

Robert Lord of the Time Epiphany

A story by Red

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Part I

Crystal Ball

“I don’t believe in anything,” Robert Lord scratched the words on a coffee stained journal page.

“Not god, not life... maybe just an occasional cigarette,” he chuckled as the burnt end of one hung limply between his lips. Wisps of smoke curled in the dim light as he looked thoughtfully down at the empty, white space on the paper.

“I would believe in something if it could tell me what happens next.”

DING!

The chime of nearly 100 clocks striking in harmony sang over the quiet night and drifted like an echo out of the cracked window at the end of the room. Some were made of silver, others gold, some plastic. Some sounded off at the wrong moment, but Robert Lord had a knack for fixing broken things and a fondness for time, so he collected time-pieces, watches, clocks and even a grandfather clock, bringing them back into harmony when they needed it and enjoying their often prescient company. Hanging from the dull, gray walls, they all ticked to the rhythm of the present, surrounding him in a symphony of ticks and tocks.

A bead of sweat dripped from his forehead as he concentrated on the page, splashing lightly on the desk next to a picture frame. He recoiled slowly from the pages, and the bare skin of his back grimaced against the cold metal chair. Black cargo pants kept the rest of him warm. Tilting his head toward the light, he exposed his long curly hair as it mingled with the smoke. His face hovered in the shadow, absent of creasing and wear. Fortunately, the appearance of his youth betrayed the old, bitter man he kept trapped inside.

Apart from the ticking, the only other noise in the room was that of an old television humming quietly along with the silence. A cartoon played itself out across the fuzzy screen. The characters likely got more entertainment from a disinterested Robert Lord than he did from them. He leaned forward with his forearms on the table.

“A crystal ball would be nice. I don’t want to know when I die or what I become—I just want to know how much is enough,” finishing his thought, he gazed out through the window.

His eyes rested longingly on the street lamps that illuminated the falling raindrops as they passed from the dark to the light.

DING!

The cartoons resumed, and the sound of pouring rain erupted from outside. He snapped back to life, his journal staring up at him as he returned from his reverie. On the screen, a small scientist with a sharp brow and a white lab coat connected wires to a heavysset man sleeping on a couch. He pranced away on his tiptoes, rubbing his hands together, a smile running to the edge of his lips. Walking around the corner, he took a square, black controller from his pocket and

pressed a red button. The man on the couch immediately stood up, arms extended in front of him like a zombie.

He closed his journal with a thump and tied together the two thin pieces of leather attached to the outside—he put the end of his cigarette in a horseshoe shaped ashtray and sighed out his last breath of smoke. Grabbing a watch from the desk drawer, he slid a pair of magnifying glasses from the crown of his head down to the crook of his nose, which appeared to be the victim of a few blows.

“This stupid thing,” he said under his breath, eyeing the culprit of the errant *ding* and turning it over in his hands.

An old man with a terrible limp once came into the shop and asked him to fix it. He said it belonged to a friend who gave it to him many years ago, and it always chimed exactly when he needed it to, but it had lost time recently.

“This looks like it could be his great-grandfather’s watch,” Robert Lord thought as he examined the weathered piece of metal. He took a brush from a metal cup on the table and began to wipe away the layers of dust. He opened the case and smiled. To his surprise, the movement underneath was in decent condition.

“At least it has one redeeming quality,” he thought, setting the watch down to grab his cigarette from the ashtray. Holding it to his lips, he sucked in, hoping the pressure might ignite the dying embers. A pleasant heat singed the back of his throat, and he smiled at the taste of burnt tobacco on his tongue. He opened his journal again, untying the leather knot that kept it loosely shut with one hand. In the other hand he held the watch.

“If you know something, like I know I can fix this watch, it is not the same as believing. Belief is the expectation that someone or something will be a certain way while knowing, or not knowing, that they are imperfect,” he wrote the thought down, hoping it might draw him away from his own lack of trust for the unknown.

“For some reason, the old man believed in me,” he closed his journal and took to tinkering with the watch in his other hand.

He didn’t always maintain an appreciation for things – to him, they came and went, just like the passing of a moment. But, the clocks, watches and other time-tracking devices made themselves perpetually useful by being consistently present. There was nothing worse for him than late, or early, ticks and tocks.

He removed the straps and mounted the watch to a small metal stand in front of him. Using the brush, he wiped away the rest of the dust to find a few scratches on the gold bezel and some wear on the crystal. On the face, someone had painted an eye. It covered the top half, and the dashes that marked the time looked like its lashes. He pulled the slightly rusted crown protruding from the side until it clicked and began to twist. The hands on the dial turned slowly, moving counterclockwise until they struck 12. The watch chimed.

The high-pitched sound rang in his ears. He reached to put his brush back in the cup. A pain shot through his head and ricocheted down his spine. Closing his eyes, he slid the

magnifying glasses from his face until they rested on his chest. He tilted his head back and put his right ear to his right shoulder.

CRACK!

He kept his eyes closed and took in a deep breath, his nose blind to the tobacco and gin smell that clung to the walls as if it were trying to flee the darkness. His eyelids burned from the fatigue of a long day. Every once in a while he wondered if he tried hard enough, maybe he could drift off and dream, keeping his eyes closed forever.

He opened them to see how much time had passed.

“Four hours?” he thought as he glanced at his watch.

“It’s barely been two minutes!” He stood up, scanning his desk, remembering the old man’s timepiece. Something was off. The hands were moving backwards. He stood up abruptly, the lights in the room dimmed and the sun shined through the cracked window—no sign of the thunderous rain.

THUMP!

He now stared up at the wood beams in the ceiling; his head throbbed against the floor.

“Did I just fall?” he thought.

He saw the brush and cup lying next to him as he turned. Just out of reach was the picture frame, cracked and lying on its side. The fading image of a man and a woman, dressed in matching t-shirts stared back at him. At the bottom it said “Robbie + Clem,” he looked back at the ceiling beams.

His head spun. A faint white hue formed in the rafters, clouding the room. Just as he wanted to close his eyes, the vague shape of a woman with glowing white eyes reached out from the mist.

“Robert Lord,” the woman said.

“Take my hand.”

“Take my hand if you want to stand.”

Robert Lord, hypnotized by his own lack of thought, reached out to the woman.

Everything disappeared into darkness.

Act Natural

“Hey,” a voice cut through the darkness.

“Hey!” Robert Lord could see light through his eyelids and opened them. His pupils adjusted to the red neon lighting.

“You might want to get the f*** up!” A large, pink woman with bulging arm muscles stared down at him—blue veins in her neck pressing against the skin as if they were trying to escape.

“Where am I?” he thought as feeling slowly returned to his body.

His hands pressed against cold wet tiles. The red hue of neon lights flickered, revealing the dirty, weathered porcelain of a toilet bowl above his head. The faint smell of piss and wet shoes floated through the air.

The muscular woman's gaze fixated on him, pinning him to the wet floor.

“Can you hear me, freak?”

“Me?” Robert Lord stuttered.

“Yes, you!” the woman shouted, spit flying from her open mouth. Grabbing him by the shirt, she lifted him to his feet.

“Get out!” she commanded in a monotone voice, ensuring to pronounce all the syllables. She shoved him towards a black door. The muffled sound of electronic music filled the air. He looked back. The woman pulled a small plastic baggie out of a backpack and poured white powder on the sink counter. She put her nose to it, finger pressed on the opposite nostril, and breathed in forcefully.

“If you're gonna stand there and watch, at least have the mind to watch the door.”

He took two steps back, mesmerized by the woman's massive pink muscles. He felt the reverberations of the music through his back pressed up against the black door. He watched as she stared into the mirror. A Superman sticker with crossed out eyes was plastered next to her reflection. The veins in her neck and arms shrunk. Her pupils dilated. She let out a deep sigh and stared down into the sink. She turned on the water and lowered her head beneath the spout. Splashing her face, she turned back to him.

“I'm sorry sir. I should have asked if you needed help. Are you okay? Why were you lying on the floor?” The words came out kindly, and Robert Lord stood in shock.

The hulking woman's body was shrinking. Her light face and the curvature of her head gave way to a sharp chin. Her eyes were thin and kind, and on the right side of her face she had a small, black heart tattoo. Her eyebrows looked well manicured and just above them rested bangs that hung in small squares. She wore a neon blue bomber jacket with two naked ladies stitched onto the shoulders and Japanese letters across the back. Her hair was bleached except for one spot dyed pink and another gray. He also noticed, poking out from behind her back was what looked like the hilt of a sword.

“Sir?” The woman rubbed her face vigorously with a hand towel.

“I-I-I...” Robert lord stammered. “Where am I?”

“You're at *The Carlisle*, silly. You must've hit your head on the way down.”

His head spun, but he kept his cool.

“Yeah, I guess so.”

The thump of the music pounded in the background.

“What's your name?” the woman asked.

“I'm...” he paused. “I'm Robert Lord.”

“That's a silly name, Mister. Wher—”

“What's *The Carlisle*?” he interrupted the stranger who eyed him quizzically.

“You really don't know where you are? It's only the greatest hotel and robot fight club Tokyo has to offer. You really hit your head, huh?” she smiled.

“Robot what?”

“Here, let me show you.”

She reached for his hand as she walked toward the black door. He pulled back.

“Okay, I know you're not feeling well...” she looked into his eyes, now bubbling with excitement—standing inches from his face, he could feel her warm breath.

“But you gotta act natural,” she said sternly, flattening her smile and keeping eye contact with him while nodding her head up and down. She reached again, this time grabbing his arm gently.

“They'll kick you out if they think you're stoned,” she giggled.

Robert Lord, confused, nodded his head silently at the sudden kindness of the stranger in front of him. They looked at each other for a moment. He could smell the damp bathroom in the warm air—the scent of mold and cheap soap unpleasantly greeted his nose. He looked into the mirror hanging on the wall to his left, half expecting someone else's face to be staring back at him. To his surprise, he saw the same person he's always seen and stared deep into his own eyes. He also noticed the old man's watch wrapped tightly around his left wrist.

“Before we go out there,” Robert Lord asked, his mind riddled with questions. “What's your name?”

“I'm Kimiko, and you... you are Robert Lord,” she smiled again.

Kimiko turned toward the door, dragging him behind her.

“And, this is *The Carlisle*.”

She swung the door open and the muted thumping was now a deafening roar of music. The smell of sweat and alcohol mixed with the soap and grime of the bathroom. Kimiko found small openings between the hordes of bodies, her hand glued to his. Lights flashed, giving him glimpses of the half naked bodies surrounding him. Kimiko turned around. He could tell she was yelling at him over the noise by the way her mouth moved and how the veins were popping out of her neck again. He worried she might transform into the lunatic he met in the bathroom, but she turned around swiftly to continue navigating.

Robert Lord felt a hand on his shoulder from behind. He nervously shifted his body in a semi-circle to see what had touched him. He tilted his head back and looked up at the massive figure to find a glistening, human-ish robot staring down at him. The cold, metal hand released

as the robot tried to scoot by. A shy, but gracious look appeared on its face as it also tried to pick its way through the crowd. The robot raised its other hand, which held a glass of dark liquid and nodded its head in thanks.

“Act natural,” Robert Lord thought to himself.

He lifted his hand up and waved timidly toward the robot, showing that he didn’t mind the nudge. He turned back toward Kimiko who continued to drag him by his arm. His wide eyes searched through the pulsating darkness for other abnormalities—his heart raced as he passed blue people, metal bodies, and flashing skin. Up ahead, he could see a bright light and what looked like a caged balcony. Kimiko fervently raced them toward it—Robert Lord felt strangled by the mass of surrounding bodies.

“And now!” a voice called out, booming over the crowd of people.

“Robot Lord vs. Marshmallow,” the crowd erupted in a blood-curdling cheer.

“Can Scottie Boogaloo take down Hot Chocolate in this underdog vs. top-dog matchup?” The crowd roared in response to the speaker with a chilling desire in their unified voice.

“Come on!” Kimiko’s voice cut through the crowd noise, “They’re about to start!” She pulled Robert Lord’s arm even harder and glided through the bodies like a fine mist.

Creatures of the Night

Robert Lord stood at the edge of the cage, clinging to the metal links with his fingers. Cool air flowed from an open roof into the club. He stared into an octagonal pit from the seventh story. Bodies lined the cement balconies overlooking the large dirt circle. Most of the spectators were clad in black clothing, if any at all—many sported leather pants or jackets—rectangular sunglasses and shiny metal accessories were also *en mode*. It all seemed a bit retro to him, though no one stopped or stared at his bare chest and cargo pants.

A large, pixelated holographic screen hovered over the arena, zooming in on the competitors below. Names floated above their heads. On one side, Hot Chocolate, an angry looking woman with pale skin, blue hair, and a half-shaved head, and Marshmallow, a blue and white, humanoid robot with a white mask instead of facial features—on the other, Scottie Boogaloo and Robot Lord. Scottie wore sport goggles and his tight black curls gave way to twists flopping over his forehead. His cut-off sleeves revealed his left arm, covered in a tiger tattoo surrounded by Japanese letters. An orange kevlar vest fit snugly to his chest and a sword rested on his back. Next to him stood a metallic figure with sharp, red eyes, marked by two vertical scratches. A glowing red halo wrapped around the back of its head and angled down its metallic cheeks. Its round head was supported by a lean and muscular metal body.

Robert Lord could make out a tinted window resting ominously behind the floating pixels. Two large men sat behind the glass; several bodies stood around them in suits. He couldn't see their faces from that far away.

"This place is insane," Robert Lord thought, wishing he still had his journal.

"Hey, look!" Kimiko pointed to a man walking on the ledge next to the cage, standing about four feet above the crowd.

"Soda, alcohol and synthetics! Three, four and five dollars!" the man cried out.

Hands reached out to him from the crowd, some holding cash, others large coins. In the light emanating from the cage, Robert Lord could now see that many of the bodies around were actually robots. The man traded with them, yelling at a few for not having enough money. He got closer, and Kimiko waved him down.

"Two AMFs," Kimiko reached into her pocket and discretely handed the man a small baggie, similar to the one she used in the bathroom. *Courtesy* it read in black ink on the little package.

He quickly poured out two cups of blue liquid and handed them to her.

"Arigatō," she said, and the man moved on.

She handed one of the drinks to Robert Lord, "Come on, we gotta watch."

"What is that stuff you gave him? It's the same stuff from the bathroom right?" He asked nervously, curious about the miracle drug that turned Kimiko from a raging hulk into the gentle and kind girl standing in front of him.

"It's *Courtesy*, now be quiet and watch!" she said through clenched teeth.

Robert Lord puffed out his cheeks with a breath of air, shrugged his shoulders, let out a sigh and took a sip of the blue drink in his cup.

"Tastes like gin," he thought to himself, trying to make peace with his current predicament.

The two newfound friends looked through the wires in front of them and down at the competitors. On one side of the circle stood a relatively small and wiry young man.

"That must be Scottie Boogaloo and Robot Lord," Robert Lord said.

"His name's pretty close to mine, huh?"

"That's why I said you had a silly name," Kimiko responded flatly, eyes glued to the pit.

"Scottie and Robot Lord are up and coming. He's a builder."

"A what?"

"He builds his own Robot mods—people think... well, I think he's a genius," she said with a smile.

"Some of their fights are fixed though. They've been asking for bigger purses and bigger matches, but it's all political you know. At least, that's what he says."

Robert Lord wanted to ask more questions, but he felt his voice getting thinner from yelling back and forth, so he looked back to the pit. Hot Chocolate pulled gloves onto the ends of her fingers. What was left of her blue hair hung down just past her shoulders, red scarring covered half her face. She also wore a kevlar vest, and two short swords hung from each hip. Her silver skirt gave way to long black boots that came up to her knees. Beside her stood Marshmallow—apart from her shining metallic body, he almost couldn't tell she wasn't human. She paced around the pit with the grace, elegance and strength of a wild animal, pacing through the dried blood that covered the ground.

"Fighters!" the voice from the loudspeaker returned.

"Take your starting positions!"

All eyes fixated on the contenders facing one another in the ring. They took stances with their hands by their sides and bowed. A loud buzzer sounded out over the arena.

"Three, two, one!" The crowd counted down in unison; Robert Lord felt brainwashed by the vigor of the moment as his tongue and lips moved silently to match the ticking game-clock.

"Hajime!" the voice yelled over the loudspeaker.

Scottie and Hot Chocolate sprinted toward each other as the robots next to them jumped high into the air, hovering at eye level with the seventh floor attendees. Robots and humans collided simultaneously. Scottie leapt, swiping his long sword over his opponent's head—she adeptly slid underneath him, using her hand to grab his leg, causing him to fall face-first towards the dirt. The robots collided mid-air, an electric red pulse emanating from the halo around Robot Lord's head zapped them apart; they flew backward into the cage, Marshmallow heading straight for Robert Lord and Kimiko. He ducked, but a buzzing white light stopped the creatures before they hit the edge. The crowd roared with lust for danger and damage.

"Wooh!" Kimiko cheered. "Isn't this great!"

"Are they trying to kill each other?" Robert Lord asked worriedly.

“I sure hope so!”

They looked back down at the humans below. Hot Chocolate had drawn her two short swords, both buzzed with an electric blue light. She threw the first one as she ran toward Scottie on the ground. He had been able to roll to avoid a more devastating fall but seemed stunned by the woman’s quickness. He threw up his long sword in the air, blocking the flying weapon and regained his composure, stepping out of the way of the woman’s next attack.

Marshmallow looked down as she fell—using her feet to push off the wall, she aimed for Scottie. On her descent, she turned into a ball, hurtling towards Scottie in the pit. Robot Lord, seeing his opponent flying towards his teammate, kicked off the wall, fire erupted from his back, letting off a sonic boom, sending him toward the ground. The crowd shrieked in delight.

Robot lord swung his leg at the metal ball that was marshmallow, but as he kicked, the ball melted into liquid. Missing the mark, Robot lord crashed into the yellow shield. The molten metal on the ground surrounded Scottie’s feet and hardened, locking him into place. Hot Chocolate ran in for another attack. Scottie quickly shoved his sword into Marshmallow’s melted body and pressed a button on the hilt. The sword glowed with red light and started to vibrate. Marshmallow released Scottie’s feet and slithered away towards Robot Lord. Scottie lifted his trapped leg to trip his oncoming attacker. She fell to the ground and Scottie raised his sword.

Robot Lord got up, but was missing an arm from his crash into the wall. Marshmallow finally regained her original form, and, seizing the opportunity, ran towards her wounded opponent. Before Scottie could bring down his sword, Marshmallow lifted her arm, which turned into a drill and drove it through Robot Lord’s face. He collapsed on the ground and the crowd roared.

“Maté!” the voice from the loudspeaker boomed and the crowd quieted. Scottie stood frozen over Hot Chocolate.

“And the winner is Hot Chocolate and Marshmallow,” Hot chocolate smiled a wry smile as Scottie threw his sword to the side in frustration. A mixture of cheers and boos rose quietly from the crowd. For them, carnage was always more fun than picking sides. Carnage has fans, sides have losers.

“Maybe next time, kid,” Hot chocolate stood up slowly, patting Scottie on the shoulder. Brushing the dirt off her skirt, she walked over to Marshmallow.

Robert Lord watched in amazement from above. For a moment he thought of the quiet solitude of his bedroom. Though it comforted him, the excitement of drugs and murder filled his spirit with an embarrassing curiosity. He never realized the joy of sin could be so effortlessly convincing.

“So, they were trying to kill each other?” he asked, terrified of the answer to his question.

The crowd dispersed and Kimiko sat down on the ledge the man had balanced himself on, sipping her second AMF.

“They’ll be fine. Whatever happens from the fight can get fixed by RoboMed.”

“Are those like Robo... doctors?”

“Yeah, they can fix *anything*.”

“So they’ll be okay?”

“Yeah, they’ll be alright.”

The tension in Robert Lord’s chest released.

“And now!” the voice from the loudspeaker shouted, but the crowd didn’t seem nearly as interested.

“Skeltoon vs. Killer Queen!” the voice droned on.

“Ooh, let’s go see Scottie,” Kimiko’s eyes lit up at the thought.

“Will they let us into RoboMed?”

“Yeah, they don’t care, plus he’s my friend,” Kimiko stood up and threw her empty cup in the nearest trash can.

Grabbing his hand, she walked towards an open stairwell.

I Can't Lie

Kimiko and Robert Lord stood at the bottom of the stairwell. They watched gurneys pass by with hearts, lungs, limbs and circuit boards—other spectators continued, unphased by the gruesome scene. Long yellow-ish lights, perched in the crevice where the brick wall met the ceiling, lit up the hallway. Robots and humans intermingled seamlessly—Robert Lord could hardly tell them apart. Some were big, some small, some square and others round, but, mostly, they were indistinguishable if it weren't the metal, skin, or odd shapes and sizes.

“Ooh ooh look, there he is!” Jumping on her toes, Kimiko pointed to a wheelchair about fifty meters down the hall surrounded by a few fans.

“Scottie!” she shouted.

The tired fighter looked in her direction and waved her over.

“Come on!” Holding Robert Lord's hand, she headed for the disgruntled man.

Kimiko hugged him.

“Ow, ow, ow, watch the merchandise you little pr*ck,” he said in a boyish voice.

Seeing him up close, Robert Lord realised he looked quite young. His light-brown, wrinkle-free skin and poofy hair now rested behind circular glasses instead of sport goggles.

“Why are you in this stupid chair?” Kimiko asked.

“Well, to be honest I got hurt in my last fight and thought I would be fine for this one, but my leg is still bothering me, so they're putting me through the dip,” he said with a grimace on his face.

“Hopefully not for too long?” Kimiko said, waiting for an answer.

“What's the dip?” Robert Lord asked.

“Who are you?” Scottie asked snarkily in response, mimicking his tone.

“Sorry, this is my friend Robert Lord. I wanted him to meet you,” Kimiko stepped in quickly.

Scottie gave him a strange look, “I'll only be in for a few days.”

“That's not bad,” Kimiko responded with relief in her voice as she raised her eyebrows.

Scottie looked back toward Robert Lord, then down at his leg.

Adjusting it in the wheelchair, he said, “The dip is the healing bath they put you in after a fight. Can even fix you if you're dead most of the time. Only thing it can't fix is old age. They scan you before your fight to make sure you get put back together the way you came in.”

Robert Lord nodded, confused but happy this place might not be as bad as he thought.

“But you die? What do you feel when you die? Or when you wake up?”

Ignoring his questions, Kimiko interrupted.

“How long until Robot Lord's back?” Kimiko looked worried.

“I mean his face did get caved in, so probably a few weeks. Won't be able to train until then, so the next fight won't be for a while. It's my fault—it was supposed to be a fixed fight,” Scottie said, looking around to ensure there were no curious ears.

"I was hoping to tip the odds in our favor and recalibrated Robot Lord's tracking system to make sure he wouldn't misjudge Marshmallow's movement. If he'd kept her at bay a bit longer, I'd have ended it. God, her mechanics are smooth! Oh well. At least we got the purse," he said with a content frown.

Kimiko gave Scottie a sad smile.

"Excuse me, Mr. Boogaloo?" A blue robot in a white medical gown approached the trio.

"Yeah, I'm ready doc," Scottie stood up.

"Please sign here," The robo-doc reached his hand out and a hologram appeared.

Robert Lord looked at it and watched Scottie sign and date it at the bottom. *Scotch Boogaloo 06/24/1994*. His eyes panicked seeing the date.

The doctor turned around, and on the back of the gown it said, *The Carlisle Medical Bay*. Scottie limped behind the robo-doc and waved at a few passing fans.

"Hey Kimiko, when I get out, come to my place. We need to talk."

"Aye," Kimiko said abruptly in a high-pitched voice as she bowed. As she brought her head up, she laughed and waved goodbye to her friend.

Kimiko and Robert Lord turned around to walk out the way they came. They pushed through the crowd once more.

"Kimiko?"

"Yes, Robert Lord?"

"Why did he write the date as June 24, 1994?"

"Because that's what day it is, silly."

A look of confusion settled on his face, "How is it 1994?"

"I don't know, why is your name *Robert Lord*? Are you sure you don't need to see a doctor? We are in RoboMed. See for yourself if you don't believe me," Kimiko paused and pointed to a bright screen built into one of the walls that had a picture of the fight card from tonight. At the top was the date *06.24.94*. Kimiko kept walking.

"I don't know how to explain this Kimiko, but... I'm not from here."

"Well no duh, I could've guessed that. You ask so many questions."

"Are you f*cking with me? What the hell is the place?"

"No, a**hole. What's your problem?"

"My problem? You just said it's 1994, that's my problem!"

"Ok, ask anyone! Look!" she said, angrily pointing at the holographic posters surrounding them. *06.24.94*.

"I think... I'm from the future," Robert Lord replied quietly.

"Well I guess that means I'm from the past," Kimiko responded, smiling at him sarcastically.

"Kimiko," this time he grabbed her by the shoulders and stared through her.

"My name is Robert Lord. I was born in a town called Unser, to Julian Lord Raymond and Meryll Janice Raymond, in 2036. I am not from here. Look, this has been a unique

experience, but I need to get back to wherever the hell I came from,” Robert Lord’s chest heaved in and out as his eyes darted around the hallway, trying to process Kimiko’s credibility.

Fight Night posters lit up the brick walls—06.24.94 they all read.

Kimiko turned and slapped him in the face.

“If you were from the future, wouldn’t you know I was gonna do that? Weirdo!” she said, her expression flat.

He stood confused, staring down the hallway as Kimiko marched toward the stairwell and turned left up the stairs. The yellow lights flickered and shoulders belonging to machines and people bumped into him as they passed. He watched Kimiko’s sword bounce back and forth as she strutted past robots and humans. He closed his eyes and let his feet move his body toward the indignant girl, surrounded by a time, a place and people he had never known.

“Kimiko, wait up!”

She kept walking.

“Kimiko, I’m not some freak. I’m not high. I’m just scared! I woke up on the bathroom floor less than an hour ago!” He reached toward her shoulder.

She shrugged his hand off. He walked faster to catch up with her as she marched toward the open club doors. Light rain dampened the sidewalk as they exited The Carlisle.

“I’m not here to change your mind about who I am. I just want to get back to wherever I came from. I’m not from here!” Robert Lord begged.

Kimiko turned to face him.

“Okay, so go to the future,” she squinted at him with her lips pursed.

“I-I don’t know how.”

“Okay, so then prove to me that you’re from the future. Tell me something that hasn’t happened yet.”

“Like, what?”

“I don’t know, you tell me!”

He thought for a moment.

“Well, in my future. Robots don’t exist... I mean not like they do here. They’re just machines that do things. They don’t look like humans. I’m not sure that my future is your future because this is definitely not my future’s past,” Robert Lord stumbled over his words talking nervously fast.

“Look, whatever I tell you could be right or wrong in your world. You might have to wait years for me to be right about something,” he kept his train of thoughts running, pleading with his hands as he spoke.

“Try me,” Kimiko said flatly as she kept walking.

“All I know is that in about 70 years from now. I’m a mechanic...” he grabbed his face and pulled down on his cheeks trying to think of something to tell her.

“I’m in love with a girl named Clementine, and she gets sick. Then she leaves me to live inside her own head,” Kimiko stopped.

Robert Lord could tell he piqued her interest by the way she tilted her head and continued as they passed bodies on the sidewalk.

“Uh... um in the future, they have these, um... these devices that you hook yourself up to, and you just live life through them,” his hands moved around attempting to symbolize the shape of a helmet.

“Almost everyone did it. One bad thing happens, people get to a bad place, and they just give up. Poof,” he said mimicking an explosion with his hands in front of his face.

“Clementine left me to have her mind controlled so she wouldn’t have to suffer through life. Right after she went in is when we found out they were just killing everyone. It was fake, they killed everyone,” he leaned his head back against the light post next to him.

Water dripped on his head. He tried to catch his breath.

“I need to get back,” water slid into his eyes as his hair dampened.

Kimiko stopped walking and waited for a few seconds. She looked down at her hands and the falling rain.

“What is the device called?” Kimiko asked quietly.

“DreamSpace. It’s called DreamSpace.”

Kimiko’s eyes widened as Robert Lord closed his and breathed in deeply.

“Robert Lord...” Kimiko touched him on his shoulder.

“How do you know about DreamSpace?” she asked sternly.

“I told you... I don’t think I’m from here,” he said, trying to keep his composure.

“I think you are exactly where you are supposed to be,” she grabbed him under his arm and helped him stand upright.

“We will get some rest first, and then I will explain everything.” Kimiko pulled him, this time gently.

The two walked slowly through a side-street. Neon signs overhead with Japanese letters glittered in the Tokyo night. Cars honked, and the rain kept the air cool without soaking those underneath it. Steam from a restaurant floated in the distance, dragging the faint smell of baked goods along with it. Kimiko and Robert Lord peacefully parted the traffic of people shoulder to shoulder as they glided further away from The Carlisle. The city sounds dimmed under the weight of confusion and fatigue as two former strangers now walked arm in arm to find the truth that lay buried somewhere between them.

They arrived at the doorstep of a wide building. Big blue doors sat at the top of a few steps. Kimiko waved her hand in front of a keypad; a blue light glowed beneath its glass surface. She pressed her palm against it.

Beep.

The doors swung open and they walked through the darkness, arm in arm up two flights of stairs. Kimiko opened a second door and guided Robert Lord up to a loft and put him in bed. With dread-filled arms, he pulled the covers over himself and curled into a ball.

“What else do you know?” Kimiko asked gently.

“I lost everything,” he said coldly.

They both sat in silence for a moment.

“Everyone is gone except for the handful that remain. Everyone went into DreamSpace looking for something better than what was here. I mean, who wouldn’t? Parents followed children and husbands followed wives. Friends followed friends. All it took was one person in your circle giving up for everything to fall apart,” he stared into the darkness.

“The world eventually found out the truth. They were just killing people, but it was too late. Oligarchy had pierced the democratic veil of our government and there was no going back. I thought Clementine and I would be safe. I thought they couldn’t touch us, but she just got sicker and was convinced DreamSpace might help. She got so sick,” his lips quivered.

“Why do you want to know about DreamSpace?” he asked.

Kimiko breathed in, hoping new air might relieve the shakiness in her voice.

“I don’t know how you got here, or what future you might be from, but you might have a chance to make sure that DreamSpace never exists,” she said calmly.

“What do you mean?” he asked.

“Get some rest Robert Lord. You’re going to need it,” Kimiko whispered, patting him softly on the shoulder.

Loser

Three days had passed since Robert Lord woke up in The Carlisle bathroom. Kimiko had left him in her apartment while she visited her mother; she was to return today according to a note she left on the kitchen counter. The small Tokyo apartment lacked no comforts. The front door opened into a space with a white couch, a wooden coffee table, and three large windows looking out over a few buildings and a graffitied alleyway. A small stove and refrigerator were tucked neatly in the left corner, and above that a loft where Kimiko kept her bed. A silver microwave, a toaster and several odd snacks littered the kitchen counter. Multi-colored neon tubes hung on strings, dangling just below exposed piping that covered the ceiling. A hologram of crashing waves played on one of the brick walls and green vines clung to the space beneath it.

Robert Lord had taken an empty journal from the bookshelf next to Kimiko's bed and laid it on the coffee table. A ring formed under a coffee mug as it perspired from the heat. He perched his lower half on the edge of the couch, sinking deep into the soft cushions.

"Being lonely isn't easy," he wrote.

"But this loneliness is different. Everything I've ever done, anything I've ever tried to be means nothing. And, I've come to understand that nothing is more lonely than trying to convince someone you exist," he stood up with a hot cup of tea warming his hands and walked toward the window.

The sound of the door unlocking startled him.

"Robert Lord!" Kimiko walked in.

He turned around to see Kimiko, carrying a large bag.

"Sorry I was gone so long. We have a lot to catch up on."

He silently walked over to help, patiently waiting for her to settle down.

"I know you have a lot of questions. Today is the day you will have answers... to most of them," Kimiko said as she dropped the bag on the ground and took off her shoes.

"How is your mother?" he asked, trying not to show his excitement.

"Well according to her, I'm a loser, as always. She says I'm wasting my future and blah blah blah. You know the type," she said in a sarcastic tone as she walked to the kitchen counter.

"But, Robert Lord. We need to talk... about the future," she continued, grabbing a glass from the cabinet.

"Scottie and I... we work together. Do you remember the men sitting up above the arena at *The Carlisle*?" She asked, turning on the faucet.

She wondered how much he was able to pay attention while he was frantically trying to make sense of the fight club. He nodded his head in silence, waiting for the punch-line. Her words hung in the air for a few moments, floating with the neon lights above their heads as the sounding of running water hitting her cup stopped.

"Well, those men. They are called *The Makers*, and they are trying to create DreamSpace," she looked sad.

“There is an organized resistance. We have been trying to stop them for the last few years; I went to my mother for advice. We think you could be the key,” she said, setting the cup down and placing her hands on the sink.

Robert Lord let out a sigh of relief, but a look of surprise covered his face as he interpreted what Kimiko was saying.

“If you’re really from the future, you could help us figure out their next moves!” Kimiko said excitedly, turning back towards him.

“So, you want me to predict the future?”

“Exactly!” Kimiko said excitedly.

They both paused

Robert Lord let out a breath and walked over to the couch. Sitting on the imprint he had made a few moments ago.

“Well, clearly your world is not my world. I don’t know everything that’s going to happen, if that’s what you think?”

The last thing he wanted was to get killed in this place by being some kind of rebel. They waited in silence as wind and a light rain pecked at the outside of the window.

“Maybe I’m the loser,” Robert Lord said, squirming in the uncomfortable quiet.

“I’m useless here,” he continued as he gathered his thoughts.

“You think I’m gonna go out there and what? Fight a bunch of Robots with you guys? Scottie is professional, and even he loses in a fair fight! Now, you want the three of us, maybe a few more, to take on guys who probably own an army of robots with a hunch that I might be able to guess what they might do?” He saw no point in waging war against an unbeatable foe.

“I just... I just thought you might want to save Clementine,” Kimiko said quietly as she looked at the floor.

Robert Lord turned his head to stare at the waves crashing over the vines tracing the cracks in the wall.

“Clementine is gone,” he said with more air in his throat than he would have liked.

“This is not my world. There is no saving her. She is where she’s supposed to be, and I am not.” His feeling of loneliness once again returned.

“At some point, we are all called to save the things we love, Robert Lord.”

Frustration filled the air as memories of Clementine erupted in his head, making it swell with love and pain.

“Yeah, well that’s why dopamine is a dangerous drug.”

Freak

Several weeks passed, and Robert Lord remained consistently curious about his predicament and persistent in his quest to get home. He missed his watches and clocks. He missed the photograph of him and Clementine. He missed his room. And, Kimiko's renewed absence had widened the growing hole he felt in his heart. So, every day he explored the town, trying to notice the small differences between his world and this one, hoping it might satiate the appetite of his loneliness. Snacks and meals were packed with flavors he never could have imagined like sour chocolates that grew in bushes and candied meats from cattle the size of chickens. And, every night, he went to The Carlisle, paid the cover to watch the matches, and laid on the bathroom floor under the red neon lights, hoping whatever brought him here might take him back. He never bothered to wipe away the dampness, and bodies came and went, paying no mind to his inevitable presence. He was now a regular, just like everyone else.

"Mystical Lady..." Robert Lord called out ingloriously from his resting place beneath the toilet to the white, ghostly woman that brought him here.

Rather than a memory, her existence felt like a dream on a night of unkempt sleep, "Please take me home. I don't want to stand anymore."

No answer, again.

"Am I crazy?" he closed his eyes, stood up, reluctantly, and pinched his skin. A red hue formed in the fingernail prints and slowly oozed, forming a drop of blood.

Walking out of the doorless stall, he looked into the mirror as he passed. The superman sticker still had his eyes crossed out, his fist raised triumphantly toward the ceiling.

"At least he hasn't given up," thought Robert Lord, feeling sorry for himself.

He walked towards the black door in front of him and swung it open. Once again the bodies intertwined like a maze; holes between the wall of humans and robots appeared briefly, opening and closing to the beat of the music. He flowed through them with ease and familiarity. He walked to the bar where a robot served the incoming drunken traffic with quick hands.

"Gin and tonic sir?" the robot asked after scanning Robert Lord's face with a beam of light.

"You got it Simon," he said, resting his forearms on the wet bar and sitting down.

"Yes, sir. I do," the robot handed Robert Lord a glass full of clear liquid, ice and a lime.

"Thanks," he grabbed the glass and chugged.

"Sir."

"Yes, Simon?" Even though the robot spoke softly, Robert Lord could hear him.

The club was relatively quiet that night. The few bodies there mostly covered the dance floor, and the rest scattered about to watch low tier fights, talk privately with friends or drink alone.

"I have received a request," Simon stated while washing a glass.

"For what?"

“Well, I hate being honest in this circumstance, sir, but there are some gentlemen upstairs that would like to speak with you.”

“About?”

“Well, that’s for you to discuss with them.”

“And, what if I don’t wanna?”

“I am to inform you, in that case, that it is less a request and more of a demand.”

Robert Lord wondered why anyone here could possibly be interested in him. He kept his existence here quiet and did nothing to cause trouble or stand out. He decided it was probably time to leave, stood up and nodded at Simon. As he pushed in his chair to turn around, he saw four men in suits standing in front of him.

“Robert Lord,” the short, scruffy man in the front said.

“Please, come with us.”

He recognized the men, not by face but attire. They were the security guards surrounding the two men in the booth above the arena—*The Makers* is what Kimiko called them.

“Act natural,” he thought, reminding himself of Kimiko’s words.

He looked at the short man.

“Did I do something wrong?”

Silence.

“Okay,” Robert Lord said, confused by their lack of response as he started for the elevators.

Two of the men walked in front of him and the other two behind him as they aimed for the yellow-lit stairwell that took him down to RoboMed where he met Scottie. One of the men in front pressed a button to call an elevator. Robert Lord watched the ticker at the top count down as the elevator descended to their level.

DING!

The doors opened into a mirrored, cylindrical elevator with blue lighting circling the top rim. One of the men pressed a button for floor 34 and the elevator ascended hastily, buckling Robert Lord’s knees.

DING!

The doors slid open once more, revealing an elegant indoor arboretum. The stars shined through the glass panels, mixing with the artificial white light that fed the plants. A large oak tree stood firmly on one side of the room, towering over the other plants. The domed ceiling held a large chandelier and underneath it rested two wooden desks that faced each other as if they were having a conversation. Two men sat behind each desk with gold, triangular name plates that read *Mr. Carlisle* and *Mr. Señor*.

Mr. Carlisle hunkered behind his desk in a suit that looked as if it were going to burst beneath his large muscles and hulking frame. Robert Lord guessed he was about the size of a small car. His face somewhat betrayed the might of his body as gray, wispy hair sprouted from his head and wrinkles crawled across his weathered face. His interlocked hands rested calmly in his lap.

Mr. Señor, much smaller but no less intimidating than Mr. Carlisle, sat neatly across from his counterpart in a suit that loosely fit his slim frame. Glasses half-covered thick dark eyebrows that slanted downward towards his nose. Behind the rims were tight, sunken in cheeks that created shadows beneath his black eyes and gave his face a cold, deathly appearance. He stared at a piece of paper on his desk. A pencil rested lightly in his left hand.

“Mr. Robert Lord,” Mr. Señor said with a thick Japanese accent.

Robert Lord stood awkwardly, tangential to the two desks.

“We know who you are, so don’t bother lying,” said Mr. Carlisle.

He looked back and forth between the two men.

“We understand your friends want us to fail. They have been ungrateful for what we have provided to this world,” Mr. Señor said as he kept his eyes on the paper in front of him, scribbling here and there as he spoke.

“We can change the world, Robert Lord. Your presence here has proven that to us,” said Mr. Carlisle.

“Come, we must show you something.”

Robert Lord felt a prick in his neck and several hands clasp his body. His legs gave out and dark suits surrounded him. He fought to keep his eyes open and saw a white mist forming in the ceiling of the arboretum. The face of the mystical lady appeared – she looked kind and gentle. She nodded her head, seemingly giving him permission to sleep.

He stopped fighting.

—

Robert Lord tried to open his groggy eyes as he awoke from a deep rest. He reached to scratch an itch on his face, but his hand wouldn’t budge.

CLINK!

Panic filled his chest. He tried to move his other arm.

CLINK!

Chains bound his hands. Looking up, he recognized Mr. Señor and Mr. Carlisle, masked in a sleepy haze.

“As you will see Robert Lord, we were always in control,” said Mr. Carlisle.

Robert Lord looked around him to see Kimiko, Scottie, a severely damaged Robot Lord and many others he didn’t recognize in large vats of clear blue liquid. Long wires connected them to tall machines coming out of the ground. They were labeled *Dip 1*, *Dip 2*, and he could only make out up to *Dip 15* as the rows disappeared behind one another.

“Your friend Kimiko is one of our experiments,” Mr. Señor explained.

A look of confusion crossed Robert Lord’s face.

“She never told you?” Mr. Señor smiled.

“She got in a terrible accident as a child, and we saved her, using biotechnology,” Mr. Carlisle finished the sentence.

“The problem with cyborgs is, quite simply, evolution,” said Mr. Carlisle frankly.

“People’s bodies, naturally, adapt to survive and overcome, and when you introduce our technology into organic material, it has a way of transforming the subjects into awfully nasty creatures that want to sit on top of the food chain, so to speak.”

Robert Lord remembered the gnarly, egregious version of Kimiko he met in the club bathroom.

“So you give them courtesy,” it was Robert Lord’s turn to finish Mr. Carlisle’s sentence.

“Well, we call it CN 87106, a derivative of cocaine actually, but yes.”

Robert Lord’s watch started to buzz, but he paid no mind to it.

“Why did you kidnap me?” Robert Lord asked, annoyed with their showmanship.

“If you were monitoring everything, which is probably how I ended up here. You would have heard me say I don’t want to fight,” Robert Lord skipped ahead in their villainous speech.

“It was more of a precaution. In case you decided to change your mind. What you might have done here may very well have affected what has already happened there,” Mr. Carlisle and Mr. Señor split up sentences as if they knew what each other would say.

“You see, it is not personal, Robert Lord, but we have a chance to change the world for the better. While we are still working out exactly how you got here, you and your Clementine are living proof that we will succeed,” Mr. Señor explained.

Robert Lord’s watch buzzed harder on his wrist, and he felt a faint tug on his arm towards the direction of the tanks. Suited men stood on either side of Mr. Carlisle and Mr. Señor. They now approached him and unlocked the shackles holding his wrists in place. Hopeless, he let them grab his limp body. The men still struggled with his strong frame, even without any resistance.

While they pulled, he thought patiently, as he always did, for a way out. For some reason, he trusted the mystical lady and, though belief often eluded him, believed he was in the right place and the right time. The men marched him up the stairs where he assumed he would be placed in one of the vats like all the others.

He thought of Clementine, and, for a moment, felt the peace of fate. In his existence, even happiness had become a burden as it was often hard to forget. Now death, whether on his terms or others, would mean no more decision or indecision, nothing more to remember or forget. No dreams, nightmares. No more loneliness or trying to convince himself that he should exist.

Breaking him from the trance, the watch pulled even harder on his wrist. He couldn’t help but notice it pulling him toward Robot Lord’s container. He looked past it at an empty vat where he would surely spend his remaining years as The Makers ran experiments on his body.

They closed in on Robot Lord’s resting place and the watch ripped at his arm, which he tried to keep under control. He took a deep breath.

“Act Natural,” he thought again, with time for one more decision.

“Hey, before you guys throw me into blue juice for the rest of my life, can I have one more moment to remember my girlfriend?” he asked the security guards.

They looked at one another, somewhat confused by his request, then looked down to their bosses standing on the ground floor of the laboratory. Their cold stare gave the answer the guards needed.

In the split-second their collective minds needed to process the response, Robert Lord leapt from the upper deck and into Robot Lord's vat. The cold liquid chilled his body and he fought not to surface for a breath. The watch dragged him now by the arm, placing him face to face with Robot lord. Light erupted from the watch as it shocked the water. He felt the electricity in his bones, his body vibrating as if both life and death were immediately upon him. Their bodies shifted closer and closer together, rapidly eliminating the space between them until it ceased to exist, until he couldn't distinguish himself from the robot that was previously in front of him. The watch surged once more, and Robert Lord felt everything he had ever felt. Then he felt nothing.

Clementine

The warmth of a blanket and pillow comforted Robert Lord's head as he slept. He breathed in deeply, recognizing the scent of coconut and cherries. He heard the short moan of a tired voice crackle through the light morning air. Keeping his eyes closed, he turned from one side to the other and draped his arm over a sleeping woman, the source of the familiar smell. He breathed in again.

"Robbie, what's for breakfast?" The woman's yawning voice caressed his ears and sent pleasure filled chills down his spine.

"Anything you want," Robert Lord said as he rubbed his groggy eyes with his fists.

The white room glowed with sun shining in through three large skylights and a pair of French doors on either side that opened up to balconies on the 8th floor. An assortment of plants traced the crevices of every wall, filling the room with vibrant greens, purples and yellows. A black wooden desk blocked them from completing a full circle and rested in the left corner.

"Just five more minutes, Clementine," he mumbled as he buried his head under the back of her neck. Clementine turned, bouncing ungracefully under the covers, until she faced him.

"I want... hashbrowns," she whispered excitedly.

His head was still facedown in the sheets.

"At your service Madam... in five minutes," he said with his mouth planted firmly in the warm bed and his arm still draped around her side.

Smiling with a giggle at her half-sleeping other half, she brought her hand to his cheek and traced his jawline to the back of his head where she twirled his curly hair. Her hand made its way down to the veins in his neck until it rested on his warm chest. Robert Lord finally looked up from his resting place to reveal red and watering eyes.

"It's time Robert Lord, I have to go."

"Five more minutes," he said as a tear finally struggled free from his left eye and dripped onto the bed, leaving a wet mark.

"It's just like sleeping. I will dream of you, everyday." Clementine brought her hand back up to his cheek – her eyes watered at the sight of his pain.

Clementine had been preparing for this day for months. A chronic sickness ripped through her body, plaguing every movement with pain, and every thought with frustration, filling her waking moments with misery. Yet, Robert Lord admired the strength of her face muscles, which always found a way to keep smiling.

"And I will think of you in every moment," he responded, barely maintaining his composure.

She fought through space and time to stay with the person she loved most, but her body begged and pleaded for a cure.

StryAtom was a company founded in 2004 by a group called *The Makers* that focused on health and cyberkinetics. Their main research involved experimentation with cyborgs and the

brain's communication with technology; smaller projects concentrated on viruses, bacteria and vaccinations. Years of previous exploration with nano-technology led the company to acquire front-runner status in the health sector. However, after years of development, they dropped nearly all their projects to focus on one, DreamSpace.

DreamSpace was StryAtom's *magnum opus*. It allowed for seamless interaction between humans and their own brains. Using their technology as the catalyst, life could be lived entirely inside one's head without the distractions of the outside world.

"Say goodbye to suffering," billboards read, next to photos of humans lying in rows with their heads covered in a metallic helmet.

However, almost two decades after its initial release in 2038, evidence revealed that DreamSpace never worked and that StryAtom had been killing people. For their demonstrations, they replaced bodies with wax replicas. StryAtom was able to hide their malpractice for so long because of government mandated automation at all dreamspace factories—no one was around to snitch. Over six billion people had been coerced into committing voluntary suicide.

It was 2057, a year before StryAtom's deadly discovery, and Robert Lord always hated that StryAtom's "cure for anything" felt more like a disease of everything. Family, friends and co-workers disappeared like birds in winter. StryAtom quit trying to fix ailments like Clementine's in favor of something more lucrative—chronic disease and depression led to an expensive and permanent solution for families as they paid for loved ones to go to sleep—many, even without illness, would join them just to keep life from feeling empty.

Most didn't fight against DreamSpace because it created an abundance of resources for those who remained—more for the few instead of less for the many. People feigned altruism, claiming sacrifice helped to build society when really they just enjoyed the spoils of the barely living and the not quite dead.

Today was the day Clementine would go to sleep forever. Robert Lord made sure her last months wanted for nothing. He even rented a new apartment they couldn't otherwise afford. No moment lacked love, even those spent arguing about Clementine's parting. Anger and despair filled them both as their inseparable nature fought against the realities of life.

He now stood, watching Clementine from behind a glass window, only inches apart. Two men and one woman pulled her gray gurney on the other side of the glass into the middle of the white room. Clementine never took her eyes off of him as she laid down and doctors attached her to cords that connected to a whirring machine. One of the women gave Clementine a pill and handed her a bottle of water.

They then placed a metal helmet over her head. Robert Lord couldn't see her eyes fixated on him through the metal facemask, but he could imagine.

"I love you," she mouthed.

Gravity pulled her head to the gurney, and she laid still.

Part II

Social Psycho

Kimiko's eyes snapped open, and she sat up straight. The feeling of the unknown possessed her as she stared quietly into a dark room. After an unsuccessful attempt to remember where she was, she fiddled around the room with her hands—a wool blanket covered her lower half. A pillow, flattened by the weight of her head, clung to the floor where she now sat. A faint line of light glimmered beneath the crevice of what looked like a door.

CRASH!

"Not like that, dammit! Don't be a psycho, try to control yourself!" Kimiko heard a familiar voice from outside.

"Well, then how am I supposed to do it? All your lemon talk and bad-mouthing doesn't help you know."

Kimiko stood up and wobbled, stumbling into the wall to her right. She followed it with her hands, taking one step at a time toward the sliver of light, grabbed the knob and turned. The door swayed outward and light poured in, blinding her temporarily. A large open warehouse came into view. Chains hung from the metal ceiling thirty feet above her. She barely made out either end of the building, as it was several hundred meters wide. Natural light filled the giant space, falling in from the skylights cut into the roof. The smell of grass and pine drifted under her nose. The door behind her slammed shut.

"Kimiko! Thank goodness," Scottie ran over and hugged her.

"How long was I out?" she rubbed her head.

"About a week."

"What happened?"

"Well, The Makers had us all trapped in the dip, and Robert Lord was able to save us and brought us here," Scottie scratched his head and looked to his right.

Kimiko turned to the floating robot that glided down from further away. A jetpack eased its landing. She recognized who she thought was Robot Lord, but with a second glance, she stood there in awe. Robert Lord's head and body mingled with pieces and parts that belonged to her old friend.

"Hello, Kimiko," Robert Lord barely managed to look her in the eye.

She said nothing.

"I know you're probably disappointed, and you probably have so many questions—I definitely don't have all the answers," he chuckled uneasily, trying to relieve some of the mounting tension. Kimiko's silence weighed on him.

"Robert Lord and I have come to an understanding Kimiko, I'm just as shocked and sad as you may be. He will help us fight. We have a chance. It's not quite as we imagined, but he set us all free. We have another shot at this," Scottie piped in.

“Where is Robot Lord... I mean the rest of him?” Scottie and Robert Lord let out a sigh at the sound of Kimiko’s voice.

“He says to say hello,” said Robert Lord, a dark tear falling softly from his eye.

“I can hear him, sort of. It’s kinda like his spirit or something. An accident gave me his body... I mean most of it,” he continued, lifting his arms and inspecting himself as he shrugged his shoulders in Kimiko’s direction.

Kimiko walked over to him. She cupped his face with her hand and rested her eyes longingly on his. He stood still as death as an unfamiliar warmth rose in his chest for the woman standing in front of him. The hair on his neck lifted with an electric adoration, and a wave of goosebumps washed over him.

“He must have really loved you,” Robert Lord said after several awkward moments had passed, letting another tear fall from his right eye—this time it was his.

“The Makers had you all trapped. They kidnapped me last. When they were distracted I jumped into the dip where they were holding him, and I guess we merged or something. I don’t really remember what happened after that, just some glimpses of fighting, flying bodies and flashes of light. Then we all woke up... here,” his voice trailed off.

Kimiko pursed her lips as they slanted downward. Tears welled up, but refused to leave the comfort of her eyes as the vessels reddened and her brow furrowed. Her hand still rested under Robert Lord’s chin.

“Yes,” she said.

“And, I loved him, but we believed in things greater than just us Robert Lord,” a sad smile drifted onto her lips, and her face finally felt the sliding warmth of teardrops.

“If there’s any chance I can get back to a world where Clementine is okay... I have to take it. You were right. If I also get to stop the people who caused everyone so much pain... I have to try.”

He almost felt ashamed of his mourning as the thought of a higher purpose, which perpetually escaped him, now somehow felt real. The universe of things had conspired to merge both the past and the future to create what people called Robert Lord, a unique representation of time and opportunity that gave an ounce of hope to what would otherwise be an abundance of despair.

“And, I don’t know what happens next, but I think you might just be one of those things,” Kimiko took her hand off him and walked toward a door on the north side of the building.

“Keep working Robert Lord. I think you are also starting to believe,” Kimiko pushed the bar on the door, and it clicked open. She pushed, walked into the green of the outdoors, and it closed behind her.

He thought of Clementine and couldn’t imagine never having the chance to say goodbye. He imagined it difficult for Kimiko to witness his chance to change his own future while watching her entire world disappear. Empathy struck him like a bruise—it was always there, yet he had only just begun to feel it. He now understood that someone could be everything you want in the world, but you could still hate them for it.

He and Scottie stared at the door where Kimiko stood just moments earlier, admiring the honor and nobility with which she carried her sacrifice.

“I’m ready,” he said.

“I can do it.”

Washed Up

Mud covered Robert Lord's face, his jetpack cracked and sputtering on his metal back. Blood streamed from his nose, which now tilted sideways, flowing steadily down to his mouth, eventually dripping from his chin to the dirt. His chest heaved in and out with exhaustion as his hands pressed into the wet earth, eyes wide in fear and anticipation. A hole the size of a grapefruit in his side revealed the mix of organs and electronics that fueled his body. They had trained everyday for the last two months, and he felt a deep ache in his bones as he looked at the ground.

"The only person who can help you up is you, Robert Lord," said Kimiko with her sword pointed at his head and her feet buried in the soft ground.

Next to Kimiko stood a large robot with a square head that looked like a television. Two eyes and a mouth in the shape of audio waves pulsed statically on the screen. It had a large block-like build, and a kevlar kimono with short sleeves covered its top half, tied off at the waist with a thick black belt. *Judobot*, his right forearm read, and Japanese letters twisted around on its left bicep. Scottie watched from about twenty feet away, also disheveled and broken from the battle.

Robert Lord grunted with anger and lifted his hand, shining with a metallic light that mingled with the natural tones of his skin.

"Come on!" he yelled at himself in frustration and pain as he tried in vain to morph his hand into something useful. It vibrated and took on a translucence as it shook with fear and strained effort. Finally it stopped, and he looked at the soggy lump that now replaced his hand in a stupor.

"Oh, come on!" he yelled again and looked up at the figure towering over him.

"Ok, please, not this time. Seriously, Kimiko. I'm tired. You're really being selfish at this point!" He begged as Kimiko raised her sword.

"Robot Lord is in here!" he yelled as his heart raced, pointing at his chest, tears forming in his eyes.

"Even he wants you to stop. Kimiko! Don't you—" Kimiko thrust her sword forward into Robert Lord's chest, and immediately retracted it, leaving a small but pungent mark. He slumped slumped to the ground, dead.

"Judobot, get him back to the dip. He is still weak," the hulking robot walked toward Robert Lord's limp body and picked him up with ease, carrying him like a sleeping child.

The fear of death still lingered in Robert Lord, even with the knowledge they could bring him back to life. Its foreign and unnatural feeling outweighed any excitement.

"It's about time we stop killing him, Kimiko. We only have a few more weeks to prepare, and we can't keep waiting to have the next training session," said Scottie with a wince from afar as he gritted his teeth in pain and stood up.

"He cannot be afraid. He has to learn to accept all the pain that comes and continue fighting," she said.

“When he wakes up, it will be time to go to Tokyo. I got word from The Underground, and things are moving faster than expected,” she continued.

“Winning will not be easy. They know we are coming,” Kimiko said matter of factly as she wiped her blade.

—

Robert Lord opened his eyes in a panic. He raised his head to see Kimiko sitting in a chair reading a book as he laid in bed; Scottie grabbed his shoulder, holding tools in his other hand.

“Hey, hey, it’s all good man. We’re just working on a few mods for your arsenal. That last laser beam was awesome, but I think I can get it to be a bit more controlled.”

He rested his head back on the pillow.

“Sometimes I wish I never met you,” he said in sarcastic anger.

Kimiko knew he was talking to her. Scottie raised his eyebrows in embarrassment but kept his eyes on his work.

“You know I’ve been killed more in the last month than I ever expected to in my entire life,” he said as he sat up quickly on his elbow, an electric anger rose in his chest.

Even though he hated being killed, coming out of the dip always made him feel like he was ready for anything.

“We have three months until The Makers unveil their plan for DreamSpace to the public. Our people have been tracking their movements on the ground. It looks like they haven’t been able to track us here, but they are still searching,” Kimiko responded flatly, ignoring Robert Lord’s comments.

She picked up a pink, silky cigarette from the table next to her and lit it.

“Exactly, so maybe if you stopped killing me, we could get some more work in!” he laid back down with a thump.

Kimiko had not taken courtesy since before she was kidnapped. Her muscles were visible through her shirt, and her attitude had gotten markedly more rough. Her abrasiveness scared Robert Lord and Scottie, but she was determined to prepare herself for battle. Robert Lord now took courtesy daily just to feel like his old self. Even one day off and the world felt more irritating. He imagined a rational and stable mind would be more suitable for battle than an angry wrecking ball.

“The problem, Robert Lord, is that even though you possess the tools and the soul of one of the greatest fighters that ever lived, is that you are both washed up! He sucks, and you are always afraid. If we are going to have any chance of permanently eliminating The Makers, we are going to need the both of you to stop feeling sorry for yourselves and start figuring it out,” Kimiko slammed her book shut.

“Well, sorry if I’m not used to flying and dying all the time!” he threw his hands up in the air as he felt the hot frustration of Robot Lord.

“Why don’t you stop wasting your time on me if I suck? Work with the other people you already say you have. I’m not the guy you need!”

“No, you’re not, but you’re what we have,” Kimiko said as thick, watery air filled their make-shift medical bay.

“What do you even have against the makers? They saved your life?” Robert Lord sat up again looking directly at Kimiko and her burning cigarette.

“At least Scottie’s excuse is years of rigged fights. But you... why are you so angry all the time? Why do you seemingly want this more than the rest of us?” Robert Lord said, his heart pounding. He felt vindicated that he had finally found a weakness in Kimiko.

“Don’t assume you know everything about everyone, Robert Lord,” she responded dryly.

“You have mistrust of the world, and I have anger. You’re depressed because of something that happened years ago, and you never learned how to move on. You sulk, you cry, and you complain because somehow everyone else is in the right place and the right time, except for you. It’s about time you started asking yourself what the hell you’re going to do about it,” Kimiko took a puff of her cigarette and squinted her eyes calmly in the direction of her recently healed friend.

“Why do you think that your life mission that you keep so secret is somehow more important than mine? You hate me, kill me, berate me. You think I don’t want to go home, that I have nothing to work for? You think I’m not angry? Look at me!” he screamed from his bed.

Kimiko sat quietly, only looking away to blow smoke toward the window.

She picked up her book and opened it, looking down at the old yellowed pages.

“I said look at me!” Robert Lord’s jetpack exploded, sending him toward Kimiko.

The two crashed into the wall behind them, crushing it under the pressure of their bodies. They flew out into the woods next to the training hall. He dragged Kimiko across the ground, crushing bushes, branches and even trees as they sped over the earth. He finally let go, standing over her.

“Do you know what it’s like to be killed everyday in a world by people you don’t know. What it’s like to be hated and hunted for just existing?”

Robert Lord’s left hand turned into a group of spastic tentacles that reached around Kimiko, holding her tightly in place. A blinding light covered his right hand as he raised it above his head. The light faded to reveal a sword connected to the end of his arm that buzzed with electricity. A halo of electric red light now floated around his head, angling down his cheekbones and into his chin. His eyes matched, glowing with anger.

Kimiko, still alive, closed her eyes.

“Do you have anything to say?” Robert Lord showered Kimiko’s face in spit and hot breath.

“You shouldn’t assume you know everything about everyone,” Kimiko said calmly as his hand wrapped around her neck.

He felt the surface of her skin start to burn from within his tightening grip, turning white hot. Her muscles bulged, splitting her shirt at the seams. Her veins throbbed throughout her body and he could feel the thunderous pulse of her heart strengthening through his tentacles. A metal mask shut quickly over her face as Robert Lord swung his arm down at her head with a battle

cry. She gripped his arm with her hand, slowly lifting it away from her face, squeezing it until the sword broke off. He recoiled and screamed in pain, gritting his teeth.

Kimiko stood up slowly, now nearly two heads taller than him. He looked down at his broken hand and concentrated. Shifting it into a shield came to him with ease. He retracted his tentacles, snapping them into his body and forming them into the shape of a spinning razorblade. He ran at Kimiko, unable to see her eyes behind the silver metal covering her entire face. He leaped into the air, shield first, and swung his razor hand into the direction of Kimiko, letting off a pulse of red light that flew in her direction. She dove toward it, ducking at the last second to roll underneath. The light beam hit the tree line, sending dozens of trees falling. They both watched briefly as the trees moaned in pain, then started to fall.

Kimiko adeptly jumped, dove and rolled through the mass of falling trunks. Finally, all was still. The two stood only five feet apart. Her mask slowly retracted as she squatted down, breathing heavily and covered in dirt.

“My parents used to work in the coal mines,” she said loudly, trying to catch her breath.

“There was a shortage of protective gear several years ago. The monarch, whose campaign was funded by The Makers, favored isolationism and slandered public health while making deals with industry. All the miners got sick—pulmonary disease, cancers—they couldn’t breathe anymore,” Kimiko looked solemnly into the swaying grass at her feet.

“Then, a few years later, The Makers discontinued the medication that treated them. They did it to prepare the world for DreamSpace—wanted more people who would willingly sign up for their experiments. My parents died four years ago so The Makers could profit off the sick, not to mention Robot Lord.” Kimiko’s face drooped with despondency and heartache.

It was Robert Lord’s turn to be quiet. He wasn’t sure whether to be more inspired by Kimiko’s past, her will power to change the world, or the incredible physical feat she just accomplished. She took a deep breath, nearly undamaged by their scuffle, and stood up.

“Good job, freak,” she said reluctantly, half smiling.

“You’ve made a lot of progress. I know your motivation, and now you know mine. Tonight we have to go to Minato. Kiki and BotBot will be waiting to take us to *The Underground*. Take some courtesy before we go; the symbiosis is getting to you,” Kimiko said as she threw a packet of white powder at him, walking back toward the compound.

Robert Lord caught it, his arm shield quickly turning back into a hand.

“Scottie will scan us for the dip before we leave. If one of us makes it back alive, we can try to revive the others,” she said her silhouette disappeared over a small hill.

Nightmares

Downtown Tokyo glowed in the night as the three determined friends approached the rendez-vous point in a gray minivan with the seats removed for extra storage space. Scottie built an internal navigation system with a VPN to ensure they wouldn't be tracked. A black hood covered his tight curls, goggles securely locked over his brown eyes, slightly creasing the skin on his face. Sweat dripped from his chin as he hovered over the maps, hoping the car continued in the right direction.

While their car drove on wheels, some newer models hovered inches from the ground, gliding effortlessly to their destinations. Holograms of naked women, casino advertisements, and men in suits floated around the bridge, calling out to the weak from the side of the road, all promising a good time, good money or both. The metal sidewalks upheld nothing but rusted streetlights, ruffled-through trash cans and, seldomly, a pair of lost feet.

The closer they got to the city, the fear and excitement of fate grew inside them.

"How much further?" Robert Lord asked as Scottie crossed over a long bridge.

They inched closer toward the Tokyo skyline.

"We're almost there. Kiki and BotBot should be waiting for us on the other side of the bridge. We'll pull off and wait in the alley for the signal."

The minivan approached the end of the bridge, and it felt like the three friends had used up all the air in the car. Every breath came in shorter and every heartbeat a little bit faster.

"Are you sure we can trust them?" Robert Lord asked again.

"We have no choice," Kimiko stared ahead blankly.

The car rolled to the edge of the bridge, and slowed where the overhead lights met a brief darkness. Turning left into an alleyway, they looked around at misfits, the homeless and addicts—there wasn't much distinction between the three.

"Zombies," Scottie said, noticing Robert Lord staring.

"It took a long time for The Makers to get courtesy right. Red-tape makes clinical trials take too long, so they flooded the black market with newer generations of the drug to see if they could get people off the streets," Scottie said with a flat expression.

"Sounds like good samaritan stuff, but it killed a lot of people and made others crazy. They say it takes your mind to another dimension, and it never comes back. We call it going to sleep."

Robert Lord gulped his saliva like a rock down his throat as the thought of his own insanity crept into crevices in his mind. Hordes of humans and robots surrounded them now, briefly showing their faces as they walked through the light of the street lamps. They mingled with the darkness as if they found it cozy, and Robert Lord wondered if there was something liberating about their tortured ignorance of the outside world.

"Maybe forgetting is better than knowing," he thought, thinking back on his choice to jump into Robot Lord's vat.

The minivan rolled to a stop behind a large trash container. The tinted windows kept any curious eyes at bay. The car's rusted, patchy exterior blended in with the surroundings—Robert Lord and Scottie stripped it down and beat it up purposefully before they left. Missing the front bumper, the driver's side door was caved in by a hammer-fist, and part of the back window was taped. The tired crew sat in the car as the clock crept toward midnight.

"We will take shifts watching out for Kiki," Kimiko explained.

"Robert Lord, you take the last shift. We need you well rested. I'll take the first."

Robert Lord nodded silently and stretched out in the back of the van. A few guns, Kimiko's katana and Scottie's mechanical longsword lay next to him. He closed his eyes reluctantly in an attempt to calm his body. He focused on his breathing.

"Sometimes, I wish I had taken that pill," he thought of Clementine.

"Why couldn't we have been like the street zombies?" He made a mental journal entry.

"That could have at least saved us from being apart. I bet you they hardly notice the difference between before and after living on the street."

The thought of Clementine comforted him and his breathing slowed. As he fell in and out of sleep, the stress of the night pulled his drowsy eyes open, and he fought to close them, over and over again. The smell of coconut and cherries floated dreamily under his nose, and he opened his eyes only to find he was snuggling Kimiko's katana. The fever dreams persisted as he tried his best to rest. The sound of the street rumbled in his ear through the floor of the car.

Thump thump thump!

The sound of someone knocking on the window startled the three of them. Scottie sat in the driver's seat, he was trying desperately to keep his eyes open when the knocks arrived. It must've been the second watch. Robert Lord looked at his watch. 2:30AM. Scottie rolled down his window slightly. A woman with an assortment of freckles and long red hair sticking out of her black hoodie stood outside—two pint sized robots flanked her on either side. She pointed silently towards a metal door. She walked over to it and began typing on a keypad.

Scottie nodded, rolled up his window and took a deep breath.

"Here we go," he said.

He turned toward Kimiko in the back with his brow tilted down, eyes glaring up at her, then over to Robert Lord.

"You ready?"

Their heads nodded in agreement. Scottie got out of the car and looked around. Only a trash can, and a circle of addicts lying lifelessly on the ground at the end of the alley. They hadn't moved an inch since the trio arrived. He slid open the side door—Kimiko and Robert Lord slid out quietly, also scanning their surroundings. They quickly and quietly gathered their things and walked over to where the girl had opened the metal door.

The group filed into a dark stairwell, standing on top of a metal grate and shut the door behind them.

"Everyone put these on, and don't talk," the girl whispered quietly.

She handed them all large shoe covers and jackets that were resting on the railing. As Robert Lord slipped the shoe covers on, a thin blue line lit up on the bottom edge. He put his foot down, surprised to hear no noise at all as he stepped on the metallic floor. He shifted his weight between feet—again, nothing. Then, he slipped on the jacket—it was soft on the inside and covered in small square tiles on the outside that were connected by wires. The girl waved her hand to get their attention, then put a vertical finger to her lips to ensure they would be silent. She pointed to the bag on Scottie’s shoulder and motioned with her own arms as if she was putting a bag on both arms. Scottie understood and pulled the hanging strap over his other arm.

Finally, the girl beckoned them toward her and pointed down the stairs—they appeared to go on forever, covered in the invisible haze of shadows. Then they began to descend.

“This is where the nightmare begins,” he thought.

“Let’s just hope we all wake up.”

Underground

The team descended for what must've been thousands of steps and finally stopped in front of a rusty metal door. Its hinges glistened with oil in the dim, flickering light—a tinted, barred window the only sign life might possibly exist in the otherwise dark hell. The cement floor smelled of stale water and hints of garbage, and the only sound was that of water drops hitting the dampened floor and a rat scurrying into a hole in the wall.

“Ah yes, to scare the clean people away,” Robert Lord laughed at his thought.

He knew exactly the type of people that would never dream of setting foot within a mile of this wretched place—the kind that wash their hands after petting a dog, the ones that need scented trash bags and expensive lotions, the ones whose behaviors create worlds like this and call their own discomfort inhumane. The clean people weren't all bad, but their will to do good often filled meaningless holes in society. At this point, he was so comfortable being uncomfortable with his life, that even this vile, rotting cement prison of a basement comforted him.

CREAK!

The door swung open into the crowd of four, revealing a massive saloon.

“Inside. Hurry!” Kiki waved Scottie, Kimiko and Robert Lord inside and shut the door behind them. She turned a metal wheel on the inside and large steel bars slid into place, locking it shut. Two large robot guards stood on either side of the entrance at attention. The eyes of the saloon collectively gazed at the newcomers. Murmurs washed around the room like the flame in a stove, rising until the heat of the whispers were palpable.

“Welcome to The Underground,” said a sly voice from behind the counter.

“Charleton!” shouted Kimiko as she ran towards a large, bearded man.

Knocking over a few drinks on her way, she all but hurdled the bar giving a wide burly man a hug. Her head buried into his chest as his arms swallowed the space around her.

“Never thought I would see you again kid,” he said in a deep and gravelly voice.

Kimiko squeezed.

“I'm just glad you're okay. Now you can save us instead of yourself,” Kimiko laughed.

Robert Lord looked at Scottie confused.

“He had a rough go with courtesy about a year ago. Some of that stuff's laced. You get addicted and you basically go catatonic. You're nothing anymore, your brain goes to mush. Most people don't come back. He's one of the lucky ones,” Scottie shrugged his shoulders and watched the two embrace.

Robert Lord, intrigued, thought of DreamSpace and how similar it sounded to the courtesy overdose Scottie just described. He watched as Scottie walked over with his arms open to embrace Charleton. The three smiled, and for the first time in a long time, Robert Lord felt the tingle of a happy memory forming.

“Charleton West,” a large hand lunged out to greet him, interrupting his thoughts.

“I've heard a lot about you kid. You're a legend 'round here. You saved us.”

Robert Lord looked at the others, and awkwardly shook the beefy hand, confused.

“You broke us out, all of us. The Makers had been picking us off one by one, quietly erasing the underground presence. A few had caught on, but we had to keep it a secret and went into hiding; we couldn’t do much from there. Story goes you and Robot Lord were able to form some kinda symbiosis and took out the makers best men. Your battle broke all the dip tanks—some of the survivors woke up sooner than others and were able to get folks to safety. They were even able to take a few things from their offices—agendas, planners, schematics. You’re a hero, son.”

Robert Lord hadn’t noticed the room fall silent, but now it deafened him. Everywhere he looked, eyes glued to him.

“Is the plan ready,” Kimiko butted in, hoping to keep the attention off Robert Lord and put him at ease.

“Yes, I think so, but let’s make this conversation a little more private so the others can prepare,” Charleton clapped his large hands and two thunderous booms erupted from them.

The crowd continued on as if the trio had never entered. A band of robots took the stage and started playing, they played uptempo rock music with a melancholy aura as the group rehashed the plan.

“We have 3 hours until the monarch parade. iClean, a subsidiary to a company owned by The Makers, volunteered to manage the streets leading up to the event, which includes removing the zombies.” Charleton made sure everyone was listening.

“We need a team on the ground to play ‘zombie’ during the collection period,” he explained, giving a knowing glance to the three friends.

“Based on what we know, we believe they will take you to their main facility at The Carlisle, which they’ve rebuilt in the last months. They have been using zombies in their experiments. We want you to go into the belly of the beast and destroy everything before it can be mass produced. Thanks to Robert Lord here, our job is a little bit easier.” Charleton pulled out several pieces of paper from his back pocket and laid them on the table.

“These are blueprints of the facility under the hotel. When you arrive, they will bring you in through the service entrance. From there, you just need to find your way down eight levels. A natural gas line runs beneath the entire facility. Sever all the lines, and turn up the pressure,” the team looked around the table and nodded.

“One of our inside guys planted an I.E.D. on one of the sub floors before they discovered him. You will have five minutes to get out before we set it off. Half of the remaining team will act as distractions at a few locations. Hopefully, that means you’ll all slip through seamlessly,” Charleton glanced around the table.

“And, what about the other half?” asked Robert Lord.

“They’ll attend the parade. We have intel that The Makers plan to unveil their master plan for humanity to conclude the ceremony—” Charleton was cut off abruptly.

“But they’re early?” Scottie chimed in.

“Yes, well that’s what happens when a band of rebels destroys your facility. Things tend to move quickly after chaos,” Charleton rolled his eyes.

“Once The Makers are on stage, we have assassins ready. Twenty bullets and a laser per maker and a few for the monarchs—at least one’ll hit the target.”

The table sat quietly, letting the music sink in like a soft bite.

“It’s about time these folks found the end of the road,” said Charleton.

“I can’t say that I still want this. Look in my eyes they’re haunted. Do you believe that I was ever happy?”

The lyrics cut through the room as buckles snapped around bodies, gloves slid on hands, and boots tied to tense feet. The band played for the last few hours and signs of fatigue had settled on the singer's voice. They drank synthetics, the black tonic of robots, and stumbled around on stage as the small army in front of them prepared for battle. The harder they played, the more they inspired the troops. With music, they squeezed every ounce of life from their souls so that others might have the courage to take on the day. Now, in the minutes before the fight, their lyrics echoed the humanity of both the wicked and the oppressed.

“Reality is never gonna sooth me,” the singer croaked along to the beat of the drums.

“Cuz you like the fake stuff,” he sang angrily.

“You don’t believe in true love. I won’t get what I want, and all of this just goes on and on.”

Robert Lord looked to Scottie who was still tinkering with his arm, modifying the weaponry at his disposal for the battle. Kimiko sat quietly on the floor with her legs crossed. Her veins pulsed visibly from within her bulging muscles. Her hands rested calmly on her thighs, and Robert Lord watched her chest repeatedly move in and out, then pause for a few seconds.

Without Courtesy she could only rely on herself to stay under control.

Robots and humans mingled in an electric harmony—it was almost peaceful, if it wasn’t for the guns on tables, swords in hands, and solemn looks.

“I’m drinking to... hoping that I lose you.”

Charleton stomped over to the three friends in black combat boots.

“You youngin’s ready?” he asked with a sad gaze and pursed lips.

He waited for a few seconds, watching their nervous bodies squirm.

“Life is as it always will be. Whether we are ready or not, there is no hiding from what is to come,” the words cut through the air out of Charleton’s mouth.

The music stopped. Kimiko opened her eyes. Everyone’s gaze rested on Charleton. Robert Lord admired the aura of leadership that floated around him, though never imagined his presence was what gave Charleton and others confidence. Robert Lord, the messiah of misfits, paupers and freaks, and The Underground who believed him to be the catalyst that might save their world from tyranny.

“One day I will die remembering my life,” Charleton proclaimed through the silence.

“And, I will want to live it all again with you. All of you.” He stood up on the round wooden table in front of him.

“We may not know the road ahead or the paths we leave behind, but our eyes find the things we all wish to keep. Hold those things close to your heart, let them burn and fester, let them live and grow in the streams of your blood and the electricity of your circuits! And today, when you fight, fight for those things,” he paused. The murmuring crowd grew louder with shouts of affirmation.

“I’ve seen the wretched days that slow as dirt kicks up in your face—the days that find you when you hoped they would never come. This will be one of those days. I’ve seen the days that stink of hunger and pain, that sit on your tongue like sour milk. This will be one of those days! But when it is over, which is the only thing we are guaranteed, you can break your heart on mine. Only then, can we mourn the lost and celebrate the living. This will be a sad day, but it is in your power to fight. And it is damn hard to beat an enemy who never gives up!” Charleton paused again, and the crowd erupted in front of him.

He raised his hand. Silence.

“And, god knows that we will never, never, never give up!” Kimiko’s mask slid up over face with a metallic clink as battle cries spewed from soldiers.

Tick, tick, tick, tick!

The drummers' sticks clacked together four times, and the band erupted into song. The army assembled into several smaller groups. Weaponry glistened as robots and cyborgs shifted in and out of shapes practicing their battle forms. Sword-shaped arms, jetpacks, electric hands, and energy shields appeared and disappeared around the room. Humans polished guns, cocking them and looking through the sites, then mounted them to their belts and strapped them on their backs. Small knives got shoved into waistbands as group leaders spoke loudly to their platoons over the sound of the music.

Charleton stood at the front of the room watching. A digital clock on the wall counted down from thirty-six minutes and thirty-four seconds. The band played through the countdown as troops filed out of the door in groups of ten to fifteen. Robert Lord’s hand moved to the watch on his wrist. He looked to set the timer but noticed it was already counting down in sync with the clock. Robert Lord watched intently as soldiers came over with tattered, oversized hoodies, a bucket of brown sludge and baggy ripped jeans.

“Time to get dressed,” one of the soldiers said.

The three quickly removed their clothes and put on the trashy garments, smearing themselves with what Robert Lord hoped was mud. Their faces settled beneath the brown dirt. The clock now read nine minutes and twenty five seconds.

“When the clock hits zero, you need to be waiting by the bridge. The cleaners will be there to pick you all up,” Charleton appeared abruptly before Robert Lord’s small team.

“That’ll be the queue for the distractions around the city. Whatever you see, do not engage. No matter what.”

The team knew what Charleton meant.

“Do you understand?”

Their heads bobbed up and down in agreement as they looked at one another.

“You are zombies. You are lost. You are no one. This is the mission.”

“*When the lights go, how will I stay on this tightrope,*” the vocalist crooned as they turned for the exit.

Rewrite

Pixelated holograms lit up the street just before dawn. Robert Lord, Kimiko, Scottie and a few others had spread out among the zombies. They limped, lumbered and laid around, mimicking the movements of those around them. Their skins smelled of mud and grime as they stepped over needles and human excrement, squishing under their feet.

Ding!

Robert Lord's watch chimed, and the iClean trucks approached on the far end of the street.

"Here we go," he said under his breath, keeping his head down as he sat against a wall.

Several robots filed out of trucks as a few men shouted commands at them.

"Load 'em in the trucks! And, if they fight, kill 'em!" said a man in a blue jumpsuit.

Robots grabbed the bodies, some forcefully, and marched them into the trucks. Some zombies were lucid enough to attempt escape, but they could will themselves no more than a few steps, as the blood that filled their veins was more akin to sap. A robot approached a man ten feet away from Robert Lord, and the man lashed out with his arm, grunting at the metal creature who promptly raised its arm.

BOOM!

The bullet ripped through his skull and hit the concrete wall behind him, sending shards flying through the air. Robert Lord looked away and saw Kimiko hanging limply in a robot's arms. It dumped her with the others.

BOOM!

This time the sound was distant and deeper, shaking the ground. The rebel attacks had begun.

Suddenly, a cold hand grabbed his arm tightly. He recoiled instinctively, only to see one of the iClean robots staring back at him. It grabbed at him again, and this time he obeyed. He let it drag him by the arm. It reminded him of Kimiko pulling him through the club after waking up in the Carlisle bathroom. He found the smell of piss and sweaty bodies quite similar.

He looked face up at the ceiling in the truck and the door shut after he was loaded in. It was pitch black. Then he heard two knocks on the backdoor.

"This one's ready!" He heard a voice yell.

The truck pulled off.

As it rumbled over the city streets, he thought of Clementine. He felt like this was the closest he'd been to her in years. He felt peace that this selfish endeavor happened to coincide with the greater good, but for love, he would have done it anyway.

The truck came to a halt. Metal footsteps clanked outside.

"They're attacking the parade," a voice called from outside.

"Yeah, yeah, bosses said scrap this lot. Can't take any... EUH."

"Hey! Sto.."

Clank!

The door slid open.

“Come on, we don’t have much time! They know we’re coming!” Kimiko waved at Robert Lord, a few others standing by her side.

He stood up quickly and jumped out of the van, a few others following him.

In front of him The Carlisle’s large red letters hung out over the street, held up by old metal poles, casting a shadow over the dark building.

“What do you mean they know we’re coming?”

“No time to explain, we know the drill,” Kimiko looked around for a brief moment. Her bulging muscles had fully returned and an angry look settled on her face.

“Fight like hell, everyone. Our lives depend on it,” she said as she marched for the open supply doors.

Scottie walked next to Robert Lord—he could see Kiki, BotBot and Judobot in the distance. Scottie pulled back his sleeve, revealing a touch pad strapped to his arm. He pressed a few buttons and looked up. Several pieces of electronic equipment exploded along the building walls.

“Targeted EMP,” he turned his head to Robert Lord.

“Their sensors are down.”

The battalion of about thirty soldiers filed into the building.

“Go, go, go! First team to the upper floors. You are the distraction. Second team stands guard on this floor. Third team with me. Kill all enemies on sight!” Kimiko stood at the entrance, waving the jogging soldiers onward.

Robert Lord ran now, looking for signs of stairs, troops at his back.

“Clementine,” The sound of her name filled every inch of his thoughts.

A man in a white lab coat walked out from a door in front of him—everyone paused. He held a black box full of papers in his hands.

A buzzing sound passed by his ear, and the man fell to the ground, dead. He kept running, stepping on the body as he passed. They hit the stairwell at the end of the hall.

“Hey!” a voice called out as he opened the door.

A woman with blue hair and a half-shaved head stood surrounded by a group of robots, Hot Chocolate.

“This is where it ends scum!” she yelled.

Robert Lord could hardly focus on her words. Even under the threat of a battle, he dreamed of his beloved. The thought of her soft skin and sweet smell lifted the hairs on his skin, closer to her than he might ever be again. His breath shifted in... then out as the momentary standoff continued. Hot Chocolate now stood between him and his beloved.

BOOM!

The noise shattered the glass windows, and lightbulbs, and even cracked the white tile on the walls. In the span of about one second, Robert Lord, using his jetpack, had traveled the length of the hallway and plunged his fist into Hot Chocolate’s chest. Pulling it out, he raised his bloody hand, which had morphed into a sword. A red halo buzzed around his head. As if

possessed, he attacked the remaining robots with lightning speed. He sliced through metal and wires, oil oozing from the slain bodies. Before the rebels had time to react, nearly twenty bodies laid on the ground, including that of Hot Chocolate.

Robert Lord jogged the length of the hallway back to the troops.

“Let’s go,” he said.

As the power of the enemy grew, so did the rebels’ will to blur the line between pure and corrupted—like a muddied spring, or a polluted fountain are the righteous who give way before the wicked. The epic battle for the preservation of the human soul had begun. It was now up to Robert Lord and his compatriots to stand in its defense, whatever the cost.

Gunshots and battlecries rang out from where they had entered on the other side of the building.

“Blow the support wall!” A voice screamed from far away.

BOOM!

The building shook as Kimiko waved the team down the stairs, watching their backs. Pieces of the wall flew down the hallway and the ceiling caved in blocking The Makers’ army from advancing. An indecisive death approached the living—this small group of misfits, the only thing standing between the sanity and obscurity of humankind.

After seven flights, the team hit the bottom floor. Running headfirst through the doors, Robert Lord stopped abruptly. The cavernous room smelled of sewage and towering pillars held up the ceiling. Water poured out of a drainpipe into a massive basin at the end of the room. In front of the rebels stood hundreds of robots and Mr. Carlisle’s hulking frame.

“Do you genuinely think we hadn’t evaluated our own weaknesses? You think we would just give you a bomb to blow up the facility? We had the gas shut off months ago. You have no chance. And, now you’re going to die,” Mr. Carlisle maintained a calm expression on his voice though his voice strained with anger.

Kimiko and Scottie stepped forward, flanking Robert Lord on either side.

“Your resistance is futile. We are bringing peace to the world and you are causing chaos!” Mr. Carlisle now shouted, his face reddening.

“You stupid f*cking kids! Do you know how much the world has suffered? We can end it! All of it!” Mr. Carlisle patronized the small group of rebels.

Some of the robots beside him started to ascend.

“Go,” Robert lord said, looking back at the troops.

“Go!” He shouted this time.

“I will handle this. Help the others. Save yourselves.”

Confused, they looked at one another, nodded and turned for the exit. Their last encounter led them to trust him. Kimiko and Scottie didn’t budge.

Red laser beams shot out of the eyes of the flying robots at the three friends. A blue bubble surrounded Scottie, protecting him from the blast. Kimiko lifted her arm, shielding herself from the beam as it pelted her skin, revealing the metal beneath and pushing her

backwards. Robert Lord stopped the beams with his hand, absorbing the blow completely. The red halo around his head glowed brighter and his body pulsed with power.

Jumping high into the air, he curled into a ball and thrust his limbs outward. A horizontal beam exploded out of his chest, striking the bots and slicing them all in half.

Mr. Carlisle watched, frozen in astonishment.

Dropping to the ground, Robert Lord shook the floor with a thud. He stood up slowly.

“Did you really think you could take everything from me and expect I would just give up? You should always be afraid of a man who has nothing to lose,” Robert Lord, walking forward, now stood face to face with Mr. Carlisle.

He placed a finger on his temple and his skin started to glow. His eyes oozed as the heat from a laser seared his brain. His hair fell from his scalp as the skin burned from the inside out. Mr. Carlisle fell to the ground with a thud.

“Go. I can end this,” he spoke to Kimiko and Scottie without turning around.

“Get everyone out of the building. I will give you five minutes, no longer.”

The two ran for the exit and Robert Lord set the timer on his watch.

Take What You Want

Robert Lord crouched, placing his hands on the wet floor as Kimiko and Scottie raced up the steps. Their hearts pounded seemingly in unison. He closed his eyes and inhaled—he imagined the smell of coconut and cherries. His chest glowed red as he concentrated, pulsing to the rhythm of his heartbeat. The light extended into his arms and down to his fingertips—even his eyes smoldered in the darkness of the cavern. Steam rose from the basin as Robert Lord kindled the power growing in his chest. The air boiled, and electric systems failed, sputtering and spewing sparks into the hot air. The metal in the room drooped in the extreme heat. The ground under his feet had turned to ash.

As he focused, a faint white hue formed on the opposite side of the cavern. It took the shape of a woman and slowly approached.

“Robert Lord,” she said. Her soft voice caressed his ears. Her translucent, white arms reached out to him. She brought her hand to his cheek.

“Take to the skies, and come back home,” she whispered.

Time was up.

DING!

Letting out a guttural scream, he jumped. His jetpack propelled him through the ceiling, smashing through layer after layer of rock, metal, concrete and finally glass. Bursting through the top floor, he kept ascending until he was hovering a few hundred feet over the building. He could see the open air arena and the glass arboretum. A light red hue had formed around his body and he dropped. Falling faster and faster, he aimed at the exit wound he left in the center, hurtling like an asteroid toward the bottom.

The earth came closer and closer. Gravity and willpower pulled him into the darkness of the cavern. Finally, inches from the ground and then... nothing.

Ring!

Robert Lord opened his eyes groggily.

“What the f—”

Ring! Ring!

A bell chimed from not far away. A large wooden door opened and someone knocked.

“Hello! Mr. Robert Lord?” A tan-skinned man with straight, white hair in a lab coat approached him with a clipboard.

Robert Lord lifted his arm quickly pointing it in the direction of the man.

“Uhh, are you alright? I’m just your doctor,” the man said, staring at Robert Lord’s hand.

The two looked at each other for a moment and then at the hand, which held fingers pointing in the shape of a gun.

“You might wanna put that away before someone gets hurt,” the doctor laughed.

“Oh... yeah I’m fine, haha,” he returned the chuckle and the words *act natural* came to mind.

“Did you guys put me in the dip or something?” he asked, setting down his finger gun.

“The dip? What are you a chip?” The doctor laughed at his own terrible joke.

Realizing Robert Lord was not in the mood for humor, he straightened up and cleared his throat.

“No, you had some serious damage done, but you’re lucky modern technology allows for some pretty miraculous healing. You got in a few days ago—you had shrapnel all throughout your body. You might as well have been a cyborg!”

“What? But, did we win? Who are you? Where is everyone?”

The doctor looked around for a moment. He placed a shaky hand on Robert Lord’s stomach and tapped while checking the vitals screen and continued smoothly.

“Win? Man, I don’t know what you’re trying to win, but you woke up. And, I can think of about a thousand reasons why you should be dead. They’re all sitting in a sharps container in the other room. I’d consider that a win. And, as for any friends, one of them is waiting outside. She hasn’t left since you arrived,” the doctor said patronizingly.

“Please send her in. I need to know what happened.”

The doctor stood back up with his clipboard.

“Okay, just warning you she’s quite the ball of energy. I’ll make sure she knows you need some rest.” The doctor paused for a moment.

“I know who you are, sir,” he said, clearing his throat awkwardly.

Robert Lord looked up.

“I know what you did.”

Robert Lord, as hard as he tried, remembered nothing about the man in front of him.

“My grandfather told me you might arrive around this time. He said you saved us all. I always thought he was crazy until a gurney brought a man with your name into the emergency room three nights ago. I thought... there can’t be anyone else with a name like that.”

The doctor shifted on his feet and reached into his coat pocket, fiddling with its contents.

“He told me you had a way of showing up at the right time and said to give you this. He said it was all that was left of you.”

The doctor pulled out a golden watch and handed it to Robert Lord who could now see a name stitched into his white coat, Dr. Scotch Boogaloo III.

“He also told me to ask you something. He said you’d know the answer,” Dr. Boogaloo mumbled, somewhat confused by his grandpa’s request.

“When you die, what do you feel 6am the morning after?”

Robert Lord sat there in silence staring into the watch as the doctor waited for a response. His heart couldn’t keep up with the pace of his thoughts—his lungs tried to steady the rhythm.

“What do *you* feel when someone else dies, doctor?” he asked rhetorically, examining the watch and placing it on his wrist.

“Some epiphany? No, no. You just want a cigarette,” he said, answering his own question and looking out the window. He took in a deep breath and let it out.

The doctor nodded and the corner of his mouth curled into the hint of a smile.

“One more question for you. Can you tell me what year it is?” the doctor asked, watching the question working its way through his patient's eyebrows.

“2057,” Robert Lord replied unsteadily, turning his gaze back from the window.

Dr. Boogaloo smiled and headed for the door.

“Do you believe in anything, doctor? God, the universe, black magic, anything?”

The doctor stopped with his hand on the doorknob. He glanced back at Robert Lord.

“I believe in two things—that everything happens for a reason, and that I need a cigarette,” he said with a chuckle.

He opened the door and closed it behind him, slowing it with his free hand so it didn't shut completely. Dust rose up as a draft carried it in the room—a small white mist formed in its wake and then disappeared.

“Is he okay?”

Robert Lord heard a familiar voice from outside.

“Yeah, he's gonna be alright. Just make sure you let him get some rest. He needs it.”

“I can see him?”

“Yes, you may.”

“Okay, how do I look? My hair looks okay?”

“Yes ma'am. You are quite beautiful.”

“Do you think the roses are too much?”

“No, not at all.”

“Okay, I got hashbrowns. Can he eat those yet?”

“That should be fine.”

The door creaked, and a tear slipped from Robert Lord's eye.