

# ROCKET BOY

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Rocket Boy lived under the knot of ferroconcrete ribbons where the road from the spaceport joined the beltway that girdled the city. He'd made a kind of nest in a high ledge beneath the slope of an on-ramp, and although traffic rumbled overhead day and night, it was as cozy and safe as anywhere on the street because it could be reached only by squeezing through a kind of picket fence of squat, close-set columns. Even so, Rocket Boy clutched a knife improvised from the neck of a broken bottle while he slept in his nest of packing excelsior, charity blankets and cardboard. The first lesson he'd learned on the street was that you needed to carry a weapon with you at all times.

The ledge was divided into two by expansion rollers at the joint between ramp and road. The old man who lived on the other side of them had been a senior civil servant before the war. He'd been arrested and tortured after the enemy had taken the city, serving two years in solitary confinement before being released and discovering that his family had been killed when a rogue cruise missile had levelled their neighborhood. He and Rocket Boy had quickly come to an accommodation. The old man guarded Rocket Boys nest while he was out on the street selling cigarettes; Rocket Boy brought the old man hot dogs and soup from the charity workers who visited the intersection every night, distributing free food and blankets to the people who lived there.

More than two hundred people lived amongst the support columns and steep concrete slopes under the intersection, in old cars, cardboard boxes, and crude huts built from dead shopping carts and pallets and sheets of plastic tied down with twine and electrical wire. Some were refugees and war orphans like Rocket Boy; some were the city's orphans, hard-eyed, feral runaways; some were men and women turned old before their time by drink, drugs, and madness. There was a little flock of shopping carts and other small mechs too, on the run from the wrecking gangs that roved the bombed-out industrial sector to the west. They stood all day in sunlight, trying to recharge their rotting batteries, and at night rolled about trying to be helpful and mostly getting in the way, like sick pets no one had the heart to put down.

The perimeter of the spaceport was only a mile away from the intersection. Once or twice a week, a heavy lifter took off from one of the massive blast pits, shaking the ground and splitting the sky with a long peal of thunder. The crazy people ran about beating their heads and tearing at their clothes, and the carts and mechs were disturbed too, racing about in circles like bugs suddenly exposed to light. At night, Rocket Boy liked to sit on an embankment that overlooked the spaceport, watching ordinary jets and ground-to-orbit shuttles glide through the

white columns of searchlights towards runways outlined by mile-long tracteries of red and green lights.

Occasionally, there was a night launch, the spacecraft small and sharp in crossing beams as it brewed clouds of steam and clouds of fire, rising achingly slowly at first, and then accelerating away in a rising curve, a spear of flame dwindling into the starry sky. Rocket Boy watched it go with a raw longing that ached like a fresh wound, the earth beneath him throbbing with the thunder of its engines.

Rocket Boy was sixteen. When he'd first come to live under the intersection, he'd called himself Vigo, the hero of a naive children's book he'd read a couple of years before the war, when he'd still been a kid, when he'd still had a family and a future, but he'd soon discovered that on the street nothing, not even your name, is your own. The young hoodlum in charge of the gang of streetsellers had started to call him Rocket Boy because of his unnatural fascination with the spaceport, and because that was the name of the brand of cigarettes he sold loose at the intersection of Fourth Avenue and Industry Way, and the name had stuck. Rocket Boy worked from dawn to dusk seven days a week, selling cigarettes to the men and women who worked in the fabricants and warehouses. Time moved oddly on the street. Every day seemed interminable, but because each was the same as the one before, weeks and months slipped by like vehicles streaming along the freeway. In winter, dust blew out of the north and shrouded the city in a yellow pall. In summer, flocks of noctids swooped through the dusk air after insects, and the inhabitants of the little shanty town under the intersection knocked them out of the air with sticks or crude bolas made from stones and wire, and made a gummy soup by boiling up their wings.

One summer night, in the middle of a long heat wave, Rocket Boy had given up on sleep and was sitting high on an embankment, watching the lights of the spaceport shimmer across kilometers of blast pits and landing strips and concrete aprons, when a vehicle braked hard somewhere above him, a sliding screech, a blare of horns. As Rocket Boy scrambled to his feet, a man vaulted the safety barrier and slid down the dry bank, asking him if he know a place to hide. He was taller and skinnier than anyone Rocket Boy had ever seen, with dark brown skin, and black hair greased back from a hawkish profile. He wore heavy boots with steel buckles and straps, filthy jeans, and a denim jacket with many zippers and fasteners. A small leather duffel bag was slung over his back. There was a gold socket above one ear, and his eyes were capped with data lenses that blankly reflected the last of the light dying out of the sky as he looked up at the edge of the road above, head cocked. A moment later, Rocket Boy heard the wail of sirens, and whirling blue lights swept past on the beltway.

“Got into a little trouble,” the man said. “My mate will lead ‘em a good old chase, but they’ll catch him soon enough, and he’ll have to tell ‘em where I jumped, so I need a place to lay low. Just for a few hours, until the maintenance workers’

shift changes, and I can sneak into the port. Help me out, and I'll give you your heart's desire."

Rocket Boy knew that the man was trouble, but he also knew that the man was one of the spacers who travelled amongst the worlds beyond, worlds full of wonders beyond measure or understanding, where he so very badly longed to go, and he led the man to the intersection, through the close-set maze of pillars, to his nest. The man declared it an ideal bolt-hole, took a swig of whiskey from a flat bottle, and promptly fell asleep. Rocket Boy, a hundred questions bubbling through his head, sat in the dark, knee to knee with his strange guest, listening for police sirens, and presently fell asleep too.

He woke when the spacer stirred. It was three or four in the morning, and still dark. The traffic on the beltway was as sparse as it ever got. Rocket Boy took the spacer, who told him that his name was Arpad, to the solitary standpipe that supplied water to everyone who lived under the intersection, and then walked with him along Industry Way toward the bus stop at a crossroads. Arpad told him that he was from Earth, like most of the human race; said that by the universes clock he was seven hundred and fifty years old, give or take a decade, but most of that was down to time compression; said that he'd visited most human worlds, and this one was the most miserable he'd ever seen.

"Of course, you just had yourselves a revolution, but still."

"It was a war, not a revolution. Our enemy took our country from us." Rocket Boy hesitated, then said in a rush, "One day I want to go up and out. There is nothing for me here."

"If you go up and out, you'll lose everything you ever knew or loved. People, your home, your country . . . You can't ever go home again; time compression will see to that."

"I've already lost all that. If I went up and out, I wouldn't ever want to come back."

Arpad studied Rocket Boy sidelong. "I guess the war here didn't do you any favors, huh?"

Rocket Boy shrugged, feeling a twinge of the old bitter hurt he could never bury deeply enough. He'd never talked about it with anyone; not even the old man.

"What was it about, this war of yours?"

"The enemy wanted our fertile land. There isn't enough, just strips here and there around the edge of the land. The enemy had a bad drought, and they took our country because they wanted to steal our good river land."

“What I don’t understand is, when you got a continent here size of Asia and the Americas combined, and everyone lives at the edge of the sea, how come you people don’t try to settle inland? Man I work for came here to hunt the big critters that live there, but there’s no kind of critter so fierce people can’t deal with them.”

“It isn’t the monsters,” Rocket Boy said. “It’s the wild itself.””

He told the spacer about the deserts beyond the mountains where no rain fell for years on end, about the endless dust storms and tornados and lightning storms. About how, in the center of the wild, it was so hot in the day that water boiled, and so cold at night it froze. He told him the story everyone learned in school, about the man who in the early days of the settling of the world had claimed he was the son of God, and had led a hundred followers across the mountains to a valley where water could be raised from deep aquifers. But insects had eaten most of their crops, dust storms had destroyed the rest, and when survivors had been discovered two years later, they had resorted to cannibalism.

“I guess things always look simpler from orbit,” Arpad said. They had reached the crossroads, and he was looking around at the long, low mounds of rubble that before the war had been warehouses and factories. “I can’t access the city’s infosystem, kid. Are you sure this is where I get a bus into town?”

“The first one comes at five. What about the police?”

“I don’t think they’ll expect me to catch a bus into town. I know a couple of people in town who work in the port. One of them will lend me his ID, and I can use it to get into the port when the shift changes. And once I’m aboard my ship, that’s it, home and free.”

Dawn was unpacking pale bars of light to the east; to the west, both moons were chasing each other below the saw edge of the naked mountains, and a few stars still showed in the deep purple sky. Rocket Boy wondered if one of them was the star of Earth. Wondered if that was where Arpad was headed, some fifty or sixty years away by universal time, less than a month shipboard. If he went with the spacer and came straight back home, a century would have passed and everything would be changed. Perhaps the enemy would be gone . . .

Far clown the road, a single point of light slowly resolved into a double star. The bus was coming.

Arpad began to search through his duffel bag. “I promised to give you something, kid. Here. Take it.”

It was a pistol. The poisonous green of potatoes left too long in the sunlight, it wasn’t much bigger than Rocket Boy’s hand. The power LED set at the rear of the

reaction chamber sparkled bright red. There were red inserts in a grip still molded to fit precisely the hand of its previous owner.

“Hold it tight,” Arpad said, pushing the weapon into Rocket Boy’s hand, and then poked at a microswitch with the blade of a small penknife.

A hologram bloomed in the air, big as an opened book. The spacer stabbed at its silky light with a dirty forefinger, selecting a submenu from the index, selecting several functions of the submenu.

Rocket Boy almost dropped the pistol when the grip moved under his fingers. Suddenly, it fitted his hand as if it had grown there.

“You need a password,” Arpad said. “Something uncommon. Sing it out nice and clear three times. Ready?”

Rocket Boy nodded.

Arpad touched one of the red buttons on the insubstantial page that hung in the air above the pistol, pointed at Rocket Boy.

“Vigo,” Rocket Boy said. His mouth was dry. His heart was beating in his temples. “Vigo. Vigo.”

“Now it’s yours,” Arpad said, slinging his duffel bag over his shoulder as the bus stopped beside them with a thunderous hiss of air brakes. “Before you decide what you’re going to do with it, you should talk with it, learn what it can do. It’s a clever thing, it’ll give you pretty good advice if you ask it the right questions. I hope you have better luck with it than I did,” he added, and climbed aboard the bus.

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Later, Rocket Boy realized that the spacer had left him the pistol because, disguised as a maintenance worker, he wouldn’t have been able to smuggle it through the security checks at the port. He also realized that the pistol was probably the reason why the spacer had been running from the police. He’d brought it here to sell, and something had gone wrong, someone had betrayed him or had themselves been betrayed, and he’d had to dump it.

The spacer could have simply thrown it away, Rocket Boy thought. Instead, chance or fate had caused it to fall into his hands, and because it was unlikely he’d ever be so lucky again, he must make the most of the opportunity.

He didn’t go to work that day. Instead, he spent all that morning and most of the afternoon in his nest, talking with the pistol. It taught him its functions and, once it was certain that he had grasped the basic principles of its operation, asked him

what he wanted to do.

“I don’t know.”

“Perhaps I have asked the wrong question,” the pistol said. “Tell me instead what you most need.”

Rocket Boy wanted his family back, he wanted everything to be the way it had been before the war, but he knew that nothing, not even this magic little weapon could give him that. He said, “I want to be safe.”

“Who is threatening you?”

“No one. Everyone. Living on the street, you feel that every moment could be your last...”

“Perhaps you should tell me how you came to be here,” the pistol said.

It teased the story out of him piece by piece. Rocket Boy found himself telling it things he had never told anyone else. He told it about the war that had started after the enemy had tried to block the flow of a major river. He told it about the so-called popular revolution, supported by the enemy, and the Night of the Long Knives when most of the government and dozens of senior officials, including his mother and father, had been assassinated. He told it that he and his younger brother and three sisters had been attempting to escape the city and reach the house of their aunt when their vehicle had been caught in a fire fight between loyalists and a brigade of enemy soldiers. There had been an explosion which had knocked the car on its side, and he’d woken to find himself in the chaos of a hospital that was attempting to deal with hundreds of civilian casualties. Suffering from concussion and a broken wrist, he had gone to look for his family, walking all night and most of the next day, only to discover that his aunt’s house had been burned to the ground. After failing to find any of his family or friends, he had fled the city, and for a year worked on the huge collective farms in the wide, fertile river valley, but when a new law forced casual workers to register with a union, he’d been scared that the cheap hack that had altered his ID chip would be discovered, and he’d returned to the city, and had been living under the intersection ever since.

After a short silence, the pistol said, “Do you require advancement, or revenge?”

“I used to think that I could hunt down the man who had my parents killed,” Rocket Boy said.

“Do you know the name of that man? Do you know where he lives? Do you know how he is protected?”

Someone else said, “If you want true revenge, you’ll have to destroy the occupying force and the puppet government.”

It was the old man. He raised his hands in a warding gesture when Rocket Boy, angry and afraid, asked him how much he’d heard, and said, “I suppose just about everything. What is your real name, Rocket Boy? Who were your mother and father? It is possible that I worked for them, in happier times.”

“It doesn’t matter who they were now.”

“Yet you want to avenge their deaths. If you let me, I can help you. I assume that spacer you sheltered last night gave you the pistol.”

“What if he did?”

“It’s like no other weapon on this world, an all-purpose hand weapon with a nanotech forge and a near-AI kernel. Very powerful, and very smart.”

The pistol said, “I also possess a database that includes several million tactical scenarios—”

“Be quiet,” the old man said sharply, and the pistol shut up at once. The old man smiled at Rocket Boy. “You have to let it know that you are its master, and make sure that it does not attempt to find a way of manipulating you. We don’t have AIs on our world—they are far beyond the capability of our world’s technological base—but I am familiar with them because I worked at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs before the war. I’ve negotiated with many trade delegations in my time, and I once traveled to another star system—you wouldn’t think it to look at me, but it’s true.”

Rocket Boy believed him. The old man, squatting in his tattered rags, hair hanging around his leathery face in filthy dreadlocks, possessed a dignity he hadn’t noticed before.

“Tell it what you want,” the old man said. “Give it an order. Make a wish. Start with something simple.”

Rocket Boy thought long and hard, then said, “I wish I wasn’t living on the street.”

The pistol said, “My analysis of your story suggests that this is a Class E or F capitalist society. Am I correct?”

The old man’s smile showed the blackened tombstones of his teeth. He said, “Much has changed since the war, but I believe that we still have money.”

The pistol said, "Tell me, who supplies the cigarettes that you sell?"

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Kalim was tall and quick-tempered, and ruled his little gang by fear. He beat anyone who showed any sign of hesitation or answered back when he gave an order, and sometimes he would pick on someone and beat them just to keep the others in line, remind them who was in charge. He'd beaten all the boys who worked for him more than once, and let it be known that he had killed people who'd let him down. "With this very knife," he liked to say, holding up the six-inch ceramic blade, "Afterward, I lick off their blood. Nothing tastes sweeter than the blood of your dead enemies."

Every morning, Kalim and his two sidekicks drove up in a battered car and handed out cigarettes; every evening they returned to inspect the takings of each boy. Sometimes Kalim took only half; sometimes he took everything. The day after the spacer gave the pistol to Rocket Boy, Kalim climbed out of the car and went straight for him. Getting right in his face, asking him where he'd been yesterday, asking him if he'd enjoyed his holiday, pushing him with angry little shoves until he was backed against a support pillar. The two sidekicks leaned against the car, enjoying the show. The other cigarette boys stood in a loose knot, watching it too, and shopping carts and mechs had crept up on either side, attracted by the disturbance. High on a concrete slope, a madwoman barked like a dog.

Kalim grasped Rocket Boy's throat in one hand and turned to his audience, producing his knife with a theatrical flourish, saying loudly, "None of you little jerks take time off unless I allow it. Time is money, and all the money around here is mine. When you take time off, you steal from me, and then I got to teach you a lesson, like I'm going to teach this little worm."

That was when Rocket Boy shot him. He was holding the pistol in the pocket of his tattered jerkin, and thrust its muzzle against Kalim's leg and pulled the trigger with a convulsive effort. The pistol made a tremendous noise, a thunderclap that echoed and reechoed under the crossing ribbons of on-ramps and beltway, shocking hundreds of roosting noctids into the air. Kalim staggered backwards, clutching his bloodied thigh, clutching at his belly and then his chest as the smart little bullet burrowed upward. It detonated when it reached his heart, and he spewed a pint of blood and fell down and didn't move again. The bigger of the two sidekicks drew a pistol, an ordinary automatic, and Rocket Boy shot him too, the self-guiding bullet drilling a hole in his forehead and blowing his skull apart. The other sidekick froze, drenched in his companion's blood and brains, his hands half raised in surrender.

The other kids watched silently as Rocket Boy climbed onto the car and told them that he was taking charge of the business. "I promise that I will take only half of what you earn, no more, no less," he said. "And there will be no more beatings."

That evening, the sidekick, a boy by the name of Vance, drove him to the cafe



where the cigarettes were distributed. The pistol had shot Vance with a smart bullet, and Rocket Boy told him that he would live as long as he was loyal, but if he even thought of betrayal or revenge, the bullet would kill him at once. At the cafe, following the advice of the pistol, Rocket Boy turned over the money he'd taken from the cigarette sellers to the fat man Vance pointed out, and explained that from now on he was running Kalim's pitch.

The fat man barely looked up from the food he was spooning into his mouth, saying, "I don't care what you punks do, long as you bring in the gelt," and that was that.

Later that evening, in Kalim's coldwater apartment at the edge of the industrial district, the pistol told Rocket Boy that there was a high probability that one of the gangsters who ran the neighboring pitches would try to take the business away from him. "They will think you weaker than them. They will think that you killed Kalim by a stroke of luck."

Rocket Boy said, "And if I kill the man who tries to kill me, will it stop there?"

The day had left him exhausted, excited, and agitated. He didn't regret the deaths of Kalim and the sidekick for a moment; all the anger and hurt he'd suppressed for so long had been released when he'd shot them. Once you'd killed someone, he discovered, your own life mattered less, and there was a wonderful freedom in that knowledge. But he felt a yawning apprehension now that he realized that he had stepped through a door into a new world, and there was no going back.

"Do not worry," the pistol said. It sat in his lap, its power LED twinkling like a baleful star. "I have fully gamed this situation. As long as you follow my advice, nothing will go wrong."

A little later, as Rocket Boy was falling asleep, it added, "You are a willing pupil. We will go far, you and me."

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His enemies came for him two days later, just after he'd distributed the bags of cigarettes to his gang of sellers. Two cars roared into the dusty arena under the beltway, each discharging a pair of thugs armed with assault rifles. By now, the pistol had learned how to control the little machines that had taken refuge under the intersection, and a rattling flock of shopping carts immediately charged the thugs. Rocket Boy shot three of them while they were fighting off the machines, and when the survivor tried to run he was knocked down by a shopping cart. Rocket Boy walked up to him, followed by two battered service mechs, and asked him who had sent him. The young thug tried to spit in his face, and at the pistol's prompting, one mech lit its welding torch, and the other snapped the pincers of its hand an inch from the man's face. "If you don't talk," Rocket Boy said calmly, "I'll let the machines

take you apart.”

That night, Rocket Boy killed the gangster who had sent the thugs after him and took over his pitch, but the pistol and the old man soon persuaded him that selling cigarettes was not enough. After spending a month training the toughest of the street kids and earning their loyalty, he began to hold up trucks bringing food into the city from the river valley. He gave half the stolen produce to hospitals and community leaders—after the war, food was expensive and in short supply, and many families could barely afford basic rations—and sold the rest at knockdown prices to market traders. Soon, produce trucks were moving only in convoys guarded by soldiers, and Rocket Boy changed his tactics and liberated a large quantity of medicines and drugs from a warehouse owned by the Minister of Health—the old man, whose name was Yan Yane, had discovered from former colleagues in the civil service that the minister had been skimming supplies and selling them on the black market.

A week after this coup, Rocket Boy was invited to a meeting with the heads of the three families who controlled drugs, gambling and prostitution in the city. He went with the old man, Yan Yane, and two burly sidekicks. He did not take the pistol because it had been made clear that he could not carry a weapon to the meeting, but the pistol had briefed him extensively beforehand.

“They want to meet you because they are intrigued by you,” it had told Rocket Boy. “If they wanted to kill you, they would have already done it. Instead, they believe that you can make a lot of money, and they want to claim a share in it.”

So it turned out. Rocket Boy gave each of the heads of the three families a generous cut of the profits he had made from the truck hijacks and the warehouse job. He told them that he did not want any share of their businesses, but proposed a new business of his own. He would organize a security service for the people of the city.

He sat at the far end of the long polished table in an expensive new suit, Yan Yane at his left hand. He felt cool and calm, facing the three men and their phalanx of advisors and lieutenants and bodyguards. The worst they could do was kill him, and he knew now that dying was nothing. He spoke clearly and with great force, staring into each of their faces in turn. “The police are corrupt, and they are owned by the puppet government. The people hate them more than they hate the soldiers that occupy our city. I will organize block committees of volunteers who will patrol their own streets and deal with troublemakers as they see fit. In return for this protection, every business will pay a small amount into a common fund—less than they currently pay in kickbacks and protection money to the police. Your businesses will be exempt, of course.”

“What will you do when the police try to shut you down?” one of the men asked.

“I will deal with the police,” Rocket Boy said.

He struck two weeks later, after extensive discussions with community leaders across the city. They were more than willing to listen to him. He had earned considerable kudos by distributing free food and medicines, and the people of the city chafed under the casual brutality and corruption of the police. At exactly nine o'clock in the morning, shopping carts loaded with bombs rattled through the gate of every police station across the city and promptly blew themselves up. At the same moment, Rocket Boy assassinated the police chief as he climbed into his armored limousine; the pistol's smart, self-guiding bullets blew off his head from a range of half a mile. The city was immediately placed under martial law by the occupying army, but the community leaders made sure that there was no looting or rioting, and the soldiers of the occupying army soon returned to their barracks in the fortified Green Zone in the center of the city. A respected religious leader announced that from now on the city would police itself, a few scapegoats were arrested, tried, and executed for the bombings, and Rocket Boy found himself at the head of a militia of more than ten thousand men.

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The occupying army quickly made an accommodation with him, but the puppet government resented the loss of power. At one of the receptions held in the Green Zone, a drunken army captain came up to Rocket Boy and told him that he should watch his ass, certain people wanted him dead.

“You've come far and fast, and so far you haven't missed a step,” the captain said. This was on a balcony of what had once been the city's museum, overlooking the central park. It was midnight, and fireworks were exploding over the lake. The captain's sweating face was briefly lit by red or green or gold light. “We know that if we took you out, there would be a civil war. So, we have come to an accommodation with you. We're a pragmatic people. We let our heads rule our actions, not our hearts. But I should warn you, some of your own people aren't content to let things lie. They want you dead, and are willing to pay a high price for it.”

*This man has an agenda*, the pistol told Rocket Boy, its voice whispering eerily in his right ear. A week ago, the city's best neurosurgeon had extracted the pistol's control chip and implanted it under Rocket Boy's scalp, connecting it to a tiny device that vibrated the bones of his ear. It was part of him now and forever, a small, still voice whispering advice.

Rocket Boy told the captain coolly, “If you mean the so called interim government, they aren't my people.”

“Whatever. Point is, we don't need this kind of trouble, but we can't be seen

to take sides. You'll have to deal with it yourself."

*That is not his own opinion. He is delivering a message.*

"Is that your own opinion, captain, or are you delivering a message?"

At Rocket Boy's shoulder, Yan Yane, his hair and beard neatly trimmed and dyed snow-white, said, "Why are you so interested in our affairs?"

"You have become a player in an astonishingly short time," the captain told Rocket Boy, ignoring the old man. "You have your secret weapon, of course—oh yes, we know all about the scrap of proscribed technology that advises you and keeps your people loyal. We make it our business to know things like that. Don't worry, I'm not here to threaten you with exposure; by now, I doubt that it would make much difference if your secret was revealed."

"The people love him," Yan Yane said.

"Your people project their desires on you," the captain said, speaking in a whisper now, his face only inches from Rocket Boy's. "They believe that you can free them. Don't make the mistake of believing that, and we'll get along fine."

*They are scared of you. You have the advantage now.*

Rocket Boy said, "Are you scared that you can't control me, Captain?"

"I like you," the captain said. "I hope you survive. I really do. Meanwhile, enjoy the party."

He squeezed Rocket Boy's shoulder and walked away, no longer seeming drunk at all.

Rocket Boy watched the black lake mirror starbursts exploding in the black sky. Yan Yane said, "He's right about one thing. I talked with an old friend of mine who has a high position in the government. There's no official plan to assassinate you, but people talk about it all the time. The Minister of Health in particular wishes you dead. He has never forgiven you for that warehouse job."

"I can deal with him, and with anyone else who moves against me." Rocket Boy felt himself smile. "You heard the captain. I've been given carte blanche."

"There may be a more equitable way of dealing with the situation."

*Remember what I told you.*

Rocket Boy waited, still smiling. In the rare moments when he was alone these

days, he'd taken to studying his face in any nearby reflective surface, trying on different expressions. It seemed to be the face of a stranger, as if he was an actor impersonating himself.

Yan Yane said, "I can arrange, through my old friend, a meeting with the Prime Minister. I am told that he is very willing to negotiate a settlement with you."

"Is he offering me a job?"

"There is a position, if you want it. The Minister for Security is willing to step aside."

"Do it," Rocket Boy said, and Yan Yane bowed and walked away towards the far corner of the splendid, crowded room, where the Prime Minister held court.

*Remember what I told you, the pistol said again. There is no time for sentiment.*

It had warned Rocket Boy that sooner or later someone close to him would bring an offer like this. "The one who brings you the offer will be a traitor," it had said. "He will have made a deal with your enemies. He will be seeking his own advancement in exchange for your life."

If only it had been anyone other than the old man, Rocket Boy thought, feeling a splinter of ice prick his heart. But the moment of regret quickly passed. As usual, the pistol was right. Ordinary human sentiment was a luxury he could no longer afford. There was too much to do, and too much at stake. "We must finalize our plans" he said, whispering as if to himself.

We have already discussed this. It is too early—

"Examine your tactical database. Use your war-gaming capability. Find a way for me to prevail."

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Six days later, just an hour before the meeting with the Prime Minister was due to take place, Yan Yane came into Rocket Boys penthouse apartment and said, "If we don't go now, we'll be late."

"I want to show you something," Rocket Boy said, and took the old man by the arm and steered him across the dimly lit room to the big picture window.

They looked through their reflections in the armored glass at the twinkling grid of the city's lights. Rocket Boy pointed to the spaceport, glittering beyond the boundary of the city like a satellite galaxy. "We've come a long way," he said.

“And now is the time to consolidate what you have gained,” Yan Yane said.

Rocket Boy glanced at his watch. It was a few minutes shy of ten o’clock. “When I was living under the intersection, I always dreamed of escape. I sat up at night and watched the airplanes and space shuttles take off and land. And whenever I could scrape together a little spare money, I’d ride the bus to the entrance of the spaceport. I couldn’t go inside, of course, but I could stand at the gate and watch the people coming and going. The people from other stars who come here to do business or hunt the big animals of the wild. The people who crew their ships. I would dream that one day I would be like them.”

Yan Yane said nervously, “If you want to negotiate for the position of Minister of Transport, it’s a little too late—”

“I’m not going to be any part of the puppet government. They were responsible for the murders of my parents and thousands of others. If I joined them, I would share in their blood guilt.”

Rocket Boy walked across the room and picked up the pistol from a side table and turned to face Yan Yane, who stood straight-backed and quite still by the huge window in his expensive slate-blue suit, his white hair gleaming in the half dark of the room.

Rocket Boy said, “If you feed this simple elements like carbon and iron, nitrogen and phosphorous, it produces bullets that are little different from those fired by ordinary guns. But if you feed it more exotic elements, it can produce bullets that are really complicated little machines. The last batch looked like beetles. They flew off into the city to search out their targets, armed with detectors that can sniff out specific patterns of DNA, and stings that deliver a neurotoxin that is instantly fatal. The men you were supposed to be taking me to meet, by now they are all dead.”

“I should have destroyed that thing a long time ago,” Yan Yane said.

“You are the only person close to me who does not carry a bullet to ensure loyalty. I trusted you. I believed that you were my friend, and you broke my heart.”

“When you took the weapon from the spacer, you made a bargain with the devil,” Yan Yane said. “I’ve seen how using it has changed you, day by day. You’re no longer the innocent boy I befriended.”

“I changed when I decided that I had to kill Kalim,” Rocket Boy said. The pistol in his head was counting now, counting backwards from ten. “How you kill someone, whether you use a stone or a bullet or your bare hands, it doesn’t really matter. What matters is the intention, the resolve. That’s the real weapon.”

*Zero*, the pistol said.

Spots of light flared in the center of the city, defining the boundary of the Green Zone. A moment later the armored glass trembled and sang as the shock waves of the explosions reached the penthouse. The lights flickered out for a moment, then came back, dimmer and redder now, running on battery power. The power grid was down, and apart from the fires flickering under rising columns of smoke, the city had gone completely dark, lit only by secondary explosions that were detonating here and there in the Green Zone.

“You’ve started a war you can’t win,” Yan Yane said.

“The pistol plugged itself into the information grid and downloaded copies of itself. It controls power and water, the information grid and the transport systems. It controls thousands of carts and mechs. It also controls the security systems of the police armories. Right now, my militia is arming itself.”

Vance entered the room, followed by half a dozen men carrying guns. Yan Yane barely flinched when Vance took his arm. The old man straightened his back and said, “You don’t see it, but you’ve become a monster.”

“I’m the weapon used by my people to free themselves from the enemy.”

Vance began to lead the old man out of the room, the armed men falling in behind them. As he went through the door, Yan Yane turned and said, “And who will free them from you?”

Then Rocket Boy was alone with his thoughts, and the pistol. He set the weapon on the table and walked to the window. Across the darkened city, thousands of sparks were springing into life at every intersection, where the people were setting up barricades. To the east, the lights of the spaceport still glittered—it had its own fusion generator.

Rocket Boy asked the pistol for a status report.

*The first stage has been successful. But overall, it is still too early to tell if we will succeed.*

“My people are fighting for their lives and their homes. Everything in your database tells me that very few invading armies have prevailed against a resolute population. We will drive the enemy back to its borders. We must do to them what they did to us.”

*At what cost?*

“Freedom is not worthwhile if it is easily won.”

*There is still time to make peace with the enemy.*

Something glinted as it passed through the light of a nearby lamp. It was one of the assassin bullets. It moved straight towards Rocket Boy, stopping a yard away, the needle in its blunt tip flicking in and out as if tasting the air.

“Are you frightened of me?”

*Sometimes it is necessary for me to remind you that you are merely mortal. Think carefully while there is still time. If you take the city but spare the enemy soldiers and administrators, you will not only save their lives, but the lives of many of your people.*

Rocket Boy laughed. “You *are* frightened of me. “

*Perhaps Yan Yane was right. Perhaps you have become a monster.*

The bullet was close to Rocket Boy’s head now. He watched it for a long moment, then reached out and plucked it from the air.

*Please. Please reconsider—*

“No. We will go on and on, you and I. Look!”

A brilliant point of light flared amongst the launch pits of the spaceport. The yacht of some trillionaire fleeing the war. Rocket Boy watched as its bright star arced away into the night.

*I am a power on this backward world, the pistol said. But there are powers much stronger than me in the worlds beyond.*

“We’re something new,” Rocket Boy said. The assassin bullet vibrated warmly between his thumb and forefinger. “We haven’t yet found our limits. Perhaps we never will.”

The voice in his head was silent.

“Switch the information grid back on. I will make a broadcast announcing that I am taking control of the city.”

*Yes, master.*

Rocket Boy tried out different smiles, studying his ghostly reflection. “Which sounds better? Prime Minister Vigo, or Emperor Vigo the First?”