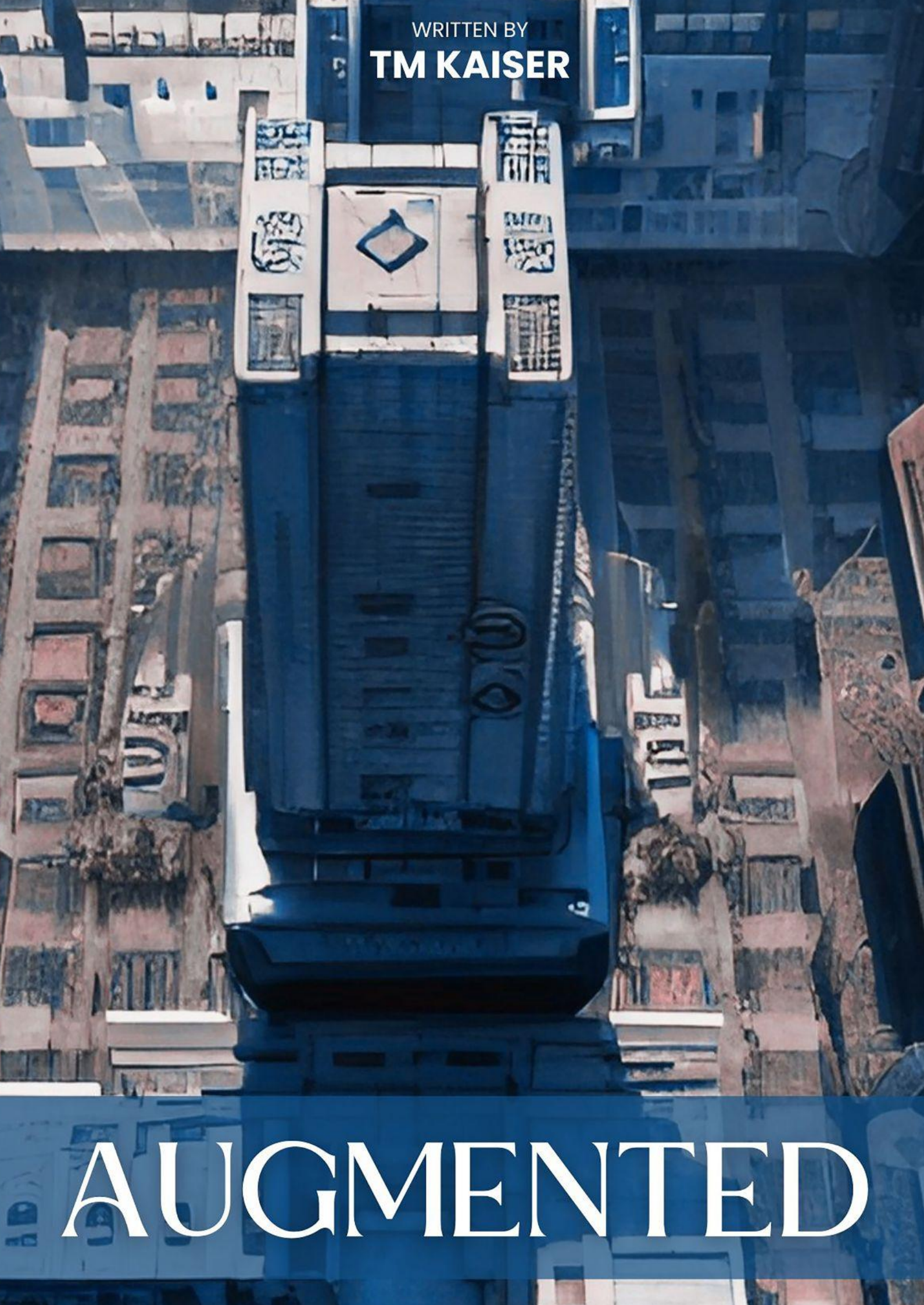


An aerial, top-down view of a city street. A blue car is driving down the center of the road, moving away from the viewer. A white van is parked on the right side of the street. The surrounding buildings are multi-story, with a mix of brick and lighter-colored facades. The image has a slightly desaturated, cinematic quality.

WRITTEN BY
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AUGMENTED

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First Edition

AUGMENTED

TM KAISER

Chapter One

Outcries to stop the mass production and distribution of pharmaceuticals fell on deaf ears. The demand for antibiotics and vaccines was too great, keeping their production going. The eager masses lined up to receive antibiotics and vaccines as if they were candy. Doctors easily prescribed these cure-alls at the first sign of the slightest discomfort in a patient.

Pharmaceutical companies ensured that these medications were readily available to the public, with an implied sense of urgency. Generations had resigned to depending on these selective poisons. At first, people not only lived longer, but their quality of life remained intact late into their final years, making immortality seem more like a possibility than a dream.

Abruptly, all were reminded of their delicate mortality that loomed overhead. The harm caused by pharmaceuticals became apparent. Antibiotics and vaccines started to fail and stifled their immune systems. Viral mutations had accelerated and were no longer affected by any antibiotics; it seemed death would claim its victims.

There were no more cures, and our extinction was on the cusp of becoming a reality. One disease emerged faster and stronger than the rest, threatening our extinction. The epidemic seemed to have appeared overnight, spreading from one continent to the next without falter. It spread so rapidly that it was impossible to trace its origins. To make matters worse, the symptoms were too vague to conclude a proper diagnosis. Patients with fevers and body aches were sent home with instructions to rest and drink hot tea to avoid further congestion of the health system. By the third day, those infected had alarming fevers, blisters, and paralysis of the limbs. The limbs soon developed open sores, resembling rotting flesh, and it was only a matter of time until the infected died from complications.

Those deemed essential for the survival of the human race, not yet infected, were retrieved and moved to a sterile compound. A team of scientists was among those collected. This team worked night and day within the safety of the compound to develop a cure. They determined that a quick resolution to halt the spread of the sores was amputation. Amputation quickly became a common recommendation to preserve life, leaving the people outside the compound not only fear-stricken but also crudely maimed. The results were satisfactory enough for the compound's scientists.

Reports from outside of the compound revealed that for unknown reasons, a small percentage of people proved to be inherently immune. Once the disease had decimated

the remaining population outside the compound, additional studies could begin. These immune individuals were collected and herded into the compound for testing.

Entire countries crumbled within just a couple of years. Ghostly ruins replaced magnificent metropolises. The compound, criticized as the Acropolis, became a sanctuary for all who lived there. It was there that two of the Acropolis's scientists made the most significant strides against the pandemic. Dr. Mason received credit for his initial diagnosis of the disease and was able to develop a vaccine. Unfortunately, this vaccine was only available to the Acropolis's inhabitants. Dr. Ivory developed biomechanical prosthetics to augment those who had resorted to amputation out of desperation.

Unlike Dr. Mason, Dr. Ivory found this time to be very exciting. His fascination with biomechanical technology drove him, and he used his talents to create stronger prosthetics for augmentation. These augmentations became the envy of all, especially the citizens of the Acropolis. Dr. Ivory took his fascination and borderline obsession one step further. He wanted to augment every human into a machine. His goal was to replace every organic organ until nothing organic remained. If humans had a soul, this is what would keep them human.

Dr. Mason assisted Dr. Ivory with his obsession for a short time. He saw the potential for good in Dr. Ivory's research, envisioning a future where transplants could be completed without waiting for donors or cultured organs, healing people without limitations. However, Dr. Ivory did not share his colleague's vision. Together, they accomplished much with their combined skills. Just as Dr. Ivory set out to do, they eventually recreated every major organ and muscle, except for one: the human brain proved to be too intricate.

Dr. Mason stepped away from the project. His objectives had been satisfied with the development of advanced artificial donor organs and the creation of the vaccine that preserved humankind's survival. Dr. Mason's departure from the project caused a rift between the two men. Dr. Ivory felt that his colleague had abandoned him when they were so close to perfection.

Dr. Ivory's disappointment was great, and even his newly acquired wealth could not comfort him. His biomechanical augmentations were highly sought after. Even those lucky enough not to have contracted the disease desired them. Those who were augmented with these biomechanical prosthetics became a sign of great privilege. Many adorned them with precious metals and stones, marking them as symbols of power and wealth. The more affluent inhabitants desired augmentation and paid handsomely for it. They eagerly began to purchase highly ornate biomechanical prosthetics for themselves and willingly had their healthy bodies modified. As a result of the heightened popularity of biomechanical prosthetics among the elite, they became too difficult for the general public to obtain, leaving many feeling forsaken.

The Acropolis's elite secured its place as the capital of the world. It survived the turmoil and preserved the world's brightest and richest citizens. The citizens of the Acropolis voted to remain in isolation, even after the danger of the disease had long passed. Eventually, the Acropolis transformed into a proper city, but the sterile compound remained at its heart. Additional cities were erected in the Acropolis's image, and people could buy a place in these cities as the new citizens of the Republic. To protect the city from outsiders, the citizens of the Republic built massive walls around their precious cities, displaying their power and strength.

Riots were commonplace outside the Republic's walled cities, and desperate attempts to breach the city's defenses started to occur. The citizens of the Republic turned to their great leaders to reexamine their resources. The augmented citizens of the Republic felt they were superior to other humans, referring to themselves as synthetics or synths as they embraced their new lives. The synths no longer viewed themselves as mere humans; they were stronger and faster, taking great pride in protecting their new cities. They formed the Synthetic Elite Response Force or SERF, comprising augmented men and women. These SERF soldiers were different from the augmented citizens, with augmentations designed for strength and agility.

Shortly after the SERF was organized, they were able to diffuse the riots, often resorting to violence. Those who escaped spread stories of the SERF's strength. Afterward, the citizens of the republic could enjoy their cosseted ways. It did not take long for the majority of the citizens to become living tributes to their former selves. The synths took great pride in the brilliant appearance of their biomechanical prosthetics. Some replaced more than just their arms and legs as Dr. Ivory made more advances.

Meanwhile, the SERF patrolled regularly into the wastelands outside the walled cities to discourage gatherings among the desolate populations. Those caught forming communities were imprisoned and labeled terrorists. The SERF created prison camps where the prisoners mined ores, gems, or built circuit components for the precious prosthetics the Republic greatly desired. Dr. Ivory eagerly moved his research to one of those prison camps to continue his work without prying eyes.

The young children of the prisoners were taken to the Republic's walled cities. Once back within the Republic, the youngest children were prepared for adoption by wealthy synth couples. Becoming synthetic meant becoming barren. Children too old to be adopted but under eight years old were sent to the Acropolis's military academy to become future soldiers for the SERF. The rest were sent to the prison camps.

Dr. Mason strongly disapproved of the Republic's actions against the desolates and refused augmentations. He was consistently chastised for his refusal to become a synth. Despite his strong feelings against the Republic, he still did not feel it was safe enough to leave with his young daughter. Dr. Mason moved himself and his daughter into the

military academy and took on the role of the resident doctor. There, he believed they could do the most good.

Dr. Mason's daughter, Mia, tried to make friends with the wards at the academy. The young minds of the wards were rapidly being molded into those of proud soldiers, and they did not see the point of personal relationships.

Even though the epidemic had passed, the world beyond the Acropolis's walls was still in a great state of disrepair. Those left behind in the barren lands had become increasingly violent. The desolates' violent actions were motivated by desperation due to the rapid depletion of resources. It was common for a desolate to die of starvation or some ailment with no promise of aid. Desperation can be a great catalyst. A resistance rose and promised the public safety and resources, with makeshift governance. They called themselves the Sons and Daughters of the New Republic. The resistance was unorganized and untrained, but they were passionate. The Acropolis's Republic decided to take military action against the resistance to eradicate any threat to its growing inhabitants.

Dr. Mason was appalled by the Republic and its constant slaughter of the desolates. He made sure to plant doubt in his daughter's mind to encourage her distrust of the synths and the Republic's agendas. Mia had spent a lifetime living within the Republic. Her father's views conflicted with everything she had grown to know. Mia rarely left the academy and continued her efforts to make friends with the wards. Even though the wards were training to be soldiers, she found herself playing a motherly role for the newest wards, assisting with their transition into the walled city.

When Mia was a teenager, she started volunteering with the SERF's medical team against her father's wishes. She aided with the raids and assimilation of the young desolate children that the SERF had collected. She always offered these children respect and compassion, unlike her comrades.

Mia secretly loved being a part of the SERF's medical team. She would never confess this to her father or her plans to be augmented. She thought the best part about being part of the SERF's medical team was that they were able to leave the Acropolis. This was the very reason that enticed her to join. She was always fascinated with the landscape surrounding the Acropolis. Everything inside the Acropolis had an artificial and sterile appearance. Concrete, steel, and glass made up most of the construction of the city. They constructed the city vertically and connected the towering buildings with a series of skywalks, some of which were so tall they pierced the clouds above.

The quiet hum of electric vehicles filled the streets. The luxuries of the old world were still very abundant here. Citizens of the Acropolis strolled through the streets with their arms filled with shopping bags bearing the familiar logos they had loved from the old world while sipping on their overpriced beverages. Even with the collapse of modern

civilization, these citizens were not about to lose the luxuries they had come to expect before the pandemic. There was a lapse in their availability, however, the restoration of these indulgent comforts was quick. Both the streets and the sidewalks were kept in a pristine state, despite the volume of people living in the Acropolis. Very little grew naturally in the city. The city utilized underground hydroponic farms and engineered proteins to provide nutrient substances for its citizens.

As Mia prepared for another trip outside the city, she tied her long, wavy, mousy brown hair up into a bun before she dressed in her gray and blue uniform. This was the uniform that all medical volunteers were required to wear. Once dressed, she quickly left the small apartment she shared with her father to the place where the SERF gathered for their march. Some soldiers paused and watched her scornfully as she made her way through the troop. She was the only non-synthetic member of the troop and was accustomed to their sneers.

The soldiers were dressed in ordinary gray uniforms. They layered black modular body armor over their uniforms. The modular armor could accommodate their military-grade biomechanical augmentations. Each soldier also wore heavy black boots and thick black helmets. The soldiers' armor made them look even less human. The soldiers stood just outside the tall concrete walls of the Acropolis in rigid rows. A few officers walked between the rows of SERF soldiers to inspect them.

Mia and the other medical staff loaded onto an armored bus where they waited patiently at the back of the troop. Once the inspection was completed, the officers shouted their orders, and the soldiers then started their long march toward their objective.

The surrounding landscape was undeniably a wasteland. Its orange coloration held a strange beauty for the girl who had grown up in a world of white and gray. The old irrigation that used to run through the wasteland was now gone, and the powerful, unforgiving sun had taken its toll on the land. The bare earth was cracked and starved of all nutrients. The little vegetation that managed to grow was tough and covered with needles. The ground ahead was almost flat with few obstacles. Now and then, a cluster of dead foliage or the debris of a forgotten town would greet them.

Settlements were sparse throughout the wastelands. The smarter settlers stayed far away from the synth cities, and their major settlements were located well beyond the Republic's reach. The people who settled in the wastelands were forced to create small, sparse developments due to the harsh conditions and their lack of real military means. On the other hand, the resistance often gathered near the Republic's walled cities. The SERF had long been aware of the resistance's efforts, but they believed there was no immediate risk and took their time in addressing them.

Despite the SERF's reassurance, Mia had witnessed her troop's surprised reaction more than once to attacks from the resistance. The rebels proved to be more of an

inconvenience to the well-armed SERF soldiers. She never felt endangered in the armored bus she rode in with the other medical staff and engineers, but she could see the rebels were slowly organizing.

Mia was familiar with the protocols of the SERF. This trip was like many others she had been on before. An officer would brief them all on safety protocol while in the wastelands. The mission was always the same. The SERF would seize small camps that the desolates had formed and disband them, arresting or killing desolates in the process. This march started the same way. They rode all day to a destination that a scout had previously marked. This time, Mia's troop seemed to have stumbled on something unexpected. The troop stopped far away from this particular camp, instead of immediately seizing it. The camp had a large grouping of campfires that lit up the dark sky in a way a great city would. She tried to imagine how many fires it would take to create such an effect.

Mia could hear the soldiers frantically making calls back to the Republic for reinforcements. Mia got off the bus, intrigued by the events, and wandered around the soldiers. This was an immediate violation of her earlier briefing. Several soldiers promptly instructed her to return to the armored bus. She ignored their instructions. A synth scout eventually emerged through the crowd of soldiers to confirm what they already knew. Mia dodged and winded through the crowd so she could hear him. The camp ahead was not just desolates; they were rebels. This was not a rebel camp; it was a colony. It was the largest rebel colony they had ever come across, and they were armed. Mia started to feel excited at the idea of sharing this news with her father. She quickly returned to the safety of the armored bus. She pressed her face against the window like a child and waited anxiously.

The SERF waited until dawn to launch their attack. Gunshots rang through the air. She secretly wished for the rebels to win. A little over an hour later, they gave the signal for the buses to move in. It was over. Mia gave a sigh of relief as a wave of sadness washed over her. How many had died this time, she wondered.

Bodies of dead rebels littered the ground, and the prisoners sat on the ground with their hands tied behind their backs, their heads covered in black cloth sacks. The young children sat on the other side of the camp, separated from the prisoners. Mia made her way through the carnage to where the children were. Her eyes skimmed over the bodies of both men and women. She hoped that most of them had managed to escape.

A SERF soldier was interrogating a small boy. It was standard procedure to immediately document newly acquired children. The small boy with black hair stood in silent protest as the synth soldier grew more impatient. Mia knew the boy was in shock, probably from witnessing the death or capture of his family. She ran over to him before the soldier could lose his patience.

"I got him," Mia called as she stooped down to wrap a protective arm around the boy. The boy snapped free and slapped her across the face, leaving a tender, stinging pain on her cheek. The synth soldier raised his rifle, ready to slam the butt against the boy's skull. Again, Mia wrapped her arm around him, tighter this time. "It's okay," she insisted. The synth soldier said nothing, and his readied rifle remained in the air. Finally, the soldier lowered his weapon with a disapproving huff.

She guided the boy to the bus. The whole time, he wailed like a wounded animal. She placed him firmly on the bus seat and inspected him for physical injuries, treating his superficial scrapes with antiseptic. Most of the children felt more comfortable with her. The boy started to calm down and watched the camp through the bus window.

Mia gently directed the boy's gaze away from the window by cupping the boy's face with her hand. "Hey, you don't need to be watching that." Her voice was gentle. The boy's gaze dropped to his feet. "What's your name?" She inquired in the same gentle voice.

"Roger," the boy answered in a hoarse voice. "Roger Harris."

"Nice to meet you, Mr. Roger Harris," Mia replied with a warm, sensitive smile. "I'm Mia Mason."

A small group of children started to board the bus at this time for transportation. Mia instinctively rose to assist the other children when Roger reached out and grasped her hand. He held it tightly with his small, hot, clammy hands. "Please don't go," he pleaded in a small voice.

Mia nodded and sat next to him, her heart aching for this child. "It's okay, I can stay right here." She wrapped an arm around his shoulders and this time pulled him closer to her side.

Roger returned his gaze to the window. The SERF and its prisoners had vanished from view. All that remained was the fallen. The other children pressed up against the bus windows to search for familiar faces among the fallen rebels. Roger didn't reveal whether he saw his family; he just kept gazing out the window, as if he knew their ghosts.

The ride back to the Acropolis was usually the hardest part. The medical staff worked diligently to treat the children's wounds, both physical and psychological. Many were crying and screaming. The youngest of the children were sent to the orphanage, while the older ones like Roger were sent to the academy, and the necessary documents had to be filed for each child. Mia helped escort the older children to the academy. Only a handful of them this time, all between the ages of five and eight. Rarely did the academy accept children much older than that; those it did not accept were sent straight to the prison camps. The medical staff started filling out the forms for the children.

"You know, Mr. Harris, you and I are neighbors now. I live in the apartments within the academy," Mia explained. Roger showed little interest in her words as he examined his new surroundings. "I'm going to leave you here with your new instructor." Roger grabbed her hand again, his eyes wide, like a wild animal that had been captured. "It's okay; they will take good care of you. I'll visit you after school tomorrow," she promised. Roger reluctantly released his grip on her hand.

Mia had kept her promise and visited Roger not only the next day but also every day. She had a special fondness for the small defiant boy. Her father had said defiance was a sign of strength.

Over time, Roger's memories of that night faded. He and the other abducted children at the academy assumed new roles. They were no longer children of desolates or rebels; they were now the future strong arm of the Republic. The academy made sure to fill the children's heads with stories of how their desolate families abused them and forced them to go hungry. The academy also told them that the world outside the Acropolis was cruel and unforgiving and that the synth soldiers had saved them. The children believed this as the truth, surrounded by warmth and a full belly.

The academy was known for its grueling conditions and the immaculate soldiers it produced. Those who proved to be exceptional were treated like gods among the rubble. Roger, like the other wards, would never leave the academy during his training. This was now his home, and he had forgotten about the world outside its secured walls. He excelled at the academy and graduated with honors at the age of seventeen. He was then immediately accepted into a special tasks group of the SERF.

Only three cadets were accepted into this prestigious group. Along with being accepted into the special tasks group, Roger was also one of the few cadets forbidden from receiving military-grade synthetic augmentations or any augmentations at all. The majority of the SERF soldiers were augmented shortly after turning sixteen when they graduated from the academy. These biomechanical prosthetics were not for aesthetics but for agility and strength. These military-grade prosthetics also lacked embellishments.

One of Roger's close friends from the academy was also accepted into the special tasks group. Farrah Harper was Roger's equal in marksmanship abilities but excelled over Roger in all written exams. She arrived at the academy the same year as Roger and was only a year his junior. She was not only the top cadet at the academy but clearly one of the academy's favorites. Farrah always had a special affection for Roger and was forthright with her feelings. Roger did not resist her for long. Farrah was a stunning young woman. She was slender and tall with fair skin and brilliant golden blond hair. Her wide, bright blue eyes all contributed to her deceptively amiable appearance. Their romance was short-lived during their early adolescent years, but they remained close friends.

Together they trained in the special tasks program for five grueling years. The training was intense, and the trio was ready to receive their first mission. There were times Roger and Farrah thought they would break from the pressure. They were pushed both physically and to the mental brink. They read countless books about tactical advantages and unconventional warfare. At the end of those five years, it felt like graduation day all over again. Farrah and Roger sat on the street curb; it was the first time either one could remember when they didn't have any classes or training. There they sat in front of the academy, sharing grandiose visions of what their first mission would be.

Mia was on her way home to her apartment, still within the academy, when she spotted the pair on the street. She held a worn leather briefcase, once belonging to her father, in one hand and a hot drink from the local coffee shop in the other. Mia was no longer a volunteer and worked at the hospital as one of its surgeons. She still lacked any biomechanical prosthetics, which is why she preferred to stay at the academy instead of purchasing one of the luxury apartments in a nearby high-rise. Mia felt less scrutinized in the academy since cadets were banned from having any augmentations until their graduation. Despite her light-colored slacks and white blouse, she sat next to Roger and Farrah on the street curb.

"What are you guys talking about?" She nudged Roger playfully with her shoulder as she took another sip of the beverage that smelled of cloves. Roger immediately brightened at her presence.

Farrah interjected in a superior tone before Roger could answer. "Mia, we get our first mission tomorrow. It's going to be highly classified."

"I bet! You two are the best soldiers the SERF has." Mia was always quick with kind words of encouragement.

"Yeah, but we're not just soldiers," Farrah said, turning her head away from Mia. "We're Special Tasks." Mia nodded with wide eyes, as if in awe of Farrah's words.

"Well, you guys just be safe, okay?" Mia rose to her feet, brushing off the imaginary dirt. Roger was immediately at her side. "Can I walk with you?" He asked without giving a second thought to Farrah.

"Sure." Mia beamed.

Mia was always beautiful. Her long, light, mousy brown hair was worn up in a messy bun, and the little flyaway wisps of hair created a halo around her face. Her hazel eyes were always warm and sincere. It was her genuine kindness that made everyone fall in love with her. Roger was no different. The age difference never deterred him from Mia. He made small talk until they were safely in the hall outside of her apartment and far away from Farrah.

He awkwardly collected his courage. "Mia, I don't know when I'll get back," Roger began with a very serious tone, rubbing the back of his neck nervously. He had a plan for this moment in his mind. "I'm pretty sure they're sending us out into the wastelands. I just want you to know..." the words stuck in his throat. "...I just want you to know that I'm really thankful for everything you've done for me." This is where he would kiss her, he thought.

"Roger, you don't need to thank me." Mia wrapped her arms around him as if he was the same small boy she first met. Her arms could barely reach his shoulders. Roger was now six feet tall and strong from his years of training at the academy. His dark features and fair olive skin lent themselves to his handsome looks. He gently took Mia's hands in his own.

"Mia," he began again to collect his courage, so he could express his feelings. "I need you to know how much you mean to me." He cast his gaze off to the side when he felt himself start to blush.

"Roger," Mia cooed as she reached out and touched his cheek. "You and me, we're family." Roger met her eyes in time for one of her signature smiles, full of love and warmth. "You have to take care of Farrah now. She's part of our family too." Roger could feel his heart sink.

"I will." Roger's gaze dropped to his feet, and he could not help but feel small; this was not the response he desired. "I better get back to Farrah," Roger announced. He wanted a quick exit. He walked slowly down the staircase as if physically wounded.

Farrah was still sitting on the curb, looking less than pleased. "How did it go with your *girlfriend*?" Her words hurt him even more.

"That's enough, Farrah," Roger growled. He returned to his spot beside her on the curb.

"Look, we have a lot to look forward to. Don't let her ruin this," Farrah snuggled up to Roger and placed her head on his shoulder, just like when they were children. Her golden hair cascaded against his arm. "I'm really glad we're both in this together."

"Yeah," Roger said with a hint of a smile. He wrapped a friendly arm around her and patted her on the shoulder. "I think I'm going to head back to the dorms and pack." He gave her one more squeeze before departing.

Roger's dorm room was at the end of the boys' wing in the academy. The sound of his heavy boots echoed loudly through the empty halls. Roger's dorm was small, but it was his own. He had shared a dorm room until he was accepted into the special task group. All his worldly possessions were crammed into this little 8'x8' room, all provided by the academy. In the small chest of drawers, neatly folded, were the same gray uniforms he had worn for years. He placed his shined black boots on top of it before he plopped down

on the bed. As he looked around the room, he realized that nothing in it truly belonged to him. There wasn't even anything on the white walls. If he died tomorrow, there would be nothing to remember him by, and perhaps that was for the best, he thought.

The next morning came quickly. Roger dressed in his gray slacks and a white, collarless, button-up shirt before putting on his gray jacket with its golden embroidery at the cuffs. He fastened his gray jacket's golden buttons all the way up to its high collar and laced up his boots. Then he looked around the room one more time. He emptied the drawers and placed their entire contents in the laundry. The bed was neatly made, and all evidence of any occupant had been removed.

Roger took the elevator to the large conference room. Usually, the conference room was reserved for officers. Farrah was already there, dressed in the same gray uniform, her long golden hair neatly braided up into a twisted bun. Two officers sat at the conference table, both of them watching the clock. The third cadet in the special tasks group was still nowhere to be seen. Roger took his place next to a very rigid Farrah before he mimicked the same stiff stance. Ten minutes after the instructed time, the third cadet showed up. He gave a casual wave at the officers and stood next to Roger.

"Have a seat, cadets," one of the officers invited. All three relaxed and sat down at the large round table. "Congratulations, this is the moment you have been preparing for. You have all worked very hard to be a part of this team. You were selected not only for your performance over the years at the academy but also for your ability to adapt and for your quick resolve for creative tactical solutions."

"Right," the second officer interrupted impatiently. "Your assignment is treacherous, but we are confident in your skills. You three will immerse yourselves into the rebels' organization. You will be cut off from all ties to the Republic. We will provide you with one set of civilian clothing, a predetermined amount of funds, a pack of basic supplies, and an envelope with further instructions. The garments have been specially selected for your mission. Cadets, this is your last day in the Acropolis, and you won't be able to return until your mission is complete."

"How long will that be?" Farrah was uneasy about leaving the Acropolis. It was all any of them knew.

"As long as it takes," the second officer replied firmly.

A SERF soldier walked in carrying three boxes and handed one to each of the cadets. The third cadet immediately started to rummage through his box and pulled out the strange clothing from it. He began to eagerly open the envelope in the box when both officers shouted at him.

"No, no! You must wait until you're alone and out of the Acropolis," the second officer said with the utmost importance. The third cadet returned the envelope to his box and placed it on the table.

"You will actually be working individually," the first officer went on to explain. "That is why it's very important for you to keep your missions classified. We do not even know what your exact orders are. We can tell you that, as elite soldiers from our special tasks group, you have been trained especially for your assigned missions without even knowing it. Failure is not an option. Once you succeed, you will be welcomed back to the Acropolis as heroes."

Roger and Farrah exchanged concerned looks. "What happens if we fail?" Farrah knew the answer before she even asked the question.

"We will be forced to terminate you. You would be too much of a liability if left alive," explained the first officer solemnly. "But you won't fail." Her voice exuded confidence. "Now, get dressed, and we'll take you to the side gate to release you."

The three cadets obediently changed into the soft, knitted, faded garments in the box. Each of the ensembles was different. Roger had a black t-shirt and dark denim jeans with a black canvas jacket. The worn black boots in the box were similar in style to his current black laced boots. The third cadet had a dark green sweater with a gray undershirt. His pants were khaki-colored with worn patches. He also had a pair of light brown, laced boots in his box. Farrah found a button-up black shirt with an oversized gray sweater, black straight-legged jeans, and a pair of tall dark brown lace-up boots. The clothing assigned to them all had a worn and second-hand appearance. None of the citizens in the Acropolis would ever wear such garments.

Once dressed, the three were discreetly led from the academy through an underground tunnel to the side entrance. Each pocketed their funds, basic supplies, and envelopes. The gates opened, and there was no grandeur about what was about to happen. The three felt forsaken as the gates closed behind them, leaving them in the wasteland. There they stood outside the walls for the first time in a long time.

"What do we do now?" Farrah asked, bewildered, feeling overwhelmingly small.

The third cadet seemed unfazed as he started marching toward the horizon. "We drink"

Drinking was strictly a privilege reserved for the most elite citizens of the Acropolis. Cadets at the academy and SERF soldiers alike were never permitted to drink or partake in any vices. Roger and Farrah chased after the third cadet like small schoolchildren as he led them to an outpost. It stood alone a few miles from the Acropolis.

"How did you know about this place?" Roger was always suspicious of others.

"Some of the cadets and I would sneak out this way every once in a while. It's a favorite of the SERFs," the third cadet explained in a matter-of-fact tone. Even though the consumption of alcohol was banned for soldiers and cadets, it was only frowned upon for the rest of the Acropolis's many citizens. The little outpost produced its own liquor and sold or traded it to anyone willing to make the short trip from the Acropolis. They were one of the few places outside of a synth city that accepted the Republic's currency. Roger and Farrah soon discovered that the other cadet had been here more than a few times.

The outpost owner greeted him by name and immediately poured him a shot of clear liquid. The owner's adult daughter came over and made drink and meal suggestions to Roger and Farrah. The third cadet had the waitress bring over three shots of the clear liquid that he had already downed two of. Farrah sniffed it and cringed as her eyes began to water. Roger downed the drink quickly and found it was a mistake. His eyes watered, and they burned all the way down. His stomach turned when the substance reached its destination, and Roger could feel it start to come back up. He fought the urge, turned to Farrah, and watched her take her shot through his blurred vision. She followed Roger's example, but she made a horrid gurgling noise when she felt the burning sensation. She suddenly looked ashen and started to make heaving noises as if she was about to retch. The third cadet was laughing boisterously at the sight of their suffering.

Soon, all three were eating and taking shots of the vile clear liquid that made their eyes water and their throats burn. Roger and Farrah struggled to keep up with the third cadet. They had to stop after a few shots of the stuff because it was interfering with their meals. The three generously paid the outpost owner and tipped his daughter. The trio had never paid with money before, and everything had been provided for them. The concept of money was foreign to the cadets. Citizens of the Acropolis bartered with money, but soldiers would only use it if they came upon it illicitly.

Slightly tipsy, the three left the establishment. The third cadet opened his envelope without hesitation. The paper his mission was printed on looked very ordinary. Roger and Farrah watched intently as he read it silently.

"What is it?" Roger finally inquired eagerly.

"You know I can't say," he retorted angrily at Roger. "I just wanted to know which way I needed to head out." He stuffed the envelope and its contents back in his pocket. "I'll see you two around," he said as he started to walk off.

Farrah was quick to embrace Roger. Maybe it was the alcohol or a purely impulsive act, but she pressed her lips firmly against his. Roger was caught off guard, but he soon found his arms around her. She pulled away and gave him a sad smile. "I won't be able to watch over you, so take care of yourself." She turned from him and started walking blindly in the opposite direction of the third cadet.

Roger, now alone and slightly flustered, pulled out his envelope and read its contents:

Ethan Jordan - Resistance

The small and neatly printed words perplexed Roger at the top of his paper. Underneath the name was the word TERMINATE. The word seemed harsh in contrast to the rest of the letter. It was clear now what Roger had been trained for. The rest of the paper contained little information. It mostly restated the importance of denying all ties to the Republic and destroying this document. Roger stuffed the envelope and its contents in his jacket pocket, not wanting to read the rest.

Roger started to walk through the wasteland blindly, as there was no directional indication of where to go. He soon came across a small settlement. Men stood watching over the perimeter, using miscellaneous items for weapons. They observed Roger as he walked across the camp to the central fire. Roger was obviously unarmed and carried no supplies of any significance. He squatted beside the fire, and a few children raced over to him, filled with curiosity.

The children pulled at his clothing and chatted at him until their mothers shooed them away. A handful of men and women came to him a few moments later, offering their bodies to him in exchange for food. Roger felt overwhelmed by the aggressiveness of the advances. He had never known anyone who had been so desperate for food. He dismissed the men and women with a wave of his hand. Roger felt too embarrassed to answer them verbally and tried not to make eye contact. He feared that any sort of acknowledgment would fuel their advances. The men who stood guard only glanced at him occasionally to ensure that he was not causing any problems.

These desolates did not look like the rebels he had heard about. They were filthy, the kind of filthy that left a film on their skin and an offensive stench. They were also very loud and uncouth. He felt he was in a foreign land. There were only a handful of families camped among the scoundrels in the shanty community. Roger observed a cluster of small, crudely assembled lean-tos constructed out of rickety frames and patchwork canvases. The aggressive advances were long gone, but his uneasiness remained. He could feel the desolates' eyes on him. He tried his best to simply ignore the desolates and pulled out the envelope that he had received. Roger read the ambiguous details of his mission before he tossed the envelope and its contents into the fire. He watched the paper curl and the last of his ties to the Acropolis disintegrate into the embers.

Roger awoke to find an old blanket laid over him. He could feel the sun peek out over the horizon. The smell of a greasy, pungent sausage grain greeted him from one of the shanties. He could only assume it was someone's breakfast. One of the children ran over to him and proudly offered him a small, chipped bowl of their thin, watery stew. Roger assumed it was watered down to accommodate many mouths. When Roger refused the stew he could see how he offended the small child.

The pale male child waited a moment before taking a seat on the ground beside Roger. The child gnawed at the stale piece of bread, which he used to dip into the rejected stew to help soften it. This child was very talkative as he ate and slurped the contents of the bowl. He talked to Roger in his sloppy speech about how his people often packed up their little shanty town to relocate. They were constantly on the move to avoid both the rebels and the SERF.

"My Momma, she says that we ain't wanting any trouble, you know? That's why we gotta keep moving, to stay safe. You see, we ain't got no way of defending ourselves. My Momma says I was born roaming with this pack here. We trade what we got and find at outposts," the enthusiastic boy explained between mouthfuls of food.

"So you never had any conflict or run-ins with the SERF or the rebels?" Roger inquired politely.

"Nah, those rebels ain't giving a damn about the likes of us. It's those synths that scared us. All the folks here are really scared of you too. You dress funny and talk funny too. You might be a rebel or even Republic. They say just 'cause you don't look like a synth, don't mean you ain't one. My Momma pays no mind to what they be saying. She says the people here are ate up in the head," the child beamed. He pulled out a second piece of stale bread from his coat pocket. The bread was wrapped in an old kerchief. "You can take it for later."

"Thank you, friend," Roger replied as he accepted the piece of stale bread this time, not wanting to offend the boy again.

"My momma said you can keep that blanket too if you want."

Roger had little to offer the boy and his mother for their kindness. These nomads had no use for the Republic's money. The talkative boy proudly pointed out the general location of a nearby rebel camp. Part of their survival depended on always knowing the location of the rebels and the SERF to avoid them.

Roger rolled the bread into the blanket and was able to assemble a makeshift sack out of the blanket. It was almost dark when Roger finally arrived at the rebel camp. The walk was much longer than he had originally anticipated. He was grateful for the bread halfway through and was now parched.

He could not believe how much joy he felt when he first laid eyes on the rebel camp. He approached the camp with a little caution and immediately, he was confronted by hostile rebels, their loaded guns trained on his torso. Flustered, Roger threw his hands into the air and dropped the bundled blanket with the last remnants of his bread.

A rebel snatched Roger by his shoulder and forced him to turn to face another man. Rebels started patting him down in a gruff manner. Another man quickly approached

Roger and snatched his hand with a sharp twist. Roger quaked with pain and surprise as the man who held his bent hand quickly pricked Roger's index finger with a crude-looking device. The man released Roger's hand and waited for his device to respond.

"He's clean!" one of the men shouted as he finished patting down Roger's pant leg. The man who held the device that pricked Roger gave a nod of approval. The guns lowered, and the man who had forcefully turned him sighed with relief. Roger could not help but feel a sense of relief too.

"You never know," the man began in an apologetic tone. "What are you doing here in these parts?" The man asked as he tucked his pistol into the front waistband of his pants, which were held up by a piece of rope. This man's dialect was neater than the desolates.

"You're rebels, right? I wanted to volunteer," Roger proclaimed. Some of the men started to chuckle.

"Oh yeah?" The man seemed unimpressed. "With your soft hands? Where are you from? You know you can't just march up in here and volunteer. We got procedures!"

Roger could not help but look confused, "I'm sorry." Roger timidly picked up his ransacked blanket and started refolding it. He then slung it over his shoulder. "I really don't know much about how these sorts of things work," Roger attempted to slow his speech and tried his best to match their dialect. It was strange and awkward to him. Their speech was foreign to how those at the Acropolis spoke. "I do a lot of traveling and I got no home to speak of," Roger explained, thinking of the nomads.

"I know the likes of you," the man said with a nod, accompanied by a look of disdain. "You're one of those drifters, ain't you?"

"Yeah," Roger agreed. If the man wanted to piece his story together for him, he was not going to object.

"What are you doing here? Ain't your kind supposed to hate fighting?" The man spat his words at him with an accusatory tone.

"That's what I've been told," Roger explained nonchalantly. "I didn't think that was right, to do nothing. I'm strong, and I know how to shoot." Roger quickly added an explanation for his skills, "I used to hunt."

The man looked satisfied with Roger's explanation. "So you've got a name?"

"... Roger. Roger Harris, sir." Roger felt no need to lie about his name. He had spent so many years in isolation at the Acropolis, he was sure very few knew who he was. Suddenly, the man's sweaty and grimy hand snatched Roger's hand in a violent handshake.

"I'm Jim," the man introduced. "Well, like I said before we've got procedures. This here camp is active. You've got to get yourself to one of those recruiting camps." Jim explained. "It's alright," he announced with a toothy smile. "You can stay here for a while if you like, that is. Heck, you can even get a jump-start on your training here. Another set of eyes is always welcomed around here. I'll be making my rounds through the recruiting camps in a few weeks."

Jim slung his arm across Roger's shoulders as if they had been old friends. "I'll show you around." Jim was a little older than Roger and around the same height, but he had a slimmer build than Roger and light auburn hair with a sun-kissed, freckled face. He smelled of leather and machine oil.

Roger learned that Jim was from a settlement on the other side of the continent. He had traveled all this way to be close to the action that surrounded the Acropolis. Jim also told Roger how the Republic's reach seemed to have no bounds, and there were rumors they were affecting everyone all over the world. Much of the rebels' focus had been on the prison camps. They wanted to free their people.

Roger found himself welcomed in Jim's camp. Suspicion of his sudden presence still ran high; however, interest in him soon died down. But then no one gave him a second look.

Roger immersed himself with the rebels and trained every morning with them. There was little the rebels would have him do besides training. Roger found there was friendly competition among the rebels. He quickly found the rebels were an extremely tight-knit group. He was never accused of treachery nor was he ever treated unfairly. Roger just knew that he would have to be patient to earn their trust. The rebels eventually allowed him to assist with patrol duties every couple of days with the presence of an escort to supervise him.

The two weeks Jim had quoted to Roger had long passed. Over three months had passed by before Jim drove Roger to the recruitment camp, as promised. Roger remained patient during that time and took the opportunity to familiarize himself with the rebels' ways. Jim's rusty-covered jeep was noisier than any of the vehicles that Roger had heard back in the Acropolis. The jeep had a crude capacitor that needed to be reset twice a day to keep the engine charged.

The recruitment camp was a two-day drive west. They slept in the jeep at night and rationed their water reserves. The city ruins were sparser in the direction they were traveling, and it was easy to tell that this land was never really developed.

When they finally arrived at the rebel's recruitment camp, Roger was searched and questioned again. Afterward, he was accepted into the rebel recruitment camp, much to his surprise and relief. This was where Roger received his proper training as a rebel. He was thankful for all the years of training he had endured at the academy. The rebels were not very advanced, but they trained their men and women hard. There was little else to

do to pass the time this far out in the desert, so even in their spare time, the rebels trained their bodies.

Jim was not kidding when he had first told Roger that the rebels had procedures. Recruits were up before five in the morning for inspection. That meant you had to have your cot made, be dressed, and have your rifle assembled and ready for inspection as well. There were no uniforms; the clothes on your back were the only ones you had. Finding a moment to wash your garments was a real challenge. The rebels' barracks were nothing more than large, poorly constructed assemblages of tents. There was no air conditioning available on the base, and the rebels mostly spent their time outside.

Their rifles were crude and required constant upkeep. There was no breakfast either. The rebels had limited supplies that they rationed. They scrutinized every morsel before rationing it out, and the protein supplements were horrendous. Roger had been accustomed to the academy's regular meal times and abundance of food. This was by far the hardest adjustment he had to endure at the rebel camp. Even though the protein supplements kept you full, there was no joy or satisfaction in it.

After inspection, Roger was off for roll call and then engaged in either strength training or calisthenics. After physical training, there was a brief period when recruits could grab a bowl of a cold, glutinous, bland meal. It was not really breakfast or lunch, but it was food or at least some sort of nourishment. The food they were fed was high in caloric value and sat heavily in their guts. After eating, the recruits had time on a makeshift shooting range. This is where Roger excelled. The other recruits and even some of the rebel officers took pleasure in testing Roger's marksmanship.

It was entertaining for the rebels that Roger could pick off the smallest of prey from the most surprising distances. Roger's signature quickly became his innate ability to place the bullet cleanly in his small target's head every time. That is what pleased the crowd the most. After Roger made the shot and held up his small game, usually his prey was some sort of small reptile, with the pride that rivaled that of a safari hunter. The rebels would cheer. This was a fun way to pass the time, but Roger was most pleased by the meat his small quarry could produce. It wasn't much more than a small mouthful, but having the cooked, shredded meat bits meld with his taste buds made the effort of cleaning the small prey worth it.

After the shooting range, it was time for dinner, the only scheduled and dependable hot meal of the day. The hot meal was their midday meal cooked up in large vats and served hot to the rebels. Then the time was their own unless they had cleanup or lookout duty. Roger truly enjoyed the rebel camp. He flirted with the girls and communed with his fellow rebels. The sense of camaraderie among the rebels was unmatched by anything he experienced at the academy. He had missed the academy when he had first arrived, but with every passing day, he grew to love his new home among the rebels.

The rebels kept Roger at the recruitment camp for a little over a year, and it was comfortable. Roger honestly liked the regulations and the predictability that each day brought. Maybe that is what made him such a good cadet for the academy. The rebels recognized his skill and even spoke about letting him run the shooting range. Therefore, he could train new recruits to shoot. The idea excited him. Roger had immersed himself in all aspects of the rebel lifestyle and all of their vices.

There was not a lot to do outside the recruit routine, and while some recruits turned their attention to training their bodies and combat skills, others found less productive means of entertainment. During the wee hours of the night, some barrack tents transformed themselves into places of indiscretion. Roger could often be found at these gatherings. He particularly took to gambling and the dark heavy liquor that was sold there. Roger found that he could not resist the vices, after obeying a lifetime of regulations. He found he had a resounding lack of inhibition. Most rebels partook in one unfavorable activity or another to help pass the time, but not all. Gambling was the most popular on the camp, especially when on watch duty.

Roger had never minded watch duty. It was an easy enough task. Nothing ever happened this far out in the desert. The low rolling hills and bright starry sky made visibility easy. The foliage was sparse, but what did grow was hard to survive the toils of the desert.

Roger was on patrol just outside the camp's limits this evening. He had slumped himself lazily against his pack while he enjoyed the contents of his bone-carved flask. He cursed quietly under his breath as he played cards by himself. Roger's rifle lay haphazardly across his lap, just in case. Even though he had been assigned weapons he had never shot them outside of target practice.

By chance, Roger noticed the silhouette of a person far off in the distance. This sight in the far distance astounded him. He was able to distinguish her feminine silhouette, but he did nothing. He continued his game while he sneaked glances at the figure to check her proximity.

When she came close enough, he stopped, set his cards aside, and watched the slender, tall woman approach him. Once the woman was close enough for them to make out each other's faces, she pulled her gun. She immediately trained it at his head as her pace turned into an aggressive march towards him.

"Roger Harris!" The voice didn't question his identity but rather addressed him with an accusatory tone. Roger allowed a smile to slip out from the corner of his mouth as he replaced the cap to his flask and placed it to the side. "The Republic has not forgotten your duties, and I was sent out to remind you of them."

"Ah. So you guys do care!" Roger facetiously replied as he tossed the soiled paper wrapper of his earlier snack at her boot. Her disgust caused her to stop in her tracks.

Roger did not recognize the woman. She did not appear to be a synth and wore no identifying clothing or markings. She crushed the empty wrapper under her large boot.

"We can't afford not to follow up on our investments," she snarled. "I'm very disappointed in you, and I know that the citizens back home will share in my disappointment. Maybe it's because you're too weak to handle all the distractions here." She motioned her gun to his flask.

"Your instructions were too vague," Roger explained with a dismissive wave of his hand. He made sure to keep his interactions with her nonchalant.

"But you were trained for this," the woman insisted. She quickly produced a small metal tubular canister from her long-fitted navy jacket and tossed it so it landed next to Roger in the sandy earth. "Since you have already prolonged your mission, they are now instructing you to empty the contents of that canister into the water supply of the camp where your target is stationed." She lowered her weapon. "Roger, I hope I don't have to intervene again... for your sake."

"I'll make a note of it," Roger retorted as he dropped his gaze back to his game. He gave her a casual nod in her general direction, seemingly unfazed by the threat. Roger reached for his flask again and brought it up to his lips.

"You are acting too much like a rebel for my taste," the stranger added just before she turned on her heel and made her departure.

Roger was relieved the incident did not turn into a fight. In truth, the encounter shook him, and he thought she surely heard his heart pounding in his chest. He now knew without a doubt that the SERF had been following him. He wondered how many special task groups were out there and if one was receiving an envelope with his name inside.

His thoughts touched on Farrah, and he wondered about her. Did she receive a similar warning? Knowing Farrah as he did, he bet she had probably already finished her mission. She was most likely already back at the Acropolis and enjoying its luxuries again. Roger remained with his thoughts at his post until another rebel relieved him of his duty. Roger gathered his belongings and concealed the small tubular canister in his satchel. The two men made friendly conversation before Roger made his way back to camp.

In the morning, the daily routine started over. Soon it was dinner, and Roger was always glad for dinner. The rebels lined up for the stew of the week. The stuff was always thick and dark-colored, and it tasted a bit like chalk from the nutrient supplement powder. As unappetizing as it was, the rebels always inhaled it without so much as a pause.

Roger spotted Jim sitting on the far end of a bench and table in the outside dining area. Roger joined him and gave him a slight nod. Jim did not return Roger's acknowledgment

and tried his best to ignore him. Jim was busy studying a digital tablet in front of him as he shoveled spoonfuls of stew into his mouth.

Roger sat directly across the table from Jim and watched him eat as he waited patiently for Jim to recognize his presence. Finally, Jim looked up at him and set his utensil down.

"What's troubling you?" Jim asked, exasperated at Roger's persistent presence.

"I feel like I'm missing out," Roger tried to sound sincere in his confession.

"What are you talking about?" Jim had little patience.

"Look, I'm ready! Let me out of here. Let me have a real assignment!" Roger insisted.
"Put me with Ethan Jordan."

"Ethan Jordan?" He straightened in his chair and folded his arms in front of his chest.
"What did you hear about Ethan Jordan?"

"You know, the guys around here talk. His name came up." Roger felt like he was stumbling. Jim studied his face for a moment longer.

"You ain't thinking this through. You don't know what you're getting into," Jim finally replied. "Besides, you're doing so well here. You practically got yourself a job here at the shooting range."

"I know, but I also know I joined the resistance to fight SERF."

"Jordan's camp is a refugee camp. There ain't much fighting out there, but it's still dangerous. If that's really what you want, I got to make some calls first."

Roger threw his arm across the table, knocking over his bowl of stew as he reached for Jim's hand. "Thank you!" He exclaimed as he shook it wildly. "You won't regret this." The words left his lips before he realized that, no, Jim would indeed regret this.

"Meet me at the communications building tomorrow morning," Jim instructed as he retrieved his hand, now covered in hot, sticky stew. "I'll see what I can do for you."

Roger bypassed his normal morning routine and waited for Jim in front of the only permanent structure in the recruitment camp. The rebels had converted an old brick, ranch-style house into a communications hub. Jim arrived an hour after Roger and led him inside to the living room, which now served as a lobby, before he disappeared into the back room. Jim came back an eternity later and sat in the armchair next to Roger.

"What's going on?" Roger anxiously asked.

"It's good news, I suppose," Jim said as he leaned forward and intertwined his fingers. "Turns out Jordan could use your marksmanship. Like I told you, he's got himself a refugee outpost near the prison camp, AD17. It's really dangerous. I'm sorry to say, there's a lot of shady business between us and the SERF there. Do your best to keep your nose clean and stay out of trouble," Jim ordered sternly.

"Yes, sir," the words came out of Roger's mouth involuntarily. He wondered what the SERF's part was in all this. "So, when do I go?"

"You go as soon as your ride gets here. There's a jeep passing through on its way to the refugee outpost," Jim announced. "One of the men in that jeep is kind of like our major. So best behavior, you hear? They will get here in a few hours. They said it'll be a tight squeeze, but they'll take you."

"Good," Roger was pleased to hear he was, at the very least, able to put as much distance as possible between himself and the stranger who threatened him.

Jim and a few other men led Roger to the main entrance. The covered jeep pulled up, and four men were already inside with their own luggage. Roger piled in, only carrying his woven satchel, a small sidearm, and a bedroll. Jim shut the jeep's door and gave the window a few quick pats. Roger was uncomfortably wedged between the door and the shoulder of the man sitting next to him. The jeep wasted no time taking off, leaving a cloud of dust in its wake.

"So, what's your story?" A fair-haired man immediately asked from the passenger seat. He was rigid and proper, unlike the other rebels. He wore a green button-up shirt with a brown leather jacket and dark-colored khaki pants.

"Just being transferred to the refugee camp outside of AD17," Roger replied nonchalantly.

"I heard you requested that, is that true?" The man's voice was stern. Roger looked up to see the man's icy blue eyes staring him down. "That's not a place anyone wants to be."

"I wanted some excitement," Roger retorted, dismissing the man's comment with a tilt of his head.

The man did not say anything. He instead twisted himself in his seat, so he could better observe Roger. He sat there, twisted, evaluating Roger for an uncomfortable moment. "I don't know if they need your kind of blind eagerness," the man finally announced as he sat back in his chair. "My name is David Stevens. I run the resistance operations in that district." Roger could feel the hair on the back of his neck stand on end.

The ride to the refugee outpost was awkward. The tension was thick, and none of the men cared to talk to Roger, and at one point even talked about him among each other.

Roger was relieved when he saw the makeshift refugee outpost. It was built, quite literally, in the shadow of the synth prison camp. The tall walls of the prison camp were constructed out of cold steel and crowned with a layer of barbed wire. A few manned synth watchtowers could be seen above the height of the prison camp's walls. The proximity turned Roger's stomach.

They pulled into the refugee outpost. It was centered around an old airfield with little to protect the outpost's perimeter. David was the first out of the jeep, retrieving his bag and a slender sniper rifle, slinging both on his back. David appeared to be in his late twenties or early thirties, with an average build but a little smaller than Roger. David had a rugged but clean appearance. His fair hair was kept short, and his face clean-shaven. Despite his handsome looks, he lacked all of Roger's charisma. David led Roger to the central building. Roger noticed the wounded civilians scattered throughout the outpost as they made their way through.

"What's going on here?" Roger asked.

"It's a refugee camp. We take in refugees here," David explained tersely.

"For what reason? You don't expect me to believe it's for their protection. The perimeter is left wide open. How can this refugee camp operate in plain sight of that prison camp?" Roger demanded. David stopped dead in his tracks and turned to confront Roger.

"Listen, I wouldn't be asking so many questions," he warned with his finger pointed at Roger. "Remember, you're the one who requested this location and got yourself dumped in my lap. Don't you think for one second that I would hesitate to have you dragged out into those wastelands and shot. After all, we have plenty of reasons to be suspicious of outsiders, and because of that, we do things differently around here. We don't have the time to babysit you."

Roger was taken aback. "Look, Davie Boy," David's face twitched with rage at the sound of Roger's casual address. "I just heard some rumors that your operation here may be in bed with the SERF. Obviously, those rumors were grossly under-exaggerated." Roger retorted sarcastically, as he maintained a relaxed attitude.

David's face ignited with fury. "How dare you," David's patience was obviously wearing thin. "We're able to offer refugees protection because we take great care not to step on any toes. We can operate out in the open because when the SERF puts an order out on a valuable prisoner that escaped, we'll return them. Now, this only happens once in a great while. Those important escaped prisoners we return could have otherwise disappeared without our cooperation."

"You return prisoners, your own people?" Roger could not hide his disgust.

"We save many others in the process. It's only a small price to pay to get our men and women back," David explained calmly, holding Roger's gaze.

"Why cooperate with the SERF at all?" Roger demanded.

"Because of our proximity, we're able to assist with the escapes and releases. Sometimes when the SERF's prisoners get too old or weak, they'll release them. We have men that run the perimeter of their prison camp daily. The SERF tolerates us for now as long as we return the valuable prisoners. Once in a while, because of our admittedly vulnerable position, we are forced to turn the occasional blind eye to our own men being captured. We acknowledge our vulnerability and know this arrangement will come to an end soon."

"This is suicide. It's going to blow up in your face! One day the SERF is going to have enough and snuff this camp out like an anthill!" Roger was now shouting.

"You're not the one who makes that call!" David bellowed back. The two stood in silence sizing each other up.

"David!" A voice exclaimed from a distance. A short, thin man walked up and shook David's hand. "Is this the man you brought for me?" He asked as he turned to Roger.

Ethan Jordan was a small-framed man with sandy blonde hair. His brown eyes were kind but tired. He did not look to be athletic or give the sense to be any kind of physical threat. Roger stared at his target in disbelief.

"Oh," Roger fumbled through his words. "Yeah, I'm Roger Harris."

"Good, I have heard great things about your aim. Glad to have you aboard. I'm Ethan Jordan." He grabbed Roger's hand with both of his and shook it enthusiastically.

"Keep an eye on that one," David instructed in a huff to Ethan before he stomped off.

"Sorry about David," Ethan replied, dismissing his words. "He's always like that. He's a good man but under a lot of pressure."

Ethan showed Roger around the refugee outpost. This refugee outpost looked to be much larger than any of the other rebel organizations he had seen. They even had a makeshift hospital running out of an old airplane hangar. The outpost had real permanent structures, like dormitories for their soldiers and a dining hall. Ethan had his own small house near the north side of the outpost. All sides of the refugee camp were surrounded by patrolling guards and a peppering of lookout towers. Even with these precautions, the perimeter was not as secured as the other rebel camps Roger observed.

After the tour, Ethan took Roger to his home for dinner. The small house was clean with little furniture. Ethan immediately opened a bottle of dark liquor and set two clouded

glasses on the round table in the corner of the living room. Ethan called out to his wife and announced that he brought home a guest and to make dinner. Roger shared what little news he had about the recruitment camp and Jim as they waited for the meal.

Tantalizing aromas escaped from the kitchen, and soon Ethan's wife was calling out that dinner was ready. She pushed open the door from the kitchen with her back while carrying plates of food in her arms. Her long golden hair flowed over her face, obstructing her view. She managed to shake her long mane out of her face and greeted Ethan with a large smile meant only for him. When she turned to greet Roger, she froze.

Her eyes wide and face ashen, there stood Farrah in the doorway with arms filled with piping hot food. Roger could not believe it. They stared at each other in disbelief. The plates of food came crashing to the floor, and one of the plates shattered on impact. Ethan was immediately at her side and assisted her with cleaning the mess. "Clair, are you okay?" He asked gently.

"Yeah, I'm not feeling so well. I should lie down." Farrah quickly gathered the remaining plates, broken pieces, and spilled food, then hurried back into the kitchen.

"Sorry about that." Ethan was obviously concerned about his wife as he watched her rush off. He ruffled his hair as if shaking free his worry. "I'm sure they're still serving dinner in the dining hall," Ethan announced as he grabbed his jacket from the back of his chair.

As they walked to the dining hall, Roger couldn't resist finding out more. "So, your wife..." Roger began. "How long have you two been married?"

"We've been married for almost a year," Ethan replied, taking on a dreamy smile. "We met, and right away, I knew I was going to marry her."

A year, Roger thought about this. He couldn't believe how fast time had passed since he left the Acropolis. He wondered if he had led the SERF to Farrah or if she managed to complete her own mission or simply disappeared.

The Dining Hall was located in another airplane hangar. It had dirt floors and exposed metal ceiling beams. Long tables and benches filled the main area of the hangar, and a makeshift kitchen was set up in the open toward the back. The food at the Dining Hall didn't smell as good as Farrah's cooking. Roger didn't even know Farrah cooked. He used the opportunity to meet some of his other comrades. David was there with his group of official-looking men and women, all of whom discussed pressing matters in low voices. However, his thoughts remained with Farrah.

Farrah showed up a little later and took a seat next to Ethan, who kissed her upon her arrival. "Glad you came!" Ethan wrapped an arm around her slender frame and gave her a kiss on the forehead. "Feeling better?"

"Yeah," she looked up at Roger with her piercing blue eyes, almost willing him to disappear. "I'm feeling better."

Dinner was not as awkward as Roger had anticipated. The food was bland. Supper consisted of a mixture of root vegetables and poultry, all items sharing a similar tone of beige. There was also lots of alcohol to ease the tension, and soon Ethan drank himself into a stupor. When Ethan had enough, Farrah rose and allowed Ethan to lean on her. She was considerably taller than her husband, and she could easily maneuver his impaired state.

She leaned in toward Roger and whispered, "I'll take him home, and then I'll show you where you'll be staying. We can talk then." Roger gave a quick nod and resumed talking to the other rebels who shared a table with them.

When Farrah returned to the dining hall, it was mostly empty. At this point, Roger was sitting alone as he nursed the last of his drink. Farrah sat next to him and avoided eye contact. She looked exhausted with worry.

"What are you doing here?" She finally asked, breaking the silence.

"Following orders," Roger said in a matter-of-fact tone.

"Whose orders?" She quickly questioned in a low voice. "Are you looking for me?"

"No, but I did get a friendly message from home," Roger sarcastically admitted.

The color drained from her already pale face. "You did?" She looked up at him now. Her bright pale blue eyes met his. He could see her eyes welling up with tears. "I tried really hard to just disappear from them. I used a different name and traveled all the way out here."

"Got married. He seems a little old for you," Roger retorted.

"I do love him." She snapped defensively.

"Do you love him like you loved me?"

"You know that's not fair." Her tone turned harsh. "You know I could never compete with Mia." He deflected his gaze now.

"What's your plan?" He asked, changing the subject.

"I don't know." She dropped her head as if she felt the physical weight of the situation on her shoulders. "If you already received a warning, they'll come for me next."

He gulped down the rest of his drink. "Farrah," Roger tried to force the words out. He wanted to warn her, to tell her to run away. None of those words came out. "I'm glad to see you."

"Yeah, in some strange way, I'm happy to see you too." Farrah agreed with a small, saddened smile. She rose from the table. "Here, I'll show you where the new recruits stay."

She led him to a brick building near the center of the camp. The building must have been a motel at one point. Roger's new room felt like his room back at the academy. It was small and plain with minimal furniture, but it was a private space. Even after a year away from the Acropolis, Roger still didn't acquire many of his own possessions.

As Roger lay stretched out in his bed in the dark and musty-smelling room, he accepted the fact that he would have to kill Ethan in order to save his own life. He hoped the SERF didn't pursue Farrah. He rationalized to himself that he would have to follow his orders to save Farrah, drop the vile in the water, and then warn her. Maybe the SERF would see that Roger had fulfilled the role of the messenger when they spoke? The SERF's moles surely saw that. Either way, he knew she would never forgive him.



"Art not only reflects life but amplifies its deepest truths, holding a mirror to our society's most unsettling tendencies."

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