

BOUNTY

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To our planet, with love.

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*On Spaceship Earth there are no passengers;
everybody is a member of the crew.
We have moved into an age in which
everybody's activities affect everybody else.*

*—Marshall McLuhan
“At the Moment of Sputnik”*

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ONE

I try my best not to kill people. Believe me, I do.

Usually, I give them a chance to surrender, come quietly, let me slap the cuffs over their wrists and end things without bloodshed. There's no point in spilling blood if you don't have to—and I wasn't in the habit of taking lives unnecessarily.

But making sure everyone gets out alive is tough when your job is dangerous.

It's even harder when you're a bounty hunter.

A soft hiss announced the arrival of a fresh spray of mist over the bustling city, adding to the humidity and the scent of wet stone and steel. The airborne water reflected the LED and holoprojected billboards dotting the buildings, pooled on the surfaces of glossy solar catchers, and danced off the slowly rotating personal wind turbines, making the already shimmering metropolis glow even brighter. But while the watery haze gave the nighttime glow of Winnipeg a dreamlike quality, it did little to relieve the suffocating heat trapper down here, in the bowels of the city.

I was perched atop a sign, crouched low and invisible within

a darkened alcove, scanning the area below, waiting for my target to emerge.

The guy had led me all over the lower levels of the city on a wild goose chase that finally brought me to the core, the devil's den: bounty hunter territory.

A police cruiser rumbled slowly through the air ahead of me, turbine-powered engines in place of wheels baying out in the night, spotlights scanning left and right over the crowd below. They wanted the populace to know they were watching, but everyone knew they wouldn't dare put boots on the ground this far down without a good reason.

As the cruiser rumbled out of sight, I could hear the cops call down to a pair of teens peering over the edge of a walkway, warning them they'd be fined if they kept throwing things down below. In response, the pair gave the cops the finger and walked off. The cruiser kept moving. If it had been 90 years ago, that slight would've meant the kids eating pavement with a boot on their neck, but in the 2120s, the police knew they should just take it.

These were the sublevels, after all.

Kilometres below the surface, on Sublevel 11, the lowest habitable level of the city, the police presence was no more than a token force, buzzing around but rarely setting foot outside their flying cruisers to do any real "peacekeeping." You were more likely to get shot by a shop owner when robbing a store than get cuffs slapped around your wrists. Then again, it was equally likely the same shop owner would be shot while the perp escaped, only for the judgement of their crime to fall, eventually, to people like me.

With my target taking so long, I finally got a chance to catch

my breath and look at the city I called home. From the alcove where I crouched, between a pair of residential towers, I drank in the claustrophobia-inducing crush of glass and steel that comprised the sublevels. Huge spire-like buildings extended from the floor of the sublevel to the ceiling in uninterrupted blocks, connected by a web of walkways, roads, platforms, and railways, filled with people skittering across the floor like ants or buzzing through the sky in transports on AI-determined flight lanes. The building I was perched on faced perhaps the most open of spaces in the immediate vicinity: one of the surface shafts that stretched, from the surface above, down to the bottom level of Winnipeg.

The tangle of residential buildings and sprawling civic districts picked up again on the other side of the shaft, but from where I sat, the real stars of the show were the hundreds of towering black Argite columns, gleaming in the light. Wherever in the city you were, these trademark mineralized carbon supports would be near, extending the entire depth of the metropolis, through each sublevel ceiling and floor, all the way to the surface. Argite cores could be found lining the city's outermost walls too, improving the structural integrity of the bedrock and allowing the existing geology to hold up the ever-expanding mass that was Winnipeg. Long Argite supports that braced the columns at various angles provided further surface area for buildings and walkways to cling to, giving the city the distinct appearance of an attic taken over by a hive.

It was an impressive sight, but after spending most of my life here, I was used to it. The Argite. The heat. The tension. The cramped space. Breathing recycled air, drinking

recycled water, using recycled ammunition. It was all normal. Natural. Home.

I relaxed slightly, shifting the rifle slung across my back, sliding down the wall into a sitting position, and letting my feet dangle in front of the flickering LEDs below me. I propped the gun on my knee, sliding the barrel shroud forward to inspect the internals. The small electromagnets that lined the barrel hummed quietly with energy, ready to fling the rounds of recycled metals at whatever I decided to point the weapon at. I'd learned long ago to inspect my weapons carefully, as a buildup of debris could stunt the charge and leave the gun unable to fire. Satisfied, I pulled the shroud back, hearing an audible click, and turned the weapon to check the status light, which held green. Charged, primed, and ready to rock.

I'd fired an old gas-operated firearm once, probably a decade ago at this point. They were almost non-existent, phased out in favour of the greener electromagnetically propelled weapons so ubiquitous now. And cartridge bullets weren't made anymore anyways, so even if you had such a firearm, you'd have to find a stockpile of old ammo to make it worthwhile.

Pulling the weapon up to a near-ready position, I took a deep breath. The thick, humid air around me filled my lungs, giving me a sensation of drowning. The rain was so tantalizingly close, imminent relief from yet another heat dome that had settled overtop of the province. Clouds had been gathering at the surface, ready to burst and bring forth the torrential downpour that always followed. It was like the city was holding its breath, pressure rising, the sublevels a metal-and-stone box of sweltering heat, the whole place crying out for release.

Or perhaps that was just me.

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Each deep, calming exhalation pushed a blast of warm air through the skull-like mouthpiece of my mask. Beads of perspiration streaked down the sides of my face. My clothes were soaked through with sweat from a day wandering the humid alleyways and rooftops of the sublevels, pelted by the routine sprays of recycled moisture meant to stem the wretched heat, chasing a guy I was sure would be coming along this way. My wrist-nav sputtered to life with a couple of flashes, and the heads-up display within my helmet blinked on to show the image of a hawk-faced man, scowling at the lucky officer taking his mugshot. His hair came together in a widow's peak as sharp as the point of his nose, accentuating the piercing stare of his black eyes.

"The Bounty Commission has sent along an update for us," the computerized voice of my AI companion ODIN began, sounding a tad annoyed. "They want to remind you that our target's name is Ivan Sobotka. A mid-level fixer with ties to multiple anti-establishment groups, wanted for tampering with probation implants and illicit sale of corporate property. Same conditions as before ..." ODIN paused, before he gave a slight, satisfied hum. "Well, now we know why he was given to us. Apparently, he was hired to broker the sale of a tablet stolen from an Argo-employed contractor who was testing recycled water samples on Sublevel 7."

"Good to finally know," I replied. High-quality corporate tech was a big-ticket black-market item, especially when it came from Argo, the gatekeepers of the city's environmental infrastructure. "The Commission know who the seller and buyer are?"

ODIN paused again, reviewing the data. "The buyer is

unknown, but according to recent CCTV footage from Sublevel 7 the seller was someone connected to the Plainswalkers.”

That made sense to me. The Plainswalkers essentially had the run of legitimate and illegitimate business on Sublevel 7. It was their turf. But what sealed it was the footage itself. Pulling up the clip on my HUD, I was met with a local security feed outside a known Plainswalker greenhouse and watched as man exited the front door, right into the path of Ivan Sobotka, when the pair collided. The angry shouting that followed—complete with rude gestures tossed back and forth—did nothing to hide the pair bumping their wrist-navs together to complete their clandestine transaction.

Unfortunately, the Plainswalker was in a spot where the camera feeds couldn't see his face clearly, so getting a positive ID was impossible.

Regardless, it was a fixer selling corporate tech stolen from a contractor working in the city's environmental maintenance infrastructure. Standard Eco-Terror Taskforce job.

Underneath the description and last known location of Sobotka, in big red text, blinked the words *Wanted: Dead or Alive*. For the kind of crimes Sobotka was wanted for, legislation dictated his bounty should be alive-only, but with a rap sheet longer than my arm, Sobotka wasn't given as much leeway. This wasn't his first rodeo fencing stolen corporate tech and tampering with implants, not by a long shot, but he also had some more serious crimes in his history. Assaulting peacekeepers—like myself—was the big one, so the Bounty Commission was assuming there'd be more risk and wanted to give me an option to do this quickly, quietly, and safely.

For me, that is.

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Despite the “dead” option, I had every intention of taking Sobotka alive. It was a matter of principle. Dropping him here from across the street with a well-placed rifle round would’ve been easy, but I wasn’t known for taking the easy road. Besides, as a member of the Bounty Commission Eco-Terror Taskforce, knowing who was trying to get their hands on Argo property, and why, was part of the job.

And you can’t question someone if they’re dead.

In any case, after a day of tracking through oppressive heat and moisture, a chase would be just enough to knock me out when this was all done.

And Lord knows I needed sleep.

Sobotka sure wasn’t making it easy for me. Normally, I would’ve set ODIN to comb through security camera footage and the social feeds to try and find him, but it seemed that along with tampering with his probation chip to dampen the signal, he’d installed ID-masking tech—a dermal implant that seamlessly hid the man within the pixels of every frame of footage.

It was expensive black-market tech, not to mention annoying as hell for hunters, so I was out of luck. Until I got a tip.

It was Tuesday.

A somewhat innocuous detail on the surface, but growing up the son of a lawyer, you learn to appreciate small details, especially when you hunt people for a living. After a brief conversation with his probation officer—a stressed-out, overworked, and underpaid young woman on Sublevel 8—I learned that Sobotka had dinner with his mother every Tuesday. Come rain, snow, sleet, or bounty hunter hot on your tail. Following that lead, I hedged my bets and came up golden. He was inside.

So, it seemed my persistence would finally pay off.

Down below, the door of the apartment complex opened, and the hawk-faced man stepped out onto the walkway of the sublevel. He walked to the railing, gazing down to the level below while taking a long drag from a vaporizer, slowly turning back to join the crowd moving like a river down the walkway. In a few seconds it became evident that Sobotka had a tail, as two bald men slipped out from between adjacent buildings to follow close behind him. The pair bore intricate tattoos that covered their heads, and I rose enough to tug my rifle around to the front and pull the scope up to my eye, studying the designs. I hadn't seen their faces before, and most of the ink was just generic enough to not offer any clues, but small matching sigils on the napes of their necks, etched in black and green ink, caught my eye. It depicted a falling star or meteor of some kind.

A stream of mugshots flowed down the left side of my HUD as ODIN checked their faces and tattoos against known offenders in the Bounty Commission's database. He let out a disappointed sigh.

"No dice. They're not in the system."

"What about the tats? Any anti-establishment affiliations?"

Same answer.

Could these be Sobotka's mystery buyers? Or had he simply hired some muscle to look after him while he made his way to the buy, knowing there was a price on his head? If the former, I needed to know more. If the latter, they were about to have an awful night.

But regardless, I needed Sobotka to talk.

Sobotka and his tail took a right down the next street and would soon be out of sight, so I began to follow, using the railings and pipes above the sublevel's walkways to remain in the

shadows. Where I couldn't find a direct path to go through, I clung to grooves in the walls of buildings, sliding along swiftly, experience and skill keeping me from plummeting to my death. Sobotka was walking fast, and so were the trailing mystery men.

A few blocks down, the three took a left, and I followed, quietly and unassumingly stalking from above. A low growl of thunder echoed through the sublevels.

They entered a plaza filled with artificial sunlight—realistically, just certain levels of UV rays pumped in through secondary lighting from the streetlamps. The sprawling plaza and park stretched across the open surface shaft, exposed to real rain and, when it wasn't raining, a few precious minutes of sunlight, though it was nowhere near enough to sustain the plants and stunted trees that lined the plaza, hence the late-night dose of UV rays.

Oxygenation proved to be a major problem the further we expanded downward. Having so many people crammed tightly together, increasingly removed from the plant life of the surface, meant breathable air became hard to come by. The solution was creating these underground parks, which often amounted to nothing more than lining many of the walkways with trees, and having low levels of UV light pumped through the sublevel streetlights to keep them alive. The alternative used for many years was having people walking around with oxygen masks, which was something people today still preferred for the extra boost of O₂.

I hopped the railing and landed on top of a rusted public airbus, riding it up onto a walkway above Sobotka. The different sublevels were layered more-or-less identically—long streets

arranged in a vague grid, a main sublevel floor with multiple smaller streets, paths, and platforms built above in a patchwork way—meaning that I could slip into the crowd and follow my target closely and easily, watching from seven-odd metres above their heads, keeping as low a profile as possible.

Anyone who saw me would know I was a hunter—I didn't exactly try to blend in. Hunters styled themselves in distinct and different armour, helmets, masks, capes, and colours, and I was no exception. Wearing my combat vest, there were dark grey plates of fibre-reinforced ceramic adorning my chest, shoulders, and back, along with extra padding on my thighs, and thick armored boots that came up to my kneepads, gauntlets that covered my forearms, and stylized skull helmet with glowing red lenses. Behind those glowing red eyes were the equally bright top-of-the-line cybernetic replacements for the flesh ones I'd lost years ago. Then there was the military-grade cybernetic right arm, the pistol on my hip, and rifle slung on my back.

Although people noticed when a hunter was around, they wouldn't say anything, and many tried to pretend they didn't see us. It would be nice to get a smile, but those were hard to come by so close to rock-bottom.

Whether they hated us, respected us, or feared us, ordinary citizens wouldn't get in our way.

That's when I spotted Mack, call-sign "Strigi," though he was never called that by anyone who knew him personally. The name was derived from the family of owls, envisioned as smart and silent predators. It was a moniker he wore proudly, adorning himself in lavish coats of a variety of colours, often billowing in the wind like some intelligent and dapper professor. On

his head he wore a simple helmet with two circular lenses, set above a long V-shaped protrusion that looked like a sloping beak and contained a ventilator.

He nodded as he passed, closing his right hand into a fist, slamming it into his breastplate over his heart before sliding the fist across his chest. This was the hunters' salute. I returned the gesture and continued moving.

There was a crackle in my helmet's comms as we moved apart.

"Nikos, you've got a bounty-snatcher ahead," Mack said. "The next crosswalk, dude with the goggles."

"Always looking out for me, Mack, eh?" I responded.

"Always, brother," Mack said with a chuckle. "Take a few teeth out for me."

The snatcher was standing at the railing, brushing the long dark hair from his eyes so he could put his goggles on. Green as grass following April showers. He had no idea the trouble he'd put himself in, from both the fixer down below and the much more experienced hunter sauntering toward him.

Stealing someone's bounty was not illegal, per se. As long as it was marked as a public bounty by the Bounty Commission, it was first come, first served. And while there were a lot of contracts, there were even more hunters, so there was nothing stopping any green kid from jumping onto a bounty and trying to sweep it out from under you, getting the payday and the all-precious points on the Bounty Board. Every monetary score equalled points on the leaderboard. And when you were starting out, like this guy clearly was, the bigger scores were the best way to catch the eyes of specialist groups like the Eco-Terror Taskforce.

Like it or not, bounty hunting prospects were treated exactly like athletes in professional sports leagues.

While I wasn't opposed to sharing bounties, tonight I needed to be sure it was done right—my brand of right. No unknown variables. So this kid needed to be put in his place.

Besides, this was a private bounty, sent directly to me for first dibs before the Bounty Commission would need to try it on the open market. How this kid might've caught wind of it I didn't know, and I really didn't have time to find out.

The slamming of my boots against the concrete caught the kid's attention and he looked up just in time to see my fist coming for him. I connected hard with his nose, causing him to spin back with an audible pop as his nose broke. I stood over him, the glowing red of my helmet's eyes reflected in the water around us, studying the would-be hunter grasping his nose, which was gushing crimson.

He was young, probably not much older than eighteen, and his now-cracked goggles lay next to him in a puddle. I recognized them from ads on social feeds and street advertising projectors. Not the type hunters would necessarily wear, but they had enough features to be useful to us. The goggles synched to your wrist-nav, and neural or dermal implants, and provided live updates on messages, news, weather, maps, social media—you name it. You could, however, find someone to hack the device and make it close to the tech in the masks worn by hunters, but there was a reason we usually covered everything—as his bloody nose showed.

The kid was dressed in black, wearing a rec-leather jacket, and slick, dark pants with a holster on his hip containing what looked like a charge gun—capable of lethal and non-lethal

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shots, but the energy was short-range, meaning he'd have to get right up on Sobotka and his buddies to use it. Energy weapons were still a way off from being totally useful outside of close-range encounters, and hunters stayed with convention, preferring modern magnetic weapons that fired caseless ammo made from recycled metals. One day, like gas-operated firearms, the magnetic-propulsion ones would be overtaken by their energy-based successors, with dialable power settings and completely rechargeable ammunition, and I could commend this young guy for taking the non-lethal option into account.

The young hunter spat out a mouthful of blood and looked up at me, a river of red trickling from his nose and highlighting the spaces between his teeth. He looked astonished, his anger had left him, and a mixture of fear and excitement flooded his face.

"You're Wulf, aren't you? Are you hunting Sobotka, too?" he asked excitedly. "I didn't expect to meet someone like you tonight."

I wasn't surprised he knew who I was, but that didn't mean I liked it. Stories of everyone in the Top 10 were passed around everywhere hunters went. If he had started bounty hunting recently, his little head would've been flooded with tall tales of exploits from me and Mack, to someone like Ravager. Not the type of thing to keep a young kid from going out and chasing glory on their first night. I had no problem with the kid working, but it was more getting him away from such a dangerous target, and out of my way. Whether he passed his certification or not, this was not the best contract to start with.

"Well, kid, I'm the reason you're going to stop today," I said

through the voice-changer in my mask. “You’re in way over your head, chasing a guy like this. You read his file?”

A naive smile was plastered across his face. “Yeah, and I thought it would be a good start,” he replied. “I want to be someone like you, get on with a task force. I’m not going to get there nabbing drug pushers and small-time aug-hackers.”

The kid was young, hungry, stupid, and on his way to an early grave.

“Hunting a guy like Sobotka is a bad idea when the ink on your licence isn’t dry. That’s not how I started, kid,” I said back, voice forced into dual octave by my mask’s exterior speaker. The sound was causing the kid to look worried, and even a bit scared. “Listen, I don’t know how you got word of this bounty, but you need to walk away now, and start smaller. This is for the Eco-Terror Taskforce, not the general pool. Believe me, I’m trying to save your life.”

“Well, how about I come with you? You could teach me,” the kid said eagerly, wiping some blood from his nose. “We could split the cash and the score.”

I stepped toward him, and the kid flinched as I knelt next to him and placed a soft hand on his shoulder. He wasn’t getting the hint, and I needed to hammer it home.

“Not tonight,” I responded quietly. “I’m no teacher, even with this. Now do yourself, and whatever family you have, a favour, and get the hell out of here. Start small, corp-crimes and alive-only contracts. Build it up the right way.” I slipped the broken goggles back into his hand. “And get yourself some proper gear. Something that won’t fly off and break after a single punch, even if it’s a good one.” My soft grip turned into a crushing one, highlighted by the pained grimace on the kid’s

face. “From one hunter to another: go home, kid. I probably just saved your life.”

The kid’s smile faded, and his jaw clenched as he weighed his options. He let out a sigh, realizing that, at least, chasing down *this* target wasn’t worth me being on his tail. Hopefully he had internalized my advice and was going to be smarter next time. I helped him to his feet and the kid brushed past me, walking down the road with his hands in his pockets.

The young hunter’s distraction had cost me some time, but luckily my mark wasn’t too far gone. I looked down to the lower level, scanning the throng of people milling about, just in time to see Sobotka round the corner again, heading towards a market.

These markets popped up all over the sublevels: scrappy stalls packed wall-to-wall in some open area, where those who couldn’t afford a shop of their own would peddle synthetic food, recycled and modified clothes, cheap electronics. Making scraps—but down here that was enough. The cramped quarters and crowd cover were also able to mask some of the more dubious business going on. Not surprising, with how desperate some of the peddlers were just to eat. If you didn’t have in-demand skills, the right credentials, or powerful and connected friends, you were never going to taste life on the surface. Throw in the influence of anti-establishment groups offering a helping hand to like-minded—or at least, willing—individuals, and this packed market would be a hotspot for a guy like Sobotka.

I slipped over the railing and onto a staircase leading alongside one of the buildings, walking around to find a perch overlooking the market.

Sobotka had stopped at a stall to admire some comms tech being sold by a young man.

My target said a few words to the man, pointing towards a tablet on the wall. It was a thin sheet of transparent material, likely recycled plastic, that could be folded and curved. The clerk complied, pulling the tablet off, and handed it over. Turning over the tablet in his hands, Sobotka shared a knowing look with the young man, and began walking away, not a single credit exchanged. It was a solid bet the tablet was the same one nicked from the Argo contractor, that the young guy running the stall was a proxy hired by the Plainswalker seller to rendezvous with Sobotka and give him the goods, and that Sobotka was now on his way to deliver the stolen tablet to the unknown buyer. Whatever this was, it wouldn't go any further. It was time to collect.