

Chapter 1

A fluorescent bulb wheezed and flickered during its dying breaths. Because of the power emergency, the lights were not at full capacity. Every third dimly glowing panel offered little to illuminate the dark hallway where Olson waited. He sank lower into his seat, imagining the OPS authorities dragging him away like the boy who had disappeared. He banished the thought and tried to delude himself. Maybe Instructor Duncan would take away his touchlite privileges or something simple.

Olson knew he was lying to himself. Violence was an inexcusable act regardless of circumstance. He shouldn't have punched Eckelston, but the guy had deserved it. He'd been picking on Hanson, and Olson didn't really know what had come over him. He'd felt this urge to protect her like she was more than just a classmate.

Olson had never infringed on the rules before today. He woke up after the allotted sleep hours. He reported to the classroom floor every morning. He only played in designated areas, installed designated apps on his touchlite, and only downloaded books for his designated grade level. The worst Olson had done was ask too many questions during class. Most of the teachers would scold Olson for not reading the book, but not Instructor Duncan. He'd actually answer the questions. When they got started, the whole class would roll their eyes, as the session usually ended up getting out late.

An office down the hall opened, and a female figure stepped into the hallway. Because she was located in the shadow between lights, he couldn't see her face. However, he could see a pencil skirt and frilly collar outlined in the dark. The figure was his Two Year teacher, Instructor Simone. Olson gulped as she walked towards him. He brushed his ginger hair out of his eyes, so his baby blues would show. She was the nicest teacher and would always help him when he struggled with his studies. He didn't want her to see him in here. Only the really bad ones ended up in the hallway after school hours. He tried to shift so she wouldn't notice him but was unsuccessful.

“Olson?” Instructor Simone said. “What are you doing here?”

“I don't know, Instructor,” he mumbled.

“Instructor? I haven’t been your instructor for nine years. You can call me Simone.”

“Ok.”

“Cheer up. Whatever it is, it can’t be that bad. Let me let you in on a little secret. We all infract sometimes... I infracted last year.”

“You have rules?”

“We all have rules. You just can’t let that credit rating slip.”

“Credit rating?”

“You’ll find out after Twelve Year. Don’t let Duncan keep you much later. It’ll be Dinner Hour soon.”

“Yes, Instruct... Simone.”

Her shoes thumped on the carpet as she walked away. Once she turned the corner, the hallway felt even lonelier. Olson was pretty sure all the instructors had gone home except for his.

Simone was right about one thing: he was getting hungry. Dinner Hour was close. He pulled his touchlite from his backpack, and it gave him a “connect to your charger” symbol. So much for passing the time. He had nothing to do but wait.

After what felt like hours but was probably only minutes, his instructor’s door opened.

“Come in,” Duncan said from beyond Olson’s sight.

Olson stepped into the office. His heart pounded. Not only was he unsure of what punishment awaited, but he was also about to go into a personal space with a door. All of his life, he had never been in a personal space closed off by a door. He slept in the Nine through Twelve Year Hall on floor ten in a small cubicle space that didn’t give him much privacy. Before the cubicle, he was in a bunk in the Six through Eight Year Hall. In the One through Five Year Hall, it was a room full of cots packed together. His friends would call him a liar if he made memory claims before One Year. He did remember a lot of One Year though. Most boys would cry themselves to sleep.

Sometimes he would dream about a bed that felt safe. It had white bars around the side. A woman in a white coat would sing to him. Sometimes she would pull him out of the bed with the bars and walk him around. He could sometimes hear her voice if he

concentrated during his waking hours. The dreams would always end in the same way. Another man and woman would come into the room. The woman was short, with a pear-shaped figure and brown hair. The man was tall and stern. She would cry over Olson's bed. The man would pull her away, and she would scream. Olson would wake from the screaming, not quite sure if it was his or the woman's.

Olson never wanted to ask those in the cubes next door because it was rude to confront people about their sleeping habits. They were all in a big room together. The cube walls were only about five feet high, so people's heads would poke out if they were standing up. There were also only three walls to each cubical unit. If someone snored, everyone had to deal with it. Olson was just glad he wasn't near one of the snorers. He would hear them at night in the distance though.

Olson sat in a large brown chair Instructor Duncan offered him. He had never seen a private space enclosed by walls before. His version of privacy was a few locking drawers and the code that prevented unauthorized use of his touchlight. The room was dimly lit, as only a small reading lamp on the desk was allocated for personal electricity usage during the power emergency. There was a couch that no doubt folded out to a bed, a luxury few could afford. There was a bookshelf with lots of antique paperback books Olson had never seen before. He would have to ask Instructor Duncan what a "Harry Potter" was sometime in class, as seven large dusty tomes took up a lot of space on the shelf. Other than the books, there were many knickknacks and even a gold trophy. Olson was amazed at the amount of personal objects just out on the desk. He couldn't leave a half-eaten bagel unlocked from his drawer without it going missing.

"It's not gold." Instructor Duncan's eyes followed Olson's to the trophy. It was very peculiar. It featured a golden guy on top of a pedestal swinging some sort of stick.

"What is it made out of?" Olson asked, temporarily forgetting that he was supposed to be in trouble.

"Plastic, I suppose." He tossed the trophy to Olson and pulled a bottle of brown liquid from his desk. He poured it into a coffee mug and then put the bottle back in the drawer.

The golden part was surprisingly light. The base was made out of a white stone material. On closer inspection, the plastic paint was chipped in places. Why would

someone put cheap plastic on an expensive exotic stone? There were words engraved at the bottom, but they had long since faded.

“What’s the guy holding?” Olson thumbed over the odd stick above the person’s head.

“It’s called a baseball bat. It’s a sport the people before used to play. They would hit a ball with the bat.” His instructor cradled the mug and turned toward his window. The shades were drawn, but Duncan seemed more interested in the liquid than opening the blinds.

Olson imagined swinging a large stick above his head. It would poke holes in the ceiling tile. The game seemed ungainly at best and dangerous at worst. The only possible way to swing a stick that high would be to do it in a public space. There were too many windows in the public areas to risk hitting a ball. All the sporting floors were reinforced and nowhere near a window.

“You can have it,” Instructor Duncan said. Olson’s heart skipped a beat.

“You’d give this to me?” The stone alone was worth more citcreds than his school-sponsored graduation gift.

“On one condition.” Duncan smirked.

The smile made Olson uncomfortable. The conversation with his teacher was not going as expected. He felt like he was talking with some lowlife G-Town dealer from a stream than a teacher. However, citcreds were citcreds. An Instructor couldn’t want anything that bad. “What’s the condition?”

“I need you to get me something from the Leamington lockdown,” Duncan said. He pulled a CitID from his pocket and slid it across the desk. Olson looked hesitantly at the piece of white rectangular plastic. It was blank. There was no name and picture printed on the front.

“What about Dinner Hour?”

“I’m afraid you’ll have to skip it.”

Olson looked at the card and back at Instructor Duncan. Citcreds were citcreds. He took the card, and his instructor grabbed his hand. The grip hurt Olson.

“You know why I picked you for this opportunity?” His teacher leaned really close. His breath stank. It was a rancid smell Olson had never smelled before. He almost

gagged. “I picked you because you’ve never broken the rules. Not a single infraction. When you hit Eckelston, I knew. I knew you’d be the one. And one more thing: that CitID. You can keep it, and all the Citcreds on it.”

Olson nodded, and Instructor Duncan let go. Olson scrambled out of the office with the card tucked into his pocket, relieved that he had somehow avoided punishment.

Chapter 2

The elevator shook as it roared down to the second floor. The noises and lurch of his gut made him nervous. He had only ridden an elevator a handful of times in his life.

When he'd first entered the rectangular box, he'd hesitated. It was natural because elevator rides cost so much in comparison to his biweekly allowance from the school. He didn't want to use all the citcreds on the card, but he didn't want to be stopped by anyone on the stairs either. While he descended, he thought of all the apps, snacks, and meals out he could have bought instead of one lousy elevator ride.

In hindsight, the elevator was well worth it. If he had taken the stairs, his friend Xiong would have waylaid him on his way down the steps. Xiong would have been curious about what happened in the teacher's office. He also would have questioned why Olson wasn't going to Dinner Hour.

While it wasn't unusual for students with some extra citcreds to splurge on skyway fare during Dinner Hour, Olson rarely earned extra citcreds. He never did more than was necessary to pass a class because it was all so boring. He was also not the most athletic. He had learned how to scrape by with his citcreds and not fight for the scraps handed out by the teachers for extra homework. Most apps had a way to unlock the better items if he played them enough anyway. He saw no reason to waste his time with extra homework when he could unlock a level with the same amount of time playing an app.

As a student, he didn't really need citcred to survive. He decided to enjoy the last two years of school-provided housing before he'd have to pay for his own cubicle. Most of his post-student job prospects would probably only get him a tiny three-walled space just a step up from the hovels in G-Town. Maybe with the citcreds Instructor Duncan promised, he could buy his own business. Since Olson didn't really have any skills, he thought that maybe he would buy a pop machine. He figured it would be easy to keep stocked and would give him daily citcred flow. Maybe he could buy an elevator when he had enough income from the pop business.

Olson stepped out of the elevator waiting room into the skyway. His touchlite would have displayed coupons and deals for the nearby restaurants had he remembered to charge it. Not that it mattered because Olson knew he wouldn't have enough citcreds to buy dinner anyway, and he wasn't going to spend any more of Instructor Duncan's money than he needed.

He walked away from a set of glass doors leading to the McGladery School elevators. To the right, there was a tiny sitting area and the public library entrance. He turned left toward an enclosed bridge. Through the triple-reinforced windows of the skyway bridge, he could see the dim power emergency lighting of the IDS Tower reaching to the heavens. McGladery was a tiny building by comparison, only about one third of the size of the IDS, which was the tallest building in the city.

The skyway was crowded with people going about their business. Most adults never looked up while they walked through the skyway bridges. They had seen the massive buildings touching the sky too many times in their life to care. Olson never got sick of it. There was a team in full hazard gear replacing one of the windows on the upper floors of the McGladery School. Their puffy white suits made them look like marshmallows with breathing apparatuses.

The skyway was a series of indoor bridges that connected the city. For the most part, it was located on the second floor of all the buildings. Some were designed in an odd way, though, and he would have to walk down to the first floor for a while and find an escalator to the second. Either way, the skyway was the vein system that connected the city. A person could walk from one end to the other without putting on a hazard suit.

Olson walked across the bridge toward the IDS Commons while keeping his eyes fixed on the tower. He saw outlines of the people in the floors above. With the power emergency lighting, they looked like phantoms. Olson often wondered how many people were looking right back at him.

Below the skyway bridge, the cracked jumble of asphalt spread out where streets used to be. Olson remembered something about carts using the streets a long time ago. Now there was nothing but rubble.

Olson stepped from the skyway bridge into the IDS Commons area. The first couple floors of the IDS Commons were open. It was such a large open space that Olson

felt dizzy the first time he entered it. There were people dashing through on their way to one of the four connecting bridges on each side of the massive space. Food carts, restaurants, and shops dominated almost every part of the floor that wasn't a walkway. There were open seating areas in the middle of the first floor. A fountain in the center would have a waterfall cascading from the ceiling if the pumps didn't take energy. The ceiling and some of the walls were made up mostly of the reinforced windows.

Olson saw Bauer coming up the escalator from the first floor. He ducked behind a taco cart before his friend made it to the top. The short order cook was too busy with the dinner rush to notice him. The smell made him hungry. His stomach growled. Olson wasn't used to skipping meals. In fact, no one in the McGladery School ever had to miss eating. There was a free cafeteria that served basic meals. Food carts were there for those who could afford the luxury. Restaurants with tables and waiters were the domain of the wealthy. Most students ate at the cafeterias, except Bauer, who blew all his citcreds on food.

"Olson? What are you doing?" Bauer poked his head around the corner. He held a sushi box. Olson didn't understand how he could like that stuff. It tasted funny, and Olson didn't like the way it felt in his mouth. Bauer seemed to like it though. He would spend almost every citcred he earned on that stuff.

"I... lost my touchlite." Olson stood up, and the short order cook glanced at them. They moved back into the walkway before the cook gave them any trouble.

"I could have pinged it for you."

"Out of batteries."

"Somebody forgot to charge," Bauer said and went toward McGladery. When Olson didn't follow, he turned around. "Where you going?"

"I thought I'd eat out this Dinner Hour," Olson said. He didn't really want Bauer to know what he was doing. It was already weird enough, and he also knew that Bauer wasn't so good with secrets. He once found the rarest weapon on a fantasy app and told everyone how to get it for themselves. It wasn't so rare after that.

"Living large! Where we going?"

"I'm not sure yet. I thought I'd wander the skyway until I found a place."

“I got time,” Bauer said and followed Olson through the walkway. “There’s this great sushi place in Cappella Tower.”

“You already have sushi.”

“You can never have enough sushi.”

Olson huffed and moved forward. He could swear that Bauer was just a mouth and a stomach. He ate everything and was always just a skinny pole. Olson wracked his brain for ways to get rid of Bauer. There weren’t any food places at Leamington, since it was locked down.

Everyone had heard the rumors. There were ghosts wandering the halls in Leamington, so they’d decided to close it up. Others would say the drug dealers worked there. He’d even heard a story that children who were taken back to the ECC were really going to Leamington instead. The truth was nobody knew what’d happened there.

Olson dashed through the skyway. His unwanted partner’s chatter bounced off of Olson’s mind, as he was preoccupied with finding the easiest way to ditch the guy. The skyway was crowded with people walking various directions. There were people in business suits, workers in jumpsuits, OPS Officers on patrol, and even people in their off duty clothes. OPS Officers always looked like spacemen with their black helmets and black body armor. Olson tried losing Bauer in the crowd, but it didn’t work so well. Every time Olson slipped away, Bauer would catch up and say, “Slow down, man! We have a whole hour!”

By the time the crowds began to thin as they crossed to the other side of the city, Bauer was becoming suspicious. They’d passed plenty of good food places, including the way toward the Capella Tower. Olson was about to cross the bridge toward the Hilton Farms when Bauer finally said, “Where are you going?”

“Leamington,” Olson said.

“Leamington? Why would you want to go to Leamington? Unless... the Hilton Farm Store is opening again! Tell me everything! Do they have sushi?”

Olson looked around and finally decided to lie. He had never lied much before, at least not with anything important. It wasn’t that he was morally opposed to lying. It was that he never had the occasion to lie. Most of his fellow schoolmates lied to get out of trouble, or to make themselves seem better than they were. However, lies were easily

deflated. Bragging could be tested. There really was no benefit to lying since the truth didn't seem to take much investigation. So it felt really weird for Olson to tell a lie. There was also a good chance that Bauer would discover the lie.

“Yeah,” Olson said. “I heard they were opening the store again.”

The store had closed a couple of years ago because people could get their groceries closer to where they lived, but that was life in the city. The kids at the school had loved the shop, because they'd had good hot food for cheap. He could pile it on the plate and go out and eat on the park floor.

“But it's only open to Beta Testers,” Olson said.

“Beta Testers?” Bauer said. “For a grocery store?”

“Yeah, they want to make sure it's perfect before they open it to the general public. Sure, you can get Hilton crops at any store, but there is only one Hilton Farms grocery store.”

The Hilton Farms were one of several skyscrapers almost entirely dedicated to farming. Mirrors bounced natural light from the upper levels to each floor. Soil was packed on the ground, and crops were planted floor after floor. It wasn't the only farm in the city, but it was the largest. The second floor at the skyway level was a park with a ceiling large enough to support trees. Only the farm laborers got to see more than the park.

As for Leamington, aside from the rumors, he did know that it was a parking garage. He could see that much out the windows. However, it was unsealed and half finished. There were parts exposed to the atmosphere.

Most of the garages were used as storage. They were designed to easily move forklifts from level to level. There was even a storage facility at the McGladery School. It was small compared to Leamington.

Olson leaned into Bauer. “I'd love to take you, but I'm not sure they'd let us both go.”

“Do you think I can sign up for the Beta Test?”

“A Twelve Year told me about it when there was only an hour left for signup, but I imagine they'll need more testers closer to opening.”

“Can I give you some citcreds, and you'll get me something?”

“You already have sushi!”

“But this is cool. It’s like being on the inside of a secret.”

“Ok, sure.” Olson figured he could buy him something on the way back. Bauer would never know the difference. Olson pulled out the blank Citizen Identification Card his teacher had given him without thinking.

“What’s this?” Bauer said as he inserted it into his touchlite. A normal CitID would be printed with information about the person.

“Um,” Olson said. “It’s the store owner’s card. He dropped it the other day when I saw him in the IDS Commons. ”

“Holy crap!” Bauer said. “Did you see the balance on this one?”

Bauer tilted the screen and Olson gulped. He had never seen so many citcreds in his life. It was enough to get him an apartment after school for sure. Olson swiped it back.

“Don’t pry. It’s rude.”

Bauer inserted Olson’s actual CitID into his touchlite and transferred the citcreds. He handed the CitID back, and Olson pocketed it.

“I know. I know. At least I know what I’m getting into when I get out of school. I’m going to own my own store. See you back in the bed cubicles.” Bauer turned back, and Olson was relieved that he was gone.

Olson walked toward the Hilton Farm. The skyway bridge opened to the park. It was one of the few green spaces accessible by the public. It consisted of a forest with winding paths interrupted by large concrete support pillars. There were no walls in the park other than the thick outer walls. The trees were cut and trimmed at the top so they wouldn’t poke into the ceiling. Mirrors would have bounced natural light throughout the park. However, the natural light was gone and various path lights were flickering to life as Olson made his way through the park to a set of double doors marked LEAMINGTON – AUTHORIZED PERSONNEL ONLY BEYOND THIS POINT.

There was a pad next to the door with a red light on it. Olson held the unmarked badge his instructor had given him to the pad. The light switched from red to green. Olson looked back to see if anyone was watching him. There were a few people on an after-dinner stroll, but for the most part, the park was deserted. He pushed the door open.

As soon as he left the humidity of the garden, he coughed from the cold dry air in the skyway tunnel beyond. Apparently, maintenance had forgotten to turn on the heat and neglected its upkeep. The windows were smudged and dirty, and the carpet was stained. At least Leamington was still sealed. There didn't seem to be any cracks in the windows or evidence that the outside air was leaking into the bridge.

"Hello?" Olson called out and was greeted with silence.

It was a strange feeling to be alone. He had never been alone his entire life. There were very few places in the McGladery School where Olson even could be alone. If he stood up in his sleeping cubicle, he could peek over the walls and see the rows of his fellow classmates sleeping. The hallways and stairs always seemed to be bustling with people. Outside the school, the skyways were never empty, except for late at night. The city shut down, and the skyway closed. It wasn't worth sneaking around after lights out. He had never seen an empty skyway bridge.

To add to the eeriness, the buildings around Leamington were also decayed, like they were on the fringes of the city. Olson was used to seeing well-kept buildings and cleared streets. The streets below were piled with rubble. There was a long vehicle rusting on the sidewalk with chipped yellow paint, small windows lining the side, and no tires. The buildings around Leamington were crumbling and missing windows. Nothing had lived in them for years. They were derelicts of a forgotten era.

Olson couldn't make it to the end of the skyway fast enough. He didn't like the emptiness. There was something comforting about knowing other people were around. There was a door at the end of the bridge, which was odd, because most of the skyway didn't have doors on the bridges, aside from the thick emergency ones that could seal an area in case of a breach.

Olson grabbed the handle. It was heavy and old. He grunted as he opened the door and was hit by a blast of stale air.

Olson entered a large waiting area. The space immediately around the door looked like a security checkpoint. Olson remembered reading about the equipment from one of his history textbooks. People had walked through these porticos that scanned for weapons while their belongings were scanned in a small tunnel with a conveyor belt. It was a very paranoid world, where enemies were seen in common people.

There was a share of crime in the city too. Apartments and unlocked drawers in cubicles were burglarized. There always seemed to be drug busts down in G-Town. There was even the occasional murder. But, overall, the Office of Public Safety kept people safe.

Beyond the checkpoint were several lined-up desks. Past the desks were rows and rows of benches and other seating arrangements. A vast majority of the room seemed like a waiting area where people would sit on the benches. From the layout, Olson guessed that the people on the benches went to the desks then had to go through the checkpoint before they could enter the skyway. However, whatever had happened in this room happened long ago. Everything was covered with dust.

“Hello?” Olson’s voice echoed in the empty room.

There were broken escalators off to one side that led both to the upper and lower levels. Olson decided to explore. There had to be someone around, or else why would his instructor send him to some distant part of the city? Duncan couldn’t possibly expect him to find anything here.

On the level below, there was another security checkpoint. This one looked as if it was meant to take people from the outside of the building, which was an absurd notion. People didn’t live outside, yet the room was clearly designed as some sort of intake area. After the checkpoint, there were desks and other various stations, some medical examination beds surrounded by curtains, and other components of some sort of process that happened ages ago. Olson imagined a massive amount of people being shuffled through the process, but he couldn’t imagine what it was for.

There was a door leading deeper into the building, but it was locked and there was no electronic sensor for his badge. Olson decided to climb the escalators to the upper levels. He couldn’t figure out why Leamington was in such a state of disrepair. Space was a precious commodity in the city. There was so little of it that so much wasted space seemed like a bad idea. If the city cleaned up this place, they could add hundreds of sleeping cubicles and turn it into an apartment complex. Who wouldn’t want to live one bridge away from the garden?

The upper levels were full of cots and other makeshift sleeping arrangements. The amount of people coming through this place had been much bigger than Olson initially

expected. He suspected that people must have been waiting for days, and from the arrangement of the security systems, Olson had to assume that the people here were attempting to get into the city. If what he was observing was true, then Leamington must have processed massive amounts of people into the city from the outside, but Olson couldn't wrap his head around this observation. His teachers said that people didn't come from the outside. The ruins were failed cities that didn't follow the rules.

People came from the Early Childcare Center. Olson took a class trip and saw all the happy One Years being briefed for a trip to McGladery, where they would live until their Twelve Year. Olson had to conclude that there must have been some sort of ECC on the outside. He decided to ask Instructor Duncan when he returned. He liked Duncan. Most teachers would tell Olson it was a waste of time to think about the world from before. They would say that the ruins around the city had been explored as much as they could be, given the technological limitations, and there wasn't anything new to learn. Instructor Duncan would entertain Olson's ponderings even if they couldn't be tested.

"Hello?" Olson's voice echoed in the empty space. The silence was almost too much to bear. People were always around, and even during sleeping hours, he could hear the breathing and rustling of the fellow students in the neighboring cubicles. Olson was never alone, and now that he was alone, he didn't know what to make of it. He almost wished that someone would show up and break the silence.

He wanted to run, but then, just as the silence became overwhelming, a voice startled him.

"Please pay at the station before returning to your vehicle," the voice said. It sounded mechanical and inhuman.

"Hello?" Olson said.

There was a kiosk standing next to a doorway. There were large blue letters on the side that read, PAY STATION. There was a blue monitor on the front of the kiosk that read, PLEASE INSERT YOUR TICKET. Olson looked at the badge his teacher had given him. He attempted to put it into the machine, but it was too big for the slot.

Another voice, this one human and gruff, said, "You won't get anything from that machine. It's a relic of the old world."

Olson turned around to see a burly man with long brown hair. Large goggles drooped from his neck. He wore a shirt, a sturdy apron, and jeans. His mouth lacked several teeth, and scars ran up his arms. The smudges of dirt and grime suggested that he worked in the lower levels of the city. Though from the oddity of so much unused space, Olson wasn't quite sure what the man did for a living.

"Why are you keeping it running?" Olson nodded toward the kiosk. "We are on a power emergency."

"So when annoyances like you enter the building, I can hear you coming before you cause real damage," the man said.

Olson stammered, "I, um..."

"Look, you want to give me that badge, and I'll get your package," the man said.

With shaking hands, Olson extended the card. The man punched a few buttons on a device that hung from his belt. It was different than a touchlite. It was smaller, but it seemed to be similar in function. He scanned the card, and a readout appeared on his tiny screen. He pushed the card back into Olson's hand. He grumbled and lumbered down the stairs. The toothless man returned a few moments later in a full hazard suit. He trounced over past the kiosk. It asked him to pay before returning to his vehicle. He gripped the handle of the exit door and turned toward Olson.

"You better cover your eyes and mouth," the man said and pulled open the door. A blast of noxious air flooded the room. Olson gagged and coughed. His eyes stung. The man was out the door in seconds, but the burn lingered. Olson was beginning to understand why there wasn't an apartment complex.

Right after the air settled and Olson's eyes were no longer burning, the door opened again. The man stepped through in a puff of red smoke. Olson was ready this time, and as soon as he heard the twist of the handle, he closed his eyes and held his breath. He could hear the man's boots clomping closer until he was in front of Olson's face.

In a surprisingly soft tone, the man said, "You can open your eyes now."

Olson's eyes fluttered open, half expecting a blast of the burning air. However, there was nothing. The cloud had dissipated as quickly as it entered. The man had a stuffed toy in his hand and walked back to the door where he had first gotten the hazard

suit. It was some sort of animal. The toy was dilapidated and shabby from years of neglect. Olson thought it was a cat, but he couldn't be sure without looking at his history book, which was locked away on a touchlight with no power.

The people from the world before had animals. They would grow them for food instead of growing the meat in vats. While Olson had eaten chicken, cow, fish, and on one occasion duck, it hadn't come from animals. Resources were too scarce in the city to waste them on animals when protein could be manufactured so much cheaper. He'd heard that the city's chicken tasted the same as real chicken, but since no one had a real chicken as far as Olson knew, they couldn't be sure.

The craziest part to Olson was that people used to live with certain animals they didn't use for food. Things like cats and dogs would eat the human's food and share the human's bed. It was a hard concept to understand because the animals had fangs and claws. He didn't know how the people didn't get bitten by the animals, like he had seen on countless horror streams where some scientist decided to resurrect the tiger, and it would rampage through the city. Of course, if the animals looked anything like the stuffed one, they were completely harmless.

The man returned after a considerably longer period of time. He was back in the apron, goggles, and jeans. He held out the stuffed toy and shoved it into Olson's hands. The animal was surprisingly heavy. Olson didn't remember stuffed animals being this heavy. "There you go. One Sylvester for you. Now run along."

"A what?" Olson said, but before he knew it, the man was gone, and Olson stood in an empty room, dumbly holding a mangy stuffed cat.

