**prologue,**

**simple abduction.**

*There are three things that I’m afraid of: Nuclear warheads, spiders, and women. Two of them are for obvious reasons, but my fear of nuclear bombs is the one I find I have to explain most often. You see, it’s mostly because they’re so big, but a small percent of it is also because of how much I’ve never seen one. I’d say it’s about 90% “they’re really big,” and 10% “I’ve never really seen one though.” Like, if there was a warhead sitting in front of me right this second, and it happened to be of nuclear capabilities, I’m sure the percentages would split up a bit better, but being that I haven’t seen one, I’d still say a part of my fear of nuclear bombs is out of the mystery of it all. In fact, ok: Now that I consider it, I’d say it’s more like 85% “they’re really big,” 5% toward my lacking of having ever seen one, and 10% blast radius. That sounds more rational, considering the blast radius and damage capacity is the most terrifying part of a nuclear warhead, right?*

*My fear of spiders comes from a long history of hearing from others how god awful terrifying spiders are. I’ve never really touched one, nor has a spider ever touched me, but I’ve seen them eating people in movies and I’m sure they’re just as prone to kill me as they are… you know… anyone else. My least favorite, should you ever have to know, is the goliath spider, which I imagine to be uncomfortably humongous in comparison to the rest of the spiders in the world. I should really Google how big they actually* are *sometime…*

*Then there’s my fear of women. ‘But Rayne, why would you be afraid of women?’ you ask? Sure, every woman I’ve ever met has tried to kill me, but I wouldn’t say that was the* origin *of this fear, really. No, their love for my death is only a catalyst. The answer actually makes a lot of sense when really think about it: Their vaginas are such an effervescent mystery of such depths and wonder that, frankly, I don’t know if I could ever muster up the courage to seek out the truth, so to speak.*

*A friend of mine told me about a spiderwoman, but refused to tell me anything about it. I imagine it to be nine foot tall and three hundred pounds of pure legs, ass, and titties. Oh, and when it looks you in the eyes, you combust into flames.*

*…*

*I suppose I might be gay.*

They were sitting there – Rayne Sykes and his date – at a café in downtown Gallegos. It was a Friday night at the end of the summer season in one of the best cities in the world. Rayne hadn’t stopped grinning since the two sat down together. He was a handsome, seventeen year old boy with longer, dark brown hair, light brown eyes, and tan skin, dressed to impress without having been overdone.

His date was Aiden Wright, the boy from the coffee shop just down the street. They had spoken a couple times during Rayne’s adventures, but mustering the courage for one man to ask another man on a date was a whole other game. Still, when Rayne’s paper coffee cup asked him to check yes or no, he couldn’t help but to say yes.

And here we are now, under the soft evening sky. A jazz band was playing inside the café; people were sitting at the tables around them, talking and laughing and enjoying their company. This place was a spectacular choice for a first date: Not too formal, but too romantic for a “just friends” occasion.

Aiden was a sight for sore eyes: Just under six feet in height; took care of himself; white teeth, blond hair, blue eyes. Compared to the weirdos hitting him up on various social networking sites, the eighteen year old Aiden Wright was certainly a sort of godsend. If Rayne were rumored to be a homosexual, this moment with Aiden was definitely the time to prove it.

They were eating penne noodles with alfredo sauce. Not that that’s gay or anything, but it was just another side description, in case anyone was curious to know.

“—but you don’t live in the area?”

Rayne shook his head, taking a drink from his glass of water. “No, actually! I’m from further north, but I come down here on a regular basis for the *business routine*, you know?”

Shaking his head, Aiden narrowed his eyes and said, “No… No, I don’t know, actually. My life is pretty confined to these neighborhoods. Even my home isn’t too far from here!”

“*Ohh*, do you have your own place?”

Aiden scratched the back of his neck, looking uneasily at his plate of food. “Not, uh… Not necessarily. I still live with my family. But I’m trying! I’m working a lot of hours, Rayne. It just sucks not having enough money to get away from it all.”

Rayne sympathized with him, but he didn’t know the feeling at all, actually. For as long as he could remember, he had lived a rather luxurious life: A big bed at home, the latest gadgets on the market, and the security of having anything he could ever ask for. He didn’t know poverty, but he could at least sympathize with those who *did* know the feeling.

After the café, they were walking on their way to Aiden’s home or, at least, the general vicinity of his home. Aiden had made it perfectly clear that Rayne wouldn’t be seeing his home tonight, and that was fine. They talked about simple things – favorite colors, music, aspirations with life – and then came the easiest question as they slowed their pace to a stop:

Rayne took Aiden by the wrist and they stopped at the corner of Providence and Main. “Aiden… can we do this again sometime? I’ve had a lot of fun tonight and… and you’re pretty incredible. I’d be stupid not to ask you on a—”

“Rayne Sykes,” said Aiden. “You have over three hundred thousand followers on Twitter. Your Facebook account is morbidly rabid. I’ve seen you on television, in newspapers, and in the displays of clothing stores and *you* want to ask *me* on a second date?”

Before Rayne could answer, Aiden leaned in and pressed their lips together. As they kissed, he pressed his hand to the small of Rayne’s back and slid it up, pulling them even closer. His fingers felt the platelets of a scaly growth in Rayne’s spine, but he wouldn’t know it until later, slowly backing away in the same second with a smile spread across his face.

“I’ll take that as a ‘maybe,’” said Rayne.

Aiden nodded behind him. “My home is just a couple blocks from here. Thank you for walking with me tonight. Text me sometime – we’ll make this happen again soon, I promise!”

“Tomorrow?”

Aiden laughed a bit, shyly scuffing at the sidewalk beneath their feet. “Yeah,” he said. “Tomorrow would be just fine.”

And that was it. They said their goodbyes and goodnights and went their separate ways. As Rayne proceeded down the alley back toward the café, he was hosting an internal debate on whether or not he should text Aiden tonight or wait until tomorrow. Would it look too clingy, or would it seem even more romantic? Still, he felt like a king: Everything was finally falling into place.

As a needle stuck into a vein in his neck, he kicked himself for not having texted Aiden first – at least to say goodnight or something sweet like that. The moment was lost, he knew, and a swift injection rendered him unconscious where he stood. Rayne Sykes, a seventeen year old, confirmed homosexual with nice hair and a brilliant smile, had just been kidnapped.

**hero rising.**

or, “Where We Were Before”

a superhero story by benn wuest

**Arc I**

Viva la Piñata—

**Chapter one,**

**Piñata Sykes**

Dark room; humid; smelled of blood and rot. People had died here. Flies could be heard buzzing in a swarm around him and he hung there by his ankles. Every breath he took sucked a thin film of plastic in and back out of his mouth: A trash bag or something of the sort, and he would be suffocating soon.

He woke to the sound of the rattling chains – another boy hanging beside him. He was panicking; shaking violently and groaning loudly. Rayne could feel his hair matted up at the bottom of the trash bag where his sweat collected. He was naked: He knew this as the cool air of the refrigerator blew down on his exposed flesh and the hairs of his body stuck up straight.

With a heavy breath, he blew enough space between his lips and the bag to allow his remaining reserve of oxygen into his lungs. He debated calling out to the boy. If their abductor was still in this room, he was probably waiting for them to speak to one another. Still, he closed his eyes and waited for the boy to stop shaking so loudly before he said, “Can you hear me?”

The boy started up again – shaking and, now, screaming for help. He could hear him.

“Calm down! Shut up! They’ll hear us!” Rayne cried out. The boy stopped; he could hear his stuttered breaths behind the bag. The boy’s oxygen supply was lower than his – he would have to calm him down to keep him alive. “My name is Rayne,” he said, though there was a mark of uncertainty in his voice. He wasn’t very good at playing the Leader role, and the blood rush to the head wasn’t helping the circumstances. “What’s… uhm… What’s your name?”

“Why did you take me? I want to go home!” cried the boy.

“I didn’t take you. I’m also hanging here right beside you. Is there a bag over your head?”

Silence. Had the boy blacked out?

No. In a moment, he said, “There is. Who did this to us? Where are we?”

“I was going to ask you the same. Just… don’t be afraid. I’m going to get us out of this, I promise. What’s your name?”

“… Aaron.” He had finally calmed down. Maybe they would have a chance at escape after all.

“Alright, Aaron… Is there anyone else in here, do you know?”

In this time, Rayne studied every inch of his body where he still had circulation. There was something he was missing: Something vital to escaping these gruel circumstances, he was sure of it. Bag over the head and bound with strings or something of the likes. Hands were bound behind the back with rope or duct tape. No clothes – at least, not that he was aware of, anyway. But his feet… they were bound, but not together, almost as if—

—Then came the grinding; subtle, at first, but getting louder. Maybe not a grinding, it was more like a *dragging* sound; metal against tile, or something. It was on the other side of the walls. Something heavy. Then, the guttural whining as a ripcord was pulled, bringing life to…

… a chainsaw.

The boy, Aaron, started screaming again. The door to the refrigerator opened and the sound of the chainsaw roared and screamed through the small room as their abductor walked in like a ghost. Rayne had never been exposed to a chainsaw before. He had heard about them around hardware stores, and maybe seen one once or twice in a film… but this? This was entirely new to him. He could feel his heart racing, fighting the urge to black out unconscious between the heat in the bag, the dehydration, and the lack of suitable air.

“I’ll take from you, limb from limb! Your skin will be peeled! I can already *taste* your flesh!” the chainsaw man screamed over his blade. “Which of you would like to go first? I’m taking volunteers! I’ll rip you apart!”

*One shot. Make it count or you’re dead, Rayne…*

The adrenaline helped.

He crunched his core; rolling his head up to his knees with a hard thrust before slinging every muscle in his body. His legs were lifted with the movement, pulling his feet up and out and over the hook he’d been hanging on. He landed on his feet, clumsily staggering, but he didn’t fall. With another jump, he tucked his hands beneath his feet, pulling them from behind his back. He tore a hole in the trash bag and pulled it behind his head like the hood of a sweatshirt.

His captor had only just realized what was happening (the guy was rambling incessantly to himself – or, perhaps, to his chainsaw – like a maniac; *just* like a maniac; eyes wide and staring at nearly everything, yet they perceived nothing) and started for him with the chainsaw, but Rayne still had a quick moment to survey his environment and determine a steady plan. The fridge was actually quite large and well lit, but there were large bodies of cattle hanging on sides of them, limiting the possibilities, but nothing was impossible. The boy, Aaron, was hanging only a couple meters from him, screaming and twisting his body in all directions in a panicked effort to free himself.

*I’m not some martial arts expert. I’m not a murderer or a spy or soldier. I’ve played a lot of video games and watched a lot of action movies – that’s where about, say, eighty four percent of my talents come from. Sixteen percent comes from my dear friend Tyler, who beats me like a piñata whenever I visit. Tyler is, after all, quite the soldier himself.*

*So then there’s this guy – this brief cameo of a chainsaw murderer – named Martino Viega who kidnaps teenaged boys, chops them up, and serves their meat at a cannibal deli in downtown Nosatros. Noble is an unusual world, but nothing is quite as unusual here as some of the darker happenings like these. Cannibalism, necrophilia, beastiality, trafficking… God knows that’s not even the half of it. It’s a sad shame I broke this man: I would have much loved to know why he does what he does…*

Rayne scuffed his itchy nose with the back of his thumb, mocking his assailant. “Can I get a minute here?” Rayne ducked – the saw blade skimming the hairs on the back of his neck – and threw his body weight into the man, knocking him back a few meters before he fell backward. He ripped a hole in Aaron’s plastic bag, allowing plenty of fresh air for him to breathe, crouched down to him and asked, “Are you ok?”

“He’s getting back up!” the boy wailed.

Rayne glanced over his shoulder. He had only a split second to move before the chainsaw would start tearing into him. In a blink, he’d tucked and rolled to the side, throwing his leg into the man to knock him away from Aaron’s upside down body. Another kick, and the man had fallen so far forward that he landed with the saw beneath him.

As the blade sawed into the man’s chest, Rayne kicked it out from beneath him and rolled him onto his back. Straddling the man, he locked his hands together and slammed them down hard against his face, screaming, “WHO ARE YOU?! WHY DID YOU TAKE ME?”

He was bleeding too much, staring into Rayne’s eyes with a wild excitement and swallowing his own blood. To the cannibal, it was like choking on the most wonderful syrup. He smiled wide and, with blood seeping between his teeth, he looked into Rayne’s eyes and said, “They’re… They’re gonna squeeze your neck until your eyes pop out—k… kid. Haha… Hahaha! HAHAHA! HAHAHAHAHA!”

The man howled with laughter, gasping for breath between his shrill, haunting cackle. The boy was still hanging upside down, watching Rayne and the cannibal together with a look of doubt on his face. Rayne’s eyebrows narrowed inward; bewildered and suddenly nauseous as the man bled out and died away beneath him. He stood up, shaking weakly as he smeared the blood from his sore and bruising knuckles on the hide of a dead cow. A growing pool of the maniac’s blood spread beneath him.

“You ok, kiddo?” asked Rayne as he untied the strings around Aaron’s wrists. The boy nodded, tears streaming up from his eyes and across his forehead. “I’m going to get you down now. Don’t move around too much, ok?”

Rayne pushed the refrigerator door open and peeked around the corner. They were in deli, it seemed – a cash register to the right and an ice chest of meats to their left. It was dark; after hours here. He pushed the door open and proceeded into the deli, keeping Aaron close to him. “We’re going to find some clothes,” said Rayne. “They’ll probably be in the back office. Wait here for me, ok?”

The boy nodded and crouched down near the cash register.

Rayne took a knife from the preparation table and took slow steps for the swinging doors at the other end.

*I wasn’t really sure what to expect here. Life for me seemed to run at a different speed than the norm for kids my age. I’d been kidnapped, yeah, but that wasn’t even* near *as bad as some of the things my companions and I had endured over the years. Knowing my life, behind this door, there’d be some sort of zombie or a guy with a gatling gun or a necromancer… I don’t know. But the knife was essential, as was the pace.*

*If he ripped my shirt…*

Swinging door. Cold, thin metal with a small window to the next room. Pitch black beyond the main lobby. Behind this door there’s a monster, another chainsaw killer, or—

Nothing. Just an empty storeroom filled with paper cups and napkins. He crept his hand across the walls in search of a light switch, but no luck. “All dark, no luck,” Rayne whispered to himself, keeping the knife gripped in his hand and against his chest as his other hand fanned through the dark for a light source of some sort.

No sound: Only the sound of his bare feet clapping against the tile floor as he walked into the emptiness. The air conditioner ducts above him spiraled to life and he jumped, pressing his back against the cold, bare wall for a moment until he could catch his breath.

*What would Tyler do? It was a question that repeated itself in the back of my mind the whole time. Tyler would have stopped the chainsaw killer. Tyler would have saved me. Tyler would have kept me safe, exploring the darkness for clothes to keep me warm. Tyler was a fearless man; a warrior, born and raised for war.*

*Not me… at least, I don’t think I was.*

He found a flashlight hanging on the wall above a desk and turned it on. As his eyes adjusted to the light, he skimmed the room for a storage box or something of the sort. In the back corner, flies were buzzing around a large bin of rotted meats. A young boy’s hand was reaching over the side. Maggots ate at the flesh around the fingertips.

A locker beside the rotted meats. He hurried down a lane of racks and pressed his fingers against the edge, searching for a latch to open the door. Outside, something heavy slammed on the ground and Rayne looked over his shoulder at the door. Nothing was moving, and only the heavy drone of the air conditioner could be heard overhead. “Aaron…? Aaron, are you ok?”

No response.

Rayne cracked open the locker. There were several small piles of human belongings. There, at eye level, he recognized the shirt he’d been wearing… whenever it was – the night of he and Aiden’s date. It could have been any amount of time, really; he wouldn’t know until they were safely out of here.

He climbed into his jeans, pulling them up his skinny legs and buttoning them around the waist, then pulled his shirt on over his chest. The maniac had the decency to keep his other belongings in the locker with his clothes: His cellphone and identification holo. He tied his shoes as he waited for his cellphone to boot up and, again, a heavy thump resounded through the quiet deli, this time much louder.

He stood straight up, alert and sweating at the brow. The hairs on the back of his neck perked and a chilling sensation swept through his skin. There was something horribly, horribly wrong.

The swinging door. He took up his knife, clutching it tightly against his chest as he took slow paces toward the door to the lobby. His breathing was slow and shaken, eyes rapidly searching; watching for the threat; watching for movement.

*There’s a feeling you come used to when your life’s in constant turmoil. Turmoil… such a fun word. Anyway. There’s a feeling you come used to – an adaptive feeling of a dangerous presence. It’s like a change in the air: Dry and chilly like a… I don’t know… like a vacuum in a mini-fridge, I guess. I don’t know, shut up.*

*That feeling is telling me not to push past the swinging door; that I should just high-tail it out of the emergency exit behind me and keep on running. Nothing good ever comes from a thump in the night. Aaron… that little boy is the reason I even tried.*

“Goddamnit…” he breathed, taking the knife into both hands at his side, staying low as he worked across the floor to the swinging door. Again, he whispered a swear word under his breath for good luck, pressing his shoulder against the door. For a moment, he squeezed his eyes shut and took a deep breath.

Then he moved, shoving the door open and rearing the knife against his chest to strike… but there was nothing to attack. Aaron was covering his junk with his hands, staring across the lobby at the large window panes near the entrance. He looked to Rayne and whispered, “I saw some things outside… The things that made the ground shake. They looked like little spaceships landing down the road.”

Rayne lowered the knife to his side and came to the boy. “Come with me. Stay low. I found a locker with some clothes: We’ll get you dressed and then we’re getting the hell out of here.”

“We can’t go out there!” argued the boy as they went into the back room. Rayne activated the flashlight and they hurried across to the lockers.

“I have a plan,” said Rayne. He pulled his phone from his pocket as the boy searched for clothes to wear.

*I hate to pester the bestie, but this is kind of an emergency…*

It was early in the morning on another corner of the planet. Elijah Crawford boarded a massive airship – coffee in one hand, ID card in the other – and proceeded across the lobby of the corporation. He was greeted by the doorman and then the receptionist in the lobby, nodding to them and tipping his coffee as a returning gesture.

The airship was docked just outside the city of Oka’pocos – a major tourism city by the ocean where Elijah and the Crawford family resided not too far from here. He worked as Tyler Stoldt’s personal assistant, a favor for Elijah’s father, who built the airship for Tyler’s business. On this particular morning, highlights from a talk show last night played on the television in the corner of the elevator as he ascended to the upper levels. Sitting on the couch, speaking with the host in front of a live audience, was Elijah Crawford.

Seeing him sitting on the couch, drinking from a mug and laughing nervously, Elijah glared and shook his head. *Smug, Elijah. You look so* smug, he thought as the elevator stopped and the door opened. He brushed a small curl of lint off his shoulder and strolled down the hallway, turning on the lights and making his way to his office space.

Elijah was an attractive young man. Eighteen years old, tall, scrawny, but he dressed well and had a great face to outweigh his weaker physique. His father designed and built the first airship, then establishing global fame toward the Crawford family name. Since then, his mother has dined with the wives of politicians, his older sister, Jadia, had been named one of the sexiest women in business, and Elijah…

… Elijah was just the runt. Even his eldest sister, Loralei, had become internationally renowned for her artwork. Art! A field with little-to-no chances for success, and she had found a way to make it popular, yet Elijah – try as he might – could barely get a spot on a late night television talk show, and even that took a shitload of strings to pull.

He turned on the television in the office as he powered up the computer and activated the office phone line. Jimmy Talon was laughing at his desk as he spoke to last night’s Elijah Crawford. “Now, your sister,” he said, “was nominated in this month’s issue of GQ as one of the sexiest women in business. That’s pretty awesome, isn’t it?”

“Aha! Uhh, yeah man. I mean, you know, I haven’t seen the article myself but I’ve definitely noticed her dancing around her room, you know, *cheering* about it and flaunting it and jumping up and down when we’re video chatting together this morning.”

“Absolutely!” said Jimmy, laughing for a moment. “It’s a huge honor, I’m sure! And your father, for the folks at home who are new to your story… Well, you have only *just* started to come out of your shell, isn’t that right? Your father designed the first airship and built it up with a small team, going out on a limb and working with the last bit of money from a limiting bank loan. That’s quite the risk! But, what a legacy he has built! He’s got three great kids – your sister Jadia, following closely in his footsteps—”

“And she’s far more attractive!” said Elijah with a laugh. The audience laughed and he took a moment to drink from his small mug of water. He felt calm, like he’d become more acclimated to the otherwise uncomfortable feeling of a live television audience. “Jimmy, my father built the airship and has since built several hundreds of them for various contractors. My sister works for the company’s branch in Gallegos. My eldest sister, Loralei, has made a pretty good name for herself and her art company over in Arcadia. It’s all like a dream come true, coming from a family who started in poverty and now we’ve worked our way up to… you know… I’m on television right now!”

Jimmy reached over and shook Elijah’s hand as the audience clapped. “Now, Elijah,” said Jimmy, “I invited you onto my show tonight to show the world a little bit more of who *you* are. The big wigs know your father and most of the kids around your age are definitely familiar with your sister, but you? Just what have you been up to?”

Present day Elijah was leaned against his desk, gawking at the sight and shaking his head as he sipped on his morning coffee. He understood that he was supposed to lie about what he does for a living, but the lie didn’t have to come out as arrogant as he… well, you know:

“Well, *my* sister may be out doing all those meetings and flashing her body in magazines, but *I’ve* actually been out in the field doing all the heavy work—”

“As noted by them huge biceps of yours right?” jested the talk show host.

The crowd laughed and Elijah smirked. “Well… Haha! Alright, alright. I’ve actually been working for Tyler Stoldt, as you know—”

“I have heard! Funny thing about Mr. Stoldt – he’s such a well-known face of international controversy these days. Surely you’ve seen the articles and the rumors floating around about him? Missiles? Weapons? They’re making your boss look like some kind of terrorist or something!”

The audience didn’t laugh, but Elijah did, stirring uncomfortably in his chair. He shook his head and agreed, “I’ve heard the stories, yeah, they’re pretty good. I think I’ve also heard one that suggests that my employer, Mr. Stoldt, is running around the cities dressed in a suit of armor and a dragon’s helmet, calling himself the, what? The Black Dragon? Jimmy, I know there’s a lot of weird things running around the airwaves, but I spend about ninety percent of my day working around this guy and I think I’d know if he were some sort of con artist or whatever.

“I know my credibility is pretty shot. Hell, most of you only just found out I existed maybe ten minutes ago! But, as Tyler’s assistant *and* as a Crawford, I could say right here on live television – with my rights to my family name and fortune at stake – that Tyler Stoldt and the Axis Corporation, you know, we’re an innovative company. We aren’t some terrorist organization. When we… When we visit cities and villages and stuff, we’re picking up supplies, yeah, but not weapons and stuff; we’re picking up medicines and ingredients necessary for our doctors and chemists to work with. We’re curing diseases with the Axis Corporation. We’ve created dozens of vaccines. We’ve saved millions of lives. What… *sense* would it make for my boss to be going around killing people when all we’ve ever been about is putting people’s *lives* above all else?”

With that, the audience started roaring with applause. Elijah Crawford, as of last night’s episode of Late Night with Jimmy Talon, had suddenly become the talk of the nation. So much hype had been built up around this new character on the scene: The unknown son of an established entrepreneur; the brother of a sex icon. This young man had come onto the show and had very charismatically and very *effectively* defended one of the most powerful young men in the world.

Today, he was smiling and shaking his head, drinking his coffee and waiting for the day to begin. And it did start. It started with his cellphone ringing on the desk just behind his ass. He picked it up and looked at it. On the screen, his best friend’s face was displayed with his name underneath and an option to either answer or end the call. It took him a good second to decide: If he was calling about the interview, it was far too early in the morning and his coffee hadn’t yet kicked in for the kinds of energy Rayne Sykes exudes in excitement.

Of course, Rayne had also gone nearly a week now without logging onto his Facebook or returning any text messages. Ignoring his Facebook was normal, even for a socialite with an ego like Rayne’s, but the boy was never without his phone. Probably some week-long rendezvous with the new guy, Aiden, playing guitar and drinking in the mountains with a band of hermits or something insane like that. Still, Elijah – sleepy and trending on media outlets everywhere – was just the right level of curious to answer the call.

“This had better be import—”

“Eli, I’m in trouble. I need—r help! I need you t—ome get me. Please! I’m begging you.”

“Wait… uh. What? Are you kidding?”

The signal was breaking up really badly, but he translated the gist of it. “Eli, I’ve—kidnapped. I’m in Nosatros, I’m sure, but there are soldi—coming this way. I can stall, but I won’t—long. Please hurry and don’t tell Tyl—”

The call ended.

Elijah sat on the desktop staring at his phone. He tried calling Rayne back, but the phone only rang with no response. Ahead of him, the anchors on the morning news talked about Tyler Stoldt and the speculation over the Axis Corporation, as well as Elijah’s appearance on last night’s talk show. To his left was a hallway where, near the end, Tyler Stoldt was dressing in his uniform to start the day’s business. To his right was an elevator to the sky garage in the upper decks.

*Rayne doesn’t want Tyler involved… and that’s pretty smart*, Elijah thought as he paced around the office. *I could steal a subship! Nosatros isn’t more than a forty minute flight from here, but what if things get too heavy? Well, we could both die. If we survive, I could… I could lose my job! Son of a bitch…*

He looked at the door down the hall. He could hear music playing from Tyler’s bedroom; Tyler’s wakeup music to slowly ease him into the dreadful mornings. Elijah’s coffee was his way to ease into the morning and it was certainly *way* too early to be seeing Tyler at this time of morning. That said, he could have probably stolen a car, picked up Rayne, and made it back before Tyler would even come out of his bedroom.

*Why is this such an argument?* He asked himself, tapping his cellphone to his chin. He stopped pacing. *The decision is so obvious.*

“Fuck,” he said aloud, pocketing his cellphone as he slammed back the rest of his coffee. “Rayne, this had better not be a joke…”

The Fresh Cuts Cannibal Deli and Bistro was located near the outskirts of a little, rundown shantytown called Nosatros. Foreign passersby would sooner believe the town had survived a zombie outbreak before they would believe this place used to be a riveting, prosperous city. It was, that is, until the bandits took over the city several decades ago. Anarchy as a whole took a steady, depleting toll on the place until this littered, broken mess of a town came to be the new norm.

The deli, compared to the rest of the shitty remains of this place, was actually quite nice. It had two large windows at the front of the lobby with a door standing between. One window had a large plank of wood nailed across the front to create an obstacle for insects meaning to come inside. There were three tables in the lobby, each without any sort of pattern to the number of chairs seated around them, and then a meat cabinet at the front.

Peeking their noses over the counter, Rayne Sykes and the kid stared beyond the lobby windows to the dark streets outside. They’d sat here with their knees against the counter and their eyes above the surface for minutes now without saying a word. Then, Rayne sat flat on his ass against the wall behind them and the boy mirrored his movements. “How many did you count?” asked Rayne.

“Four,” the boy affirmed.

Rayne nodded. “Me too. How are you feeling? Can you run?”

The boy, Aaron, smirked a bit and nodded. “I can run. I’m more worried about you—”

“Why would you be worried about me? I’m fine.”

“Are you sure? I saw something on your back. It looked like… I mean,” the way Rayne was staring back at him, Aaron knew he wouldn’t have to explain. “You already know about it.”

“We really need to get moving—”

“Rayne,” Aaron took Rayne by the wrist. He wasn’t too much younger than Rayne – maybe fourteen or fifteen years old – but was, proportionally speaking, just as fit: A swimmer’s body type with a strong chest and traps and a 26 inch waist carrying down to bulkier quads above his knees. His eyes were dark green and his hair, as messy as it was in their current state, settled across his face in pin-straight, dark brown strands. He wasn’t one to lock eyes with Rayne, staring instead at his cheekbones. “Rayne, if you’re one of those monsters I’ve seen on the news, I’d rather you tell me now so we can part here… You’ve saved my life tonight, and I’m forever grateful for your bravery, but I’ve seen what they do and I can’t stop you if you change—”

“What’s your name again, man?” Rayne interrupted. Flashlights could be seen whipping every which way along the sidewalks outside.

The boy looked off to the side, still flustered, but understanding. “It’s Aaron.”

“Aaron… I can keep you safe. I promise—”

“I can protect myself.”

“We were kidnapped, Aaron: Obviously, neither of us is completely invulnerable, so I believe we’re best to stick together, at least until I get you far enough from these guys.”

“Who are they, Rayne?”

Rayne peeked over the counter again, then back to the boy. “I don’t know. But they’re here for one of us.”

“… Are you a soldier?”

“We don’t have time for conversation, Aaron. You coming or not?” Rayne asked as he tucked the knife into his belt loop and double-knotted the ties in his shoes.

“But Rayne, where would we even go?”

“First thing’s first, we’ve got to get out of this deli. The more ground we have to work with, the better. Are you any good at booby traps?”

Aaron’s eyebrows turned inward. The question was unexpected, given their short timeframe to work with, but still he said, “I mean… I guess.”

“Good,” said Rayne, staring at the wall just behind his companion. There were four large propane tanks sitting beneath a miniature cooking grill. Rayne smirked to his younger friend and said, “We should get crafty and get moving.”