

HAVEN'S END



Bernard

GREG J. AUSTIN

***Nakella stood beside the dark
crevice.***

Conquering the long descent and discovering the great burrow below, only to be repelled by those alien creatures, did not agree with him at all. He sat down to remember what they'd found—the freezing waters and inconceivable scenery, the loud thumping noises, and the silent demons.

"Better left alone," he muttered.

Something caught his eye, wavering down in the darkness like a string of fireflies.

They'll find nothing of value down there.

Watching them had already brought goosebumps over his body before he consciously registered they weren't fireflies—they were in too much order, stopping and starting as one. He gasped and leapt up. Sprinting a distance away from the crevasse, he turned and waited.

A shelled man-creature wormed over the edge and stood up, staring at him with one blazing demonic eye.



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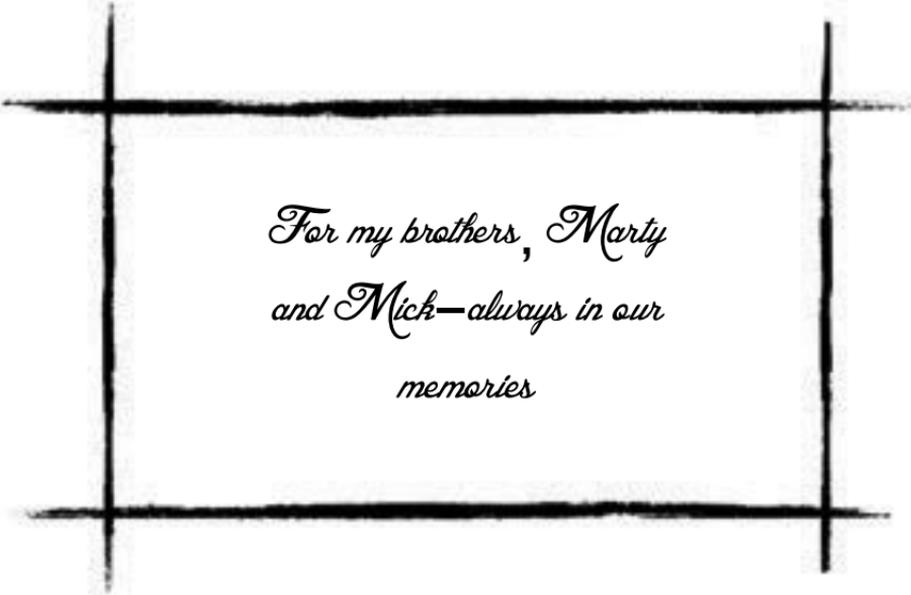
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*For my brothers, Marty
and Mick—always in our
memories*

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***Crouched in dim misery, I
lie mirthless in the shadow
of my shadow.***

— A.I. streamed impulse
Last Haven Control Matrix
City Year 555

Earth shifted and ground against the buried city's dome, which flexed and re-built itself after each event, keeping the citizens secure inside. For centuries, rivers of condensation had flowed from between the dome skins, draining kilometers away to the cavernous lake system the buried city straddled.

The Founders had been right—this was the last haven left on the planet.



Last Haven
Year 728 Post-Collapse

BETWEEN THE ICE-FILLED LAYERS OF THE CITY'S OUTER DOME, eight green-suited skaters hurtled in line down from the peak. They turned as one through the maze of rounded tunnels.

Marcus Jarrett dug his spiked elbow guard hard into the ice wall, easing his acceleration before the next turn appeared.

Tight left, the pathfinder's directions crackled in his ears. Shards of ice made Jarrett squint behind his goggles as Dena Glenn's lean body almost inverted, her skates gouging furrows in the surface as she spun around the bend in front.

"Sound off," he called, coming out of the turn.

The mazeplayers behind him confirmed they all were through.

"It's fast, Dena," he gasped, leaning back, crossing arms against his chest as the incline fell almost straight down in sections. The maze programmers had sent their giant worm-like borers on a wild dig for this match—the configurations were impossible.

Jarrett pulled into a forward crouch, racing in long spirals down through the immense dome skins; bright walls howled past in a blur. Harsh scraping of blades over ice

was muted by the constant, composed guidance from Dena. She was bobbing, twisting, getting away from him on these straighter runs.

His shuddering skates sent pain up through his ankles to bent knees, but soon they'd be out of the dome maze and into the arena, where he could straighten up. He took the final turn on her command, jarring his shoulder against the wall, recoiling and spinning around and down through the sharp bend.

Out of the dome, they skated fast toward the arena along one of two ice-links suspended over a clear-water moat. Vast cathedral ceilings underpinning the next level made this icy space look like a scene from Old World, up on the surface. Already, the ice formations were melting into the moat, soon to leave behind only worn granite-and-fibercrete walls.

Jarrett could hear the roaring crowd through the arched arena entry ahead and knew by its tone the Yellow Sector team of mazers hadn't yet made it down.

"Got us all through, Dena," he said between breaths, appreciating the skill only those like her possessed, the reflexes and intuition to decipher this level of maze. She'd uncovered the fastest route to the arena from the labyrinth of paths layered digitally over her goggles.

All that talent wasted on a game. In Old World times, she'd have been put to important service, perhaps as one of the pilots flying sorties during the final surface conflicts.

Jarrett led his team into the arena through the giant archway to thunderous spectator approval. Skating around the narrow perimeter that circled the maze and centre rink, he collected his stick from a rack. Now the real action was about to be offered to entertain the blood-lusting city.

He took off his helmet and face mask, wiped a wet strand of dark hair from his forehead, let-the chilled air

cool him. Overhead, on the vast ceiling screen, a picture of his face and prominent features zoomed close.

The spectators whistled and clapped and stomped; he raised a hand in response. Dena's voice came through his headset, despite the incredible din, when he put the helmet back on.

"They say the only way out of this city is when you're dead, Marcus. Looks like you'll get your wish." She skated past and pointed behind him.

Jarrett spun around to see Yellow team's big men skate fast into the arena.

"Make sure you visit me in the infirmary," he said.



MINJEL SAT CROSS-LEGGED ON A PLATFORM OF ROCK JUTTING from the cliff face. It was already dusk. A cold wind blew up from the plains. He pulled his hides around his thin body and gazed toward the horizon.

The whole earth was a flow of blue and gold. Flocks of white-tips lifted screeching from the plain, flying back to roost in the trees of the mountain rain forest. For a day he had waited, and at last the whispering of his predecessors joined his chanting, soon to absorb all other sound. As he slipped into a trance, his vision blurred; and slowly, the Song Paths appeared.

"Find the way across the valley of sun..." he muttered in the tongue of the ancient people.

He continued, mentally following the trail, committing to memory a path a great distance beyond—one he had never travelled, to be passed on to his son. Forest spirits called in the night. Insects, owls and other nocturnal creatures sang to the priest, a harmony of sounds that grew in his head to a constant hum. Minjel felt a sensation of weightlessness. His breathing deepened before he fell further into trance.

The sky was full of stars and his breath misted when he reopened his eyes. After a moment, he let his mind drift to the stories of long ago. He recalled an age when dark clouds blew across the land, an age of a brutalized, starving people.

Centuries past, his ancestors had left their tribal grounds. They walked far from the poison rains and found the mountain where they now lived. His father's father had looked out from here to see desert; now, the Greening went on forever.

"How it has changed, Janagai," he told their clan spirit. "Our bellies are full, and the sky is now clear. But for Nakella, all would be well." He looked at the night sky. "Why has my son involved himself with the renegades, leading them out into the Never Never?"

Change irked Minjel. He envisioned a depleted people, their children leaving in search of new land and adventure.

Will I be the last of the Holy Ones when I leave for the Dreaming?

A terrible premonition of disaster gripped him.

"What trickster soul has taken my boy?" he asked the spirit.

Unfolding his tired limbs, he stood and started back to the village.

2.

ACROSS THE PLAIN, NOT FAR FROM THE MOUNTAIN AND DEEP below the surface, water lapped against buttressed walls and rocky shores. Twelve monolithic turbines, spaced in a circle, rose from the subterranean lake like an ancient monument. Seven were fractured or had slabs sheared from their sides, and their shattered tops were scorched black. Skeletal, moss covered remains of fusion drives angled out from the burst casings.

The huge power generators were fully automated, some having run for a century or more before superheating and meltdown triggered the next to come online. From the conical hood of No.8 Turbine roared a bright beam of power, feeding life to the entombed city and bathing the outer limits of the cavern in flickering red light.

Levels above the lake, the Colosseum was packed to overflowing. Worker citizens sang at the tops of their lungs the anthems of the two opposing teams, releasing their fanatical passion. Most took the sport more seriously than they did keeping City Life Support balanced.

“Extreme from the start!” boomed the announcer’s voice across the arena and from every available loudspeaker in the city. “The run from the dome top was fast, and no advantage sits with either team. All players made it down and are through the maze surrounding centre rink, where Yellow is winning the battle!”

The ceiling screen had shown the teams' rapid descent through the dome tunnels and into the ice-maze arena.

Jarrett pulled his mask down under his chin and took a tactical glance up at the screen; the view expanded on him. Sweat ran down his face from under the green helmet; he was surprised to see how tired his gray eyes looked.

A yellow-clad figure appeared in a blur. He spun to one side and smacked his elbow into the face of his opposite number, flipping him over backwards hard onto the rink. The spectators' roar lifted when Jarrett looked up again and winked before pushing the face mask back in place.

"Yellow win. To the outer, now!" he relayed through the chin mike.

His figure diminished on the screen as the view zoomed out. The combatants streamed back into their opposing maze entries from the circular centre rink. Yellow had the puck on their side, belting it through the curved maze corridors. Medics were lowered to treat the injured.

Down on rink level, the armored forms in front of Jarrett crouched low, retracing their paths. High ice walls and dead ends rushed past as they squeezed the last reserves from their bruised bodies. To get out of the maze before their opponents skating from the other side did was of paramount importance. Their failing energies, sapped by the long play, meant this match had to end soon.

As the first Yellow Sector player skated from the maze onto the perimeter rink, his squat, fast-moving opposite Green Sector number struck, slamming him off his feet into the perimeter wall with a force that broke ribs and left him gasping on the wet surface. The mass of spectators lurched to their sandaled feet with a roar, watching the green-suited players streak around the outside of the maze, heading for contact.



LATE INTO THE NIGHTCYCLE, PART OF THE TEAM HAD LEFT POST-game celebrations, following Jarrett to the Archives, his official workplace. In their orange overalls, they lounged on granite benches jutting from the circular wall in the cramped viewing room located deep in the complex. Stale air, many times recycled, seeped through stained ceiling membranes into the gray, pockmarked room.

“Select disk, City Founder, Day One Diary. Light down,” Jarrett ordered. The faint whirring of electronics sounded in compliance. He watched the image of Alexandra Trudeau swirl into view on the small hologram stage in front of him. He slowed his breathing, like he did before a match, clearing his mind. He felt his body relax—it was good to see her again.

Jarrett turned his head to check on Axell. The giant dark-skinned man lay on the fibrecrete floor, back propped against a wall; his dreadlocked head tilted forward as he slept. He was too big to be able to rest on the benches in comfort. The rest of the team was in a similar state of exhaustion.

The virtual’s flickering light on her face roused Alli from resting against him. She reached up and lightly touched the gash on his jaw.

“You wish you were back then, don’t you?” she murmured.

“Back when?” Jarrett whispered.

“The time before Last Haven, mazer. Back on Old World, with her.”

He placed a finger to her lips, then stroked her soft hair. She looked around, then back up at him.

“You in trouble with Red Sector again?” she whispered. “Order should leave you alone!”

“They’ve been tracking me for a bit. Our wise Fulberth rulers are getting restless, again.”

“You need to be careful, Marcus,” she said through a yawn, then dropped her head back on his shoulder and fell asleep.

Turning back to Alexandra, he felt again an inexplicable oneness with the Founder. Her narration began, and he was captivated. He *did* wish he were back in that time, with her.

In the full-size virtual, Alexandra wore a plain blue robe and sat in a white room on the edge of a carved wooden chair. Her youthful face was lined by anguish that had drained it to a point of irreversible fatigue. Jarrett heard the subterranean city hiss and rumble in the background of the recording. Well-functioning sounds, exhaling life for the new citizens toiling inside the metropolis.

“And the wind sings sadly, dropping softly through the barren earth, drifting down to here...” she began. “I can still hear the refugees—how they must have suffered. We barely completed the sealing; they were pleading, running for salvation, but we gave only death.

“Yet even that may have been salvation, in its own way. Costain’s forces slaughtered thousands so that we can... So that one day our children’s children will...”

She lowered her head and sighed. Clearly, the unbelievable horror of that day, the day Last Haven shut out the rest of the world, had forever tormented Alexandra.

Her brow furrowed; she raised her head, and her eyes hardened before she continued.

“While above us the fetid world is sleeping off its sins, we will wait, caste and wealth forgotten in our quest to return, one day, to the surface.”

He watched the image dissolve, then rested his head back on the granite wall, staring at the low ceiling. *She had no way to know how life would turn out for us.*

He’d started to call for another Founder record when Dena sat up. The only woman on the team, she was game-worn, had been at it longer than any of them. Now her time was about done. Past injuries kept her from reaching peak

fitness, even with the grueling training regime. The game was getting tougher each season.

"Hey, you're still awake," she mumbled. Her eyes were bloodshot slits, one side of her face bruised and swollen. She got to unsteady feet and blinked her eyes the rest of the way open. Her blond hair was pulled back tight. "You look a wreck," she said. "Let me guess. You can't sleep, and you're still troubling about the city's use-by date, I bet."

"You should talk," Jarrett said. Alli slept on his shoulder; he eased her back into her chair. "The more I dig, the harder it gets to find out anything," he continued. "City records are getting impossible to access."

"Let it go, Marcus. Red has killed for less." She leaned down and shook Axell awake, then pressed work-worn hands to each side of her face. "My head hurts."

"And your knee?" Jarrett asked as he watched her limp about the cramped room.

"That game may have been my last. The medics say no more bone-regain for me. Too many knocks."

"Yeah, I know the feeling." Jarrett rubbed his shoulder. "If there's anything I can do...your credit?"

"I have my contacts, Marcus, and I'm not ready for the recycler yet."

She *was* well-connected, and did find some satisfaction living down here, even without playing the maze. He reached down with an empty food sachet, placing it near an animate no larger than his hand. The robotic spider blinked a fiery eye at the waste, turning it to dust. After sucking up the remnants, it scurried away, fueled by the waste, looking for other morsels to eat.

"Axell, you've conquered the maze before," he said. "How do you feel about the next?"

Axell got up, towering over them.

"Any other than the Reds, Marcus. They're too fast," he drawled in his deep voice.

Red Sector was billed to play Blue Environmental Control next maze. Blue Sector had commissioned Jarrett's

team for the match. Axell's task was to protect the pathfinder in the arena maze, the two skating ahead of the pack, Dena stabbing markers into the ice walls and rattling off positions and paths for the team gliding behind.

Dena turned to Jarrett.

"Amos De Jaeger has been trying to join us for some time now. He's the most experienced at hand."

"I've followed his game," Jarrett agreed. "He should do. We'll trial him next session."

The Archives being close to their quarters in Black Sector gave Jarrett, Dena and Axell only a short walk along a defunct people conveyor, following a railed tubeway that ran in a wide arc around the city core.

Daycycle broke: dim yellow light bled through the grime on the cracked walls and from the pipe-lined ceiling. Jarrett saw their identity markers in the polished ceramic path surface change to red, which meant they were illegally grouped in a restricted zone, or work schedules weren't being followed, or for whatever other farcical notions Fulberth paranoia could dredge up.

"Fulberth control is as stifling as these walls," said Jarrett as daycycle fully phased in.

"Somethin' up?" asked Dena

"Red Sector operatives have been following me all over the city."

"That comment about degraded worker lives in your last interview?" She looked peeved at the security intrusion, or maybe at him for bringing unwanted official attention on her.

"That's all it took. Fulberth Magnus Halerd has taken a special interest, it seems."

Axell sighed. "You got a death wish, Marcus?"

"Someone had to speak up for us," said Dena. "Workers have fewer rights than ever before, and if tried by the Fulberth-controlled courts..."

"It's going to get worse," Jarrett added. "They're slowing stem-cell food yield until all maintenance programs are on schedule."

“Fix it or starve,” said Axell.

“Tasteless muck, anyway,” said Dena.

Fibrecrete columns, dulled and cracked with age, reared up to disappear into blackness. Axell glanced at his marker and split off without a word, entering a branch tunnel. His blood-red shadow marched alongside him.

Jarrett flicked his eyes to Dena then back ahead. After a moment he said, “The game’s all but over for us.” His marker had faded to a lighter shade.

“All things come to an end, Marcus.”

Through a brick archway, Jarrett watched a knee-high animate, its many tarnished mechanical arms rapidly laser-welding a tangle of broken pipes in a cascade of bright red lines and smoke.

“We spill our blood for the workers, Dena. They laugh when we can’t get up and cheer when we’re carried away. We’re no different from these machines. The Fulberth feed us sachets and the workers call for our blood in the Arena.”

“Round and round it goes. Only stops when we become dust to fuel the food batteries,” she said.

Jarrett sighed, pulled his attention away from the repair animate and continued along the defunct conveyor. Without the game, they’d end up like the rest, toiling away until worn out and then recycled. Keeping the robed Fulberth rulers alive so they could play their petty games in the Senate.

Is this what it all amounts to?

Ahead, a security squad stepped out from a line of columns. The area was cast in early morning light, making it easy for them to merge into the surrounds in their gray camouflage fatigues and open-face helmets.

“What’s your excuse this time?” Dena muttered.

“Obviously been waiting. Low-ranks...likely just a schedule check,” Jarrett muttered back. He slipped her a small silver data-ball. “Here, keep this for me.”

“It’s only the game keeping you safe, remember.”

The security squad surrounded them, and they greeted each other with familiarity. Some of the guards looked ill-at-ease, Jarrett noticed. He knew why when the blond-haired Gerrade emerged from behind. The new, younger breed of officer that, outside of direct Fulberth control, could do as they pleased. He wore a fitted gray collarless suit.

I’d love to wipe that smile off your face, Jarrett thought, meeting the other man’s smirking blue eyes.

Gerrade held out a small reader and motioned impatiently with it. Jarrett lifted his wrist close to transfer his assigned work periods from the implanted chip. A blue holographic screen flashed up and hung in the air. Gerrade shook his head in mock disappointment.

“You’re off-program again, Marcus Jarrett. You mazers are a privileged lot.”

“And you Reds have half again more food rations and your clothing recycled on request. Who’s privileged?”

Gerrade’s smile dropped. He turned to the squad.

“Here’s the most favored citizen in all of Last Haven. A mercenary skater who plays only for the Sectors that can afford his fee.”

“C’mon, Gerrade, we’re the same, you and I. Both of us help control the workers for the Fulberth.”

“And the Fulberth needs you controlled, Jarrett, just like the rest.” Gerrade moved through the hologram closer to Jarrett, disrupting the data.

Dena had watched the two square off; she pushed between them.

“We’re on our way, Officer. We mean no disturbance to Last Haven—got caught up, was all.” She leaned close to her captain and whispered, “Time to go.”

They walked away, accompanied by jibes from some of the security squad. Jarrett slowed, went to turn back, but Dena grabbed his arm and pulled him along.

"You wouldn't stand a chance. The next match is against the Reds. We'll see who's laughing then."

"You're right. Leave it for the arena, and it's legal," he muttered. Gerrade's goading had caught him off-guard. He was exhausted and his whole body ached—no doubt why he was being so sloppy.

She followed him into a shallow recess and turned to face front. Metal rods clanged across, locking in before the car lifted in a hiss of expelled air up to another Black Sector precinct.

"We're not like them. They're as corrupt as the Fulberth," she said as the bars retracted.

"They kill and maim the workers, we do it to each other—not a lot of difference there." Jarrett stepped out onto the street then added. "One cycle we'll be free from this tomb—the Reds, the Fulberth...even the workers."

"Not in our lifetimes, Marcus. I have some unfinished business in the lower levels. Be careful." She squeezed his hand and palmed off the data-ball he'd given her before turning off the main path into a dark service corridor.

"You, too," he called after her.

He headed for a station. From the suspended glass-walled esplanade, he could see a line of workers trudging along a lower tier of the city. As he approached his destination, crowds of people passed him in their rush to pick up a transit. Many turned their heads in recognition, but he kept on, in no mood to stop and talk.

Then he was alone again, seeing only the great columns that slowly soldiered past as he walked in silent reflection. A transit blew by in a howl of noise and wind. Passengers stared out hollow-eyed through the narrow windows, some gazing after him until the curve of the tunnel obscured him from view.

Jarrett stopped for a moment and closed his eyes. He felt the oppressive weight of the megatons of fibercrete and rock caging the metropolis. *No way out, ever*, he thought.

When he was ten years old, his birth parents had lectured him on his obsessive interest in Top World. *Careful with these fantasies. They will make it hard for you.* He was taken from them soon after that warning and placed in a work program.

Fifteen years later, he was no closer to discovering anything more about conditions outside. Other than what was publicly broadcast by way of the Red censors.

He entered a narrow side corridor that disappeared in a gradual turn into the distance, lined with thousands of ochre-colored doors, one of them his. He positioned his wrist in front of the lockpad then ducked his head and pushed into the cramped cubicle. One metre by three, it contained a bunk opposite the door, a console set flat against the wall above the foot of the bunk, and a bathroom compacted into the other end. Beneath a trapdoor in the floor, a small space held his meager possessions and his change of clothes.

The hard-glass console swung up at his touch. He placed the data-ball on it then stripped and showered and felt refreshed, his muscles loosened by the blast of water. The data contained research material about the rundown state of City Environ Function for an upcoming Fulberth Commission.

Something like this doesn't fall my way often, he thought.

Set on the console's read-dimple, the ball changed colour to green and scanned his face.

"Identify," demanded the reader.

"Marcus Jarrett, Archivist, Mazeplayer, born city-year seven-oh-three."

"Confirmed. Reason for opening file?"

"Cross-checking city utility data, Fulberth directive." Jarrett knelt on the bunk and moved his fingers over the light

pad that appeared in the console, allowing him access to the files.

Much later, virtual screens shifted in the air about his bunk. As he sifted through the layers of Last Haven data, something caught his attention—a cross-reference to a file stored in Central Control linking to Last Haven’s design criteria. This was outside his terms of reference, but he coded in entry to the storage space, then called for the information. Just maybe...

A voluminous directory of city specifications pushed out toward him, flickering statistics highlighted in blue. Not believing his luck, and holding his breath, he tapped in a question regarding the forbidden knowledge—Last Haven’s intended lifespan. Sweat beaded his forehead in the hot little room; he checked the intruder alert at the bottom of a floating screen.

ACCESS DENIED suddenly flashed up in red. *SESSION CLOSED*. The screens dissolved to black, but a small pip at the bottom of the last screen to vanish told him a message was being transmitted.

“To the toxins in Red Sector, no doubt,” he muttered. He should have pulled out of the file when it was obvious he hadn’t the clearance. Still, he might have a chance of explaining away the error—perhaps being a little too thorough in his cross checking and forgetting the rules.

“That would hardly do,” he sighed, leaning his head on his hands and rubbing his eyes. Why the need for such secrecy?



LEVELS UP, ON THE OTHER SIDE OF LAST HAVEN, RED SECTOR had been notified of the crime. The information was relayed instantly to the immaculate office of Fulberth Halerd, a wiry man with a trim black beard.

“Director Halerd,” called one of his agents through the room intercom.

“What is it?” he snapped.

“One of our surveillance numbers has committed a breach in Black Sector. His file is linked for your personal attention.”

“Send the data to me now.” He hoped it was the individual he had been after for some time.

His elderly male servant came softly into the room via a side door and left a gold-inlaid bowl of genuine grapes on the table. Head bowed, the servant slipped back out. Magnus Halerd held one finger to his temple as he examined the message displayed on his screen. A smile creased his face.

“And that will be your last mistake, commoner.”

Jarrett had taken the bait.

Halerd had spent considerable time setting the trap, making sure the dissident had access to a number of sensitive files. Because of Jarrett’s high public profile, it was important he be dealt with quietly. His style of play had rekindled interest in the game; the commoners had returned to attending the Colosseum in droves.

“Termination time,” Halerd muttered, accessing Jarrett’s programmed movements in Last Haven for the cycles ahead. Following the much-publicized match against Red Sector, it showed his team had secured a stay in the Buildlife refuge.

He would let him ponder his crime in the refuge then have Fulberth Tessman, the director of Jarrett’s department in Black Sector, interview him about the misdirection of privileged information. Tessman was a fool, an embarrassment to his clan and the weak link in the plan to snare Jarrett; but this was the formal process, and he didn’t want to give the game away too soon.

The outcome should prove amusing, he thought, mixing Tessman up in this.

Feeling well pleased, he looked forward to the coming entertainment; life had just become a little less tedious.



JARRETT TUBED BACK TO ARCHIVES, RETURNED THE DATA-BALL to its tray in his office cabinet and locked it up. His staff would complete the next work programs during his absence in the maze and, later, in Green Sector's refuge.

Deep in thought, walking back to his cubicle, he questioned again why the information he'd sought was blocked from public view. Did they know the surface was habitable?

"I'll never find out now," he muttered. Red would be on his case soon enough; he only hoped they'd give him until after the visit to the refuge before coming for him.

Outside his door, he was swamped by a noisy group of youngsters who tugged at his sleeves, pleading for information about the match against Red. He grinned and patted a couple of heads and roughed them up, playfully tackling some in a gentle parody of the bone-crushing contact in the Mazeplay arena. They disappeared shrieking down the passage.

What chance did they have for freedom down here? Conform or be imprisoned, which usually meant death. Become part of the machine or die. Life for a worker was tough and getting worse each cycle as the Reds pushed harder for control, squeezing out every last bit of compliance.

Back in his cubicle, lying on his bunk, he heard the door lock activate—he had made it back just before shutdown. He retrieved a card he had hidden under the console and held it to the screen, uploading its contents: Alexandra presenting her first speech to the new citizens of Last Haven.

He wasn't sure why he played the card repeatedly. Perhaps because it came from a bygone era, a dangerous time when people battled for survival up on the surface. Or perhaps, just because of her.

Alexandra's virtual image swirled into view in miniature at the end of his bunk. Standing behind a podium, she wore gray pants and a white shirt, her name stitched across the front pocket alongside other lettering that authorized her access to anywhere in the city. Her dark hair was cut short, and those wide green eyes held a depth of knowledge, of sorrow, greater than any other person he had ever seen.

"Light down."

He saw the prodigy, Neville Duraine, standing behind Alexandra. The architect of the city, Duraine had been a tall, unassuming man and only thirty when the city was ready for occupation. He'd been almost worshipped through the centuries by Last Haven's Guild of Engineers.

"Citizens," began Alexandra, "today Last Haven was sealed. We are the final link with civilization, a collection of people from all the nations of the world, and now we must commit ourselves totally to one aim—that is, to the welfare of this great city and its people."

The recording had deteriorated and had many misalignments. All the same, Jarrett found it fascinating to watch the slight woman command such authority as she talked about the city and some of its regulations. Little did she know the rules were to devolve into a system of slavery.

"At this time, the Earth's surface is substantially uninhabitable and will become completely so within the next twelve months. Worldwide, governments have collapsed, and war continues for control of the last food crops." She stopped, silent for a moment, staring at Jarrett as if she addressed this horror to him personally.

"You must fully understand—there is no turning back. Our specialists have estimated life will return on the surface between four hundred and..."

The image blinked off because the maximum estimate had been censored. He let out a breath and pondered the missing information.

“Fill in the missing space,” he said.

Alexandra’s image reappeared, suspended high above large sectors of the city that formed and dissolved and formed up again in front of him. The great common in Green Sector called Buildlife materialized, showing live plant and animal species and kilometers of hydroponics tables that encompassed an entire level. Canals of blue water ran concentrically between the tables to end up surrounding the wide central core’s granite block walls.

“Artesian water will supply the city for a thousand years,” said Alexandra, “and food creation means you will never go hungry. Every living thing in the city will be reconstituted at the cellular level.”

Unlike our rights, taken away more each generation and never returned. Jarrett thought. These facts and more he knew well, but that led him no closer to an answer.

Alexandra’s speech concluded, “...and the light in many dazzling colored shards, like raindrops blown on a summer breeze I saw, wrapped in my dream, when we climbed from the city onto the new Earth.”

After packing for next cycle’s mazeplay, he lay on his bunk as images of a world he had never known fashioned in his mind, flashes intermingling with the gray of city walls. Of sunrise and sunset, of opaline clouds and distant, shimmering green horizons. And Alexandra appeared, an apparition, beckoning him to cross into the Promised Land.

3.

Old World

New York 2042 C. E.

“THIS IS HOW WE END,” ALEXANDRA TRUDEAUX WHISPERED, standing alone in her immaculate, white-carpeted office high above the chaotic streets. Outside, a warm, sticky December morning saw the drizzle of dirty rain persist as it had for almost a year. It stained buildings and turned road surfaces into sludge. The dark-gray algae, expanded from the flooded subways, had climbed higher up building walls today; laser-transmitted news bulletins flashed intermittently on the-sky-towers, warning people to avoid skin contact. The spongy, toxic mass was impervious to spraying and absorbed much of what little light filtered over the dying city.

Alexandra frowned, watching a haze of smog drift along grimy boulevards and the barren ground that had been Central Park. How much of the World Government’s propaganda, she wondered, would people believe? The breakthroughs in climate control programs were a fabrication, a global deception of a necessary kind. Her gaze dropped to the teeming sidewalk; on the streets, swarms of humanity surged amid the refuse of neglect. They moved as a single organism, consuming. The truth would generate hysteria.

She sighed, turning from the window to sit at her polished glass desk.

“We can’t be beaten yet,” she whispered, her bright eyes reflecting the monitor as she read the most recent statistics on the rapidly altering global ecology.



THE SLEEK, SILVER ELECTRIC CAR SPED THROUGH DECAYING New York precincts, past mountainous heaps of waste and dirty power plants that had been hastily set up to supply individual city blocks. Neville Duraine watched the morning sky darken to twilight as the vehicle was immersed in smog and then rain that spat oily residue against the bulletproof windows.

The self-contained air conditioner filters coiled flat under the bonnet kept the stink of the streets out; and he felt comfortable in his dark suit, as if it shielded him from the despair and wretched poverty outside. Parts of Manhattan and other boroughs had succumbed as rising sea levels broke through the seawalls, and the secure zones in the habitable parts of the city were shrinking fast as food and fuel supply lines were intercepted by lawless hordes.

He stretched his long legs and took off his glasses, made sure the centre camera lens was clean and then fidgeted with them, thinking of the coming meeting and of seeing her again in person. He felt a flutter in his stomach—something he could never analyze were his feelings for Alexandra Trudeauux.

The old-tech glasses pinged; he put them back on and took the incoming call. Alexandra’s face appeared centimetres from his eyes.

“Hello, Neville. I trust your visit went well?”

“Australia has better control than the rest.” He struggled with his words.

“Are you certain this is the final design? Time is running out.”

“Everything is in place, Alex.”

“You don’t wish to expand on that?” She chuckled. “Our new security chief, Mr. Costain, is coming out to meet you with an escort.” She signed off.

Had she laughed at him then? He made a note to try and improve his conversation skills, with her at least. Behind her light front she was a driven and sometimes remorseless achiever, the end product of many generations of ultra-wealth and power. To realize his part in building the city, her idiosyncrasies needed to be calibrated in with everything else. *Tougher than the physics calcs needed to build the greater dome*, he thought.

Sporadic gunfire snapped him back to the reality of existing on a dying Earth. He caught glimpses of bedraggled, soaked street people passing as they were herded away from the fortified area the vehicle had entered.



DURAINÉ FOUND ALEXANDRA IN A CORNER OF HER PENTHOUSE office filing a handful of data tablets, clad in blue jeans and a plain sleeveless white top. Her straight dark hair fell down her back. When she’d finished, she came over and sat at the desk, elbows on its top and hands supporting her chin. She looked like an elfin princess with her big emerald eyes and delicate face.

“Right, city update time,” she said. Those eyes became sharp.

“The final design, Alex.” He opened his briefcase and pulled out a small glass disc. He knew her well enough to recognize that, behind the casual pose, she was jumping out of her skin. They had worked closely together on her concept, both managing international teams of specialists. To have reached this point in their long struggle was momentous.

Duraine tossed the disc into the middle of the room. It stopped to hover just above the white carpet then lit up. A rendering of a twin-skinned dome materialized above

his head. Faint contours of bedrock and earth were layered around the dome and over the peak. He heard Alexandra take a quick breath. The city would be massive; many times the size of any other construction in history.

“Show cross section,” he said.

The model split vertically and swung apart to reveal hundreds of levels with a central tubeway running down through the layers.

“Expand to executive quarters.”

A section near the top of the display shifted out and magnified to show multiple rows of spacious rooms amid gardens, halls, and other civic areas.

“Your new home,” he said.

Alexandra got out of her chair and walked spellbound around the model, which was filling in shades of red, blue, and brown.

“My headquarters are moving to Cape York earlier than scheduled. Most of us need to be in Australia, closer to the construction site,” she said.

“The subfloor pillars and vast spaces are prepared and excavated, waiting for this,” continued Duraine as the image of the city turned and unfolded. “The fusion generators and control equipment are under assembly and will power the construction before going online to support the city.”

The model closed and lifted to accommodate a more detailed view of the developing sub-city regions spread over the floor, showing kilometre runs of corridors and utility rooms that ended on the shores of a large body of water. A ring of pillars appeared in the centre of the manmade lake—the fusion generators.

“Complete global collapse will happen sooner than projected. You need to start the next phase of construction now, Neville.”

“We’re set to initiate. All contractors have been briefed.”

Both were consumed by the venture; there had been little time for anything else, but he sensed she felt some sense of release at reaching this pivotal stage, as did he.

She reached into the top of the model with both hands and parted the dome with a gesture to examine the city's core auto-control centre. It looked like a dissected human brain. Then, she came over to him smiling, shaking her head in wonder. To his astonishment, she hugged him, then reached up and kissed him on his lips.

"Brilliant work, dear," she said softly.

He felt his face heat up and found his arms moving involuntary around her. He had never calibrated this eventuation into his plans. They stayed like that for a time, staring out over the dying city—the wealthiest heiress on the planet embraced by a young architect of talent but no authority. Together, they had organized a lineup of renowned masters in about every building and science discipline there was.

The sun turned a deeper red in the polluted sky.

Later that night, Duraine stood in darkness, alone in the penthouse office. He'd come up from the building's residential level where he'd left Alexandra asleep. He felt strange, and wonderful emotions he had never experienced before presented themselves to be sorted out. Thinking of her, touching her soft skin last night, and her scent...just beautiful. The project had to succeed, to keep her alive.

Then his thoughts turned to the damaged planet, to how little time they had left. Fires, floods, windstorms...anarchy—Hell was coming.

"Windows, show mid-twentieth," he ordered the computer.

The murk outside the windows changed to light blue; then, he stood again in darkness as the glass panels focused to show a night scene from the last century. Sky towers vanished, letting Duraine gaze across a sea of sparkling streetlights stretching to a visible horizon. He went over to the glass disc still lying on the carpet and gave it a nudge with his bare foot. It spun up the project model again.

The next morning, Alexandra came up to the office wearing only a white robe; her hair was tossed, and she carried two mugs of coffee.

“Thought I’d find you up here,” she said, and then gave a low whistle. The domed model was broken up, colorful sections suspended everywhere—stairways, climate control rooms, structural columns and beams. An expanded main central tubeway, with hundreds of tiny branching tubes in red, took up a whole corner of the room. Some sections had highlighted components spliced into them or were flattened out like the one Duraine was kneeling over.

“Alex, I need your signature on the variation specifications running off these,” he said, glancing up.

“Good morning.” She chuckled. She came over, knelt, and placed the mugs on either side of the shimmering lay-out then kissed him on the cheek.

“Uh, yes. Good morning.” His concentration was waning fast.

“You should take those glasses off, dear,” she said, and slipped her naked body out of the robe.



LAST HAVEN'S FUNCTIONS HAD BEEN ACTIVATING OVER THE YEARS as each phase of construction was completed, carrying it close to fully operational status. The final phase of the project—ramming megatons of fibercrete into the tunnel—was close.

Alexandra stood with Neville Duraine on a barren rise above the construction site sweating under a murky sky. The temperature was fifty degrees centigrade.

“The silence is beautiful, Neville,” she said. It made her forget, for the moment, the years of desperation she had lived through, right up to this day.

“Finished, at last,” he said.

“Is that a smile I see, darling?”

“We’d better get inside, Alex.”

“Lock-in for me is midnight, Neville. I don’t feel like saying goodbye just yet.” She looked up at the expanse of sky. A strong wind had started up and pummeled them from behind, blowing her hair forward. She reached for Duraine’s arm with one hand and held her hair from her face with the other.

A shantytown had haphazardly sprung up only kilometres from the secured perimeter. Her anxiety returned in full measure. Tents, corrugated iron shacks, and other shelters knocked together with anything that could hold a nail or screw, numbering in the hundreds, lined the trickle of water that was once the surging Jardine River. Word about the real purpose of the project had finally leaked, drawing refugees from the crumbling cities where millions were dying of starvation and pestilence and in the street warfare running unchecked in communities throughout the country. The town grew bigger each day.

Intercontinental travel had slowed then ceased years back. *A godsend*, Alexandra thought. She shielded her eyes from the burning sun, making out small bands of people, all heading in this direction. The coming days would bring not groups but columns of refugees.

“Mr. Costain estimates that by end of the final stage the influx will have quadrupled,” she said.

“He assured me they will not be a threat unless they’re carrying heavier artillery. His spies say so far this isn’t the case.”

The bodies from last night’s abortive raid still lay on the stretch of desert between the huge supply compound and the town. It had been their boldest attempt yet. Alexandra wanted to assist the desperate people but knew she couldn’t. The citizens of Last Haven, including Fulberth, the ones who had bought their way into the city, were on a strict rations program; there was nothing to spare. The protocols for distribution of food had been engineered down to the last mouth-

ful and would remain in place for the life of the city, even when the thousands of organic recyclers and stem-cell food replicators functioned at full capacity, and when the acres of hydroponic tables were generating good yield.

"All a matter of survival," Duraine said, staring coolly at the contorted bodies. To most, his dispassion would have reinforced the appearance of uncaring economy that had made him legendary. She knew better.

"Come quickly, Alex," he said.

She turned in the direction he was looking to see a kilometre-high dust cloud advancing fast.

As she returned on his arm to the bulletproof four-wheel-drive, she felt despair for the world, for the people of the shantytown, along with doubt that the underground city would function past the next few years. Close-off procedure was to start within the next twenty-four hours, all of the soon-to-be world's last people buried kilometres underground.

"Only nine months over schedule," she remarked, trying to mask her dread, but it was in her voice, she knew.

"But just in time," said Duraine.

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