

Manumission

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This morning, when you wake up and look at your rippled reflection in the basin of water near the concrete wall of your cell, you only have one true personal memory left. It can't be that your entire life is based off this one event, so you suspect they've left it with you to piss you off. To "motivate" you. To make you one raging motherfucker.

It's a riff on the Countee Cullen poem. You're six, standing on the street holding the anonymous arm of your mom, and the other kid staring back at you flips you off and calls you nigger.

That's all they really left you with.

Sure there's other stuff, you're no vegetable. You can use money, eat, walk, tap the net, and know just about anything headlined over the last thirty years. But anything specific is faded, general, lost behind static and fuzzy feelings.

You empty the basin with a flourish and look around your cell.

The headache, the all-over itching, the scars crisscrossing your entire body, that gets to you too.

You've signed yourself away, the men in the black suits have explained back when you first arrived in this cell. They sat across from you on a sterile metal table. The document they slid toward your burnt smooth fingertips is legit.

So you listened to them, and nodded, and they got up to leave.

Oh yeah, one last thing, they had said.

Your name.

Pepper.

And your last name?

They just chuckled and closed the door.

Nine o'clock. Newport, Rhode Island. A forest of masts bobs slightly, boats cheerfully tied at their docks. You slide off the blue awning over the side entrance to a small bar and hit the slippery cobblestones to face a portly middle-aged accountant with slicked back wiry hair.

"Oh shit . . ." is all he has time to say.

Then slumps.

The small wires that knocked him out recoil back up into your wrists with a flick. You squat over the man, push his trousers up his hairy calf, and look at the tattoo on the back of his knee. He's ShinnCo property. Your eyes scan for forgery, defects, get in closer for a finer look, where every hair seems to be tree-sized.

All good. You blink your eyes until they return to normal, the thin extra membrane rolling back behind your eyelids.

His hands are clammy when you grab them. His breath reeks of alcohol. With a grunt you pull him up onto your shoulder and stagger toward a waiting car.

What, you wonder, has Mr. James Edward leaked to the Federalists? You really don't want, or need, to know.

Twelve hours later, five thousand closer to freedom, an old 6.35mm Astra Model Cub pistol tucked in the inner pocket of your oilskin duster, you're sitting in the lounge of an airship over several hundred feet of water, languorously easing your way toward the next stop, Eleytheria.

It's moored out in the Atlantic off the Eastern Seaboard this month.

At street level the Gulf Stream winds kick through the downtown buildings of Eleytheria. Your oilskin duster takes on a life of its own, bucking, trying to pull you off course as you make the usual staggered path, random jigs, sudden stops in front of reflective surfaces. It's not even a conscious thing, checking for tails.

Monotone pedestrians in business camouflage, the grays and blacks of their seemingly timeless and conservative professions, mill past you.

It isn't New York, but any of them could have been plucked out and placed in that environment without even noticing. No, just a few miles away the salt clears the breakwalls in clouds of mist and hovers into downtown.

Eleytheria is a giant bowl riding the large open ocean. Free to go where it pleases. Do what it pleases.

Many things start in Eleytheria.

Like yourself, years ago, deep in the bowels of one of Eleytheria's denizen companies. You've found old archived public camera pictures of yourself walking down the streets, into the center of ShinnCo, to sign your self, this self, into what you know now.

Sometimes you hate your old self for selling you into this bondage. You wonder what he got? Lots of money? Some last great fling? Or were you just desperate, a wandering piece of hardware abandoned by some former First World secret gov project made obsolete by the Pacification?

You'd like to think you did it for some great cause, like helping your family out of a dire situation. But late at night you doubt it and think there was some stupid, selfish reason for doing it.

They'll never tell you. Because if it was something like a family, you might try to contact them.

No. They have your memories. You'll get them back when you serve your contract.

It always comes back to Eleytheria. When your feet hit the seacreate, your nose fills with misted salt, and you have returned to the only home you know. All your recent memories, everything that is you, starts here. Ever since you

woke up behind a garbage dump in the back alley of ShinnCo.

And they've never let you back in through the front doors because they know full well what kind of monster they created. They control you, but they don't sleep well at night. If you were to ever get near a door the automated security would hit you with an EMP pulse that would pretty much liquefy the machines in you, then the guns would reduce you to bloodied ribbons of flesh.

You won't be getting your memories back using the new skills they've grafted into you. No way. And they still have one final trick, to keep you close, to control you.

So you stand in front of a small food cart. A faded orange umbrella hangs limply over it. When you palm the metal rail, the countdown inside you resets. You're allowed to live for another week. A pointed way of letting you know you're motherfucking owned, and you don't get to stray. At all.

The edges of the umbrella flutter in the cold breeze, and on the other side of the cart an old Greek stands up.

"Morning, Kouroupas."

"Morning, Pepper," he says, looking you up and down. "The usual?"

"The usual."

The front of the cart has a faded poster of a model with a strained smile, flat white teeth, holding up a gyro in perfectly manicured hands. They're "heeeeros" she says.

"Lettuces, mayonnaises . . ." Kouroupas' crazy white hair flies all over the place in the wind. It makes him look like a mad scientist.

He slaps the flatbread down. A cloud of flour tickles your nose.

A few browned strips of meat, some folded metallic paper, and you have your gyro, along with a small napkin neatly slid between your fingers.

You look at it, your eyes adjusting to the fibers, mapping out a pattern along the embroidered edges, translating the woven picture into words.

Susan Stamm. Ten thousand. Location. Eleytheria.

Ten thousand closer to getting yourself back. To freedom.

And she's right here.

You fold the napkin and its encrypted directions into your pocket, pick up the gyro. Kouroupas smiles.

"Good day," he tells you. "Be careful."

You nod and slide a few bills over to him.

"You too."

Be careful. It's the first time Kouroupas seems to acknowledge that this isn't just a gyro purchase. Seems to be telling you something's not quite normal this time.

Out of sight of the gyro stand you toss the gyro into a trashcan that thanks you and trundles away.

Not nearly enough raw sugars in gyros for you. Takes too long to metabolize. What you need now is something to spike your blood sugar to combat levels.

Susan Stamm has done many, many unique things to hide her presence. But she's on the run and wants off the planet. To do that she has to come to Eleytheria. Once an hour, every hour, a capsule is launched into low Earth orbit.

To really get far away, Stamm has to get Out There from Down Here.

So you sit and flip through pictures of embarkees who've been photographed at all three entrance points. One by fucking one. And these are just the ones the Port Authority computers have served up as possible matches. ShinnCo is being very generous with info and resources right now. They really want her back.

You're sitting in a small outdoor café, eyes closed. On the right eyeball is Susan Stamm's corp ID photo. On your left is some random face pic snapped by the Port Authority entrance machine.

Then another random face.

You reach for the sugary soda, take a long cold sip, and the next picture comes up.

Another sip of sugar water. Gotta keep the machines inside you running happy.

You flip to another pic.

Ha.

She looks thinner than the last official photo. She's still five-nine, but now has a recently bobbed haircut and green eyes.

Four hours later you're in the lobby of a smaller Eleytheria hotel, looking up at the atrium eighty stories above you, licking the icing off a Danish. In the background, over the hum of people, over the echoing shouts of kids screaming and waving from several floors above, comes the explosive whip-crack of a capsule being thrown into space.

There was this mugger that jumped you a year ago. Before you even realized it you'd spun, broken both his arms and a leg, and the man lay in an unconscious heap by the side of a brick façade.

His clothes were ragged, he was thin, and when you held his gun in your hand, you realized that it was unloaded.

Ballsy. And pathetic.

By going through his wallet you found out that his name was Jack Connely. He had three kids and a very attractive blonde wife. Jack had been a spacer entrepreneur of some sort, reduced to Earth living after the Pacification.

Now all the businesses could buy a ride into space. Move their offices up into alien stations, use alien services, buy alien products, machines. Not much use for small guys, you could hardly scrape together the price. But multinationals can, and now that they're all in orbit, or beyond, the pretense of even caring about the world they originated from was thrown out.

You could have used the money you found in his pocket, his day's take, though you couldn't use it toward paying off your ShinnCo contract. They only accept their own in house credit.

You couldn't even use the money to disable the shit laced all through your body. You tried that once before. Almost killed you on the table.

Instead, you sent his wallet and the money back in the mail to his family. And you added some of your own.

You're a good person, you tell yourself.

But it's very hard to believe when it was so easy, so automatic, to have grabbed that man's gun and pulled the trigger, right down to within a hairtrigger of firing, before stopping.

That can't be all wired into you, right?

Susan Stamm walks through the revolving door, past a doorman, and on toward a cab. You shake your shoulders and arms, loosening up the great mass of coat around you, and step in behind her. She's better looking in person, unlike some of the dolled-up, make-up-caked women you've seen in the past.

As she grabs the gullwing door of the bubbly autocab she spots your reflection in the window and turns around.

"Could we share this ride?" you say. Already you flex the muscles in your wrists, begin to raise your left arm and coat to obscure her body. She'll fall, and you'll sweep her up and into the autocab with you.

As the autocab rides off you'll look like two lovers cuddling in the back.

Instead her eyes widen, hands curl into fists, and a small dart burrows into your stomach.

You're on the ground, convulsing. Spit flecks your lips. You break into a heavy sweat. Vomit tastes like sugar water, flowing out onto the concrete sidewalk. It takes effort just to slowly roll over.

The doorman turns around.

He moves, a blur that you know isn't natural, and hits Stamm from the side. She hits the door of the autocab, shattering the Plexiglas, and the doorman grabs her neck, turning her head to confirm her ShinnCo tattoo.

Small silver fans protrude from the back of the man's neck. Antenna. You can see heat rising off his uniform, rippling the air around him. A timeshare. Not under his own control then—just renting his body for sudden on-the-spot jobs like this one.

You have a choice. Give it up. Let this competitor grab her, kill her, whatever.

Or.

With just a quick flex of your arms the wires spit out of your wrists and hit the back of his neck. The man spasms, lightning sparking across the surface of his skin. The antenna melt, dripping down the back of his collar. He spins around and raises his arms.

"Oh fuck," he screams, the link to whatever controls him from orbit gone. "I'm burning. They killed me! I'm burning!"

As he staggers toward the door, people gather. Someone tries to get the doorman to sit down. Someone 911s to call this in, speaking into his pinkie finger.

On your hands and knees, eyes burning and streaming tears, wires retracted back into your wrists, you push forward into the car. You grab Stamm, pull her in with you, and barely manage to shut the door.

She's in better shape than you, coming back to consciousness as you vomit sugar water all over her red high heels.

"Drive, damnit," she shouts at the cab's autopilot, and gives an address.

"Damage has been detected," it warbles. "Failure mode initiated. A replacement cab is on its way. We apologize for the delay."

"Shit."

The cab rocks as she leans forward.

Your muscles fail.

Your brain goes zero.

You're out.

There are rooms and then there are rooms. They're square more often than not, with white walls. But this one has dirty laundry, fake wooden paneling, a giant mirror on a wall, and a small cot that you're lying on.

A wicker chair next to you creaks. Soft hands stroke your forehead.

"You're tough. That was supposed to kill you."

"I feel like shit." Every pore hurts.

"I would imagine." A finger traces the scars all over your body. "I'm sorry. I think I may have got the wrong person. It was the doorman I should have shot, he was the one coming for me. Who are you?"

Don't say anything.

Just shiver and turn back off. It's easier.

You wake up hungry and naked. Disoriented. You have no internal time. The

small set of numbers that usually hover in the corner of your left eye is gone.

There's a pink bathrobe on the wicker chair that you grab as you sit up.

It takes everything you have to stand. Muscles protest, and every cell seems to ache.

"Feeling better?"

She's sitting by the kitchen counter, hands up, watching you warily.

You nod.

"Okay. So here are the rules. Any sudden moves I fire another one of these pips into you. If your hands aren't where I can see them, I shoot. I doubt you survive another one. So sit. Put your hands on your lap."

The bathrobe is comfortable. You slowly wrap it tighter around you and sit. Her tone drips with suspicion, guarded overtones. The air is tense.

She points at your leg. That's where they tattooed the small logo on you. Inner thigh. It really, really hurt.

"You're ShinnCo."

"Yes." She knows, you know. No point in denying.

"And the doorman?" she asks. "Did you know about him ahead of time?"

You shrug.

She stares at you and you stare right back, not sure where this is going. You have the faintest sense that you'll get out of the door alive.

"Why are you still here?" you ask, which also implies, why am I still alive? "You could have left me here."

Stamm smiles.

"I felt bad for you."

That is not the response you really expected. And you don't believe it for a second. Someone this dangerous isn't that stupid.

"You know what I am . . ."

"Get real. They want me alive. You're not that dangerous. Neither was the doorman, he was just a backup. It's unfortunate they don't care a whit about his life."

You've never spotted backups of any sort before. This is different. Very different. She spots the frown.

"Is this your first high profile recapture?" Off in the distance is the whipcrack of another space launch, and she smiles. It's a broad one, full of glee. "Look, I'm within walking distance of getting away. They're getting desperate. I shouldn't have gotten this far. You're a backup, the doorman was an emergency backup, and the first three they sent after me are all lying in alleys somewhere."

She's dangerous.

Kouroupas tried to warn you.

"So what now?" you ask.

"Well I'm hungry and making some breakfast. Can I get you anything?"

You smile.

"Anything with sugar, I could really use something sweet."

She nods.

"Yeah, I'll bet you could, but I know what makes you tick." Your smile drops. "None of that for you. I'm leaving you weak, and slow for now. Just stay on the bed, don't move, and I'll bring you some diet soda."

You stare at her, and she laughs at you.

"I know a lot about those systems in you. How do you think I ended up with those little pips I hit you with? I designed them myself."

She walks into the kitchen, opens the fridge, and tosses you a can.

"Drink up. . . . What is your name?"

You look down at the sugarless drink in your hands.

"Pepper," you say.

Susan Stamm. ShinnCo property since birth. Mother died having her, orphanage signed Susan over. She starts telling you all this stuff as she sits at a small table across from you and eats obscene amounts of breakfast sausage and eggs. The place reeks of it.

"You never even realize there is a different way of life," Susan says. "But I remember, when I was twelve, suddenly understanding that there were people who didn't have logos on their bodies, who didn't have to report into minders once a day, who weren't being encouraged to study certain things that the company needed." She picks up a greasy link, pauses. "And then I decided I would escape it."

"How many years has that been?"

She flashes a smile and downs the sausage.

Then the dishes are tossed in the sink, she washes her hands while looking over her shoulder at you. You're still sitting in the pink bathrobe, sipping from the can.

"Just on the other side of Eleytheria is a launcher. I have a ticket off this world, and out there I have passage far out as crew on a mining ship. I know it won't be easier, but I'll be my own person." She raises a wrist. "I can burn this fucking logo off my skin."

"So you'll leave me here?"

She shakes her head.

"I have a proposition. You can't buy your freedom from ShinnCo, I'll bet, not for a long time yet. But what would you do for a ticket offworld?"

You just stare at her.

She takes it as hesitation.

"You owe me your life anyway. I need someone at my back, because if it's just me they'll try and pick me up at the gates to the launcher. Last ditch, overwhelming numbers."

"Okay." Opportunity glints in your eyes. At any point along this journey you may have an opportunity to overpower her. She spots the reaction. She thinks she has you.

"You'll walk me to the launcher, then I'll hand over the ticket. Try to double cross me before then and I'll fire another one of these nasty little critters into you. So it's in your best interests to work with me."

You nod.

She laughs.

"You realize you're free, don't you? You weren't just physically disabled," she says. "I scrubbed clean all your systems. You understand what that means?"

You test everything she has just said, and she is right. But . . .

When you look down to your wrists she steps back slightly. It's an unconscious move.

"Those still work," she says. "They're bio-mechanical. Nothing that can be scrambled, infected, or shut down."

For the briefest flash of a moment you've seen freedom. And then, you think to yourself, there is the matter of the countdown. That's firewalled off from the rest of your body and bio-mech. You can't see the countdown, but you know it's there. You don't explain this to her. Right now she thinks you're in her debt.

Play along.

"I've set you free from them," she says. "You can do anything you want now."

You nod again. "Okay, fair enough. I'll help you for the ticket. Can I have my clothes back?"

The smile on her lips fades. She sizes you up, squinting. Apparently something satisfies her.

"Other side of the bed."

They've been washed, pressed, and folded into a neat pile. The Astra Model Cub pistol lies on top of them all. It's loaded.

Golden. Like that tantalizing glimpse of freedom she'd tried to give you.

Fifteen minutes later you're both out the door. You've got the overcoat draped over your right arm. You're weak, tired, and at a disadvantage, but all it will take is one well-placed shot where you can drop behind some cover, and she's down.

Susan faces you as she locks the door, still wary, but there is joy in her face. She can see the end of the road.

It's almost sad.

You walk down a corridor toward a pair of steel doors. As sunlight spills into the dimly lit area, you scope a vending niche just ahead and to the right. A drink machine hums a long low note. All you have to do is slow down, just get behind her by one step, shoot her, and use the machine for cover if she tries to use one of those lethal darts.

Two shadows force their way through the doors at the end of the corridor.

The gun's easy enough to spot; you duck and jump to your side. Susan fires at one of them as you dodge into the niche.

What puzzles you is the wrenching pain in your shoulder that drops you to the floor in front of the neon glow of the soda machine.

They're not aiming at Susan.

That was meant for you.

Your chest is wet with blood and your left arm can hardly move, but with your right you feel around the inside of your overcoat as Susan falls to the ground. Unconscious, not dead.

You drape the coat over the good arm to hide the Astra and wait.

It's Kouroupas that turns the corner. His wild hair makes a halo around his head, bathed and filtered in the light of a flickering fluorescent overhead. There is no waiting, he looks down at the overcoat hanging over your right arm, hesitates for a second, and you fire four times in a row, blowing a hole in the overcoat that the muzzle sticks through.

"Damn it." Kouroupas looks shocked as he slumps to the ground.

You crawl over to him and lean close.

There are no last words, no apologies or explanations, just his creased eyes looking up at the ceiling, his flour covered hands holding his bloody stomach, and then he stops breathing.

With some effort you retrieve his gun, pocket it with your Astra, and slump with your back against the soda machine.

Fifteen sodas later you shake Susan awake again. The first time you tried, after plucking the feathered dart out of her neck, she just lolled back into unconsciousness.

Your shoulder is packed with a shirt torn off the anonymous, dead, would-be assassin at the far end of the corner. You're still seeping blood.

"Come on," you whisper to her. "You need to wake up."

Her eyes snap open.

"No!" she shouts, throwing her hands up in front of her. You grab her wrists, a quick snapping motion, and look at her. She thinks she's been captured and been taken back to ShinnCo.

"You're okay, you're still here in the lobby. You got one of them first, I got the other."

She looks at you, then calms.

You're keyed up, your body's retooling itself, parts coming back online. She'd given you an out, a way to leave. Your body, deactivated, could have been worked over by any shitty street surgeon. There was the slightest chance you could have found a way to be free eventually, thanks to her trick.

Now the insulin is surging, the blood sugar's up, and the teenies in your blood scurry around, revived and back to business.

You're back. Rebooted. Tiny emergency warnings flash in your vision, detailing the damage done to your shoulder. It numbs itself and the bleeding clots and stops.

Susan hardly protests as you pick her up off the ground by her wrists with one arm.

"Do you still have time to make your launch?"

She's dazed, but focuses.

"Yeah. Yeah. We need to move."

Gun in hand, the other shoved in a pocket so you don't move it, you sweep the area ahead. Nothing stops the two of you.

In the cab she asks you why you stayed with her.

You sit there, adjusting the bloodied shoulder bandage, and avoid her gaze.

"They came at me first," you explain. "I'm a target now." ShinnCo has spent too much time up in orbit, not enough time on the ground. You are just ants, resources to be used. And in their eyes you've turned on them, bitten them. It's easier to eliminate you and find a new worker of your talents than risk something going bad. You've seen it before. No doubt you'll see it again. "What good is bringing you in if they're going to shoot me as I try do it?"

"You could still have just left me there."

True.

You wrap your coat back around you and look up at her. "I owed you one."

The cab bumbles on down the road while you both sit in silence for a while. Then she puts a hand on your knee.

"You rebooted. I can fix you again, so you're free of all their machines."

You look down at her hand.

"Take too long. You have a launch."

"Yeah." She pulls back away, crosses her arms over her chest, and looks out the window. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be," you say. "Your trick probably wouldn't have worked anyway." And you tell her about the ticking bomb in you, the nano flechettes timed to go off unless they get their little code from that contact on the gyro stand.

We own you motherfucker.

"They aimed at me first," you tell her. Kouroupas came to finish it, and they'll get to aim at you again when you have to go back there to the cart in three days. Or you'll be sitting, standing, somewhere, when the bomb goes off. You'll look normal for a while, to bystanders, until your body falls down in a shapeless mass. Shredded from the inside out.

"That's why I rebooted."

You look out the window now as well, watching the terminals approach.

There isn't much to say after that.

There are some things you know about memory technology.

One is that it began here on Earth. Using existing technology: superconducting quantum interferometer devices that map specific memory recalls. It was pretty much there when the Pacification happened. With alien technology brought down out of orbit it got nudged along just a little further into maturity.

Two. The memories are burned out of your head. They aren't coming back.

Three. The same alien technology that matured memory alteration allows backups.

Four. When you figure out how to disable the bomb inside you, you will then go out and find that backup.

If there is no backup, there will be payback.

You walk Susan up to the terminal booth. Several streets behind lie the bodies of more dead ShinnCo who tried to stop you. You stand on neutral ground. Even ShinnCo wouldn't piss off the alien launch corporation that owns Eleytheria. Overhead the floors sweep out over the road like wings. The architecture is impossible, like Frank Lloyd Wright on crack. The supports are too small. The wings too large. It's a building designed by something that evolved on a lower gravity world and is forcing their sensibilities onto an Earth object.

The inside of the booth is filled with a light pink gas of some sort. It's more than bulletproof; any hostile action you could take would result in

vaporization.

Alien ticket takers don't put up with shit. Too many Earth terrorists tried to take out their aggression on them in retaliation for the Pacification. The orbital corporations that own the rest of the solar system found it annoying, so they put in countermeasures.

Susan scans her ticket in.

Inside the booth, tentacles move. Half of them are plugged into the wall, the other half seem to support a globular mass. This creature looks like a cyborg octopus. It's light years from home, trying to scrape out a living in a weird world, looking out at you with three eyes at the center of its trunk and burbling something.

"Clear. Proceed," the speaker orders.

The security gate to the right of the booth slides aside.

Susan turns to you. She slides an extra ticket into the palm of your hand.

"In case it ever works out . . ." she says.

You wonder if the memory of her walking through the security gate, or the memory of her hand sliding away from yours, could easily be burned out of your head.

Not this time at least.

Several minutes later the capsule thunders out in the great above and the thing in the booth hisses at you, wondering what your deal is.

Time to move on.

You stop at a public access point near the corner of a road.

The demands you send the ShinnCo emergency contact points are as follows:

One negotiator familiar with your case, with authority to bargain. The cart, fully functional, in the usual space. And you'll confirm the cart from a distance, making sure it isn't a fake.

Two hours. They couldn't get an identical fake, with heat generating machinery of the same signature inside in that time.

Or else?

Or else you have time enough to go hunting before the countdown hits the last second.

You'll need a hatchet, for starters.

It's a metaphorical high noon. They're not going to back off, and neither are you. The first sign of weakness is death. You're locked in, no turning back.

They set a nice trap. The gyro stand is up, and what looks to be a middle-aged man stands there. He isn't putting much into the façade, half-heartedly telling interested passersby that he's out of flatbread.

You spot the three snipers on balconies above.

Two men in doors nearby, lounging.

Four pedestrians.

One by one would take far too long, so you steal a bubble cab.

Even the new gyro guy doesn't spot you until you swerve the stolen machine off the road and slam into the cart. Flour, flatbread, meat, and sauces explode into the air. They drip off the door as you swing it up and open, using it for cover as you knock the stunned man out with a flick of your wrist, and pull him into the car.

The shots start. Silent insect-like buzzes and then explosions of concrete. The glass windows of the cab explode, the seats kick up leather and stuffing. In addition to the glass splinters buried in your face, the concrete shards ripping your overcoat apart, they hit you in the thigh, and then again in a foot.

Keep moving.

You grab the hatchet and smash the cart apart while keeping low, and pull out what you need. Your forearm gets hit, bone splitting out of the skin and causing waves of pain and nausea until things inside your body decide the pain is getting in the way of your ability to function.

The cab can barely hold everything. Glass bites you in the ass as you sit down and barrel out of there.

Engine smoking, tires flopping, it lasts long enough to get you deep into an alley.

The gyro man is coughing blood and dying in the back thanks to a well-aimed shot to the stomach. What you really want to do is get to work on him, make him forget about that pain and worry about a whole new universe of hurt. Maybe it will help you forget about yours.

Instead you work on bandaging your own wounds with strips of fabric torn off the overcoat and watch him struggle to stay conscious.

His eyes dilate, mouth drops open.

"I know about your memories," he croaks.

"You the negotiator?" You hadn't expected them to actually put him next to the cart. He ignores that, moves on.

"You don't have any. You never had any," he says quickly. "You came to ShinnCo looking for ways to reverse the process. But you were state of the art. Recent government surplus, useless after the Pacification. If ShinnCo didn't claim you, some other corporation would. So they screwed you over."

"I can't help you," you say. Even if an ambulance got here in time he wouldn't make it back.

The man closes his eyes and groans. The inside of the cab smells of shit from his ruptured stomach. His messy hands are both folded over, he's almost fetal.

"Fuck them," he rasps. "They told me this would be easy. That you wouldn't even get to cross the street."

"They fucked you. They fuck everyone."

You watch him.

"At least you're as fucked as me," he says, eyes still closed. It's almost a whisper now.

You don't bother to tell him the truth.

Another long moment passes.

"They have what you did know on a recording. You had something stored. They have that."

"And do you know what I was?" you ask.

He shakes his head.

Then shudders.

Passes out.

The actual dying will take a while more. You slowly shift, reach to his head, and snap his neck. After rummaging around you pull his wallet out. A picture of a redhead. Girlfriend? Must be, you think. No ring.

So what price are you willing to pay for your self?

Is it worth it?

Time heals all wounds.

In your case, it takes about three weeks before you recover fully.

Now you're standing in front of that same booth, same alien in the pink gas, holding out your ticket. You have gotten your photo ID and background check (faked). It warbles behind the security glass.

"Name?"

"Pepper."

"Secondary name?"

You pause.

"Smith."

"The size of your luggage is unusual," it protests.

"It is necessary," you insist. The remains of the important bits of the gyro stand. And some extra devices to shield it from any ShinnCo attempts to make it call home and make your life miserable.

It looks at you.

"Human." The word is unstressed through the speaker. But you know the meaning behind it.

You stare the creature down and wait.

The go-around takes several minutes, but the creature finally tacks on a massive surcharge and lets you through.

Settling into the capsule's launch chair, the long lines of the launch tube visible through the tiny portholes ahead of you, you pull your new overcoat closely around you.

You wonder if Susan can find room for you on her mining ship.

It's a wild non-world out there. One where humans are minorities, alien conglomerates ply the worlds and negotiate with primitives like your own people for their gas giants and extra unused planets. They trade them for space access, advanced technology. Beads and glass many suspect, but not to primitive planets like Earth.

This is your new environment.

ShinnCo you can leave behind.

You reach your hand up and caress the data amulet hanging from your neck. It is the memory of a sandy beach, your back relaxed against a palm tree. The gentle swish of the wind through leaves and water breaking against rocks at the end of the bay soothes you. That's it. A single memory of a life you once wanted to remember back. ShinnCo put a lot of security around it. Your past is the past.

The chair wraps around your waist and comes down your shoulders. You are the person you make yourself to be.

Fifteen seconds.

You are the person you are now.

The whine of the accelerators reaches a crescendo.

You're not going to look into the past and what you were.

Three seconds.

It really isn't important.

Launch.

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