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MICHAEL FLYNN FELT NAKED. The sidewalk outside of a transit station on the edge of The Dirge was far from the safest place to stand alone at night. Even so, waiting there to rendezvous with his roommate was less risky than walking home into The Dirge alone.

He glanced up and down the street from his vantage point atop the steps that led back down to the transit bay. The other passengers who had left the bus with him dispersed into the night along isolated paths. A homeless woman sat hunched beneath a small overhang, silently begging as they passed without taking notice. Michael supposed he could be in a worse situation than having to stand a few extra minutes waiting for his roommate to meet him. The woman had been in the same spot when he had left that morning. Did she have a place to sleep?

Sleep. He'd welcome it after such a fruitless day. Maybe, if he could just get home and relax, his problems might go away for a bit. They might even look better in the morning.

A soft rain began to fall. It spattered on a fallen poster that proclaimed the arrival of the new 2051 model year Uhatsu sedans. The woman's bare feet pressed on the pavement as she tried to better position herself in the dry spot beneath the overhang. Michael watched her and doubted anyone in the neighborhood was in the market for a new luxury car. Then he noticed something more.

She'd worn shoes that morning.

He cursed under his breath that someone would have stolen them from her, and his wallet was open before he'd really even thought about it. What insignificant cash he had clung to the inside and made the empty space there all the more prominent. He stared at it for a few moments and then put it away again. Soon he would need to worry about how to feed himself.

Yet there was still no sign of his roommate. After casting a few more glances along the street, he found himself meeting the woman's chance gaze. The resignation in her eyes struck him; they were devoid of hope and heavy with loss. Michael's heart sank in the brief moment before she turned away, and, once the contact was broken, he looked down at his own shoes, barely six months old. He'd bought them just before coming to Northgate. Though the city had marred them a bit, they were still in solid shape.

He reached for his wallet again and walked the short distance to the homeless woman with the regret that he wasn't better equipped to help. At the very least, he wished he could have caught whoever had taken her shoes.

Her hands were chapped, weathered, and dusted with the grime of street life. She took the few bills he offered, and her dirty fingers briefly brushed Michael's own before withdrawing, almost apologetically, from the contact. After a moment, he took out another five and passed that to her as well. Tired eyes looked up at him and a melancholy smile passed over her worn face before her gaze quickly dropped again.

"Thank you," she whispered.

He opened his mouth to offer some form of comfort, but any words he could think of only sounded hollow. He cast his eyes about in a search for what to say, yet all he managed to find was the sight of his roommate's arrival. His roommate kept his distance down the sidewalk, waiting in the evening drizzle. Michael left the woman with a weak smile to cover his loss for words, and then hurried to join him.

His roommate turned and began to walk as Michael reached him. "You've found a job, then?"

"Well . . ." Michael shrugged. His search that day had been a bust. "Not really, no."

"You shouldn't be throwing away money on strangers," the other said. "Thought you said your savings are running out."

"Yeah, I know." It was true: he was twenty-two with almost nothing to show for it, and giving her a portion of what little money he had left probably wasn't the smartest thing he could have done. "But . . . she probably had less."

"It won't help her. You might need it." He quickened his pace toward the bridge ahead. "Come on."

Michael looked ahead of them, across the water. The clouds broke along the horizon, and the Moon was just beginning to rise over the degenerating slums where he lived. Most just called it The Dirge, a violent, forgotten section of the city where police seldom went and those elsewhere tried to ignore. Roving gangs had long ago torn down the security cameras that were otherwise common on public streets and in the corporate-run sectors of the city. Even so, his pace quickened to get there. Meager though their apartment might be, it was a place to call home, and sometimes just the fact that he had a roof over his head was a comfort. At least it was in one of the more subdued quarters of The Dirge. Still dangerous, yes, but there were worse places, and it certainly wasn't expensive.

Yet he still had to eat, and if he didn't find a source of income soon, well, he wasn't exactly sure what he would do. The small sum he'd given the woman might buy her a meal or two. Even so, his roommate was right. If he wasn't careful, he'd be in the same position.

Still, there were so many like her.

"Uncle Frank always used to give to charity. Even as the farm was going under," Michael said suddenly.

"He was a good man. Hard worker. I liked him. But in the end he couldn't afford to pay the hands. Things changed."

Michael nodded, forced to agree. "I am trying to find a job, you know," he said. "It's just—no one wants to hire a bodyguard without experience. They all want real freelancers. I figured that Aegis course would be enough—they certainly said so when I enrolled—but even they won't hire me."

"They only hire from their elite courses," the older man said. "Give everyone else the rest."

Michael grimaced. "Yeah, well, they forgot to tell us that."

Most of his money had gone into Aegis Security's training program when he'd first arrived in the city. They'd seemed the best place to start. They were the largest security corp in the world. They handled most of the downtown corporate district's policing. Everyone respected them.

"I don't know," Michael said. "I just figured security would be the way to go. Protect myself, protect other people."

"So you've said."

Michael blushed at his venting. "Well, it's what you do, right? I'm starting to think everyone else had the same idea. I don't know. I guess maybe I'm just not looking in the right places."

He caught his reflection as they passed a darkened window, and beside his roommate's silhouette, he saw the short brown hair and youthful green eyes of the man for whom no one seemed to have a purpose. At least he had the build for security work. Years of laboring on his uncle's farm had helped to develop him, and while he was not quite as tall or muscular as his six-foot-three roommate, Michael hoped to one day be just as imposing.

His roommate grabbed his arm and stopped them both. Michael turned from his thoughts to find him looking into the distance of the sparsely lit street ahead. "Trouble," he said. "Better cross over."

With that, he let go of Michael's arm and started across to the other side of the street. Michael followed, peering in the direction his companion had indicated. "What is it, Diomedes? Gangers?"

One of the streetlights ahead was dark. He wasn't able to make out much in the gloom, yet Michael trusted that his companion had seen something. While Michael's eyes were the same ones he was born with, Diomedes had replaced his with cybernetic implants. Not only were they marginally better than the norm, they also had a few enhancements installed that Diomedes would rarely speak of.

"Maybe."

They reached the opposite sidewalk and continued walking. Michael kept looking for some sign of the group ahead and was soon able to make out a small pack of figures. While he still couldn't tell if they were gangers or not, Diomedes had seven more years' worth of experience than he and knew what he was doing. Michael might not have seen them on his own until it was too late.

Diomedes, on the other hand, was a freelancer: a modern-day knight errant, part of a new caste of society that supplied security and protection for those who needed it. The very word excited Michael's imagination. Michael wasn't sure if Diomedes was in service to any particular company. Only some freelancers were affiliated. In a time when a corporation might control more land than some countries, a few freelancers even signed lifetime fealty contracts. Most, however, had more freedom to find their own causes. Diomedes's attitude made

it clear that his own affiliation was not to be discussed. To Michael, that only added to the mystery and adventure that surrounded this man, through whom all of his dreams had come.

"How much was it?" Diomedes asked suddenly.

"How much?"

"How much did you give her?"

"Oh," Michael said. "About ten."

"Here." Diomedes pressed a twenty into Michael's hand. "Don't give it away."

He was right. Michael pocketed it. "Thanks."

His roommate only grunted.

Across the street, the group of people Diomedes had spotted ran past them. Cackling, laughing and screaming in a way that Michael had once only attributed to the mentally disturbed, they took no notice of the two men on the other side of the dim street. He tried to steal a glimpse of them as they passed by, avoiding direct eye contact in an effort not to attract any attention.

"I hate when they do that," Michael muttered.

"Just noise."

"Yeah, but it seems like every single ganger in the city has to do it."

"I told you you'd get used to it. So get used to it."

"Yeah, but . . . Yeah." Not wanting Diomedes to think less of him, Michael left it at that. At least the fact that it didn't bother his roommate was still some comfort. Geez, how he could hope to be as strong as Diomedes when he couldn't even deal with a little screaming? "I'll get used to it," he added, almost to himself. *Eventually*.

A brief while after the howling group had continued onward, Michael looked up from his thoughts to see that they were nearly to the run-down apartment building where they currently lived. "It's dingy, it's ugly, it probably should have been condemned years ago," he mused, "and it's still good to see it."

"Don't complain."

"I'm not, really," Michael insisted, genuinely glad for a safe place to sleep. "You rigged up some great security."

"Never trust a lock that's not yours."

Michael nodded and took a few more steps before deciding to ask something. "Why do you still live here? If you can afford the gear you've got in there—"