at a pace that would have put a machine-gun to shame.

“I don't know,” said Hermes and made some adjustments to the capsule. “But I'm going to try and wake her up.”

Travis continued to shoot out questions as he examined her. Hermes ignored all of them and let the boy talk to himself. Setting everything up correctly for the wakening process took all his attention. If he set something wrong it could prove fatal for the girl.

“Stand back. There are some gasses inside that will make you feel sick if you breathe them in.” Hermes gave the boy a stern look. Travis took a few steps back and stopped the torrent of questions. He looked on intently as Hermes went through the procedure of waking up the girl.

The capsule popped open with a hiss and some gasses escaped from it. Tarvis made certain not to breathe in any of them even though he wanted to rush in close to see what was going on. The gasses got sucked up quickly by the ventilation system that was letting out a racket, but still working.

“It's all right. You can come closer now,” said Hermes and pushed a few final buttons before directing his attention to the girl.

Travis took a few hesitant steps and leaned in. He saw the girl's chest rise as she took in a deep breath. He looked up at her eyes just as they opened. They were a deep brown. For a moment the two just stared at each other. Then the girl screamed.

The boy jumped back. “What the hell? Why is she screaming?”

Hermes stepped in and put a calming hand on the girl. She tried to sit up and get away, but his single hand was enough to keep her down. “It's all right. We're not going to hurt you. You're safe.” He employed his most calming voice and it worked. The girl stopped screaming and struggling and instead eyed both of them in a silent suspicion.

“Travis, give her some water,” suggested Hermes.

“Ah, ok,” the boy dug out his water container and offered it to the girl. Hesitantly, she grabbed it and brought it to her lips. Her hands shook and made her spill a lot of the water, but some got down her throat.

“Thanks.” Her voice was raspy, but it still stirred something within Travis that he had not known to be there before. He gave her an uncertain smile and took back the offered water container.

“How do you feel?” asked Hermes. He was slightly concerned about her weakened state. It meant she had been in the capsule for a long time.

The girl coughed. “Weak.”

Hermes nodded. “That's to be expected. You've been inside the capsule for a long time.”

"How long?" asked the girl with slight panic in her voice.

"We don't know," replied Hermes.

"What year is it?"

"We don't know."

"What do you know?"

"Not much."

A faint smile crossed the girls lips. "Do you at least know who you are?"

"Somewhat," said Hermes without a hint of humour in his voice. "I'm called Hermes and the boy over there is Travis."

The girl gave Travis a look. He smiled. She turned back to Hermes. "My name is Samantha Jang. Most people just call me Sam."

"Ssamjang?" Hermes found it odd someone would be nicknamed after a Korean food of past times.

"My parents were..odd," said the girl with a small smile.

Travis thought she was quite cute when she smiled.

"Can you sit up?" asked Hermes.

"I can try," Sam replied. It took a bit of help from Hermes for her to get up to a sitting position. She flung her legs over the edge of the capsule bed and sat there. She looked around the room.

"Do you remember why you were put in there?" asked Travis. She was the first person he had seen in years if you didn't count Hermes and the memories he had of his parents were vague at best. He wanted to know more about her.

"I..I think it was my father," replied Sam hesitantly. Wrinkles appeared on her forehead as she concentrated to dig up the memories.

"Do you remember when it happened?" asked Hermes.

"Spring of 2256," replied the girl. Her expression brightened as the memories started to come together. "My father worked here on some project. I lived here with him along with a bunch his colleagues kids. One day he called me here and put me in that capsule. He said it was to protect me."

"Protect you from what?" asked Travis.

"He wouldn't say," replied Sam.

Hermes had an idea what it could have been. 2256 was fifty years after he

had been put in the capsule, that much he had recovered from his memories. It was likely the Jinx project had something to do with her needing shelter from danger. He went to one of the consoles with slight hope in his heart and dug up the calendar. It said the year was 2306. A smile passed his lips. He now had a rough time-line to work with.

“What was the world like back then?” asked Travis without knowing it was the question Hermes had been about to ask.

The girl frowned. “I didn't pay much attention. After a while the news just got too depressing to watch. There were all sorts of troubles. Animals going wild, mutating. Plants taking over places over night. It was like the world had turned mad.” She shuddered and wrapped her arms around herself. Suddenly, the situation dawned on her. “Where is my father? Where is everyone?”

Travis gave Hermes a pleading look. He had no idea how to answer such questions.

“They're probably dead,” said Hermes and glanced at the girl before returning his attention to the screen. “You've been in the capsule for fifty years. The world outside has continued to spiral into chaos. I wish there was any other conclusion to offer you, but there simply isn't.”

Travis's mouth hung open as he stared at the man. He really had no clue when discretion was needed for breaking news. He turned to look at the girl and saw the tears rolling down her cheeks. A sob escaped her lips. The boy dug out a dirty rag from one of his pockets and offered it to the girl. She was too emotional to question whether it was clean enough to use and accepted it and started to dry her tears.

“Are there any others around?” the girl finally asked and eyed the odd pair. She handed the rag back to Travis. There were dirt stains on her face from using it.

Travis shook his head. “I haven't seen anyone in years. You're the first person since my parents.”

“What happened to your parents?”

“The monsters got them.”

“Monsters?” Sam sounded confused.

“You mentioned animals mutating,” interjected Hermes before Travis could reply. “Well, they've turned into real monsters. There are rats big enough to reach my stomach if they stand up and wolves that walk on two legs and act like werewolves.”

“You're pulling my leg,” the girl said in disbelief.

Travis shook his head. “He's telling you the truth. I survived among such creatures in the desert for years.”

“The desert? There isn't a desert anywhere near here.”

“Walk a few days and you'll see it for yourself,” said Hermes and punched up some more information from the computer. He was having a hard time accessing anything more complex than a calendar and basic applications. There had to be files somewhere that told what had been going on at the facility. Some record of events. The only interesting thing he found while perusing through the computer was a video file. He clicked on it to see what it contained.

The image of a man appeared on the wall mounted monitor. He wore a white lab coat and there were other people working behind him. Even with the grainy image you could tell the man was nervous. There was a tag on the bottom of the screen, telling it was a journal entry for a doctor Dave Jang.

“Father!” Sam cried out and tried to jump down from her seat, but there was not enough strength in her legs to hold her upright and she had to quickly grab on to the side of the capsule. Travis helped her back to a seated position.

“Samantha, if you're watching this video then I am dead,” the man started, drawing a sob from the girl. The sadness of his words reflected from his eyes. “I can only imagine what sort of a world you have woken up to, but it was the only way I could save your life. The project..”

The man struggled for words.

“The project leaves no one alive. I swear to you that I did not know the full extent of their plan. I would never have helped had I known. I hope you can forgive me. I have failed as a father. I can only hope the world you wake up to is one where you can live, where there are still others. This room should be safe so use it as your base. Be careful when you venture outside. I have left some items for you in one of the lockers and I've programmed the security system to respond

to you. Hopefully it will still be operational when you wake up. I hope you find this message.”

One of the people working in the background walked up to the man and whispered something to him. Sam's father gave him a frightened look and swallowed hard.

“I don't have much time it seems,” he continued. “We will have to go out to meet them. Sam, I love you. That is why I have done this for you. I hope you wake up to a better world where we have succeeded.”

The recording cut off as Dave pulled out what looked like a gun from his pocket and stopped the recording.

Hermes felt frustrated. Why did no one explain things properly in the videos and recordings that were left behind? It was all useless gibberish.

Mission update.

Targets 1 & 2 found.

Targets are safe.

New mission.

Bring targets Home.

Home? Hermes had no idea where that was. How was he supposed to find it?

“Your father must have really cared about you,” said Travis, trying to calm down the girl that had broken down in tears again. He offered the dirty piece of cloth again so she could wipe the tears away and in the process dirty her face further.

Of course, items! Hermes scanned the room for the lockers. He spotted them on the other end of it, right by the door they had entered from. He quickly made his way to them and opened each one until he found a military style backpack filled with stuff. He dragged it out and returned to where Sam and Travis were.

The boy had managed to calm her down.

“Sam, I found the things your father left behind for you. Do you mind if I go through them?”

The girl looked up into his blue glowing eyes. She shook her head. “Go ahead.”

The backpack contained a lot of things you needed for survival; rations,

water, tools and cooking equipment. There were clothes and glow sticks and flares, but more importantly, there was a compass and a map.

Hermes cleared a table and spread out the map and started to examine it. Sam's father had been courteous enough to circle the area where they were. He quickly traced their route through the desert. On the map the area was shown as fields of crops and forests. The ruins of the city were the only thing remaining of that time.

“Define Home”

Hermes said it quietly enough that Travis and Sam couldn't hear it over their own conversation. The two seemed to pay no attention to him anyway as Travis was busily telling his life story to the girl. She seemed interested enough as she nibbled on a piece of meat the boy had given her.

Searching..

Home: Research Facility #2, Bushmore Drive 7, Old York.

Hermes examined the map. It didn't have street names, save for the most important highways. It did have city names and he was pleased to note Old York was not that far away. Maybe a weeks walk through the forest, less if the terrain became more passable. It'd probably take longer to find the right road within the city. He could only hope there would be a map somewhere along the way or that his memories would guide him to the right place.

Travis was busy describing the wolf creatures and their habits in detail. He recounted his many encounters with them and how he had managed to stay alive; how he had hidden in nooks and crannies they could follow him to, how he had outsmarted them time and time again and how he had managed to hide his little nest from them until the day Hermes arrived.

“Sam, what do you plan to do?” asked Hermes, interrupting Travis. Both turned to look at him, the girl with a lost expression, the boy with a hopeful one.

“I don't know,” admitted Sam.

“You'll come with us, of course,” said Travis. “It's dangerous being out here alone. Not to mention lonely.”

The girl looked hesitant. Hermes couldn't blame her. She had just woken up to a strange world with two unknown persons she knew nothing about. Anyone

would be hesitant to just agree to go with them. "You don't need to decide right now," he said. "It'll take time until you're strong enough to walk any length of time. We'll stay and help you until you can look after yourself. Then we can decide what to do."

The girl needed to be ready for travel, that much was true, but Hermes was not about to give her a chance or reason to say no. The mission did not allow for that.

"He's right," added Travis. "You'll need some help to get your strength up and we'll be happy to do that."

The girl looked hesitant, but it melted away soon enough. She realized she was not in a position to say no as she couldn't even run away if she wanted to. Finally, she nodded. "I'll be grateful for any help you can give me."

So the third member of the group got in. It took her two days to get some strength back to her feet. Once she did she spent a lot of time with Travis exploring the ruins. They didn't find much of interest in there, but it did give her some much needed exercise.

There were no monsters in the complex, as surprising as it was to Travis. He had expected every corner to be infested with some sort of threat. He was starting to think the desert had been a worse place to live.

He found himself enjoying the company of Sam. There was nothing wrong with Hermes, but he lacked some things the girl had. There was something more natural about her, how she behaved and talked, how she reacted to things. It made it that much easier to like her.

Perhaps the most interesting thing about her were the stories she could tell of the past. She could tell of times when there had been plenty of people around and all the ruined structures around them had been in perfect condition and filled with families and people working.

During their exploration trips Travis managed to do a bit of hunting. Snakes were not that fast in getting away and once you had a decent blade in hand they posed little threat. Sam had her reservations about eating their meat, but once she tasted it she found it not to be that bad. Much better than the bits of dried meat Travis had been feeding her.

In return she showed the boy some plants that could be eaten. While the jungle like forest had not been there when she was alive, there had been a garden on the premises and there were some edible root vegetables that had spread and prospered as well as some herbs. Soon they were enjoying a proper snake stew that tasted better than anything either of them had eaten until that point.

Hermes had himself tucked away in the basement most of the time. He didn't worry much about the two kids facing any danger. During the first night he had examined the ruins and found nothing of worth. The only danger posed was crumbling structures and snakes and he trusted Travis enough to handle both of them.

The computers in the basement were still his best chance for finding out more about the past and the Jinx project so he spent most of his time on that, but it was slow going work. It looked like a lot of the data had been wiped before the facility was abandoned.

It made him wonder why that was. If they were trying to help people then surely they would have left as much information behind as possible? Why the secrecy and hiding? It made him question whether the mission he was on was one of good intentions. Why had he been led to the two kids? Why was he tasked with protecting them and bringing them to a facility labelled Home?

While the questions hounded his mind, he did find many interesting little bits in the computers. There were memos detailing the experiments done at the facility – some having to do with climate, others with how to deal with the mutating plants and wildlife that threatened the planet at the time. It was fascinating reading, but offered little to explain how the current situation had come about. Obviously the efforts had failed since the plants were running wild along with the mutated animals, but how had it all started? Nothing told of that.

He did find that the signal he had been receiving was indeed broadcast from the ruins. He managed to track it down to one of the computers, but even the original file was garbled and encrypted so he couldn't learn anything new from it.

As days passed and more and more material had been gone through, Hermes found himself not any wiser than when he had started. Everything was still as big a mystery as before.

It was a full week later that Sam finally declared that she could take care of herself again. She did look better than when she had woken up. Her skin had gained some colour under the sun and while she was still thin there was more energy bubbling from her.

“So, will you come with us or stay here?” asked Hermes as the three sat outside on one of the rooftops of the ruined buildings. Travis and Sam were busy cooking up a snake stew. The two seemed to get along better than Hermes had expected and the fears the boy had expressed over getting along with other people had proven unfounded.

Sam stirred the simmering pot as Travis added a piece of wood to the fire underneath it. The boy glanced at her with an almost pleading look. Having gotten used to another person being around, he did not want her to stay behind. He knew that Hermes wanted to move on and that he would go with him, no matter the girls decision.

The girl looked like she was having a hard time making the decision. She put all her focus on the stew.

“We don't want to push you to make a decision,” continued Hermes. “But we can't stay here much longer. There's a place we need to go to.”

“I understand,” said Samantha. She stood up from her crouching position and turned to look at Hermes. “I'll come with you. I don't know what I'd do here all alone. Seems better to go with you as you at least seem to have a goal in mind.”

Travis grinned as he jumped up to hug the girl. There was a moment of confusion and surprise on her face before it melted into a smile in face of the boys enthusiasm.

Hermes smiled at the sight as well. “That is good to hear. I honestly had my reservations about leaving you here all alone.”

“What? Were you going to force me to come with you?” asked Sam.

“No, nothing like that,” assured Hermes. “I was just prepared for a more lengthy debate about it.” He brought as disarming a smile as he could on his face. Never mind he had been fully prepared to forcefully drag her along. All for the sake of the mission.

The girl gave him a look, but returned to the stew without saying anything more. She stirred it and took a taste. "It's ready."

Travis grinned and handed Sam his cup. It was soon filled with steaming hot stew and the boy blew some air to it to cool it down before taking a spoonful of it. He smiled as if it were the best thing he had ever tasted.

"So when do we leave?" asked Sam as she cooled down her portion of the stew.

Hermes looked up at the sky. It was too late to get much done that day. They needed to gather some supplies, mainly water as two people would need a lot more of it. There was no guarantee there'd be water where they were headed to. There were still a few things he wanted to check himself so leaving wouldn't happen with a quick schedule.

"A few days to get things together," he finally offered to the pair. It was not like they had a tight schedule to follow or a certain date by which they had to be where they were headed.

The two youngsters nodded and continued enjoying their meal. Hermes stood up and headed back to the basement for some more research.

Chapter 6

The forest had grown thicker. Hermes was having difficulty cutting down all the vines and undergrowth so the two following him could move ahead without too much effort. Even though Samantha had regained some of her strength walking still took a toll on her and they had to stop more often so she could gather what strength she had to move on once more.

For three days now they had waded through the thick forest. Even though it was more work than it had been from the edge of the desert to the ruined facility, the mood among the three was much better. There was something to be said for having more people around you to share the burden, the fears and hopes and the job of setting up camp.

Even though Sam could not carry much stuff, she did help with setting up camp which allowed some more free time for Travis and Hermes.

The two days spent preparing the departure had flown by. Hermes had buried himself in the basement looking for final clues, but had drawn an empty card from the pack. Nothing new had been uncovered.

Samantha and Travis had spent their time readying the supplies. They'd caught snakes and prepared the meat so that it would stay edible for a good while. They'd filled containers with fresh water and even prepared some better protection against all the insects. They both now had a hooded cape like costume that covered their heads and faces as well as arms. It did not leave much skin visible, but it also did not become too hot because of the way they'd designed it. Wind could get under it and there were places where air and sweat could get out.

On the fourth day they finally emerged from the forest. They were greeted by a field of grass that seemed to go on forever. Wind made the long straws bend and at times it was like looking at a sea of green water as the waves ran through it.

Travis and Sam were happy to shed their insect resistant clothing and return to something less heavy. Both enjoyed the cool breeze that caressed their skin and they even had a little fun chasing each other in the tall grass. The two laughed and Sam's giggles rang out like a collection of fine brass bells.

Even Hermes had to admit it was nice not to have to work for every footstep as they made their way into the long grass. For him it was waist high but Travis and Sam both almost drowned in it and at times all you could see were their heads as they happened upon a patch of taller grass or a dip in the ground.

As darkness fell they stomped a large circle in the grass to make camp. It was much larger than they needed, just to give some warning if anything happened to be drawn to their fire. The grass did not burn well nor for long, but there was plenty of it so they soon had a fire that needed almost constant feeding, but offered them light and enough warmth to cook up some of the roots Sam and Travis had dug up and brought with them.

Hermes kept a close watch that night. The tall grass would offer the perfect cover for any predator that might be attracted to the fire. Samantha had wrapped herself in a blanket on the opposite side of the fire to where Travis was. The only sounds during the night were the rustling of the grass as gusts of wind blew over and the noise some small insects let out as their mating calls. The blue glow of his eyes scanned the darkness at times, but there was nothing there that would pose a threat.

The morning came without incident and the trio packed up their belongings after a quick breakfast before setting off for another day of walking. It was midday when Hermes spotted something in the distance. Even he couldn't quite tell what it was, except that it was large, brown, and headed their way. He looked around for any sort of cover but there was none to be had. It was grass all around them.

"What is it?" asked Travis as he peered over the tall grass.

"Is it something dangerous?" asked Samantha, looking worried. So far they had not met anything after she had come along. It was bound to have happen at some point.

"I don't know, but it's headed our way," said Hermes and stared at the brown blob. He spotted a flash of white from time to time, but that was all he could see from the distance. He reached back and took out the long blade he had been using to cut their way through the thick forest. He looked around for some place for the two to hide, but there was nothing but grass as far as he could see. He started cutting it down to give himself some room before meeting what ever was

headed their way. "Travis, take Sam and get some distance between us. Lay low, hide in the grass until I come for you."

"But.."

"Just do it!" Hermes shouted and continued cutting down grass. He had a wide path now that gave him a few feet of clear visibility.

"Come on, let's do as he says," said Sam and grabbed Travis by hand. She dragged him with her into the grass behind Hermes.

The creature was getting close now, forcing Hermes to stop cutting the grass and take steps back to the very end of the corridor he had made. He raised the long blade and readied to meet the brown lump headed his way.

It emerged from inside the grass and ground to a halt in the sudden open space it had. Bull like horns protruded from its head and its body was much like a cows, save for its head that resembled one of a bear as well as the feet that ended up in large paws with long, sharp looking nails. It stood up on its hind legs, towering over Hermes nearly twice his height. The roar it let out revealed a row of sharp teeth.

Danger.

Defence mode activated.

Assessing threat level...

Threat level: 87

Use of long range weapons is advised. Avoid hand-to-hand combat. Risk of critical injury high.

"Great," muttered Hermes. The creature launched itself at him quicker than he had expected. Its nails scraped his leg as it swung a mighty paw at him. The long blade cut deep into it, making the creature roar in pain and turn around to hit him again. They had switched sides in the exchange.

The beast lunged at him once more, this time trying to snap its jaws on Hermes. He sidestepped its snout and struck down with the blade. It hit the neck and cut deep. Another roar escaped the beast and then it did something unexpected. It made a step to the side and knocked Hermes off balance, sending him down to the ground. Before he could react, strong jaws had his left arm in a tight grip. The teeth sunk in deep and even the protective layer he had on his

body was not enough to protect him from the force.

Warning.

Damage to left arm imminent.

Critical damage imminent.

Hermes grunted and swung the blade in his right hand. The red warnings flashed as the blade sunk into the creature's eye and deep into its skull. The jaws let go and the creature tried to back away, but there was no give in Hermes. He held onto the blade and was dragged with the beast. Regaining his footing, he swung himself up onto the creature's back and yanked out the blade. The beast roared as he started hacking away at its neck. The blade sunk deep and despite the thrashing the hits were accurate. On the fifth strike the blade found its mark, a soft spot in the spine and cut right through it. The beast immediately slumped down and remained motionless.

He wanted to be certain it was dead so he hacked away at it for a few more moments before finally letting the blade come down to rest.

Danger neutralized.

Defence mode deactivated.

Warning!

Damage to left arm. Joints 1, 3, 4 & 6 inoperable or damaged. Range of movement will be limited. Arm strength at 30%.

He let out a deep breath and took a look at his left arm. The sleeve of his shirt was completely torn and the protective layer beneath it had a large chunk missing, revealing the wires that ran underneath it as well as the metal frame that made up most of his body. He was relieved to see no liquids leaking from the tubes that ran close by. Hermes quickly went to his backpack and dug out a piece of cloth to wrap around the gaping wound. On the one hand it was to protect the exposed area from dirt, but at the same time it was to keep the two kids from worrying.

"It's safe now!" he shouted out once he had the wound covered and a new shirt over it. The torn one he stashed into his backpack. It took a while before the two kids appeared from within the tall grass.

"See? I told you there were monsters," said Travis as soon as he saw the

dead beast. He kept a respectable distance to it.

Samantha stared at it with wide eyes. She then glanced at Hermes. "Are you all right?"

Hermes smiled and waved a hand. "I'm fine."

The girl gave the monster another look before glancing at him again. She seemed to be in disbelief that he had managed to kill it without getting seriously injured.

"I wonder if it tastes good," said Travis. He had managed to gather the courage for it and was now poking at the dead beast. "A lot to eat in it," he noted while inspected one of its meaty legs.

Hermes tossed the blade to him. "Why don't you give it a try? I think I need to rest a bit before we continue on."

Travis grinned and grabbed the blade. He started hacking away at the leg.

"He's not really going to eat that, is he?" asked Sam quietly enough that the boy wouldn't hear her. She had inched next to Hermes as he had sat down.

"He has eaten worse things," replied Hermes.

"Like what?"

"Like that dried meat he gave you. It was from a werewolf like creature."

"Oh." The girl managed to hide most of her disgust, but some of it shone through as she looked on what Travis was doing. The boy had managed to hack off a leg and was busily examining it. He cut off a thin slice of the bloody meat and chewed on it, making faces as if he was trying to determine the vintage of a fine wine.

"He could have at least cooked it," muttered Sam as she turned away.

Hermes didn't feel like arguing. "Why don't we set up camp here for the night? You'll have a chance to cook some of the meat and take it with us. And I really could use a bit of rest after killing that thing."

Travis stopped cutting the monstrosity into pieces. "What if there are more of them?"

Samantha turned to look at Hermes with a worried expression on her.

"If there were more I think they'd have attacked us already," noted Hermes and looked around. "There aren't many places to hide here so even if we go

forward they'd find us easily enough. If we stay here then at least we can make some preparations in case any more are lurking around.”

The two youngsters exchanged uncertain looks before glancing around the flat grass plain. They couldn't argue against the logic.

“Let's at least get some distance between our sleeping place and that..thing,” pleaded Sam. The thought of sleeping next to a dead monster was not the best thing to assure a good nights sleep.

“Yes, we should not sleep right here. Set up camp a bit way off,” said Hermes and stood up. “It'll get messy here, right Travis?”

“Probably,” admitted the boy and eyed the corpse next to him. “Its insides will probably smell too.”

Hermes grabbed his backpack and guided Sam a fair distance away from where Travis was hacking away at the corpse. They started cutting down grass and stomping it down. Some was gathered into large piles to be burned later. By the time darkness began to creep over them they had a large circle of flattened grass to give plenty of visibility and warning if anything came close to the camp.

Travis lugged over some pieces of meat just as Hermes had gotten a fire going. The boy had bloody hands and some had splattered on his clothes, but otherwise he was remarkably clean considering what he had been up to.

“These should be the best parts,” said the boy as he threw the meats onto a grass bed.

Sam did not look convinced and she kept her distance to the meat as well as Travis. She didn't offer to help in the cooking, leaving Travis to handle it alone. He did not seem to mind and was whistling happily as he strung pieces of meat by the fire. The smell of cooked meat soon permuted the small camp and Sam had a hard time denying that it had her mouth watering. She inched closer to the camp fire and waited impatiently.

Hermes spent his time resting. Neither of the two had noticed his injured arm. The warning still flashed in his field of vision. There was little he could do about it. A screwdriver was the only tool he had that might have been of use, but even that was too big for the little parts that needed repair. Not that it would have helped if he had a smaller one since he didn't have the needed spare parts. There

were limited repairs built into the arm that might eventually be able to strengthen the damaged joints, but even those would be far from fully repaired. He'd have to make do until they'd come across a place with suitable spare parts, which might be a long time, though their destination might have something in store if he was lucky.

Travis inspected the pieces of meat and nabbed one of the smaller ones and carved a slice from it. He munched it down quickly and cut another piece. He then noticed Sam staring at him with the sort of eyes that seemed to beg for a piece.

"Do you want a piece?" he asked. It had grown dark and the flickering light from the fire made it hard to read facial expressions as there were too many shadows.

"Since you didn't bother cooking anything else I might as well try it," replied Sam, not wanting to give the impression she did so out of free will. Still, as Travis sliced her a piece and she bit a piece from the tender meat there was no denying how delicious it was. It tasted almost like beef, but with a slightly more gamy flavour.

"How is it?" asked Travis after eating another piece.

"It's good," admitted Samantha, even though reluctantly. "Can I have more?" She licked the grease and juices from her fingers.

"Of course. There's plenty to go around," said Travis and sliced a few pieces for her. The two continued enjoying the meal for a long time. As the meat strung around the fire cooked Travis removed them and wrapped them tightly in canvas and cloth to keep the juices and heat in. After an hour he packed the meats in bags that Sam's father had put in the backpack he had left her. According to the instructions it would keep meat and other perishable goods edible for a good while even in tropic heat.

With a full stomach both of the youngsters fell asleep quickly, leaving Hermes to watch over them. He kept the fire going all through the night with the slow burning grass. He hoped he had been right about the monsters. If another one of them came running at them now he had doubts on whether he'd be able to kill it. At the very least he'd suffer more damage, further impairing his ability to

see through the mission.

But his assessment turned out to be the right one. No monster bothered them during the night and when they wrapped up camp in the morning there was no sign that anything was headed their way.

The group wandered on for the entire day. Travis and Sam were back to exchanging stories. The meal they had shared the previous night seemed to have laid to rest any reservations the behaviour of Travis had brought up. Samantha seemed to have forgiven him for it completely because he had been right about the meat being tasty.

It was midday when they started seeing ruins in the horizon. The closer they got the taller the crumbling concrete shells looked. They happened upon the remains of a paved road and started to follow it into the ruined city. The grass had pushed its way through the pavement, making it crack and splinter into large chunks.

Travis started to feel nervous as they passed the first buildings. He had grown up in a similar place and he knew the dangers that could be lurking in the darkness. "Are you sure this is wise?" he asked Hermes while glancing at the dark ruins. He didn't like how they were walking in so openly. By the looks of it the ruins extended far in front of them and that left a lot of room for someone to hide and observe.

Sam was feeling nervous as well. The fear of monsters had been instilled in her by the encounter on the grass plain and as she looked around and reflected on the stories Travis had told her. She could not help but feel like they were walking straight into a nest of trouble. She glanced around constantly, jumping at every sound of loose stones falling down because of the wind.

"It'll be fine," assured Hermes and pushed onward. So far he had not seen any signs of life, no footprints or anything. Rusty metal poles rested against crumbling down concrete. The grass that had filled the landscape behind them was starting to give way and all that was left were the most resilient of weeds that pushed through the tarmac. There was no open ground left. Everything was covered by the once black, now shallow grey coloured pavement.

They came to an intersection. Travis and Sam had huddled closer together

the further into the ruins they went. Hermes noted the green signs with white text on them at the street corner. One said Fall Avenue and pointed north while the other said Brown Street and pointed west. No matter which way he looked, the ruins went on with seemingly no end to them.

Finding the right street looked like a daunting task.

“Hermes, what are we doing here?” asked Travis. He and Sam had inched closer to him. The ruined buildings towered high above them even in their skeleton like state. The wind howled through them in an eerie symphony which made the pair all the more nervous.

“Finding Home,” replied Hermes and looked around. Just walking around randomly searching for the right street would take weeks, if not months. He had no idea as to how large the city really was. They needed a map and the only place likely to have one was inside the buildings. They just needed to find the right one.

As they'd walked through the streets Hermes had seen rusted store signs, some still hanging on to the crumbling concrete, some fallen on the ground.

“Home?” asked Sam.

Hermes nodded. “Home.” He couldn't explain it in full detail to the pair. It did not seem like it was information they would need to know. They'd start asking question about the mission and why they were targets and all manner of other things he had no answer for.

“How are we going to find anything here?” asked Travis.

“We need a map,” admitted Hermes. At least that the two could help with. “Try to find a store of some sort. A place where they'd have maps.”

“What's a store?” asked Travis, garnering a surprised look from Sam.

“You don't know what a store is?” asked Samantha.

Travis shrugged his shoulders.

“You forget where he has grown up,” said Hermes.

“Oh, right.” Sam looked a bit embarrassed. She turned to the boy and explained. “A store was a place that sold all sorts of things. Food, drinks, other useful items, maps..”

“So how do I know what's a store and what isn't?” asked Travis. The thought that you could simply walk into a building and buy food from there seemed

amazing to him, though in the stories Sam had told there were even more wondrous things mentioned. He felt a slight sting in his heart over having grown up in a world where such things were nothing but crumbling down memories.

“Look for large windows and shelves inside,” suggested Sam.

Travis recalled seeing such places in the desert ruins. They'd been empty for the most part, save for a few items here and there. He figured they must have been the first places to be emptied as they were easy to get to. That, or the elements had done their job with the easy access a large window provided.

They started their search and headed north. There were several places that looked like stores, but even a glance through the window told there would be nothing there. Many were completely empty, some had remnants of shelves covered in dirt. It was usually Hermes that had to do the checking since both Travis and Sam had reservations about sticking their heads inside. They feared monsters and Hermes couldn't really blame them for it.

Even though there had been no sign of any, there were far too many good place to hide for there to be any certainty of it.

As it started to get dark the urgency within Travis and Sam grew. If it had been up to them they'd have been out of the city already and headed somewhere else. As it stood, sticking with Hermes seemed like the best option, despite his insistence on staying in the ruins. At the very least he was the one who'd protect them if something did pop-up.

In the dimming light they had to stop the search for a map and try and find a suitable place to spend the night. They found such a place in one of the smaller ruins. It was a basement room with a solid metal door that still opened and closed and could be locked from the inside. There were a few crates there along with a lot of dust and dirt, but given that the door was the only way in besides a narrow window, it was as safe a place as any they could hope to find.

The cold meat made for a not so uplifting final meal of the day before the two youngsters fell asleep. Hermes stood guard as usual, though the night was much more lively than others before it. The sounds that came echoing down even through the metal door left no doubt that there were monsters in the city. The sounds of fighting and cries of pain echoed down and startled Travis and Sam

awake. They did not sleep much that night.

They were all thankful when morning came and the first rays of sunshine tricked down from the narrow, barred window that was on the street level. Hermes went out alone to make sure it was safe as the pair remained in the safety of the room, enjoying breakfast. They both looked spooked and Hermes was certain he'd have trouble trying to convince them to stay in the city, searching for a map.

After what he had heard during the night, he could not blame them.

He was relieved to see the streets as empty as they had been the previous day. There were no signs of the monstrosities that had kept them on edge the entire night. As he returned to the hideout he found himself facing two very determined looking youngsters.

"Hermes, we think we should leave the city," said Travis. Next to him Sam nodded in agreement.

"And go where? Out into the grassland?" asked Hermes.

"Away from the city," said Sam. "There are monsters here. There weren't that many in the grasslands. We can find a safer place."

Hermes was thinking furiously. He couldn't allow the two to leave the city. Even just one day might be enough to convince them that it was worth staying if they found a map. "If we leave the monsters might follow us. Here we have places to hide, out in the grass we'd be sitting ducks," he finally said, hoping to scare the pair into staying.

The two did exchange worried looks.

"But if we start walking now we'd get far enough away from the city that they wouldn't be able to catch up," said Sam.

"You're assuming they wouldn't be quicker than us," pointed out Hermes. "We know they can be faster, right Travis?" He gave the boy a look. There'd be no way for him to deny it.

"It's true. They're likely faster than us," said Travis reluctantly. The wolf creatures he had had to deal with his entire life could outrun him, but they weren't that smart which had allowed him to escape many times. He seemed to hesitate more over whether leaving was the best choice. Doubts started to gnaw

at him.

Sam glared at the boy. She did not appreciate him starting to falter from the agreed upon line.

“Give it a day, all right?” asked Hermes. “If we don't find a map, we'll hunker down for one more night here and then leave.”

Travis glanced at Samantha, as if seeking approval for agreeing. The girl frowned, but finally nodded.

“We'll give it today,” agreed Travis.

“Good,” said Hermes with a smile. “Let's not waste time and get on with the search.”

The group left the cellar to walk the empty streets and search for the map.

Chapter 7

It was pure chance and Hermes spared no thanks to his luck for it taking place. They had spent barely two hours searching when they stumbled upon a run down gas station. From within they found a crumpled up fold-out map that looked ready to fall apart, but with careful measures allowed them to examine how the city was laid out.

There had been no monsters to mention of, but despite that the two youngster following him were huddled together and glancing around almost frantically. Neither felt easy in the shadow of the ruined buildings and both refused to enter any dark area.

As soon as Hermes had the map laid out on the rusty surface of the remains of what used to be a vehicle, the two crowded next to him and examined the faded ink. It took a moment to get their bearings and find any signs of where they actually were. Hermes had to send Travis to take a look at the faded signs on the nearest street corner. The boy reluctantly did so, but as he returned it was simple enough to see where they were.

It took Hermes a while to find the road he was looking for. The good news was it would lead them away from the city and its centre and towards the outer edge of it. The bad news was it looked to be quite a long way and it might mean spending another night in the city.

“This is where we need to go,” said Hermes and pointed to a spot on the map, north-west from where they were. He traced a route with his finger to their current location.

“That seems like a long way,” noted Travis as he followed his finger tracing the route.

“Can we even make it before dark?” asked Sam from next to him. The anxiety in her voice told how much she liked the idea of spending another night in the city.

“It does take us away from the city centre,” said Travis, trying to find something positive about the situation.

“But not by a short route,” complained Sam. She looked at the map. If they backtracked a bit they could be out of the city in a few hours. Venturing deeper, even if it was circling around the very centre, was not something she was looking forward to.

“We’ll find a safe place to stay,” assured Hermes. “Look around. There are plenty of buildings with cellars similar to the one we spent last night in.”

“Plenty of places for monsters to be waiting for us, too,” said Sam and stared down the blue eyed man.

“They won’t bother us in daylight,” said Hermes in the sort of voice that left no room for arguments. “We’re wasting time arguing about this. We need to keep moving if we want to make any decent length of the way.”

The two youths looked at each other. There was hesitation about Travis while Sam looked determined to get out of the city. Something seemed to pass between them and Sam rolled her eyes.

“Fine. We’ll go with you,” she said and looked grumpy.

Travis smiled, trying to alleviate her tension, but she ignored him completely while Hermes rolled up the map and hoisted his bag back on his shoulder.

“Let’s go then,” said Hermes and started the way he had plotted out on the map. After a moment the two youngsters followed him, though neither seemed too enthusiastic about it. They kept glancing at the buildings, expecting some monstrosity to jump out at any time.

Despite their fears, the streets remained empty. The only sounds came from the occasional gusts of wind that sent pieces of paper flying across the ground and the store signs the creaked as the wind slammed into them. Every sound made heads turn and sometimes Travis or Sam jumped out of surprise, but that was all they ended up having to worry about on their journey.

The sun was dangerously close to the horizon when they finally entered the street Hermes had picked out. They had gone from crumbled skyscrapers to what looked like an industrial zone with large warehouses and fallen down chimneys.

“Which one are we supposed to go to?” asked Travis with urgency in his voice as he glanced at the setting sun. The shadows cast by the buildings were getting dangerously long. Soon there would be only darkness.

Hermes scanned the close by walls. Many of the crumbled buildings were surrounded by fences or stone walls. Some still stood as if nothing had happened. He spotted a faded number seven by one of the gates.

“It's that one,” he said and pointed to the gate.

The group went forward and entered the premises. What they found was a large building that seemed to have stood the test of time better than many of its companions. There were even a few intact windows left on the second floor of it. There was a rusty metal door next to a pair of larger doors that seemed big enough to fit through one of the smaller buildings they had passed on their way.

“What if there are monsters?” asked Sam just as Hermes was about to pull open the rusty door.

“I'll deal with them,” replied Hermes and pulled out the long blade he had been carrying strapped to his bag. With the equalizer in hand, he pulled open the door. The hinges protested for being put to work after such a long time, but the door opened.

A large hall was revealed behind it. There were a few crates scattered around it, but other than that it looked to be empty. Hermes motioned for Travis and Sam to follow as he stepped inside. Hesitantly, the pair did so. Being left alone outside did not feel as appealing as the safety walls around you could offer.

Dust covered the stone floor in a thick coating that blew around in small clouds around their feet as they stepped in. Sam sneezed. The echo of it made them all stand still for a moment, listening intently for any response to it. After a moment Travis let out a sigh of relief.

They spent a moment exploring the area they had arrived in. There wasn't much there and the only thing that looked like it would be worth exploring more was the staircase in one of the corners that led downward.

“We need to find shelter,” said Sam and gave Travis and Hermes a pleading look. There was genuine panic and fear behind her eyes.

Hermes went to the metal door and pulled it shut. He compensated for the lost light by pulling out a torch from his bag and shining its light around. The closed door wouldn't hold away any monsters though since there were plenty of open window frames dotting the side of the building.

“Let's explore below,” he said and headed for the stairway.

“Come on. Maybe we'll find a safe bunker like we did last night,” said Travis and gave Sam the sort of look that begged for her to agree.

“It's not like I can go back outside,” said Samantha and followed the two men down the stairs.

The eerie blue glow of Hermes's eyes and the light from the torch were the only things allowing them to see in the dark corridor the stairs ended up in after going down two stories worth of stairs. There was a bend in the corridor and after that a metal door. There was a panel next to it with a red light lit.

“That looks secure,” noted Travis as Hermes started looking over the panel. The boy knocked the metal door and got a sound metal ring in response.

“If we can open it,” muttered Sam. A solid metal door did little to help you if you were stuck on the wrong side of it. As it stood they were neatly trapped with no way to escape if some monsters came down the stairs. It made her feel all the more nervous.

“It looks the same as the one where we found you,” said Hermes and punched in numbers on the keypad he had managed to fold out.

“See? Hermes will get it open. There's nothing to worry about,” said Travis and stepped closer to Sam to provide her with some comfort.

They both watched as the man worked on the keypad. The code he had used in the facility they found Sam in did not work. He was digging through his memory for something else. Finally, the right code popped up from his memory and as soon he punched it in the door started to open.

Hermes was the first to go in. He held the long blade at the ready and the torch pointed forward. Travis and Sam followed closely behind. The room they entered was well lit and almost as large as the warehouse above. The far wall was dominated by what looked to be a huge computer. Other than that the room looked to be empty.

The group ventured inside, Travis and Sam looking around like frightened rabbits.

“What is this place?” asked Sam. She looked at the black lines on the floor that formed a circle. She steered clear of it. A bit of a way off there was another

circle like it.

“Home,” said Hermes and inspected the surroundings. They all jumped as the door behind slammed shut.

“We're trapped,” complained Travis with an anxious voice. He started towards the door only to be stopped by Hermes putting a hand on his shoulder.

“I can open it again. See? There's a panel just like the one on the outside.”

Travis nodded. He glanced at Sam. The girl looked as worried as ever despite the fact they were now safe for the night. No monster was going to get through that door.

“Why do you call this place home?” asked Sam as Hermes started towards the large computer. There was a single capsule in front of it, just like the one he had woken up from and where they had found Samantha in. The only difference was that this one was empty.

Hermes looked around the room. He saw the two black circles on the floor and the lines that led out from each one only to be combined into one that went straight to the computer.

Mission successful.

Guide targets 1 and 2 onto the circles.

“I call it home because it is just that for me,” said Hermes. “Why don't you step into the circle?”

Travis looked up at him. He had only just spotted the circles.

“Are you sure that's wise?” the boy asked.

“It's just paint on the floor,” replied Hermes.

The boy shrugged his shoulders and stepped in. The moment he was inside it a see through tube came down from the ceiling and trapped him inside.

“Travis!” Sam cried out and rushed to the dome. She banged her hands against it just as Travis did on the other side. Their pounding had no effect on the thing. Travis seemed to shout for help, but no voice came through, telling of how well built the trap was.

“Help him!” pleaded Sam as Hermes walked over. He put his hand on the dome, but made no effort to break it.

“Why aren't you helping?” demanded Sam as she continued to pound

against the see through material.

Hermes turned and looked down at her. "Because it's not my mission."

Having said that, he reached down and grabbed the girl. With little effort he hoisted her up on his shoulder and carried her over to the other circle. She struggled but there was no escaping the grip that had been put on her. Hermes threw her inside the circle. She yelped in pain as she slammed against the hard floor and a similar see-through tube landed to trap her and stifle any further cries from her.

"Well done, Hermes," came a voice from the front of the room. There was something familiar about it.

"Who are you?" asked Hermes as he spun around and examined the man. White coat, grey hair, old. He wasn't really there. It was obvious by the flickering that he was a hologram or some other sort of projection.

The man looked surprised. "Who am I? You of all should know." His expression grew distant for a bit, as if he were trying to recall something or live through a memory. "Ah, I see now. You have been..damaged. That is unfortunate, but nothing we can't repair. I'm amazed you managed to accomplish your mission in your state."

Hermes stared at the man. He certainly knew a lot. "Who are you?"

The man sighed. "I suppose I will have to explain. My name is James Fandergeld. I'm the man who gave you your mission. To find these two kids." The hologram motioned towards Travis and Sam who were both still banging against the walls of their prisons. The look of fear on both of them could not have been more complete.

"Why?" asked Hermes. The plight of the two youngsters didn't bother him that much now that the mission was over, but having spent so much time with the two he couldn't just throw them away without understanding the reason behind it.

For a moment James looked regretful, but he soon turned back into the calm looking man as before. "It was what the Jinx project was made for."

The hologram walked up to Hermes and looked him straight in the eyes. "Humanity was at its peak at the time in many ways. There was nothing left for

us to fear, nothing to push us forward. Many became lazy. They stopped caring about learning how the world works, All they needed to know was that with a push of a button they could have food and push another button and there would be entertainment; music, movies, what ever they wanted. Myself and a few of my colleagues saw this and decided to act. We could not allow humanity to continue on the path it was headed down. We knew we had to act before we degenerated into nothing but mindless zombies, nary a step above the primal ancestors that climbed down from the trees and served as the foundation for all humanity had achieved.”

“So you created the problems? The monsters and the plants that ran wild?” Hermes stared at the hologram. All he got in response was a grin.

“We did more than that, but I suppose those were the most visible parts of it,” said James and walked over to where Travis was still banging against the wall. “You have no idea what all we did and I don't have the time to explain it all to you now. We'll see if we can repair the damage that has occurred to you, perhaps you will then remember, but for now let's say the monsters, as you call them, were the thing that mattered the most. It forced humanity to face a danger once more. To focus its energy towards survival rather than indulging their desires.”

A sad smile passed James's lips. “The plan worked better than we expected.”

“It got out of control,” said Hermes.

The hologram nodded and turned to walk over to where Sam was trapped. The girl had stopped pounding the walls and instead had slumped down onto the floor. She looked up at James with the sort of defeated look you'd expect from someone who had been in prison for their entire life.

“We never intended for it to destroy humanity, only to make it stronger. We did not understand what we unleashed. Some of my colleagues were horrified at what we had done and worked to counter it, but it was too late. Some agreed with me and continued with the project, with slight modifications.”

“Samantha Jang. Her father was one of those who opposed you?” asked Hermes.

“Dave Jang,” said James with a voice thick with memories. “Yes, he believed

what we started could be stopped, should be stopped. We couldn't allow it, of course. His entire team was cleansed.”

The hologram turned his attention back to Sam and looked at her with new found interest. “I'm surprised she survived. Dave always was a clever man, but to have saved his daughter for such a long time..unexpected.”

“So you laid waste to humanity. What do you want these kids for?” asked Hermes. He couldn't quite wrap his mind around it all. It was all too twisted to make much sense.

“Ah, yes. Your duty,” said James and turned to face Hermes once more. “We did not want humanity to die, as I said earlier. Even with the rampant monsters and plants we knew some would survive and they would be the strongest individuals, ones who could make tough decisions, who had ingenuity and intellect to adapt to a changed world. They would serve as the seeds for a new humanity. A better one. A stronger one.”

“We just needed to find them. That was why we put Seekers like you all around the world. The satellites in orbit monitored everything going on and as soon as the population had dwindled down to the last viable pool of men and women, the Seekers were activated to round them up and lead them to facilities like this one. You are the last one. With these two we can now start the final phase of the Jinx project.”

“What is that?” asked Hermes, though he had a good idea where things were headed.

“Rebuilding humanity. Better and stronger than it was before,” said James.

“The thriving society that was here before could not defeat what you unleashed. How can a scrawny group of youths rising from the rubble do it?” asked Hermes. It seemed like an impossible proposition. They had no weapons besides basic blades. Even the rats would give them a hard time and they were the smallest of the threats. What sort of monstrosities were there besides them? How many had they missed by just pure luck on their way through the city and the jungle?

James smirked at the question. “We're not going to use the people you Seekers have gathered. Not directly anyway.” His expression grew distant again

and after a moment the ceiling above Travis and Sam opened and metal arms with all sorts of instruments attached to them lowered down along with a metal slab that served as a table.

“See, what we need from them is their DNA. We need samples of their tissue, of their organs,” explained James as the arms grabbed the two youth despite their best efforts to fend them off. Both were lifted onto the metal slabs and pinned down. “That is what their use is, what the use of everyone before them has been. They will give us a blueprint from which to clone their successors. We can create thousands of them every day. We can put minds into machines or bodies much like your own. Once the battle is won there will be enough different lines of DNA to allow humanity to prosper through natural means of reproduction.”

Had Hermes been completely human he would have called the man insane. What else could you call someone like him? He showed no emotion over destroying an entire civilization. There was a part of Hermes that wanted to take the few steps that separated him from James and strangle the life out of him. Not that it would have accomplished anything because he was not really there, but it would have perhaps offered some measure of justice and satisfaction. But that part of him was suppressed by layers upon layers of code that dictated his actions and behaviour.

So when the arms stuck needles into both Travis and Sam, Hermes did nothing but watch. The two youngsters soon faded into unconsciousness and the metal arms started their real work. Clothes were cut to pieces and removed. Blood flowed as the first cut into skin was made. The arms worked fast and with precision only a machine could achieve. The two bodies were opened up in no time and dripping organs hoisted out onto trays that quickly disappeared into the cavernous complex that was the factory. Flesh was carved out, tissue removed, and soon there was nothing but a skeleton left on the slab, spotless and clean as if picked at by a flock of hungry ravens.

Then even the bones were cut and snapped off, carted into the depth of the facility. The arms retracted back into the ceiling along with the protective shell that had imprisoned the two young ones that were now gone.

It was all over before Hermes could bring himself to do anything but watch. Then it was too late to do anything. The two lives had been extinguished and the pieces left carted over to be analysed and prodded for secrets to their survival and how they were better than those that had come before them.

“Your mission is complete,” said James and walked over to Hermes. “The job of the Seekers is done, for now.”

“What do I do now?” asked Hermes. It felt odd not having a mission to accomplish. He had been tasked with protecting the two young ones on the journey and now that they were dead he could not help but feel like he had failed, despite knowing his mission had been a success. Travis had not been a bad boy and his company had grown on him during the journey. The same went for Sam, despite her late introduction.

“I think it's time we fixed you up,” said James and motioned him towards the open capsule. “You will still be of use to us.”

“How?” asked Hermes as he laid down onto the soft bed of the capsule.

“We might not succeed as planned,” said James just as the capsule closed.

For a moment Hermes looked out through the see through cover of the capsule. He then closed his eyes and went to sleep, waiting to be activated once more.