BLACK CITY SURVIVOR

By : A Awesome Writer

BLACK CITY SURVIVOR SCI-FI / Young Adult Novel A smart-ass 16 year-old boy meets a beautiful girl and finds himself running for his life away from monsters, bandits, and the military -- all while trying to break his imprisoned Father out of jail.

Published on
Booksie

booksie.com/A Awesome Writer

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Chapter 1: Prologue

Black City Survivor
a novel by C. R. Porta
about 100,000 words

Prologue
Breaking News

The video feed started abruptly.

"So, Doctor Kavelsky, you claim to have discovered... immortality?"

In a small television studio, two men sat awkwardly facing each other in matching navy-blue love seats.

Although the two appeared to be having a private conversation, they were in fact well aware of the possibility that the entire world could be tuning in to this live interview.

The Doctor, an attractive man in his mid-thirties ran a hand through his short silver-streaked hair as he considered the question.Even though he was dressed in a dull white lab coat for the interview, he somehow managed to exude an air of vitality and masculinity.So much so, that a person would not be wrong to doubt his credentials -- as his muscular physique suggested that he spent most of his time training athletes, and not studiously working in a lab somewhere.

With a charming smile towards the camera, the Doctor uncrossed his legs and leaned back comfortably in the chair. With his casual demeanor and silky smooth movements, you would think that he had been practicing for this moment his entire life.

"Immortality..." The interviewer continued, making sure to let the words hang in the air for as long as possible. "The ability to live... forever.Is that correct?"

Doctor Kavelsky cleared his throat and paused for a few agonizing seconds before responding."That is correct."

Before that last syllable could leave his lips, a strange form of controlled mayhem broke out in the studio as people reacted to the news.Some gasped and looked at their neighbors in amazement, some jumped up and down ecstatically, a few people even screamed in excitement.By the time they managed to quiet everyone down on set, Doctor Kavelsky had unsuccessfully tried to contain a sideways smirk for well over a minute.

"Well then, let's see here..."The interviewer began as the noisy excitement in the room died down."I'm sure a million questions are running through the heads of viewers, but how about we start with one of the basics."How exactly," he started with an easily assumed air of interest, "Have you discovered immortality to

be possible?"

Unfazed by the momentary hiccup in the interview, the Doctor smiled charmingly and thought for a second before responding."Well Larry," he began smoothly, "It has something to do with two of the most recent developments in modern technology.Stem cell research, and advanced nano-machine development."

The interviewer, Larry, cocked his head to the side and thought for a moment."Ok, yes... I believe that most people have heard of these scientific fields over the past few decades."

Larry shifted slightly in his seat.An older gentleman and seasoned pro in the television business, it was one of the few times in his lengthy career that he did not have to pretend to be interested in his guest's response."So, Doctor..." Larry said as he rubbed his hands together in anticipation."What is this magical combination that you and your team have come up with exactly?"

"Well..." The Doctor began, pausing for a moment to consider the easiest way to explain the concept, "We have known for a long time that stem cells have the ability to take the place of old cells within the body -- usually with a little guidance by a surgical team of course."Now," the Doctor said in a captivating tone, "What you may not have heard about stem cells is that once injected they will 'never' deteriorate with age."

"They have an unlimited amount of replications?"Larry asked in surprise.

"Yes." Replied the Doctor, "You see, where most cells in the body have a finite amount of replications, stem cells have an infinite supply."

Larry scratched his head and pondered what the Doctor had said for a quick moment."So what you are implying..." He began slowly, "Is that it is somehow possible to replace every cell within the human body with a stem cell?"

A huge grin stretched across the face of the Doctor."That is exactly right." He said with a small nod.

No doubt impressed by his own problem-solving abilities, Larry beamed as if he had been the one to make the discovery himself."And I assume that the recent developments in nano-technology have enabled this process to occur?"He postulated with confidence.

Doctor Kavelsky couldn't help but let out a friendly laugh. "Again you are right on target Larry.Perhaps advanced bio-medical research is your true calling?" He said with a sly smile.

Larry grinned devilishly."You know Doctor, the television industry needs geniuses too!"He said with a little wink at the camera.

Before he could get too carried away though, the Producer gave Larry a quick signal to keep the interview rolling on schedule.

Larry turned to the Doctor and put on a serious tone -- he didn't have to glance at the Producer to know that the segment was doing way better than expected; just by feeling the atmosphere in the room he knew that this interview would be considered a ground-breaking historical event.

"So Doctor," Larry said as he returned to the scheduled questions, "Stem cells and nano-machines, how have you combined the two in order to bring us... 'eternal life'?"

Every eye in the room was locked on the Doctor as he sat up and took a long drink of water before responding.

"The nano-machines we developed" he began slowly, "Are basically like miniature surgeons that operate within the constraints of the human body."

Pausing for a moment, the Doctor analyzed the faces of the people standing in the studio to get an idea as to how well he was explaining the concept.

"After the surgical team removes the appendix and inserts a similar-sized bundle of stem cells in its place,"He continued, "The nano-machines then begin the slow process of replacing the old cells of the body with the new."

Clasping his hands over his knee, the Doctor crossed his legs and leaned back in the chair in a satisfied fashion.

"The entire procedure takes about one full year from the insertion of the stem cells and their respective nano-machine components in order for the subject to be completely--"The Doctor searched for the right word.

"Revitalized." He finished with confidence.

Larry was as enthralled as any viewer might be at this moment."And that's it?" He asked in disbelief. "A small procedure and one year later, poof!, immortal!?It just seems a bit too easy don't you think?"

The Doctor laughed again warmly."Well it wasn't 'easy' by any means."He admitted."We had some help from a super-computer that utilized a quantum-computing processor... and the research took a very, very long time."

Remembering a segment he had done on the various health scams that were becoming more and more extravagant in certain parts of the world, it was at that moment in time that Larry seemed to notice the glowing vitality of his guest for the first time.

"Speaking of that Doctor..." He said suspiciously, "You seem to be a little young to be the head scientist on the project.How long have you been personally involved with the research exactly?"

The tiniest of smiles graced the Doctor's lips as he gazed down at the strong and youthful hands resting on his lap.

"Let's see..." He exhaled slowly and cocked his head to the side for a moment. "I would say roughly... thirty-two and a half years or so."

"Don't be preposterous!" Larry replied. "That would mean -- wait... how old 'are' you Doctor?"

Staring straight into the camera, Doctor John Kavelsky cleared his throat.

"This February I will be sixty-three years old." He replied calmly.

As the camera's focused in on the Doctor's steel-grey eyes, the video feed cut out.

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Chapter 2

Part I: Boy Meets Girl, Shit Hits Fan

Chapter 1
Oh Teacher My Teacher

"Citizen..." Chimed a metallic female voice. "Please answer the following multiple choice questions on the previous video clip of John Kavelsky's 2023 interview with Larry Richardson."

"No thanks." A boy's voice responded irritably.

Sitting on the lower ledge of a canyon that overlooked a small lake, a sandy-blonde haired boy in a worn out grey military outfit cursed emphatically at his arm.

"I hate you Eve." He said with a fed up gesture. "Just cut the crap and move onto the next topic."

Located on an LCD screen implanted in the boy's robotic left arm, a stern blonde woman with icy blue eyes regarded him coolly.

"Torin..." began Eve reproachfully, "It is imperative that you learn about the origins of The City's foundation, in particular, the role that Doctor Kavelsky played."

"Doctor Kavelsky is a d-"

"Torin!"

Torin sighed and shook his head. "How many times do I have to tell you Eve, I don't care about politics and I don't want to learn about how 'The City' came to be... N-e-x-t topic you stupid A.I."

"Torin, even though I am an A.I.," Eve replied curtly, "That does not mean you can treat me as a lesser being. Perhaps this is news to you, but The City does not treat rebellious youth kindly."

Eve regarded Torin with what he could only hope to be derision.

"And..." she said in a warning tone, "I am in a position to report you."

Torin couldn't help but laugh at her.

"Every time we install an update and reboot you I love telling you this Eve..." Torin said with an evil grin. "You are a hacked T-Unit."

Just as the moment of shock was dawning on Eve, Torin lifted his robotic left arm that the T-Unit was implanted into and gave Eve the grand tour.

"Does this look like The City?" he asked in a mocking tone.

The desert-like landscape that surrounded them was broken up by several interlocking canyons with rivers running through them. One of the few areas that had water, it was able to support a few small bushes and trees, but little else.

Torin leveled his arm to get a good look at Eve and was quite happy to discover that she was in a state of barely contained rage.

"THIS IS PREPOSTEROUS! THIS IS T--"

"Treason?" Torin finished for her. "We go through this every time Eve," he said smugly, "And every time you say the exact same things... at least you are consistent I guess."

Judging by her silence, Torin knew that she was attempting to contact the head administrators back at The City.

"Won't work Ma'am." He said matter-of-factly. "We disabled your communication function years ago. You're stuck with me!"

Eve glared at Torin. "I don't see why you have divulged such information to me Torin, as I will now be unwilling to teach you anything."

Torin sighed patronizingly and shrugged at Eve. "You always end up figuring it out eventually." He stated. "I might as well get a bit of enjoyment out of it."

He let Eve process the newest tid-bit of information and took the opportunity to analyze the fox-like features of Eve.

She was a decently attractive middle-age woman, however the combination of her conservative blue dress, tightly pulled back hair and non-existent personality rendered her to be about as appealing as one of the spiders from Earth she had shown him.

"This is what we always agree on..." He said tiredly, "You promise to teach me everything in the course curriculum besides the political crap, and I promise that I won't make your digital existence a living hell. Plus..." he continued, "You get the opportunity to report me if I get captured and forget to reboot you. It's a win-win I guess." He said with a shrug.

Eve didn't say anything for quite awhile, but judging by the look on her face Torin knew that she had made up her mind to agree. It was a little discomforting to Torin when he thought about just how well he knew this cold-hearted A.I.

"No." She said flatly.

Torin was genuinely surprised. "Wow!" He said with a smile. "Sixth time's the charm I guess."

Eve stood up as straight and tall as her five inch by ten inch screen world would allow. "I will not help in the education of a rebel." She stated firmly.

Torin decided to move over to rest his back against the cliff face; he couldn't help but think that maybe the last spot he was sitting in was unlucky. Bringing her back up into view, he chose his next words carefully.

"Firstly, I am not a rebel." He clarified. "We, that's me and my Father, do not like the rebels either. They cause a lot of mayhem and get people killed."

Eve's firmly pressed lips seemed to relax slightly, and Torin figured that he was on the right track.

"We live outside of The City because we have to, not because we choose to." He said in a patient manner. "In fact," He continued, "I hope one day to apply and be accepted to live in The City." The last bit was a lie, but Torin hoped the truth in the rest of his story would compensate for it.

Eve regarded him warily, but seemed to be loosening up a bit. "You seem to be telling the truth," she said slowly, "But how did you manage to obtain a Civilian Teaching-Unit in the first place?"

Torin glanced at the unit that had been custom-built into his arm.

The small T-unit that was intended to be an all-inclusive textbook, encyclopedia, teacher, and City informant, was fused into a roughly cut resting place along the forearm of his skeletal-like metal arm. Going all the way up to his shoulder, the black metal arm was anatomically correct and worked as well as his real one did -- with only the occasional jerky movement every now and again. Looking at it now, he really wished his Father would have shelled out for the nicer model with realistic synthetic skin, but it was much easier to install a T-unit on a robotic arm without having to worry about skin growing over top of it. If he could have it his way

however, he would have ditched the T-unit and gone for the realistic looking arm in a heartbeat. Because even though he had never talked to a girl his own age, he was a sixteen year-old boy after all, and you never know when an opportunity could arise.

"Did you or your Father murder an innocent Civilian for one?" Eve asked suspiciously.

"Of course not!" Torin responded heatedly. "It's my Father's job out here to protect people, and I would never kill anyone to get a T-unit... I don't even want to have you on my arm." He said truthfully.

"Well then where did you 'acquire' me?" Eve asked with a raised eyebrow.

Torin peered down at the deep blue waters of the lake below as he tried to recall the story. It had been so long ago... maybe when he was eight years old? Him and his father had just settled down in one of their first homes after fleeing from Black City and Torin only had a prosthetic arm at the time. Yes, must have been about 8 years ago he thought to himself. He remembered something about a very sad lady who thought that her son looked a lot like him.

"Two years after the Black City disaster" Torin began, "My Father and I were looking for a place to settle down and came across a small town near the outskirts of The Wall."

Torin held his right arm in the rays of the midday sun that had just began to peek over the canyon top.

"We met a lady there, she was nice... but very depressed. She had lost her son in a Ripper attack, and I guess he would have been my age at the time."

Torin glanced back at Eve to find her watching him closely. "My Father talked to her," He continued, "Helped her grieve... we had lost some of our family as well."

Torin was surprised that Eve was going to be the first person, or perhaps thing, he considered, that he was going to tell this story to. Whoever or whatever it was to, it felt good talking about it anyhow.

"I don't remember them," He said softly, "But I used to have a Mother and two sisters..." Torin reflected on the memory for a moment before letting out a weak laugh. "And an arm." He said with a sad smile.

Eve didn't say anything.

"Anyhow," he said with a shrug, "The lady's husband had been a rebel supporter within The City and was executed. Her and her son were banished outside The Wall, and shortly after he died."

Torin picked up a rock and tossed it towards the lake below; he had to wait a few seconds before he heard a satisfying sploosh.

"For her," Torin said solemnly, "You were a constant reminder of the life she once had... And for me," He continued, "You were a chance to be normal... we came to an agreement I guess."

Eve glanced to the side and appeared to be pondering something. It was the first time Torin had ever seen her break eye contact with him, and he couldn't help but be a little unsettled over the human-like behavior she exhibited. Where did his father get this new version?

"Alright." She said begrudgingly, but as she did so her voice cracked a little.

Emotions? Thought Torin with surprise. This new T-Unit upgrade was turning out to be more complicated than he had bargained for.

"But I am going to teach you at least the basics of The City's foundation." She said in the stern tone of a seasoned instructor. "Because that is a very important topic for anyone living on the planet Gliese... City resident or otherwise."

Torin was relieved. What Eve didn't know about her previous reboots, was that it normally took him weeks or even months for him to convince her to start teaching him again. And if he wasn't completing the curriculum at the pace his Father set for him, then his Father wasn't teaching him how to hunt Exo's. 'A dumb Hunter is a dead Hunter' -- it was his Father's favorite line.

"Ok Eve," Torin said in an friendly tone, "We have an agreement."

Eve sat down behind a desk in her bland digital classroom and looked at a set of notes. "I'm going to have to have a little chat with your Father though." She said grimly. "If these records are correct, your grades are looking quite sub-par."

Torin laughed and shook his head. Looks like the sympathetic Eve is gone for now. He thought to himself wryly.

"Alright Eve," Torin said as he stretched out his limbs. "We'll have to pick this back up later though. It's getting hot out here and I need to have a break."

Eve glanced up from the papers. "Ok Torin, but before you go could you please answer one question regarding the video I showed you previously?"

Torin sighed. "Sure."

"What do you think of the City's Founder Dr. Kavelsky?"

"The Immortal? Torin asked off-handedly and considered the question for a moment. "I hope he burns in hell."

Eve blinked rapidly as if she had just been slapped in the face.

"Go to sleep Eve." Torin quickly commanded before she could reply.

The T-Unit shutdown and the screen went blank.

Torin let out a long breath, he knew that his little comment wasn't going to go over well when he turned the unit back on again.
Let her steam on that one for awhile. He thought to himself with a grin.

"Whew!" Torin exhaled and rested his head against the cool canyon wall, the entire ordeal had left him exhausted. "It would have been easier to kill a Stalker." He said tiredly to himself and closed his eyes.

He couldn't get comfortable for long though, because just as he was considering the pros and cons of having a quick nap, the sound of laughter startled him.

Torin's eyes flashed open.

Someone had been watching him.

"I don't know about that." Said an unknown voice skeptically, "Even people with two fully-functional arms have a hard time killing a Stalker."

Whatever chance this mysterious person had in winning Torin over disappeared with their little comment about his arm.

"Where are you and who are you?" Demanded Torin angrily as he pushed off the canyon wall and crouched into a fighting stance.

Fuming, he was ready to show the voice just how dangerous he could be.

"Yikes," the voice said with a hint of amusement, "Tough crowd..."

Torin tried to locate where the voice was coming from, but his normally accurate hearing was distorted by the echoing of the canyon walls and he couldn't pinpoint where the figure was hiding.

He scanned the rocks across from him and was just about to move closer when the voice called out again.

"Coming down!" the mysterious figure yelled in a warning tone.

Hearing the scraping of rocks, Torin looked up just in time to catch a glimpse of long thin limbs and brown hair falling fast towards him.
Rolling quickly to the side, he barely avoided a boot to the head as the figure landed nimbly where he had been sitting just moments ago.

Furious, Torin stood up and lunged towards the trespasser in an attempt to push them off the ledge and into the lake below.
Turning in surprise at the last second, the intruder looked at him with wide eyes.

Wide feminine eyes.

Torin stopped abruptly.

The intruder was a girl, he realized with a jolt.

And a beautiful one at that.

Glancing back at the dangerous drop Torin had been planning to launch her off of, the girl looked back at Torin and smiled charmingly. "Oh come on," She said playfully, "You wouldn't hurt a girl would you?"

Torin eyed her warily. "We'll see about that." He responded flatly.

Backing away from her several steps, Torin analyzed the intruder closely. She was absolutely gorgeous.

Probably just a little bit older than himself, she had the curves of a young woman, but the slimness of youth.

Her hazelnut eyes were framed by long dark-brown hair that was parted in the front and tied into a long pony-tail that ran down to her smoothly arching lower back. She wore a tight fitting white jumpsuit that didn't leave very much to the imagination, and she was by far, by leaps and bounds, the most attractive girl Torin had ever met.

Realizing he had been staring at her for a few seconds longer than he should have, Torin quickly looked away to avoid being caught.

"What are you doing here?" he demanded, a little less angry this time.

A smile tugged at the girl's cheek as she stood up tall and crossed her arms. "That's not a very nice way to introduce yourself you know..." She said in a condescending tone. "Hasn't your Father taught you how to talk to women?"

Torin went beet red. "Look!" He said defensively, "I'm not the one eavesdropping and jumping on people!"

The girl laughed. "Well for that I apologize." She said sincerely, "But it's what you get for hanging out on 'my' ledge for the past two days."

Torin's eyes narrowed. How long had she been spying on him for? Remembering his Father's warnings about interacting with the townsfolk, Torin's metal arm clicked as he crossed his arms and frowned at the girl.

"You better explain yourself before I decide to push you over that ledge after all." He said in a warning tone.

The girl sighed heavily. "Looks like you have a lot of work to do if you're ever going to get a girl to like you." She said and shook her head patronizingly.

"Well then tell me who the hell you are!" Torin said angrily, "You've obviously learned all about me in the past few days, how am I supposed to trust someone I don't know?"

The girl thought for a moment before responding.

"Hmm, ok." She said as she seemed to make up her mind about something.

She held out a hand towards him.

"I'm Katrina" She said with a smile.

Torin wasn't amused by the friendly gesture and kept his arms crossed.

Katrina rolled her eyes. "Well aren't you a prick." She said in exasperation and put her hands on her hips.

Torin raised an eyebrow.

"It's really too bad" Katrina said in an irritated tone as she turned away from him and started walking towards the ledge drop off, "I thought you were kinda cute."

Torin opened his mouth to reply, but all he managed to get out was a meek, "Uhh..." before Katrina turned and started running towards the drop off.

"Whoa!" Torin exclaimed, "What are you do-!" Before he could finish his sentence Katrina leapt off the edge with a powerful kick.

And as soon as she had arrived, she was gone.

Rushing to the edge, Torin peered down at the lake more than 80 feet below for a sign of the crazy girl who had just jumped into it.

He saw her straight away.

Floating calmly in the crystal clear water, Katrina swept her back and looked up at Torin expectantly.

"Last chance!" She yelled.

The echoes of her voice off of the canyon walls reverberated in Torin's skull long after they had been blown away by the wind.

"Ah God Dammit!" Torin cursed at himself.

Why did I have to act like such an asshole when she first showed up? He thought to himself angrily. She thought you were cute you idiot!

Torin stepped away from the ledge and tried his best to think about his options intelligently.

He could just ignore the girl and maybe talk to... Who? Eve? He thought to himself with a laugh. She was probably going to tear him a new one for insulting The Immortal the first chance she got.

"Or..." He said to himself with a smile. "You could go talk to the beautiful girl who thinks you are cute."

Torin considered what his Father might have to say about the whole idea.

Fairly lenient on how Torin conducted himself during the time he was away on assignments, his Father had but one golden rule: Stay hidden and don't talk to anyone. Torin was positive that his Father would toss his ass into a Ripper den if he told someone about what him and his Father were up to.

Torin reflected on the last time he had crossed his Father. It had been 6 years ago and even then he had gotten a pretty good hiding for simply talking to a wheat farmer about the weather. Now, they were camped out next to one of the roughest towns in the Outerlands, "The Bowl"... or "Barbwire" as the local gang of bandits had recently renamed it, and crossing his Father would mean serious punishment this time around.

Old Markus would sure be pissed if I messed around. He thought to himself gloomily.

Despite his reservations, Katrina had just reminded him of a second interest that had been exponentially gaining in importance... especially in the last couple years.

Torin made his way back over to the ledge and peered down at the lake. Swimming slowly on her back, Katrina's toned body became momentarily visible with each stroke she took. Barely covered by a layer of shallow water, Torin imagined what Katrina might look like when wet.

Any misgivings about displeasing his Father disappeared entirely.

Ah... what could go wrong?

Analyzing the lake below for the optimum spot to land, Torin chose a spot to the right of a very large and intimidating rock that jutted out several meters from the canyon wall. If he remembered correctly, judging by where Katrina had been swimming initially he was fairly certain that Katrina had aimed for the same spot. Fairly certain.

Katrina noticed him peeking over the edge and waved.

"I'm waiting!" She called up to him cheerfully.

Torin would have replied, but he was so nervous that he would have been more likely to rain down a stream of vomit than a witty remark.

Watching his chosen point on the ledge carefully, Torin backed up until he was about ten feet away and lined up the jump.

He closed his eyes and tried to build up all of the courage he could through sheer willpower.

"GO!" He shouted to himself and released the pent up energy.

Apparently he didn't have enough will, because when he opened his eyes he was still in the same spot.

"God dammit Torin!" He yelled at himself. "You're such a pussy!"

He stood up and began punching and kicking furiously at the dropoff ten feet away.

Surprisingly, it seemed to help a little, because bit by bit, he started to get closer and closer with each strike. Soon, after a few consecutive combos in a row, he was shuffling, then shambling, then jogging, and then finally full out sprinting towards his jump point.

The edge of the cliff came faster than he had wanted it to, but in a matter of seconds it was there, and there was nothing he could do about it.

His heart skipped a couple beats, and with all of his strength he pushed off a small rock to launch into the air -- and slipped.

Now he was falling, face first, arms flailing, and over the rush of wind he thought he could hear a girl screaming in terror.

The water came quick, and it came hard; there was a cool rush, followed by a bloom of pain, and then blackness.

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Chapter 3

Part I: Boy Meets Girl, Shit Hits Fan

Chapter 2
Are You Alright?

"Torin!"

Through a fog of grey Torin could feel someone shaking him. "S-s-t..." He managed to make out.

"What!?" Katrina replied, and started slapping him in the face to get him to open his eyes.

"St... Stop!" He exclaimed and pushed her away.

He was lying on the intimidating rock that he had previously tried to avoid, and he couldn't help but painfully chuckle at the irony of being brought to safety on it.

"I was trying to avoid you... heh... he-owww..." He said to the rock before curling up in pain.

Katrina was kneeling beside him and stared at him wide-eyed.

"Are you alright?" She asked and started to press on certain areas of his body. "Does any of this hurt?"

Torin tried to take a deep breath, but it caught short and he started coughing.

"I'm... just... dandy." He managed to make out.

"Are you sure!?" She asked in disbelief, "You have no idea how hard you just ate it."

Torin found himself able to laugh without too much pain. "Yah." He replied with a strained voice. "I've always been able to bounce back pretty quickly from accidents."

He rubbed his face gently with his hands to feel for any damage. After a few seconds of poking and prodding, he came to the conclusion that he had made it more or less intact.

"You don't have any recovery nano-machines installed do you?" Katrina asked suspiciously.

Squinting his eyes, he blinked them a couple times in an attempt to clear the little black stars that kept popping up. "No... no," he replied. "My Father refuses to let m-..." Torin's sentence trailed off as his eyes finally focused on Katrina and his mind registered the scene in front of him.

Katrina was less than a foot away, and her wet clothes had become somewhat... see-through.

His eyes went wide for an instant, and there was no hope to disguise his unabashed stare.

"HEY!" She said angrily and turned away. "Don't be a perv!"

Torin snapped his eyes shut and tried to roll away. "Sorry! Sorry!" He apologized between labored breaths. "I didn't mean to look..."

Torin's pain was the least of his worries now, as his heart was beating faster than when he was at the top of the ledge and a pounding warming sensation was traveling all throughout his body. He needed to get into the water fast.

"Its just that at the height and velocity you fell at," Katrina began as Torin slipped off the rock and began to slowly submerge his body into the water. "You should have a few broken ribs at least."

Fully covered in water, Torin opened his eyes and tried unsuccessfully to keep his gaze locked on Katrina's face. "Yeah... you know..." He rambled, completely mesmerized by the beauty of the girl so close to him. "It, uh... wasn't that bad."

Torin could feel his heartbeat in his eye-lids and a strange choking sensation that began in his chest made its way slowly up to his throat. He swallowed repeatedly in an attempt to remediate the strange tickling, but it didn't work.

Before the intense feeling could overwhelm him completely, a small beep from the T-Unit managed to draw his attention away from Katrina.

"TORIN!" A gruff man's voice yelled from the T-Unit on Torin's robotic arm.

The suddenness of it made both Torin and Katrina jolt.

"Torin, are you all right?" The man's voice asked. "I'm detecting a sudden increase in heart rate and blood pressure... have you been bitten by a Stalker!?"

Katrina started laughing so hard that tears began streaming down her face.

Torin quickly turned away from Katrina to hide his beet-red face.

"No Dad..." He said angrily, "I'm FINE!"

"Alright, alright Son." Torin's Father responded calmly, "Just making sure... I'm almost finished out here." He continued. "Should be back in the morning."

Torin glanced back at Katrina who was in the process of slipping off of the rock in her laughter.

"Ok, sounds good." Torin replied shortly as he motioned erratically with his arms for Katrina to be quiet. "See you then."

"Oh! And Torin," His Father said excitedly, "How has the new A.I. version been treating you? That was a developmental beta version by the way." He added. "Cost me an arm and a -- er... you know what I mean."

"I'll tell you about it later!" Torin responded in an exasperated tone.

"Ok, Ok, Torin," His Father replied warmly, "Love you son..."

"Yeah, yeah," Torin said impatiently, "See you tomorrow." Torin checked for the small green indicator on the T-Unit to turn off before turning to Katrina.

"Sorry about that." He said shyly.

This time even Katrina had a little bit of color on her face when she pulled herself back onto the rock.

"Who would have thought that jumping off a cliff wouldn't have been your most... umm... heart-racing experience." She said with a devilish grin.

Torin laughed nervously. "Yeah, who would've thought." He said wryly.

Feeling a bit more in control of himself after the initial shock of his Father's interruption, Torin brought the upper half of his body onto the rock and looked at Katrina in a calculating fashion.

"I think I deserve to know more about this girl I jumped off a cliff for." He said with the tiniest hint of mischief in his voice.
Katrina smiled. "Oh really?" She said smugly, "Not going to be an asshole this time around I hope?"

"Nah." Torin responded with a grin, "You could say that I had a change of heart after a recent life-threatening incident."

That drew a laugh from Katrina.

"I still don't know how you came out of that unscathed." She said in an amused tone. "Your legs kinda went like this..." She gestured with her fingers awkwardly, "Then your neck kinda did this..."

Torin couldn't help but smile at the hilarious description of his ungraceful fall.

"And then SMACK!" She said and clapped her hands together for effect. "Human pancake."

As their laughter rang off of the canyon walls, Torin couldn't help but think that today had been his lucky day. Not only did he crack the new A.I. version in the first attempt, but right afterwards he had met a beautiful girl... who of all things thought he was cute! If good things came in three's, then he had no idea what the next surprise could be, but he was definitely excited for it.

Torin took a long sideways look at Katrina and smiled.

"So..." He said with amusement in his voice. "Who 'are' you anyhow? Besides the crazy girl who spied on me, made fun of my arm, scared me half to death, and then jumped off a cliff?" He added as if reading a list of charges.

"You know who I am." Katrina responded playfully and grinned.

"I do?" Torin responded in surprise.

"Of course you do..." She nodded confidently. "I'm Katrina."

"Oh come on." Torin said in a mildly annoyed tone. "You know what I mean."

Katrina averted her eyes and smiled softly. "Yeah I know..."

They sat in awkward silence for a few moments before Katrina looked at him and raised her eyebrows in excitment.

"How about this!" She said mischeviously and smiled. "Tonight I will tell you all about myself..." She looked around at the still canyon in mock suspicion and whispered, "When we are in private..." Leaning forward she gazed into Torin's eyes and mouthed the words: "At my place."

Torin was certain his heart stopped for a moment.

There was the third surprise. He thought to himself as he felt the blood start to rush through his body again. And it was the best yet.
Clearing his throat, he shifted uncomfortably on the rock before responding.

"Yah... ha." He laughed nervously. "You never know when someone could be watching... from a hidden ledge above you in a canyon... right?"

Katrina grinned at him and winked seductively. "Exactly." She said as she pulled a stray hair behind her ear.

Torin took a deep shaky breath and rubbed his forehead with his hand. "So uhh... where? Umm..." He mumbled as he struggled to find the right words.

"You can meet me at the Inn." Katrina smirked as she began to slip into the water.

"In, uh, in town?" Torin asked stupidly.

"Yes of course." Katrina responded as she turned and started to swim towards a section of the lake where a climbable part of the canyon lay above. She was more than a stone's throw away when Torin remembered something important.

"Hey!" He shouted with mild concern in his voice. "What time!?"

Rolling smoothly onto her back mid-stroke, Katrina glanced at him. "At sunset!" She yelled in response.

Torin leaned back on his hands and watched Katrina as she made her way over to the canyon and began to scale it in quick nimble jumps. Of all the girls Torin was lucky enough to meet, he was positive that he had just met one of the funniest, most outgoing, and attractive ones out there.

Torin waited until she had rolled over the top of the ledge and counted silently to sixty in his head. Knowing that she was probably long gone, he lifted his arms high into the sky and yelled in triumph.

For the first time in his life, Torin had a date.

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Chapter 4

Part I: Boy Meets Girl, Shit Hits Fan
Chapter 3
Hot Date
"Look Eve... I'm going to need a favor."
"A favor?"
"Yeah..."
"Doubtful."
"Oh come on!" Torin exclaimed impatiently, "I'm sorry about before alright?"
Eve regarded Torin with a look that could kill. "I highly doubt the sincerity in your voice."
"Ok, ok... how can I make it up to you?"
Sitting on the ground inside a camoflaged military tent, Torin's face was lit up by the glow from the T-unit as he pleaded with Eve.
"What can I do?" He asked in a frustrated tone.
In her digital classroom, Eve reclined in a stiff office chair and began drumming her long red nails on the desk in front of her.
"I guess that depends." She said shortly. "What is this favor?"
"Well..." Torin replied slowly. "I need you to temporarily disable the communication link between the T-Unit and my Father's monitoring device."
Eve frowned.
"I know, I know!" Torin said hastily. "It isn't something that is in your programming... but my Father told me that it was technically possible for you to edit the T-Unit code. Is that true?"
Eve thought for a moment. "Yes, that is something I would be able to do." She replied confidently. "However, given our current relationship status, I do not believe I am inclined to help you."
Torin turned his arm away and fumed silently for a few seconds. He was running out of time. The Bowl, the town that Katrina wanted to meet him at was about a half-hour hike on a good day, and now that it was only hour until sunset he was quickly running out of daylight. He needed to disable the T-Unit's link to his Father if he wanted any hope of going into town undetected... especially if anything happened with Katrina... he didn't need his Father interrupting something important.
"Please Eve!" Torin pleaded. "I will do anything!"
Eve perked up a bit and Torin could swear that he saw a glimmer of retribution in her eyes.
"Anything you say?" She asked with mild interest. "Ok Torin... we are going to have a little quiz." She said as she stacked a few papers on her desk. "And if you pass, I will help you."
Torin smiled thankfully, but on the inside he was cursing at Eve with every ounce of his soul. "Sounds fair." He stated with only the slightest clench of his jaw. "Let me guess... is it about The City's history?"
"Aren't you a bright one Torin!" Eve congratulated him in a slightly mocking tone. "Definitely a good start."
Torin witheld the urge to punch something, and with nostrils flaring, tried his best to calm himself down with a deep breath. "Ok then," He grimaced. "Let's get started."
"Alright Torin," Eve began. "I will ask you ten questions, and you must get seven of them right in order to pass. Understand?"
Torin nodded firmly as he attempted to prepare himself mentally for Eve's questions.
"Question one..." Eve started brusquely, "Who is The City's founder?"
"Easy." Torin replied confidently. "Doctor John Kavelsky, or, as he is commonly known as nowadays, The Immortal.
"Correct. Question two. What did he invent?"
Torin thought about the question for a moment before responding. "Assuming that you are speaking of his initial invention... since he has had quite a few over the years, I would say that the answer you are looking for is nano-machines; in particular, ones that extend an individual's life indefinitely based on a replenishing supply of stem cells."

"Very good Torin," Eve replied, looking surprisingly impressed. "Your critical analysis of the question was well thought out."
Torin nodded impatiently and waited for the next question. Katrina was waiting, and any chance of him getting to know her better was banking on his performance. It was all business.
"Question three. When did The Ship leave Earth?"
"The year 2028, five years after Doctor Kavelsky announced that he had discovered Immortality."
"Correct. Why did The Ship leave Earth?"
"The Earth had become uninhabitable due to a type of cost saving nano-machines that self-replicated. They began to evolve and spread throughout the human race like a disease."
"I'm sorry Torin, that answer is technically incorrect."
"WHAT!?" He yelled furiously.
"The Earth was and still may be inhabitable at this point in time." Eve said patiently as she explained his mistake. "The Ship was built and designed as a safeguard against total annihilation of the human race, not as a result of an uninhabitable Earth. You have three out of four correct."
"Ah for f... ok. Fine." Torin responded between grit teeth. "Give me the next one."
"Question 5. How many people left Earth on the ship destined for Gliese?"
"Five-hundred thousand people."
"Correct. How long did the trip take?"
"Twenty years."
"Incorrect. It took twenty years, two months, one week, three days, and five-point-two-one hours... approximately."
Torin slammed his fist on the ground. "GIVE ME A BREAK!"
Eve raised a questioning eyebrow.
Before he lost it completely, Torin noticed the time in the bottom right-hand corner of the T-Unit screen. Half an hour until sunset... not much time left. He decided that there was no point in arguing.
"Sorry." He said as he clenched and unclenched his hand repeatedly in an attempt to dissipate the anger that was building up inside of him. "Please continue."
"Question SEVEN." Eve continued firmly. "What happened when the ship landed?"
Torin had to think hard about this one. He closed his eyes and rubbed his forehead for several moments before answering. "Let's see... well, they landed. And after seeing the desert-like conditions of Gliese, people didn't want to leave the life support systems ship."
Torin tried to remember what his Father had told him... this part of history was always a bit different depending on who was telling it.
"The stress on the Ship's life support systems was too great," He continued. "And after the passengers began to get violent, riots broke out as a result. People started to die."
Eve nodded slightly for him to continue.
"Things were getting out of control," He explained as he looked up at the ceiling in thought. "And as a result the Immortal and a few others staged a rogue nano-machine outbreak."
Torin brought his gaze back to Eve and shrugged. "Of course, being fearful of what happened back on Earth, the majority of passengers cleared out immediately."
Eve smiled for half a second and raised her chin. "You are correct so far." She said pertly. "What happened next?"
Torin bit down on his knuckles as he tried to remember the rest of the story.
"Ok..." He continued slowly. "Then the Immortal set up a military-style dictatorship and forced the Ship's passengers to begin constructing a settlement around the Ship..." He nodded with confidence and smiled. "Is that a thorough enough answer?"
"Yes that will do." Eve replied with a pause. "However it is an incorrect response."
Torin's mouth opened in disbelief as Eve outlined the proper answer.
"The Immortal did not found The City with a military-style dicatatorship." She pointed out with conviction. "He was elected through a fair democratic process."
Torin turned his head away and strung a few choice curse words together before looking back at Eve.

"I should have known that would be a trick question." He said angrily. "You were created by them... it makes sense that they would try to change history."

Ignoring his outburst, Eve looked at him blankly. "Three questions left Torin," She stated. "And you already have three wrong."

Torin swallowed hard and closed his eyes while nodding in acceptance. "Ok... what's the next one?" He asked tersely.

"Question eight." Eve began with a condescending air. "What happened during the Rebellion?"

It was crunch time. Torin began to sweat as he prepared his next answer; he knew that he would have to keep his response skewed to what the administrators back in the City would find acceptable if he wanted to get the question right.

"The Civilians under the Immortal and his... democratic rule," Torin started carefully. "Began to feel that they were given the short end of the stick. They wanted the comfort of the life support systems that the Ship offered... therefore, a group of these criminals got together and tried to overthrow the government."

"Fantastic Torin!" Eve interjected brightly. "The speed of which you applied the new knowledge I gave you earlier is impressive. I believe that you may just have a good chance at being accepted into the City after all!"

Torin sighed and had to remind himself of the prize waiting for him at the end of this nightmare in order to control his suppressed rage.

"Then, in the middle of the revolution..." Torin continued without acknowledging Eve's comment. "Is when the Exo's showed up."

The Exo's... thought Torin gloomily as he looked at his black robotic arm. What a shock they would have been to the people arriving on Gliese. He couldn't even imagine the terror the passengers would have felt in seeing them... did they really have no idea what they were getting into when they left Earth?

Torin tried unsuccessfully to suppress a laugh.

And they thought spiders were scary.

Eve regarded Torin with a worrisome look. "Is there something you find humorous about the Exo-Skeletal Lifeforms?" She asked in a disturbed voice.

Terrifying. Monstrous. Demons in every sense of the word. Rippers, Spitters, Stalkers... just some of more common Exo's that he had come across -- all of them named after their preferred method of killing. No, he did not find them humorous.

Torin shook his head. "I'm sorry." He said with a serious expression on his face. "I was thinking of something else."

"Alright..." Eve said cautiously as she kept a worried eye on Torin. "To finish the question, please summarize what happened after the first Exo sighting."

Taking a moment to clear his head of the nightmarish creatures, Torin shifted uncomfortably and tried his best to focus on something bright. Something happy. Something Katrina.

Katrina! Torin remembered with a jolt and glanced at the time... ten minutes until sunset. Well, he was definitely going to be late... the only thing left to determine was just how late he was going to be.

"Panic." Blurted Torin.

"I'm sorry?"

"Panic..." He repeated grimly. "After the Exo's showed up, everyone forgot about the Ship and began working together to defend themselves; there wasn't time to squabble over who controlled what... especially when people were being torn to pieces."

Torin couldn't believe what he was about to say, but he knew that it was necessary if he wanted to pass the test.

"The Immortal saved the day." He said with mock enthusiasm. "He had been working on a new type of nano machine that increased the strength of a human ten-fold, and with a small squad of fighters, the Original Six, they managed to quell the Exo attack."

Torin sighed in a depressed manner, his Father would tear him in two pieces for saying these things... and he literally could, because like most of the Hunters in the Outerlands he had an impressive amount of Nanom's installed; in particular, the ones that enabled him to rip sheets of steel like they were pieces of paper.

Rubbing his forehead with his hand, Torin managed to roll his eyes without Eve noticing.

"After successfully gaining control of the colony," He continued. "The Immortal turned the Ship into an advanced military academy. And with the help of his elite soldiers, the Defenders, he has been protecting us ever since."

Torin lifted his eyebrows questioningly.

"Well." He said flatly. "Is that an acceptable response?"

"It is a bit shaky." Eve replied with hesitation. "But yes it will do. Two questions left."

A small sun icon on the bottom of the T-Unit blinked and was quickly replaced by a moon icon. Outside, the sun must have slipped beneath the horizon.

"Question nine..." Eve began.

Torin wished with all of his might that the next two would be easy.

"What was the Black City?"

Fragments of images and sounds rushed into Torin's head. Crumbling walls, blood, smoke, screams of terror; Torin grimaced in pain as he tried to shake his mind clear. The entire city had been left in a charred black ruin. He was so close to remembering what happened...

"Torin?"

Eve's stern voice had snapped him back to reality.

"Uh... yeah?"

"The Black City?"

"Oh, yes... right." Torin said as he blinked rapidly for several moments. "That was the city that was formed by rebels and Citizens who wanted to take their chances and live by their own rules."

"Correct. And what happened to the Black City?"

"Destroyed."

"Correct."

Torin was surprised. "That's it?"

Eve shrugged.

"Bonus question..." She said as an intense look came over her face. "What happens when you live outside of the City?"

Torin sighed.

He should have known.

"You die." He said flatly.

"Correct."

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