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BLAISE STOOD ON THE BULLET TRAIN PLATFORM WAITING FOR a car, oppressed by an overwhelming sense that Minsheng had highjacked his life. It was late, after working hours, and a crowd of Class II men and women in maroon jackets chatted with one another about the pleasures they anticipated in the Slag Zone, L.A.'s prime destination for professionals to do a little slumming to relieve the stress of Cloud duties. In addition to these pleasure seekers, a sizable group of Slags in dirty overalls and maintenance crew uniforms stood apart, speaking in whispers and eyeing the Class IIs mistrustfully. Holographic ads with attractive young men and women in the latest fashions leapt from the back wall whenever a Class II ventured close enough for an eye-scan capture. The ads irritated Blaise. They were like Halloween ghosts popping out to try to scare the well-dressed commuters.

Before the bullet train burst from the mouth of the tunnel, Blaise heard a high-pitched hum as it decelerated from a cruising speed of seven hundred kilometers per hour. It was the unmistakable whine from displacing air along the bullet's magnetic field, created by electrified coils in the guideway walls and track. That hum had always evoked a comforting delusion in Blaise, as if his world of PTSD flashbacks and workaholic stress had been opened by a tesseract that would admit him to a parallel dimension.

Passenger doors, aligned in pairs, whisked open in each car. As Blaise pressed forward with the Class IIs, a male android in a crisp gold uniform and bellboy hat touched him on the shoulder.

"Mr. Blaise Pascal? Where are you going, sir?"

For an instant, Blaise wondered if this might be a plainclothes SWAT cop here to arrest him. But no, the painted smile and depthless blue eyes marked this figure as an android.

“I’m boarding,” he answered curtly.

“Oh, no, sir. Class 1s ride up front.”

The android gestured toward the bullet’s needle nose. “Please, Mr. Pascal. This way.”

Blaise spotted a couple of SWATs observing him. He decided to follow the android to the lead car, which gleamed like burnished silver. A sleek door slid open, and Blaise found himself in a posh suite with a long, plush green couch accented by gold and maroon cushions. Tropical potted plants, soft-glow wall lamps, and the strains of a string quartet sweetened the atmosphere. Through an alcove at the car’s back end, he spotted a staircase and bannister under a lozenge-shaped ceiling lamp. In gaps between the picture windows, heavy gold and maroon curtains afforded a view of the tunnel wall.

“You will need a belt beam, sir,” the android explained. “If I may offer you an apéritif?”

Blaise sank into the couch, wearied by the day’s events. A translucent belt beam snapped into place around his waist. A tray of hors d’oeuvres, liqueur bottle and glass had been set out on a coffee table before him. The male android offered Blaise the glass.

“Patron Lalique Limited Edition. Your favorite liqueur.”

“When I can’t get sake. Sure. Why not? It’s been a helluva day.”

The bullet door slid closed, and the train bolted into the tunnel. After a few stops the car decelerated and pulled into the station Blaise wanted. As he stepped onto the platform, he noticed an old-fashioned ATM machine next to the bullet train ticket dispenser. It reminded him he needed cash, a lot of it, something he never would in his live/work/play pod, where monthly bills and other transactions debited and credited automatically when his paychecks hit. But here in the Zone, Slags paid for everything in cash. Glancing about to make sure no mugger lurked, Blaise approached and spoke his authorization code to the ATM. An eye scan touched his iris, and he was amazed to find that his bank balance had nearly tripled, a perk of his promotion to Class I, courtesy of Minsheng. A tray opened. He felt archaic pleasure from the feel of crisp green bills in his hands.

The train hummed and vibrated behind him. Then a tone sounded, and the train sped away, exposing a grimy mosaic spelling SEPULVEDA BOULEVARD, a musical name suggesting festivity and flowers, accompanied by the hum of

unseen lighting over a tobacco-stained concrete floor. Rubbish and condoms were piled in corners. Graffiti splashed the walls: obscenities in English, Spanish, and some obscure Cyrillic script, beside vandalized holographic ads with flickering images of last year's fashions and models. Down from the escalator shaft came voices and an aroma of peppery street food. Blaise shoved past Slags headed uptown for their shifts, and glided up, up, up into the fetid fumes of South Central L.A. He hastened across the lobby with its reek of dried sweat. Red, yellow, and green posters promoted the latest wrestling matches and displayed men with ferocious masks and muscular bodies. Tunes blared from loudspeakers, Latino pop ditties singing about passion and heartbreak.

On the street, he sweated profusely. No temperature-controlled bubble shielded him from the sun or the stench of the crowds that milled about the sidewalks and tarmac. Blaise heard snatches of guttural English, Spanish, Haitian French, Vietnamese, Chinese, Arabic, Russian, and other tongues. All of L.A.'s defeated populations clawed for subsistence here. It was past 1800 hours, but the sun glared mercilessly even as it sank behind the rooftops. Slags of all races came in and out of peeling botanicas, restaurants, dollar-discount stores, and low-slung plaster apartment complexes with orange slate roofs. They gave Blaise's navy-blue jacket a wide berth, and many of their faces were creased with fear, deprivation, and hopelessness. Slags had no official K-Spot third-eye implants, only tiny black Hindu-style forehead dots with minimal functionality. Many of the men were rail-thin wrecks who stank of cheap wine and cigarettes, fallout from lives eked out scrubbing toilets, repairing sewers, or maintaining live/work/play pods as their fathers, grandfathers, and great-grandfathers had before them. Others carried their poverty with dignity, dressed in clean, well-starched overalls, and they shared defiant peals of laughter with one another about an absurd world. Blaise was drawn to this better class of laborers because they carried themselves with an air of humble triumph over circumstances. As for the women, aside from a few skinny street hookers in see-through blouses, many were overweight and worn out by childbearing and labor and trailed by filthy children thinned out by hunger and disease. Yet here, too, he glimpsed dignity, a capacity for compassionate endurance. In many cases, these impoverished mothers managed to dress their children in clean, well-pressed clothes. It was clear from their maternal voices, their loving phrases spoken in a dozen languages, that they believed in a future for their children.

It struck Blaise that despite the way he used their women for pleasure, he harbored a furtive affection for Slags. They were, despite their crudeness, human, and their suffering merely a blunter version of his own. They fascinated Blaise,

too, because each face carried the stamp of individuality, of variegated journeys through life, something that people in the professional classes had long since given up in exchange for VR addiction and submission to neurofeed propaganda. Hatred for the ruling order choked Blaise's heart. Minsheng's image rose in his mind, monolithic and implacable. But what was the use of hating Minsheng? Or The Cloud? Blaise was one of them now; Minsheng had said so himself. Best to accept the inevitable and plunge into the forgetfulness the Zone offered.

Passing a shit-smelling alley, Blaise saw two SWATs torturing a Latino workman with vintage cattle prods. The Slag, curled up in a fetal position, twitched like an epileptic in his overalls and boots. Blaise averted his eyes and saw before him a dripping wall stained with pigeon shit and grime. On its bleeding surface, someone had spray-painted ROBOT CELLS FOR STOICS. For some reason that line made him stop to witness the torture. A Class I executive could, of course, never dream of interfering with SWAT. This was their domain. Blaise couldn't afford to draw suspicion to himself. But he couldn't resist an urge to turn into the alley and approach a scene good sense told him he should run from as fast as his feet could carry him. The Latino man's wretched cries touched something within him deeper than caution. He couldn't bear to see anyone enslaved, particularly given how Minsheng had just placed him in that category.

The Latino man screamed "Dios ayúdame!" in a cry ripped from exhausted lungs.

One of the SWATs, a well-muscled thug, looked up from his victim to Blaise as he approached. "Restricted area. You'll have to leave."

Blaise flashed the optimistic smile he'd trained himself to display to the world. "Got a bit turned around. My favorite strip club's around here. Can't seem to find the street."

The other SWAT, a slender, wiry man, grinned at Blaise, obviously impressed by the Class I blazer. "That would be the Odradek Theater, sir. Four blocks from here. We'll be glad to direct you."

"Thank you." He glanced down at the Latino Slag. "Manuel?"

The Slag glanced up with terror in his eyes, but he clearly recognized Blaise.

"You know this turd?" the muscular SWAT asked.

"I think he's with the maintenance crew at my condo pod," Blaise replied, thinking, *Careful, this bastard's a killer.* "One of the others called him Manuel," he added pleasantly. "What's he done?"

"Leave, now, if you know what's good for you."

Blaise pointed to the sunburst medallion pinned to his lapel. "I don't take orders. I barely take suggestions."

"Show me some ID, asshole, or submit to a neural scan."

“You’re the one who’ll submit to the neural scan. Then you get a visit from the Mantis.”

The muscular SWAT brandished his cattle prod, but the wiry SWAT looked frightened and grabbed his partner’s arm. “I got a wife, kids,” he pleaded.

Blaise sensed hesitation in the muscular SWAT and switched tactics. “Chill, buddy,” he laughed. “I got no quarrel with you boys. Just doing a little location scouting. For Mythoplex.”

The thin SWAT’s jaw dropped open. “You work at Mythoplex, sir?”

“Guilty as charged. I’m a games planner.”

“Would we know your stuff?”

“Watch *Viral Empire*?”

“You coded that?”

Got him now, Blaise thought. *Must be an aspiring actor*. “Pretty much.”

“Best VR series ever! How do you think that shit up?”

“Can’t shut it off.”

“Hey, if you don’t mind me asking, they ever hire new actors for those series?”

“Let me guess. You’re an actor.”

The thin SWAT blushed. “Took a few lessons. I was an extra in this commercial vid.”

“Know Vidracom Studios?” Blaise answered confidentially. “Saturday mornings they have an open casting call.”

“No shit?”

The Latino Slag had managed to take advantage of the SWATs’ preoccupation and had crawled away, then had staggered to his feet and limped down a side alley.

The muscular SWAT noticed. “Our fish slipped off the hook.”

“Let him go,” the thin SWAT retorted. “I’m gonna make one of them tryouts. Get me an acting gig. Sir, we’ll show you to Calle Ocho.”

“No need,” Blaise answered with a dismissive gesture. “Been there a hundred times.”

The muscular SWAT’s face colored. “Thought you said you were lost.”

“Got my bearings now.”

“You let that Slag piece of shit get away. Now you suddenly get your bearings? Let’s see some ID.”

Blaise felt an old but still familiar adrenalin rush. Blood pounded in his temples and tightened his scrotum, signaling rising blood lust. He calculated distances between him and the tall, muscular SWAT and the short, lanky one.

“I never argue with an idiot like you,” Blaise replied firmly.

The muscular SWAT lunged at him with the cattle prod. Blaise ducked and rolled clear in a clean martial art move he had used in firefights back in the day.

Then he bounded up and delivered a roundhouse kick to the muscular SWAT's groin. The SWAT screamed and dropped his prod, clutching his balls as Blaise grabbed the rod and hurled it at the lanky SWAT, who was drawing his laser burner. The prod caught him across the face, breaking his nose. He crumpled to the ground, clutching it with hands that couldn't stop the spurting blood. Blaise rushed him, kicked him in the balls and scooped up his laser burner from the street. He pictured both SWATs smoldering in a stench of charred flesh and blood reek. Then horror overwhelmed him. This was precisely the kind of violence he had fled from to become Mythoplex's top games planner. So he set the laser burner on stun and sent both SWATs into temporary blackness they'd wake from in a few hours. He glanced about, giddy and sweating from the unexpected exertion, senses sharpened to a soldier's hypervigilance as he checked to see if surveillance drones might be cruising overhead—but nothing and no one were in sight.

He knew he had to clear the area before other SWAT patrols showed. But what had happened to the Slag? Against his better judgement, he made his way to the garbage-strewn alley and stepped into it. Fifteen paces down he found the stricken Slag, who knelt beside a girl of four or five. The girl, weeping, in rags, and stinking of piss, was thin as a sheet of smudged paper.

“Está bien, cariña. Está bien,” the Slag kept reassuring her.

At the sound of Blaise's step the Slag clutched the girl.

“I won't hurt you,” Blaise reassured him.

The girl pressed herself against the Slag, as if trying to burrow into him. Her eyes were wild as a bobcat's, and though the Slag stroked her ratty hair, and shushed her over and over, he couldn't silence her whimpers, which erupted into screams when Blaise took a couple more steps her way. Whatever had brought her to this moment had obviously driven her insane.

“Where will you stay tonight?” Blaise shouted to the Slag, so he could be heard.

“Aqui. We stay here.”

Blaise approached the pair. The girl burrowed herself into the Latino Slag and wailed even more loudly. Blaise reached into his pocket and took out the \$1,000 credit chip Harper had given him. He knelt before the girl and smiled.

“Cómo se llama, cariño? Solía tener una niña como tú.”

The girl looked nothing like Mei; she had stringy hair and was pale as death. But she trilled in his heart, as if he were connected to her by an invisible wire. He flashed her a disarming smile, and stretched out his hand with the credit chip. Its metallic surface caught the glow from a streetlight. The girl noticed and looked at him curiously. Blaise gently opened her tightly closed fist and slipped the credit chip into it.

“There’s a hotel a couple blocks from here,” he told the Latino Man. “Get her there and buy her some decent food.”

Moments later he sprinted past the two unconscious SWATs and reached the avenue. He was still carrying their laser burner. He wiped it down with a pocket handkerchief and hurled it down an alley. He passed odorous throngs of Slags when he reached Calle Ocho and made straight for the Odradek Theater. In a maw-like entryway, he pushed bills into the hand of a bearded gorilla in denim behind a barred window grill. Soon he was inside the forgetfulness of the black-lighted club, with its lavender colorscape and pornographic holograms. The barmaid who served him was a neo-emo Minnesota Swede in a black micro-skirt and transparent top. She sported self-mutilation scars on her arms, which were all the rage in her crowd, an emotional release from lives without future prospects. She recognized him as a regular and brought a bottle of black market sake. He handed her a hundred-dollar bill. A Guatemalan girl worked the stage pole with flaccid disinterest. The Class IIs who lounged about the railing yawned at her gyrations and refused to push any more notes into her garter.

“Any new talent?” Blaise asked the barmaid.

“A Brasileria and a China doll. You might like the China doll.”

“Oh, yeah?” Blaise pushed another hundred into her hands. “If she’s a looker, send her over after her set.”

The sake was hot, the bottle large, the rush to his pleasure center immediate. The stringy-haired DJ in his booth at the back spun sultry neo-grunge rock and hip-hop from many generations back. Blaise’s mind softened, released from the inner turmoil his recent violence had stirred up, and he melted into the pleasure of the archaic chords, the jangling guitar riffs and crass lyrics. Four bottles of sake later, inebriation and the glow of undulating flesh made him forget anything existed beyond this lavender club, with its reek of marijuana smoke and cheap cologne, coned-shaped black lights pointing at the serrated ceiling, and tangy, twenty-something talent gyrating, stripping, and scooping up tips.

Blaise was deep into his fifth round of sake when the new China doll stepped up on the runway, balancing on spiked heels. Her creamy skin, long, shapely legs, ample breasts, and waist-length hair mesmerized him. She danced with conviction and worked the pole with the skill of a Cirque du Soleil acrobat. She shed her bikini top and G-string in languid moves that brought a confetti burst of cash from the audience ogling her stage-side.

The barmaid approached to see if Blaise needed another round. He tugged her close. “Who is she?”

“Scarlett Johansson.”

Blaise pressed another bill into the barmaid's hand.

"Bullshit. What's her real name?"

"Jin. From Shanghai, I think."

"Tell her to come see me after her set. Not these other assholes. Me. Tell her I want a VIP room."

His heart raced like a testosterone-bloated schoolboy's, and sweat dripped from his armpits, when Jin, the Chinese beauty, sashayed up in a blue silk kimono with a smile like iridescent pearls. She slipped into a chair beside him and crossed her legs in a way that wafted her perfume straight to his pleasure center.

"What are you drinking?" he managed in a husky tone.

"They got nothing worth shit here," she laughed. "Anything wet'll do."

"Sake? And a vitamin water so you can rehydrate?"

"Sure thing."

The waitress passed by after serving another customer. Blaise signaled her.

"Vitamin water. Two fresh glasses. Another four sakes."

The waitress nodded and left.

"Haven't seen you here before," Jin said. "Course, haven't been here long."

"What paradise did you descend from?"

"Paradise? Yeah, right."

The waitress brought their sake and a bottle of water. Jin sipped the water and joined Blaise in drinking the sake. They watched another dancer stripping.

"You're a much better dancer than her," Blaise said. "You glide like a gazelle."

Jin gave him a wry grin. "Good line, there."

She toasted him, and they drank sake in earnest. Blaise, flushed and tipsy, ran his finger along her calf and thigh. Jin playfully nudged his hand away.

"Whoa there. Can you even walk to the VIP room? 'Cause you got sake bleeding outa your eyes."

"You really from Shanghai?"

"No way. I'm a Frisco gal. But Shanghai's got cache, y'know?"

"Yeah, know. So, what do you do when you're not driving men crazy with lust?"

"Grad student. USC."

"USC's still around?"

"Sure, babe. The derelict University of Southern California. They turned it into a vocational school staffed by cockroaches and rats. They let me take robo-classes from wheezing old profs, cuz no Class I or II bitch comes near the place anymore, y'know?"

"What do you study?"

“Philosophy and business administration.”

“Philosophy?”

“Sure. No money in it, but beats the hell outa business classes. Nothing there but money-making scams I’m never gonna tap.”

“Don’t you like money?”

“Course I do, babe. I’m gonna take a buncha yours in a few.”

He brushed her hair back from her cheek with his fingertip. “I want twenty dances.”

“Good God Almighty. Got myself a live wire here. What do you do?”

“Code VR series. I’m a mythologizer. A games planner.”

“Wish to God I could afford VR. But it’s cool, cuz I know this hacker dude? Lets me jack in through my K-spot.”

“No shit?”

“I go crazy for historical series: ancient Rome, China, Persia, Egypt. Read novels, too. You know, the old-fashioned printed kind?”

“Used to read ‘em back in the day. My mom encouraged me.”

“It was my dad with me.”

Desire washed over Blaise in a warm tidal surge. “I want you.”

“You got me, babe. Twenty dances worth. Let’s go.”

“Look, nothing personal, but I gotta eye scan you first, make sure you’re not an android. They creep me out.”

She laughed, brought her nose to his and rubbed it. “My real name’s Kristina Sun.”

She took his hand and led him past the pee-reeking men’s room, down the bar to a loutish Slag in ripped denim, who scrawled twenty dances on a tobacco-stained pad. Then Blaise and Kristina slipped into a room with a ratty couch, side table, and black light. She drew the curtain, hung up her robe and slipped out of her bikini. He slammed her against the wall and devoured her mouth with deep, sucking kisses, lost in the jungle of her hair and breasts, the silkiness of her belly and thighs. Her body burned new electrical circuits in his brain as it evoked the hallucinated apotheosis of a goddess. Kristina guided his middle finger down to the sticky miracle of her shaved pussy, gifted him with its carnal tang, its scent of generation, seed, and birth. Now was the time for one-liners and repartee to win her over and make her his sugar baby on a monthly allowance, but his sang-froid had fled. He of many elegant words and lines of code had been rendered speechless. He pushed her down on the couch, sucked and licked his way up her back, starting with her toes, and relished the salty perfume of her calves and thighs and the pertness of her savory ass.

“I gotta have you tonight,” he moaned.

“Honey, we can’t. It’s the rules.”

“Fuck the rules. I’ll give you a thousand bucks extra.”

“You’ll get me fired.”

“Two thousand.”

“You’re making my head spin, honey. I can’t date customers.”

“I’ll sponsor you, baby,” he promised when he came up for air. “I’ll give you an allowance, just name it, I swear to God.”

She peered into his eyes. “You’re so full of shit. Promise a girl big bucks, get her hooked, then run out on her.”

He tried to hold back the feelings beating in his fevered brain, but he was too drunk. “You’re the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen. My wife died two years back. I need . . . I need . . . baby, please, God, please.”

“You’re serious about the allowance?” she probed. She stroked his face, touching a glistening tear in the corner of his eye.

“Five thousand a month if you want.”

“I do need the money. I got family.”

“Kids?”

“No. My mom. She lives in a roach hotel out in the valley. Dead broke in her sixties.”

“Where do you stay?”

“Apartment three blocks from here. Notice that Italian dive up the street?”

“Scalopini’s?”

She nodded and grinned. “Open all night for folks coming off shift from the upscale zones. Wait for me there.”

His heart swelled with drunken hope. “OK.”

“Get a booth in the back so you can feel me up under the table,” she giggled.

“When?”

“Midnight. I’m starved. We’ll order antipasto, pasta and Italian sausage, garlic bread with extra virgin olive oil, a gallon of Chianti to wash it down. Then we’re gonna fuck all night.”