

Joe Cabello's
TECHNO-VIRUS:
HERO
AND
THE GIRL

Dedicated to

Andi Cabello

Sasha Feiler

And

Fred Le

All of whom contributed inspiration to this piece in
different ways.

Ultra Cops (n):

Super powered humans recruited by law enforcement to combat Super Criminals. No one knows why they came to be or why their parturition has since dwindled to extinction.

CHAPTER 1: SADIE

It all starts at a pizza parlor. A real one. Not one of those pizza parlors you see nowadays, with nowhere to sit and a menu that's more Greek than Italian. Nothing wrong with gyros, but pizza parlors are for neon signs, busted arcade games, and red pebbled cups filled with crushed ice, not lamb meat.

The neon lights hum like cicadas in heat and the inside buzzes with life. Nuclear families escaping the obstacle course of domestic horrors to remember what it's like to laugh together, harmless stoners grasping arcade sticks as tightly as their fleeting childhoods, and new teenage love politely picking at pepperonis, exchanging stories they'd eventually tell a dozen different times to a dozen different lovers — if they'd have chosen any other restaurant.

And, of course, the scene wouldn't be complete without a birthday party. A pizza parlor birthday party, to be exact.

The best kind.

The never-ending smell of fresh pizza taunts the senses. An aroma so good that the taste couldn't possibly live up to it. At least, that's what's on the mind of the newly 10-year-old, Maris, though there's nothing new about her cynicism. Skeptical whether anything is ever as good as it's promised.

More on her later.

The big front window frames the scene like a TV set. A nostalgic tableau as warm as a puppy's bare belly. A flaking, grey Nissan truck wobbles into the handicap spot, taking front row seats. The truck bed sags, filled to the brim with motherboards, sticks of rams, and ethernet cables. Inside, a mountain of computer parts piles up to the roof, pressing against the passenger window, sparing just enough room for the driver.

The truck door clunks open, and circuitry trails out like a cloud of dust as the driver lugs himself out. A long hoodie hangs down to his knees and stinks like sweat and mold just by the look of it. His hood veils over his face as if to hide something better off unseen. He's an unsettling and unwelcome gray cloud invading sunny skies, but in that moment, the pizza parlor bustles enough for him to trudge in unnoticed, without grinding conversation to a halt.

His name is Tetsuo, but this isn't his story despite his irrefutable contributions to it. You'll have to forgive the many omissions that would otherwise color his palette, but often the things that upend our lives end up being of the least importance in the shadow of what came from them.

Let's get back to Maris, the freshly turned 10-year-old. While it's actually a couple days *after* her real birthday, there's precedent for late celebrations. Especially with her mom having this particular night off. Between you and me, I wish she would have had to work.

Her mom's name is Sadie, and it's adorably clear that her daughter devoured every last morsel of her genes first, only to realize she was too full for any of pop's. Not that he's still around to prove it.

The 20 years between them aside, they only differ in their eyes. Both big and brown, like the chocolate dots on thumbprint cookies, but the atmosphere behind their eyes is like completely different planets. While Sadie suffers no shortage of contemplations, Maris' pools of fudge hide a churning ecosystem of rich thoughts below their surface. Some would attribute it to her being "wise beyond her years," but is it wisdom to know things you don't fully understand yet? Despite her many deep thoughts, she has yet to pose such a question to herself. She still has the ignorance of youth, though she wields it like a blade.

Maris can see things most adults struggle to see. A possible divergent outcome of all the free time a kid's mind has to wander. Instead of pontificating big, 5th-grade-sized questions, like what would happen if your butt fell off, Maris studies people, possibly searching for some clue for why daddy left.

Sadie and her friend Ingrid, another thirty-something woman with a starfish tattoo sprawling over her shoulder, finish singing the birthday song, aided by the dulcet murmurs of randoms joining in. Maris tightropes between loving and hating it.

The modest cake in front of them needs forks so Ingrid goes in search for some, hoping to briefly escape the feeling of being an interloper. Sadie and Maris' relationship has that effect on people.

Maris hits her mom with a scowl.

MARIS: This is embarrassing.

SADIE: Oh, shut up. This is revenge for all those temper tantrums you used to throw here.

Maris bumps Sadie with her shoulder. Her tough way of asking for a hug, which she gets, smothered in extra love.

Not even the hug-fest distracts Maris' keen eyes from catching an attractive man in his thirties smiling at Sadie as he passes. Maris doesn't miss a beat.

MARIS: Someone likes you.

SADIE (dramatic): He was just staring because he felt sad for this pathetic, single mom.

MARIS: Get over yourself. Go talk to him.

SADIE: I'm not going to hit on a man during my daughter's birthday.

MARIS: Excuses, excuses.

Maris crosses her arms, feigning disappointment. They both share a love for the over-dramatic.

SADIE: Fine. But if he turns me down, I get the gross frosting rose thing.

MARIS: Deal.

Sadie puts on a show of gathering courage before getting up. Maris watches as her mom approaches and talks to the man. It's going well. Smiles, laughs, and phone numbers exchanged. Mission accomplished. Maris isn't looking for a dad. She's looking for her mom to be happy. Not that a dad would be an unwelcome bonus.

Sadie silently celebrates as she turns back to Maris—

But the hooded man swooshes past, almost shoulder-checking her as he leaves like a passing stench. *Click-clack*. A jagged, old flash drive drops from his pocket just before he pushes his way through the door. Sadie's good Samaritan skills kick in and she swipes the drive off the floor, trying to catch the man before he's gone.

SADIE: Sir, you dropped this!

A futile effort. Her voice fades as his truck peels backwards out of the parking lot. No use shouting at an empty spot. Confused, she clutches the drive in her hand. She flinches.

The sharp, jagged edge glistens red as a drop of blood bubbles up from her finger. She shoves it in her pocket and shakes the pain away.

Of course, Maris caught everything.

MARIS: What was that all about?

SADIE: I don't know... but I got that guy's number. His name's Greg. Good ole' Greg.

Ingrid returns to the table overhearing the tail end of Sadie's response. Maris decides to have a little fun.

MARIS: You would use my birthday parry to hit on guys? Real low, mom.

Sadie retaliates with a finger of frosting on Maris' nose. Not one to be bested, Maris digs her finger into the frosting and jousts it at her mom's nose, but she must have poked her eye because Sadie jolts and turns away.

MARIS: Sorry! You ok?

INGRID: She get your eye?

Sadie's shoulders rise and fall with laborious breaths. Otherwise, she says nothing. An insecure smile tickles Maris' lips, hoping to catch the scent of a practical joke.

Silence can be worse than the loudest cries of pain.

MARIS: Mom?

Sadie slowly turns to them. Their hearts sting with alarm before they even catch a full glimpse of her — their bodies realizing something's wrong well before their brains. Her skin is suddenly so pale that the blue veins under it look like circuitry under milky water. Electronics protrude from her skin as if a computer has exploded inside of her skull. Her eyes stick out of her head like bulging balls of mozzarella.

MARIS: Mom?!

Sadie's hand reaches for Maris, jagged with protruding circuitry, and Maris screams so loud it sends the whole pizza parlor on red alert, though it won't save any of them.

CHAPTER 2: OLD TREES

Hero's almond eyes squint up at the clear blue sky in a war against the sun. A five o'clock shadow patches his face like hungry fleas and his bodybuilder figure is almost cartoonish. With his arms crossed, his biceps bulge like water balloons. The kind of body you can only get by living #gymlife and eating nothing but unseasoned chicken breasts. Not that that's the case with Hero. His body comes from being an Ultra Cop.

Former Ultra Cop.

HERO: Come on...

Two dots of light bash together then blast in opposite directions like mating flies using the endless sky as their cheap motel. Seconds after impact, a sonic boom cracks through the air. Car alarms wail and dogs bark with the ambience of a low-income neighborhood. Hero, of course, remains unflinching. The two dots continue to bash and separate. Bash and separate. An inexplicable dance.

HERO (shouting): Get your asses down here!

CRASH! SHOOM! The two dots collide one last time before a blur of red hurdles toward Hero. He cocks his head to the side to just barely avoid the careening object grazing past his cheek. The faint smell of burnt hair comes as quick as it goes.

Hero glances over at the now stagnant, mangled body in red tights dug halfway into the dirt. He trudges over to it with a hangover limp. Muscles tight with dehydration and restless sleep.

The twisted body in the ground belongs to a Super Criminal known as Red Comet. His lifeless, yellowed eyes wash clear like a cloudy sky disintegrating back to blue, and his limbs snap back into proper shape like one of those toys that falls apart when you press a button, then comes back together once you let it go.

Hero stretches his hand out like a sprawling banana spider, then clenches it back into a meat mace.

HERO: Now it's my turn.

An energy — unseen, unheard, and only felt — pulsates from his fist as he rears it back like an Olympic shot putter. His hips twist, coiling back like a spring. His feet raise ever so slightly off the ground as if the energy encasing him is physical, a barrier separating him from the Earth he stands on.

HERO: Apocalypse fist!

Like a Japanese super-train, he goes from 0-60 in a blink, fist out like a javelin, sliding across the grass. His legs remain still — only an illusion — In reality, they pound the ground with so much force and speed that they're imperceptible, springing off the air beneath them before ever even touching the ground.

He's ached for this feeling again: to take down a Super Criminal.

The joy of anticipation is short lived. Fractions of a second at most before a blue blur zooms between him and Red Comet, forcing Hero to dig his heels into the

grass like Wile E Coyote desperately trying not to run off a cliff. He grinds to a halt with his legs plowed knee deep into the grass. The blue blur is now clearly a man in blue tights and a mask posing before him. His name's Blue Arron, a proper Ultra Cop.

BLUE ARRON: Stand down, Hero. I have this taken care of.

HERO: Don't be an asshole.
They've had this argument before.

BLUE ARRON: Don't get mouthy. You shouldn't even be here.

HERO: Come on. I've been watching you giggle-puss up in the air with this clown for fifteen minutes. I'd have been done in two.

BLUE ARRON: My job would be easier if I could just punch every Super Criminal into dust, but it's a little more complicated than that.

You'd think Hero would have a solid comeback for that by now, but it's hard to clap back at the truth. Blue Arron snatches Red Comet by the neck like a kitten and darts off into the sky, gone.

HERO: Since when is there something wrong with punching the bad guys?!

The neon lights of the pizza parlor hang dead, unlit, like blood-drained veins stretching across the window. Police-tape feebly restrains the mess of broken glass and blood. Lots of blood.

Cops track around the crime scene like ants navigating a maze of puddles.

Detective Kipher walks sure-footed through the chaos inside. If he were a tree, cutting him in half would reveal a spiral of rings, coiled tightly, containing the memories of every gruesome crime scene he's ever seen.

But none like this. Not even close. He knows that stepping in one of the hundreds of blood puddles won't change anything. It's in direct contrast to the rookie next to him playing "don't step on a crack or you'll break your momma's back." That's how we like our rookies though. No complaints.

Kipher holds a handkerchief up to his pockmarked face.

DETECTIVE KIPHER: What the hell happened here?

It's a question for God. The rookie answers anyway. He's a rookie, after all.

ROOKIE: Not quite sure. We got two witnesses.

DETECTIVE KIPHER: Only two witnesses? It was a Friday night. The place should have been packed.

ROOKIE: The cook. He says it *was*. He only caught a glimpse of it before he hightailed it out of here. Says a woman went crazy. Just started killing people.

DETECTIVE KIPHER: He just ran off?

ROOKIE: Can you blame him?

DETECTIVE KIPHER: Ok. So, where are the bodies?

Guessing would only be an exercise in conjuring nightmares, so he lets it go without an answer.

DETECTIVE KIPHER: Who's the other witness?
The Rookie hesitates.

DETECTIVE KIPHER: Spit it out.

The Rookie's voice is steeped in impotent compassion. Kipher hopes the Rookie will live long enough to recognize it as such, or even better, find a new job before his compassion dies quietly in a dark corner of his heart after finally realizing just how useless it's become.

ROOKIE: The woman's daughter.

DETECTIVE KIPHER: All saints... How's she doing?

The Rookie shoots him a look. Fair enough.
Detective Kipher kneels next to the only body present, covered in a black sheet.

DETECTIVE KIPHER: This her?

ROOKIE: Yeah, but I should warn you—

Kipher flips the sheet away and flinches. Sadie lays there, bullet holes peppering her chest like volcanic craters. Circuitry pokes out of her skin, white and oozing. Somehow her face still beautiful through all that mess.

DETECTIVE KIPHER: What the hell is this?

ROOKIE: No clue. That's how she looked when the officer responded to the scene — other than the bullet holes. He had to plug her when she came at him.

DETECTIVE KIPHER: You know the cop?

ROOKIE: Yeah. He's a good one.

DETECTIVE KIPHER: A lot has to happen for a good cop to plug a pretty white woman.

Kipher pulls out a tiny metal wand and stretches it out to a foot long. He prods the body. *Squishy. Squishy. Tink. Squishy. Tink. Tink.* Flesh and circuits stitched together with blotchy seams.

DETECTIVE KIPHER: This shit coming out of her skin... She one of those people who gets all those piercings in their faces?

ROOKIE: Those aren't piercings I've ever seen. And I used to date a goth. She used to hate when I'd called her that. Didn't know what else to call her.

DETECTIVE KIPHER: I'm sure "babe" would have been just fine.

Kipher prods at a bloodstain on her coat. The flash drive slips out of her pocket, clinking to the ground. Kipher slams the rod down in what the Rookie mistakes for anger, only to realize Kipher was simply retracting it. In one fluid movement, Kipher pulls tweezers from his pocket, picks up the drive, and drops it into a baggy.

DETECTIVE KIPHER: We'll run this for prints.

ROOKIE: Really? Why?

DETECTIVE KIPHER: Just a hunch.

Hero's one-bedroom shithole sits on the second floor of a building that looks more like an old hotel than an apartment complex. Not a blade of grass on the property and smoke alarms caked over in yellow paint — or maybe it was white once, who knows. The cheap stuff always turns yellow eventually. The canary in the coalmine for slum living.

Inside the apartment, rusty free weights litter the ground. A punching bag sags unhung on the floor in the corner. Food wrappers scatter about like tumbleweeds. The carpet is dappled with stains that wouldn't be there given even the meekest of wipes weeks, months, or years ago when they happened.

Hero sits on the edge of his couch, hovering over a sloppy meatball sub as the news drones on.

REPORTER: ... the arrest of Red Comet at the hand of Blue Arron marks the last of the Super Criminals to be taken into custody. Perfect timing as the Ultra Cops are set to participate in the Great Ultra Cop Summit at Island Yukio.

A meatball slips out of his sandwich and plops on the carpet. He pinches it between two fingers to inspect it. A swirly stray hair has glued itself to one side. He wipes it against the wrapper and pops it in his mouth, hoping for the best. His attention goes to the open letter on his cluttered coffee table.

"Your request for invite has been denied as your status is no longer active. If you believe this to be an error, please contact your local Ultra Cop Resource Manager."

He dumps a heavy pour of vodka into a coffee mug, then tops it off with the last remaining drops of a purple Gatorade. He takes a swig and gags.

Red and blue lights dance on his curtain from outside, followed by the familiar *WOOP-WOOP* of a cop car.

HERO: Son of a bitch.

He takes another swig, gagging once more.

Detective Kipher's temples bulge with veins, like an octopus has latched onto his head, arms stretching across his scalp. His feet crunch against the gravelly concrete as his elbow digs into the hot metal of his trunk.

His hand looks tiny clasped around Hero's meat paw. The arm-wrestling match is at a stalemate — because Hero chooses for it to be. Hero strains about as much as if he were carrying a half-gallon of milk.

DETECTIVE KIPHER (straining): You gotta stop butting into Ultra Cops business.

HERO: I wasn't butting in. I was helping.

DETECTIVE KIPHER (straining): You're. Not.
An. Ultra Cop—

Kipher tenses as he activates every muscle in his body for one big push. All his effort is met with a smirk from Hero as he smacks Kipher's hand down on the trunk like a snare drum. The jet-black Buick sedan rocks back and forth from the force.

Hero doesn't bother gloating or even acknowledging the victory, as if it were no more a physical feat than scratching an itch. Meanwhile, Kipher massages muscles in his arm that he didn't even know he had.

KIPHER: You gotta admit, I've gotten a little stronger in my old age.

HERO: Never can tell.

Kipher frowns. Not what he wanted to hear. His shaky, spent hand grabs for a greasy paper plate of tacos on the trunk. It bends in half, spilling the tacos all over the ground with a drumroll of wet thwacks.

KIPHER: Dammit...

HERO: Come on!

KIPHER: Stop whining. Five minutes ago, you didn't even know these tacos existed. This was supposed to be *my* lunch, not ours.

Hero helps Kipher clean up the mess, pinching a taco in between his fingers off the ground and devouring three-quarters of it in one bite.

KIPHER: You're disgusting. Listen, I'm trying to pull some strings to get you back on, but I can't do that if you keep up the shit.

HERO: You know for a fact I'm stronger than all those idiots—

KIPHER: No one gives a shit about how strong you are if they think you're gonna kill a kid!

Hero spits a pebble out of his mouth, leaving a trail of spittle down his chin. Kipher doesn't regret saying it. Being straight-up is a perk of being Hero's only friend. Perhaps the only perk.

KIPHER: I'll come by tomorrow with some lunch — a proper lunch — and let's talk about what we can do, OK? You just gotta play ball.

Kipher stares at Hero with a sense of pity they both can feel.

KIPHER: Just try to do the right thing from now on.

HERO: I'm not too good at that.

KIPHER: Start by helping someone. You don't have to punch anybody to do that.

HERO: Who the hell am I supposed to help?

KIPHER: It's LA. There's always somebody.

Neither man knows what else to say that wouldn't root them in a five-hour sit down neither of them is too keen on having. Kipher jingles his keys in his hand nervously.

HERO: Bring Lee's tomorrow. BBQ pork. Two of 'em.

Kipher smiles. Banh mi sounds nice. Maybe by tomorrow the haunting of the pizza parlor would fade. Not go away — they never do — but at least fade long enough to enjoy lunch.

Hero waits for Kipher's Buick to clear the corner before he goes across the street to buy another bottle of Gatorade to smooth out his drink. A tall boy too. He'd just go back for one later anyway.

The sun sets, casting an otherworldly orange glow across the city. It's beautiful but bittersweet. In Los Angeles, the sunset is only beautiful when something's burning.

Kipher pinches the bridge of his nose as his eyes scan a document, not looking for anything in particular, trusting his eyes to work without him having to think. He never knew being a detective would be more paperwork than gun fights, but he's been in enough gun fights to prefer the monotony and tension headaches of paperwork.

The youthful Detective Cage skips in the door, holding something in his hand. Cage hasn't seen a single gun fight, but Kipher wouldn't mind having him by his side in one. He couldn't say that for everyone.

DETECTIVE CAGE: Here's that drive you wanted. Only fingerprints on it were the vics. Or assailant. Whatever you want to call her.

KIPHER: I guess she was both.

Cage throws the tiny evidence bag onto the desk, knocking it into Kipher's coffee mug, following it with a

quick “sorry.” Kipher doesn’t acknowledge the infraction. It’s evening time. No use wasting words on unnecessary apologies.

KIPHER: Might as well check what’s on it.

DETECTIVE CAGE: By the way. Did you move her?

KIPHER: Who?

DETECTIVE CAGE: The woman. The victim-assailant.

KIPHER: What do you mean?

DETECTIVE CAGE: The morgue said they couldn’t find her.

Peculiar, but not completely out of the ordinary.

KIPHER: Probably just moved her to be identified by a relative. Can’t let the kid see her like that.

DETECTIVE CAGE: The kids all she’s got.

Kipher sits quietly for a moment, mulling that over. Cage is a smart kid, but still has a lot to learn.

KIPHER: That means she was all the kid had too.

Cage feels a tinge of shame for not considering her, even if she was never his responsibility to begin with.

DETECTIVE CAGE: I’ll make sure she’s OK.

KIPHER: She’s still here? Jesus. Yeah, check on her.

Cage leaves without another word. No use wasting words on unnecessary apologies.

At least he’s a quick learner.

Kipher peels open the tiny bag and dumps the drive on his desk. He takes it gingerly in his fingertips and reaches blindly behind his PC to stick it in. Wrong way. Flips it. Wrong way. Flips it. Wrong way. Flips it. Click.

KIPHER: Ouch!

He recoils. Blood bubbles up and drifts down a slit in his fingertip. He sucks on it as the computer beeps angrily.

DRIVE CORRUPTED

KIPHER: Great...

KNOCK.KNOCK.

CLARA: You ready? The show's at eight.

Kipher looks up to see his wife, Clara, and his eight-year-old son, Eli at the door, dressed for a night out. She's wearing the stockings he likes and the earrings his mother gave her. He likes when she wears those. His boy stands next to her with an army posture. He can't help it. He's just built that way, and hell if it doesn't effortlessly give the kid a gravitas that Kipher has had to work his whole life to build for himself. Kipher can't believe he's so lucky.

KIPHER: Let's go.

As he slides his arm into his jacket sleeve, his thumb rubs the cut on his finger, feeling a slight rigid protrusion around it.

Good. Already starting to scab.

CHAPTER 3: NEW FRIENDS

Nighttime in Skid Row.

The shadows churn. Nothing of note. Just the subtle tremors of existence, seasoned with brief spikes of hunger-induced aggression. Nothing that won't pass and be forgotten by tomorrow. The same ebbs and flows as anywhere else, just with a little more grime.

Gardens of trash sprout in the streets where cars no longer venture. The sidewalks are a sickly grey, steeped in piss. Tents line the streets like studs on a jacket. All in disrepair, though it's good living compared to the tarpers, and even kingly compared to the daytime sidewalkers. You know the ones. Crashed out in the middle of the sidewalk, baking in the sun like lizards.

A tarper named Elia uppercuts her sagging roof, briefly popping it back up before it inevitably sags back down again. The routine feels good. It takes her mind off going out and buying a six pack. Yeah, she has money. Just a little. Nothing more than a spoon to dig herself out of the hole she's in, and when you're in a hole, beer's as good as anything to spend your money on. Even still,

she's decided to kick the stuff. Or at least try. What else is there to pass the time as she awaits the next tragedy to befall her? She ponders this with no bitterness. She figures it's true for everyone. Some just have harsher tragedies.

She misses the crackling of her tarp as it makes its way back down. The sound is overpowered by squeaking brakes and a chugging engine. She pokes her head out to get a look at the old pick-up truck with a camper back slowly plowing through the gardens of trash. *They must be lost.*

A procession of people follows behind, shuffling in unison. Bits of electronics flake off the bed, clacking onto the ground like distant gunfire.

Maris' feet dangle off the chair, her heels knocking an arrhythmic beat against its legs. A relentless scowl forms little mosquito-bite-mounds between her eyebrows. Whatever sorrow she's been feeling has since funneled into a swirling blend of anger and annoyance. Her annoyance has everything to do with the man in front of her: Detective Cage.

Maris is the type who might witness a man transform into a wolf and immediately think to herself, "that's a werewolf." No ifs, ands, or buts about it. As for Detective Cage, she's starting to get the feeling that he's the type who would stay skeptical, even as the damn thing ripped his stomach out of his ass.

Detective Cage takes a knee in front of Maris to get on her level. A move he assumes would get him a pat on the back from a child psychologist, however, with his elbow resting on his quaking leg, he looks more like a community theater actor playing the role of "cool teacher" than someone with a master's degree.

DETECTIVE CAGE: I know sometimes when I get really scared, my mind makes up stories in my head too, because sometimes make-believe is less scary than real life.

MARIS: I'm not making it up!

DETECTIVE CAGE: You experienced something very traumatic. I'm not denying that. I want you to know, I hear you.

MARIS: You can't just say you hear me and not listen to a damn thing I say!

DETECTIVE CAGE: Let's watch our language.

MARIS: You're not my mom! My mom's dead!

A jolting pinch stings her chest, as if saying it out loud finally broke the news to her heart. She's not the crying type, but a kid doesn't need to be when they're in her situation, and she knows it. She seeks refuge in blunt facts.

MARIS: There are zombies—

DETECTIVE CAGE: Zombies aren't real—

MARIS: They're like techno-zombies. I don't know— but if you don't listen to me, everyone is going to die.

DETECTIVE CAGE: Why do you say that?

MARIS: Haven't you ever seen a movie?

Detective Cage fails to hide his “do you hear yourself?” smirk before Maris catches it, forcing him to straighten up. He's wise enough to realize patronizing her won't help. Too foolish to know what will.

DETECTIVE CAGE: You want a cookie? I bet you want a cookie.

They've reached an impasse, so she decides to play the cards she's dealt, even if it's a shitty hand.

MARIS: Yeah.

Her voice sings with an unbecoming child-like timbre, not that Cage would know. He smiles warmly,

soaking in the false victory. To his credit, it's hard to perceive guile from a kid whose mom just died.

As he stands, she darts up and wraps her arms around his thin waist.

MARIS: Thank you, detective.

This'll be his go-to first date story for years to come.

DETECTIVE CAGE: I'll be right back.

He gives her a squeeze on the shoulder before gingerly opening the door, as if even a moderate gust might upset the delicate balance of her emotions.

DETECTIVE CAGE: The door will lock behind me, so you'll be nice and safe. No zombies will get you.

MARIS: Thank you, detective sir.

Detective Cage lets the door close behind him, hoping those cookies from Robert's birthday are still in the breakroom.

On the other side of the door, Maris has jammed his notebook between the lock and the doorsill. Not such a bad hand after all.

MARIS: I. Hate. Cookies.

Detective Cage struts through the hall gripping three cookies in his hand: chocolate chip, raisin, and sugar. He's hoping someone will stop him and ask him what he's doing so he can explain his good deed. No one does.

He gives the door a friendly rap of his knuckles before popping the key in and preparing for his hero's welcome. As the door swings open, his tiny sliver of view expands, each inch further revealing the truth: Maris isn't there. The cookies crumbles in his fingertips and fall to the ground, exploding into tiny pieces.

DETECTIVE CAGE: Shit.

Maris' reflection stares back at her from an unblinking, black eyeball. The iris whirs open and closed, struggling to focus on her tiny figure in the dark haze of the LA night.

She's an ant-like dot in front of the tremendous brownstone building that makes up Blue Arron's headquarters. The aged brick and oak trim are merely a facade to the newly constructed steel frame behind it. A throwback to simpler times and simpler crimes. Many Ultra Cop's headquarters adopted this nostalgic direction. It put people at ease, like the Ultra Cops were supposed to be there. As if they had always been there. The nostalgia made it easier to ignore that their billion-dollar buildings had usurped the affordable housing that once stood in their place.

The camera finds its focus, staring back at Maris with an emotionless eye. An electronic beep acts as a greeting.

MARIS: I need your help! There's something serious going on and I need to talk to you!

The iris loses focus, adjusting noisily.

MARIS: Hello?! Blue Arron! People are in danger!

Static crackles out of the speaker.

MARIS: Hello?!

BLUE ARRON: Hello, this is Blue Arron. I see that you are a...

The software cycles through responses, searching for a best match.

BLUE ARRON: ... *LITTLE GIRL* who needs assistance. I have notified the police and they are on their way to assist you. If this is a Super Criminal matter, I assure you, I am already aware of it.

The hum of the speaker clicks off and the lens slaps shut. Maris slams her foot against it, leaving wavy lines of dust on the glass.

Her stomach grumbles angrily. She wishes she would have taken that cookie.

A mound of pork sizzles and spins on a spit. Little droplets of fat slap on the titanium like raindrops. The simple taco stand is nothing more than a scuffed fold-out table, a portable flat grill, and several bins of diced onions, cilantro, and salsas, but you won't find better food within a mile radius, except for maybe that Thai spot that's so good it could bring Jonathan Gold back from the dead.

Maris plants her hands on her hips, standing uncomfortably close to the cook who pushes the carne asada around on the skillet for no other reason than to pass the time.

TACO GUY: All the Ultra Cops are gone, mang. They're on that island.

MARIS: All of them?

TACO GUY: The good ones anyway.

He dips the corner of two corn tortillas into a tin filled with oil and slaps them on the grill.

MARIS: What do you mean, the good ones?

TACO GUY: The legit ones.

MARIS: What makes them legit?

TACO GUY: They got a license or some shit.

MARIS: Does that mean some of them might still be here? If they don't have a license?

He pinches the tortillas between two fingers and uses them like a glove to pick up a tiny pile of carne asada from the grill.

TACO GUY: Pendeja, do you want a taco or not?

MARIS: Of course, I want a taco.

He throws the taco on a paper plate and slides it her way. If she wants more conversation, she'll have to actually buy a taco, and that ain't happening.

Luckily, the vendor gave Maris enough information to catalyze her into action, or maybe it's the taco finally hitting her system. For some people, rice, beans, and a tortilla is enough to wake them from the dead. Maris is one of those people. Not that she'd be physically capable of sitting around and doing nothing anyway. The techno-zombie problem nags at her like a bug bite under her scalp.

She traverses the moonlit city without so much as a second glance from passersby. You may wonder how a little girl can roam the streets at 9pm without a single soul questioning her safety. That's because Los Angeles is a city where people like to see a return on their investments. Care is only as valuable as what an Angelino stands to gain from giving it. Otherwise, it's just not worth the trouble of looking outside of their own bubble.

She trots down the long stairway to the subway. The air starts to smell like hot metal the further she down she goes. "Some people sleep here," she thinks, not realizing she might be one of those people. Sure, she has a home, but the cops will check for her there, but mostly she'd like to avoid it because she knows the picture frames hold ghosts that she doesn't want to confront until she's done doing what she has to do. She won't have the strength to do it otherwise.

She plants her hands on the turnstile and lifts her legs over the bars in one swift motion just as the train pulls up. A smattering of people files in. A fine opportunity. She rushes in and bumps into a middle-aged Korean woman carrying a pillow-sized bag of rice. Maris apologizes, stumbling away with a smile and a bow. The woman's scowl softens, and she smiles back at the little

girl, smacking the bag of rice playfully in place of comforting the girl in her native tongue.

Maris pushes her way into the next car, patting the woman's phone in her pocket to make sure she actually pulled it off. She slides back out past the doors just as they close, but her finger snags between them, just enough to bruise the tip of her nail. She almost cries out for her mom before stopping herself, squeezing the finger as tight as she can to let the pain course from her fingertip to her palm, like a drug through her veins. Suddenly the pain isn't so bad. She's thankful for this new friend.

Warm pellets of rain slap Maris' cheeks. It never rains here until it does. She's glad it's warm. It feels good, though minutes later, as her clothes melt to her skin and she starts to shiver, she curses it. At least it hides the fact that she's crying, even from herself. That is until she crawls under the cover of a playground structure and the warm drops don't stop falling on her cheeks. Her chest convulses as the grief grows like a creature trying to birth itself out of her chest. She squeezes her bruised finger with all her might until the creature rests back in her heart. She thanks her new friend for its help as she pulls out the cellphone and collects herself before dialing.

OPERATOR: Ultra Cop Association. How can I direct your call?

MARIS (adult voice): This is Jane Parkman at the Ultra Cop retreat. We're having a little issue here with a former Ultra Cop trying to get in. Do you know anything about this?

There's a brief pause that makes Maris nervous.

OPERATOR: Oh, God. It's gotta be Hero.

MARIS (adult voice): Hero?

OPERATOR (O.S.): Hero Yoon. Big, buff Asian guy, right?

MARIS (adult voice): Um... yes.

OPERATOR (O.S.): Ugh. He's always trouble.

MARIS: We would like to send him a warning letter. Officially. Do you think you could provide us with his address?

OPERATOR (O.S.): Yeah. One second.

Mission accomplished.

By the time Maris hangs up the phone, her eyes fall closed and she enters the world of dreams, where it's not raining, and her finger is fine. Where the creature in her chest can play with her all he wants without her new friend to stop the fun.

Instant noodles slap at Hero's lips like angry octopus's arms. Some of the noodles are still hard. He didn't let them sit long enough. The water isn't hot enough either. It turns out you can fuck up just about anything when a hangover is squeezing the back of your skull like a vice. He swallows down the soft/hard mass, already knowing it won't be enough to stop his stomach from performing whale calls, but maybe it will be enough to give him the grit to walk to the Thai place. But that place is expensive. Everything is exhausting.

Three sharp knocks send his nerves on edge, followed by a cool surge of relief from his fingertips to his brain. For a second, his pain goes away: Kipher said he was bringing food.

HERO (shouting): You're late! Get your ass in here.

The door shoves open followed by Maris charging in, taking center stage in the middle of the room like she was asked to be there.

MARIS: Hello, Hero. Great name by the way. Just really direct and to the point. Great job. Anyways. Chit-chat's over. We have a problem. There's a weird virus that turns people into zombie-things, and maybe that's not it exactly, but it's something bad like that. And you're the only one who can help me, so it's time to be a hero, Hero.

Hero stares at her, slowly piecing together what's happening. He can feel the alcohol in his shoulders like drying cement.

Outside, a stray chihuahua sniffs at an empty yogurt wrapper by the dumpster. It's the best day he can remember in a long time, until Maris' body comes flying out of Hero's 2nd story apartment, landing with a soft plop into the full dumpster.

The chihuahua is long gone by the time Maris huffs and grunts her way out.

Hero shoots back the rest of the Shin Black ramen broth like a shot as Maris bursts back in, seething.

MARIS: I'm going to look past that since you were at least nice enough to throw me in the *full* trash bin.

HERO: There was a trash bin?

Maris burns red. She grabs an empty King Cobra can and chucks it at his head. His reflexes are shit. It bounces off his head into the wall and rattles off into a corner to be forgotten. He coughs blood in utter surprise. It's just something Hero does when he's surprised.

HERO: What the hell's your problem?

She calms down enough to see that a change in approach might be necessary. She changes her tone to her child-like timbre.

MARIS: I came here because I need help, and you're the best hero in this city... Hero.

Hero's brain is notably slow on this particular day, but it doesn't hinder his detective sense for sniffing bullshit. He smiles confidently.

HERO: And I'm the *only* UltraCop in town.

She drops the act.

MARIS: Well, technically you're not an UltraCop.
He growls, no longer amused.

MARIS: Just hear me out. That's all I ask.

HERO: Why should I?

MARIS: My mom died.

HERO: Jesus.

MARIS: She was killed.

HERO: Jesus.

MARIS: Yesterday.

HERO: Jesus!

Hero sighs.

HERO: Make it quick.

At the cluttered dining room table, Hero's banana fingers squeeze a lemon over a stained coffee mug filled with water. He slides it to Maris, splashing vodka into an old McDonald's cup for himself.

MARIS (re: the vodka): It's morning.

HERO: I work nights.

She's already given him the rundown, but he's not sure how he feels about it. He doesn't get the sense that she's lying, but he also knows that many lies have been told by people who thought they were telling the truth.

MARIS: We have to figure out what's going on.
The cops won't do anything.

HERO: I'm sure Blue Arron and the other dorks can help you better than I can.

MARIS: By the time they're back, it'll be too late.
What if this is like a virus? Half biological, half mechanical. The circuits grow inside people, and it makes them crazy—

HERO: Little girl—

MARIS: Maris.

HERO: Maris, that's way too specific. Here's the thing. If you can think of it, then that's probably not what's happening. That's true when you're six or when you're sixty. I don't wanna play shrink, but I think you're making up stories to make it easier to get over your mom's death.

MARIS: Why does everyone think they're a child psychologist? I'm not making up stories! I know what I saw. There must be some biological scientist bad guy you know in town, right? We can track them down and get information. They have to be in on it.

Hero's impressed with her train of thought, but he buries the feeling as quickly as it comes up.

HERO: How about this? Any minute now, my Detective friend should be here. He'll help you—

Maris jolts up.

MARIS: What?! I gotta get out of here.

HERO: Why?

MARIS: I broke out of jail.

HERO: Jesus Christ...

MARIS: I can't wait on this. I'm going to figure this out with or without you. Thanks for that stupid lemonade.

Maris darts out of the apartment so fast it takes him a second to realize she's actually gone. He's relieved, though the sudden silence feels like static clinging in the air. He walks over and taps the TV on. The remote stopped working a long time ago.

The news is on. Helicopter footage of a wreck. A jet-black Buick sedan.

ANCHOR: The city is shocked by yet another mysterious scene of violence. The car ran off the road around 9pm last night. Considering the gruesome condition that the wife and child were discovered in, authorities aren't ruling out some sort of animal attack that must have occurred following the crash. The

eyewitness first on the scene described the victims as “ripped apart.” Authorities have yet to find the driver’s body, suspected to be Detective Kipher of the Los Angeles City Police Department.

Hero freezes in place. The news courses through his system like a bad drug. He hopes if he can stand perfectly still, maybe time will too, and if time can stand still, maybe it can go backwards, and if it can go backwards, maybe it won’t be true, even if just for a few seconds longer. Every milli-second is precious. Every moment before it finally feels real. His whole body feels like cement now, and it ain’t no hangover. Something sits in his chest. Dense and cold. He needs a drink to burn it down. To kill it.

Hero waves his arm in front of his face, feeling like his bones are delayed a microsecond after his muscles. He tries to capture the feeling to make it stay with him — to become permanent — though it disappears as quickly as it comes. In the end, he’s just waving his arm in the air for no reason.

He dumps a box of files onto the coffee table, instantly regretting it as papers slip and slide out of their folders onto the floor. The regret quickly dies, stillborn. Vodka hits the back of his throat before he even realizes the cup is at his mouth. He instantly regrets it. He instantly loves it.

File after file. Drink after drink.

Minutes pass. Hours pass. Who knows?

He squints hard, trying to capture the letters between his eyelids. His eyes focus, like a sniper’s crosshair on a target 3,000 yards away.

Former biological scientist

Criminal for hire

Sandalwood storage facility

He sucks in a breath, as if he's about to go underwater, then lets out a powerful gust. He has what he needs. More drinks wouldn't hurt at this point. They'd be tomorrow's problem. Today, he did OK. Today, he's earned a cigarette. He always does.

It's one of those nights where he's drunk enough light up inside. Though there's been more and more of those nights lately. And it's been lately for a while now.

The cigarette smoke crawls into his lungs, then escapes into a formless shape in front of him. In that moment, he's convinced he's seeing Kipfer ascend to heaven through the smoke.

HERO: I'm doing this for you, you know. See you soon enough, old friend.

Hero chain-smokes the pack until he coughs blood, desperate to catch another final glimpse of his friend in the smoke.

Wires tangle together like weeds crawling up towards the blue light from a wall of monitors, all varied sizes and eras, molded together like a mosaic glass window, flashing static, blipping programs, and scrolling code.

Tetsuo hunches in front of them, pressing enter on the dusty, grimy keyboard. He smiles, his gums a mix of pink flesh, green circuit board, and metal flecks, though smile isn't the right word for it. Nothing about it is right at all.

CHAPTER 4: SUNSHINE

The gallon of water Hero chugged before falling asleep paws it as his bladder like a bored puppy. As annoying as it may be, it gives him the opportunity to track the rise and fall of his hangover by observing the fading shade of piss every time he gets up to relieve himself. An unintentional science experiment, but nonetheless, a successful one. He wakes up around 9am feeling relatively refreshed, though not 100%. It's been too long for him to remember what 100% feels like, and it certainly won't become a habit, but he considers it his way of honoring Kipher's death all the same. Finally keeping his promise of getting it together, if only for a morning.

Somehow, he wakes up without feeling hungry, so he walks to the corner store and grabs a tallboy. His stomach is moaning by the time he gets back to his apartment. Nothing beer can't fix. The first sip draws his hangover out of him like a magnet. He finishes the rest of it in labored gulps, then sleeps the rest of the day away in a starved haze.

If only for a morning.

Hero wakes up at around 6pm and stays in bed until seven thinking about food. He has to leave soon. No time to cook. He doesn't cook anyway. He'll pick something up on the way. Something good.

After a hot shower washes away the stench of his wasted day, he squeezes into his beat-up Honda Civic to head to the Sandalwood Storage Facility. He used to drive something else back when he was an Ultra Cop — his signature Ultra Cop-mobile — but not anymore. All it does is scare people now.

As for food, Hero settles on two coconut waters and a Combo C from a local Chinese fast-food joint that makes a surprisingly good hamburger. The ten-pound styrofoam container bursts at its sides, noodles draping out of it messily and sticking to the fabric of the passenger seat as he sets it down. How many times has he made his car his dining room? He pictures himself living as a caveman millions of years ago, crouched in the deepest recesses of his cave, gnawing on a rotten bone like a pathetic animal. The thought quickly suffocates and dies in the atmosphere of orange chicken and chow mein.

The magical mash of rice, noodles and several types of chicken stops time. The little girl's mom isn't dead. Kipher's still alive. And no one expects anything of him. The only misery comes from the moments in between bites, but you can't spend your whole life eating Chinese food.

He leaves half the food for later and heads off to Sandalwood. The little girl did most of the thinking for him. All he had to do was dig through his old files. He wasn't supposed to keep those, but how else is he supposed to butt into Ultra Cop business? Plus, it'll be

any day now that they ask him to come back. Any day now.

If there's anyone in the city involved with something biological, it would be Henson. Not that Hero knows him all too well. He's just another name in a long list of infamous names. Most of the Super Criminals have chilled out over the years. They've drawn back their battlelines to the type of criminal activity where the Ultra Cops won't bother butting in. Throw a car through the busy promenade? That'll get you an Ultra Cop. Distribute drugs to the Southside? That'll get you some money in your pocket.

The game had changed slowly. There was a time when being an Ultra Cop meant something. Now it meant being a poster boy for ideals built around the needs of people who would never even come face to face with the violent consequences of their pen strokes and handshakes. Worst of all, these people are gifted with the ignorance of their own evil. If the Ultra Cops actually meant anything, they'd go after *them* before the guy with a jetpack and octopus' arms.

Back to Henson. It's most likely that his genius for creating man-made viruses got him solid work cooking meth these days, but Hero figures he's worth checking out anyway, though his file is admittedly light. Hero has no idea what he's walking into with the guy. He could have a laser-blasting helmet, or an army of henchmen, though that isn't likely. Most of the dangerous ones work for the military now.

He flips his headlights off as the Civic chugs towards the barbed wire fence of the storage facility. It's a good place for a racket. Everyone minds their own business, not wanting any light shined on them. There's a particular shame with having so much stuff but nowhere to put it. He parks off to the side and takes another forkful of food before getting out of the car.

He sizes up the barbed wire fence. Manageable. His knees bend so low that his butt almost touches the floor, then he leaps over it with one big motherfucker of a jump. He lands gracefully and walks in proudly, completely missing the tiny hole cut in the fence a couple yards away.

Hero edges across the side of the facility. Cautious. Every footstep a whisper. Not that he's worried about getting caught. It's just better if Henson has less time to think about how to lie to him. Regardless, he's happy to practice his sneak-step. There aren't many opportunities these days.

He pancakes himself against the wall near the corner and slowly peers around. As he does, the bottom of his gaze catches a half-circle that grows like a brown sunrise, wispy rays of light fluttering out of it. He grinds his teeth as he takes in the full picture. Two big brown eyes and a smiling face. He can't help but cough a healthy smattering of blood.

Maris pushes him against the wall like a bully.

MARIS: Sh! Will you shut up?

HERO: What the hell are you doing here?

MARIS: I could ask you the same question.

HERO: Yeah, well I asked you first.

She can't fault that logic.

MARIS: I followed the clues.

HERO: Who are you? Detective Conan?

MARIS: Who?

Hero sighs.

HERO: I have work to do. Go home. I'm trying to figure out this stupid virus crap you were talking about.

MARIS: That's why I'm here, dummy. Obviously.

He feared as much. He gives her a once over, impressed by her grit.

HERO: So, you're pretty smart, huh, sunshine?

MARIS: Don't call me that.

HERO: Whatever you say, sunshine. Get out of my way so I can crack this case.

He shoves her aside and strolls down the asphalt deeper into the facility. He's too annoyed to care about being sneaky anymore. Maris is quick on his heels.

MARIS: You're going to need my help.

HERO: No, I won't.

MARIS: Well, you're going the wrong way.

Hero stops, causing her face to bump into his butt.

MARIS: Gross. The office is back there. That's where we should be able to find Orion.

HERO: His name's not Orion. It's Henson.

MARIS: Not anymore. He changed it.

HERO: How do you know that?

MARIS: I'm Detective Conan, remember?

Hero sighs. He's tired.

HERO: Ok. Lead the way.

MARIS: We should have a hand signal.

HERO: A what? Why?

MARIS: Because we're partners.

HERO: No, we're not.

MARIS: If we're not partners, I'm not helping.

HERO: I don't need your help—

Maris turns around and walks away. Hero's already forgotten which way the office is, and he figures the only way to keep her out of his way might be to keep her close by.

HERO: Fine. We're partners.

MARIS: Then that settles it. We need a hand signal.

HERO: So I've heard. What are you talking about?

MARIS: Something to signal each other that we're OK. How about this?

Maris holds up a peace sign. Her tiny fingers look like the runts in a bag of baby carrots.

HERO (sighing): Fine. Whatever.

He throws up a half-hearted peace sign then makes his way in the right direction. Maris catches up and pushes his body in the *actual* right direction like she's righting a hulking ship lost at sea.

MARIS: This way.

The office is designed to look like someone stuck a suburban home on the side of the ugly concrete building. Textured white walls and ornate windowsills, despite the windows being fake. Painted on. Not much of an advantage for either party, though there are always security cameras.

Hero approaches the door with Maris attached to his hip.

HERO: What are you doing? Stand back.

MARIS: Why?

HERO: This could be dangerous. Just let me handle it.

Annoyed, she takes a single step back.

HERO (sarcastic): You're so much safer. Great job.

She takes a few more steps back, making a show of it.

Hero reaches for the doorknob— it pulls away from him.

Maris cries out just as time slows, warping her voice like a bent record.

Hero watches the hammer of the gun slap backward as the flames lick past the barrel and the tip of the bullet emerges from it, spinning directly towards him.

CHAPTER 5: PSYCHO MODE

The muzzle flash activates one of Hero's special abilities: Psycho Mode.

Here's the thing about psycho mode: It's really good for causing as much damage as possible, as quickly as possible, but it's not very good for anything else.

The majority of Ultra Cops possess super speed, super strength, and most importantly, flight. Flying is important for optics. There could be an Ultra Cop with a toddler's punching power, but if he or she could fly, that's who they want on the Wheaties box. Hero can't fly — a sore spot for him — but punch for punch, there's no one better. Too bad you can't pick up a teacup with a construction crane, and sometimes the job required picking up a few teacups.

With his normal strength, he could crush a teacup like a ball of paper. In psycho mode, his gravitational pull alone would dissolve it into dust right in the palm of his hand, though that isn't the only benefit. Psycho Mode also gives Hero heightened strength, reflexes, and perception, all sparked within an instant. Sometimes — and often —

activating regardless of whether he wants it to or not. Fighting it feels like trying to keep your eyes open when all your body wants is to sleep. Futile. Uncomfortable. It's better to just go with it. Better for who? That's arguable.

Hero watches the bullet spiral out of the muzzle like a turd leaving a sphincter, less worried than he is angry. He lifts his heels as the balls of his feet rotate into position, his right arm coming around for a hook, every muscle in his body activating in a perfect series of clockwork-like gears so the energy from his tensing toes snowballs all the way up through his legs, to his hips, to his knuckles. Perfectly timed, his fist smacks the side of the bullet, and it vanishes into tiny, imperceptible particles. Hero's arm recoils before the trigger even bounces back to neutral.

With the exception of taking the gun away from Henson, the fight is as good as over, but rage has already infected Hero. Such is the problem with Psycho Mode. They don't call it that for nothing, nor is Hero the one who named it, though he's adopted the name for better or worse.

His face burns red at the audacity of someone daring to try and shoot him. The train isn't going to stop. He forgets about Maris. He forgets about the virus. He even forgets about the very target of his rage. He isn't even fully aware of where he is anymore. All the while, not even a full second has passed.

His feet lift centimeters off the ground, like a Japanese magnet train, and his voice comes out slow and droning to his senses, his vocal cords unable to match the speed of his mind as he shouts, "Apocalypse punch!"

His body slides forward like it's on tracks, his legs not needing to pound the pavement or even move to send him hurdling forward. Instead, powered by a force yet to be understood by science.

To Maris, it happens all at once. The gunshot as Hero disappears into the office like he's been sucked in by a vacuum. A cloud of red mist blasts out of the doorway like the thruster of a rocket ship.

A mess of thick gunk slaps against every wall in the office. Flesh, bone, and organs, all fused together into a jelly, then exploded out like a horrific gender reveal.

HERO: Crap.

Outside, the cloud of red mist begins to settle, dotting Maris' white sneakers and tickling her cheeks. She wipes her forearm across her face, leaving a red smear. She stumbles in, confused.

MARIS: Are you ok?!

HERO: I'm fine.

MARIS: What happened?! I thought he shot you.

HERO: Don't come in here. You shouldn't see this.

She peeks in. It's a crime scene without a body. The crime scene *is* the body.

HERO: Aaaand you're seeing it.

MARIS (annoyed): Why'd you do that?

HERO: I'm used to punching super-criminals with super strength and shit! Henson's just a regular guy!

MARIS: You turned him into mush. He was our only lead.

HERO: I know! Believe it or not, it wasn't exactly my plan to punch a guy into Jell-O today. We gotta get out of here.

Hero steps out and shakes his boots off, sending flecks of blood flying everywhere.

MARIS: Don't forget, dummy.

She sucks her hand into her sweater sleeve and uses it to close the door, rubbing the handle clean for good measure. She shoots him a sassy look that screams, "see? I *am* useful."

HERO: I didn't touch the doorknob, DUMMY.

Her face turns red as it cooks up a comeback, but Hero stomps away before it bakes. She glares, watching his bloody footprints trail behind him. She sweeps her foot over them like a hockey stick, little blood splatters crawling up the lip of her sole.

I am useful.

Maris catches up to Hero as he approaches his car. He's still not sure how she got over the fence. He's not entirely sure about anything. It isn't until the passenger door slams shut and her tiny body cups in the seat next to him that he realizes he's not only stepped in shit but tracked it all over the carpet too.

Nonetheless, he can't kick her out of the car.

MARIS: That proves it, right?

HERO: Proves what?

MARIS: That something's up. We have to go to the cops.

HERO: We're not going to the cops.

MARIS: Why not?

HERO: Because I just killed him.

MARIS: Who cares? The guy was obviously hiding something. He's a bad guy.

HERO: He was a civilian and I'm not even an Ultra Cop.

MARIS: Ooh. So, that makes you a Super Criminal.

HERO: No, it doesn't.

MARIS: You killed a normal human with your powers. That's illegal. That's what Super Criminals do.

HERO: Then we're both Super Criminals.

MARIS: So, you're saying we *are* a team?

Hero gives her the middle finger, which despite her seemingly endless knowledge, she doesn't understand.

MARIS: That's not our hand signal.

HERO: We're not a team.

Hero turns the ignition over and peels off, expecting a comment from Maris but she seems perfectly comfortable with the excessive speed. They sit in silence as the Honda chugs down Vineland towards East Hollywood.

MARIS: We'll have to figure it out ourselves.

HERO: Figure what out?

MARIS: What's going on. If we can't ask the cops for help—

HERO: Cops wouldn't help shit anyway.

MARIS: So, you agree. We have to do it ourselves.

HERO: There's no "we" anything. Just shut up so I can figure this out. I just need to get back to my place and everything will be fine.

Bloop. Bloop. Red and blue lights flash behind him.

HERO: Shit. Get your ass in the back.

In one smooth move, Hero reaches over her lap and reclines her seat, then grabs the ruff of her shirt and throws her in the backseats. He hears a click and turns around—

HERO: What the hell are you doing?

She's folding the back seats down and crawling into the trunk.

HERO: Oh. Good idea.

Her face peeks out before she closes it all the way.

MARIS: Promise you're going to help me, or I'll start screaming in the trunk. That'll look a lot worse than me sitting in the passenger seat.

OFFICER (loudspeaker): Pullover immediately!

HERO: Fine!

Maris flashes him the peace sign and hides, clicking the seat closed in front of her like a tomb.

Luckily, the cop only gives him a ticket for speeding, though Hero's heart races the entire time, glancing down at his blood-caked shoes. As for his clothes, the speed of his Apocalypse Punch caused enough energy to radiate from him to keep any blood and grime off. He knows he'll have to get rid of the shoes though. That along with the \$300 ticket makes the day a total loss.

Once the cop pulls away, he leaves Maris in the trunk hoping for some peace and quiet. He isn't too sure he's going to have much of it from now on. Luckily, despite a couple of kicks to the back seat, she eventually calms down.

Hero pops open the trunk to find Maris sound asleep. He nudges her with his sausage finger, but she's completely conked.

HERO: What the hell am I doing...

He cradles her in his arms and trudges up into his apartment. He sets her down on the couch and heads straight for the kitchen table, pouring himself a half-mug of vodka. Behind him, Maris yawns and stirs awake.

HERO: You can sleep on the couch—

He hears the scuttle of tiny footsteps followed by the soft spring of her tiny body on his mattress. He rushes over to see her curled up on his bed like a little shrimp.

HERO: Fucking hell.

He downs the mug as quickly as he can, but the party is over. His body's need for sleep beats out his mind's need to be drunk. He falls in and out of sleep on the couch, sweat forming on his body in sticky sheets.

His door ajar, he can hear Maris sniffing and gasping in sorrow, trying desperately to muffle it as best she can. In the quiet of the night, in a warm bed, she can't ignore her broken heart anymore.

Hero stomps up and slams the door so hard it breaks a hinge.

CHAPTER 6: GASHAPON

The morning sun creeps past the armrest to Hero's forehead, cooking him awake. He lays with his eyes closed in a futile attempt to stop time from moving forward. He's happy to hole up in his mind's womb for as long as possible until the slits of his eyes peel open like a swollen, pregnant vagina, birthing him into the world. Another day. Another hurt.

His body even believes the lie for a while. The manufactured darkness keeps the anxiety and joint pain at bay. He plans to enjoy it for as long as he can — the fading shores of sleep as he sails further towards the inevitability of a new day — but the unwelcome image of Maris flashes in his mind like a neon sign. As hard as he tries to erase her, she comes back again, even clearer. So does Kipher. Then Henson at the storage facility, disappearing into a bloody mist. A horrific GIF repeating endlessly. Their images fill the blackness like a collage of magazine clippings until there's no use trying to sleep anymore.

His eyes open to the popcorn ceiling looking like a starry night sky in the negative. He turns his head to find Maris sitting across from him, dangling her feet from the chair, bored. There's something to be said about a kid who withstands boredom to let you sleep. Hero takes note of it.

MARIS: My mom was messy. I always did the cleaning.

It's too early for Hero to decipher what she means, but as he swings himself upright, he takes in the coffee table in front of him. Aside from a splash of green paint that was once hot sauce and a series of permanent cup rings of bubbled lacquer, the coffee table sparkles clean.

His eyes dart to the kitchen table, clear of any debris. He continues to scan the room in silence. Even the carpet looks to be in better shape, though the only way to truly clean it would be to rip it out and burn it. His gaze finally tracks back to Maris, carrying a sneer along with it.

HERO: It *was* clean.

MARIS: No, it wasn't, and it still isn't. I think something might have died in the walls. Are there supposed to be this many flies in one apartment?

While most would welcome the help, it only reminds Hero that what he likes most about being alone is that he can keep criticism at a pole's length. A necessity for someone with so much to criticize.

HERO: You got your bed for the night. Now scram.

Maris launches up from her chair.

MARIS: Scram? We have a case to crack.

HERO: Last night was a favor. That's it.

MARIS: You're right. Last night *was* a favor. A favor that I didn't go to the cops and turn you in.

HERO: Nice try, kid, but you turn me in, you turn yourself in.

MARIS: Hm, let's see... little orphan girl who ran away from the cops because she was scared *or* disgraced Ultra Cop who killed some guy... I think I'll be much better off than you are.

HERO: Oh, yeah? Good luck with the zombies or whatever the hell are out there. Those chumps at the station aren't going to help you—

A smile rises across her tiny little face, a counterweight to his sagging, meaty shoulders. He's made her argument for her. It's an argument that depends on there actually *being* zombies terrorizing the city, but there's no use not believing her anyway. For one thing, Kipher's death stinks of something rancid. For another, he's not lucky enough for it *not* to be true. Shit always finds him like a gas station toilet. He decides to take it one step at a time because as is, he has no idea what to do with the girl. Hell, as is, he doesn't even know what he's going to do for dinner.

He just wants to get past the next couple of hours, and he doesn't need Maris getting in his way.

HERO: We're not going to crack anything in the daytime, so relax.

MARIS: I'm not just gonna sit here and do nothing.

Hero gestures to the stack of old Ultra Cop files.

HERO: Then make yourself useful.

He disappears into his room while she begrudgingly plops down on the floor in front of the files. Minutes later, he emerges in slacks, a wrinkled dress shirt, and black dress shoes caked in dust and lint, headed straight for the door.

MARIS: Where are you going?

HERO: To screw chicks and drink beer.

He slams the door behind him, rattling the windows.

The sun fries the browning grass and turns the cemetery headstones into hot plates. Rows of cops in full uniform gather for the funeral, glistening like pigs in the sweltering heat. Their uniforms wrap their bodies like cellophane. A large portrait of an unrecognizably young Kipher sits on an easel beside the coffins. The same easel they're all destined to someday.

It's not hard to get a full turnout for a cop funeral, but any one of these cops would have missed their own kid's birth for Kipher's. He was like an uncle to those younger, a brother to his contemporaries, and as far as anyone older, there wasn't any. Though that isn't why their pink faces have gone sheet white. It was a common refrain to say that things couldn't be so bad so long as Kipher is still kicking around the city, but now he isn't. Even worse, it wasn't a thug's bullet that got him. It was a mysterious tragedy with no one to cuff and a mountain of unanswered questions, and by all accounts, Kipher was the bad guy in this case.

Every single cop would have a harder time hitting the streets accepting the sobering reality that they were just as likely to take a bullet from a thug as they were to turn the gun on their wives then themselves after a bad night. They can't help but see his death as a bad omen, though every last one of them is too big a fool to understand just how bad.

Kipher's empty casket sits next to two smaller ones for his wife and kid, sealed shut to hide the nightmares inside. The mortician did the best she could, but you can't remodel a house made of sawdust. This wasn't a simple car accident. Kipher had changed while driving his wife and kid to the theater. His brain warped until the only thing he wanted to do was smear every last

drop of his wife's blood and guts all over his body. He did exactly that.

They said the kid's body looked like a wetsuit full of pink paste.

Not a bad omen. A promise.

Hidden behind a tree, Hero watches from afar. The distance makes the event seem quiet and insignificant. It makes him feel more alone than ever.

Maybe he should have brought her.

Maybe he should have told her that whatever evil they're chasing took the same thing from both of them.

Or maybe he doesn't owe her shit.

Maybe he can still bail on her.

Officer Cage appears from behind him. Even though it startles Hero, he only shows it with the raise of an eyebrow.

DETECTIVE CAGE: I had a feeling you'd come around.

HERO: And here I was thinking you were a crap detective.

DETECTIVE CAGE: Thanks— Come on.

Cage looks like a teenage boy next to Hero's bulky frame.

DETECTIVE CAGE: Never found his body. Funny how quick they'll close a case when it's convenient.

HERO: What do you want, Gabe? You here to take me in for questioning?

DETECTIVE CAGE: It's Detective Cage. And no. I just wanted to say I'm sorry.

Hero nods and the two men stand in respectful silence. They both share the same empty feeling, too cursed by their masculinity to lighten the load by sharing their pain.

Without another word from either man, Hero marches away. He stops after several paces, not sure the

next time he'll talk to another adult who isn't selling him booze.

HERO (over his shoulder): Something fucked is happening in this city.

DETECTIVE CAGE: I know.

Cage's agreement doesn't make Hero feel any better, but he wasn't expecting much else. He continues onward.

Definitely not a crap detective.

The Earth is home to hundreds of small islands dotting the ocean like freckles. Most of them will never be printed on maps due to their insignificance, or in this island's case, their significance.

Island Yukio, where the heroes go.

It's small enough that you could walk from shore to shore in less than thirty minutes, if it weren't for the lush foliage guarding its shores, extending all the way from the water to the center where a massive mansion dots the middle like an iris. If one wanted to reach the iris, they'd have to traverse a thick sea of spindly blades and poisonous leaves.

Or one could simply descend from the sky.

The well-manicured lawn surrounding the complex acts as a domesticated warning to the bushes, trees, and vines around it. A warning of the inevitable.

Two blue boots slowly crunch onto the dewy grass. Then another pair, and another, until all the Ultra Cops settle onto the grass like raindrops.

The complex is completely enclosed, hiding the treasures within. Pools and gardens bathed in artificial sunlight so convincing that the roof has been repaired countless times from an overeager Ultra Cop launching into the air after one too many Mai Tais. A banner hangs

from the front, “The Rusiv Foundation Welcomes the Ultra Cops.”

The full collection of active Ultra Cops convenes on the grass. Some with capes, some without. Some with masks, some without. All with egos. They make their way into the complex, shaking hands with each other, smiling. All old friends.

Hero bursts into his apartment with a three-pack of tallboys in one hand and a small sack of street tacos in the other, almost forgetting about Maris until he runs right into her standing by the door.

MARIS: I figured it out.

He quells the urge to throw her across the room.

HERO: Figured what out?

Her eyes track to the baggie of tacos.

MARIS: Is one of those for me?

HERO: No.

He pushes past her and settles on the couch, ripping a tall boy out of the package.

MARIS: Rude! I’ve been starving here all day!

HERO: What’d you figure out, sunshine?

MARIS: Don’t call me that. I figured out who’s at the bottom of this.

Hero unfurls the greasy aluminum foil to reveal the mushed trio of tacos.

HERO: They’re lengua anyway. You wouldn’t like it.

Maris snatches one, immediately taking the air out of Hero’s hungry sails.

MARIS (chewing): I studied the rap sheets of all the Super Criminals and their lower-level allies, then cross-referenced who’s worked with who.

HERO: Sounds like a lot of work.

MARIS: Ew. This is gross.

She spits it out.

HERO: I told you. Lengua means tongue.

MARIS: Who eats tongue? You're weird.

Hero stares straight ahead, eating his taco, sipping his beer. For a moment, as the beer sizzles down his throat, he's at peace.

MARIS: So?

HERO: So, what?

MARIS: Do you wanna know who it is?

HERO: I already know who it is. Gashapon.

Her face burns red.

MARIS: How did you know?!

He ignores her and keeps eating as she sulks.

MARIS: I'm hungry.

He throws the sweaty bag of taco garnish at her.

Soaked carrots, spicy onions, and a mini tub of salsa. As she chomps on the soft, spicy carrot—

MARIS: It's not enough...

He throws her a tallboy

MARIS: What is this?

HERO: Calories. Eat up. We're leaving in thirty.

The freeway toward Northridge stretches empty at this time of night, allowing Hero to cruise at 70. Not fast, but a rare freeway speed in Los Angeles. The wind whips at Maris' face from the open passenger side window and she enjoys every second of it like a dog being scratched behind the ears. Her cheeks glow red like a doll, and her eyelids droop ever so slightly. The wind feels like freedom painting her face and she feels in the moment in a way she's never experienced before. All for the simple fact that she's a little drunk.

Ok, *a lot* drunk. A tallboy will do that to a 70-pound body.

Hero turns up the radio in a battle against the wind. Van Halen's "Panama" pops against the cheap speakers as his fingers smack the steering wheel to the beat.

Maris' tiny hand reaches for the volume knob, but Hero smacks it away as if he's been waiting for the transgression.

HERO (Chris Tucker impression): You don't ever touch a black man's radio!

Maris gawks at him with the kind of angry confusion only a drunk can muster. Rightfully so for a ten-year-old girl who has never been given the gift of watching *Rush Hour*.

MARIS: What the—?

HERO: Just don't touch the damn radio.

The altercation is enough to shift Maris' mood from sky-high happiness to rapturous drunk rage. Hero's no stranger to the shift. He's fallen victim to it more than most, but a wave of guilt strikes him upon seeing just how drunk the little girl next to him really is.

Great. Kidnap a girl. Have her sleep in your bed. Get her drunk. Real smart, Hero.

HERO: How about some super drink?

Curiosity wins over her rage.

They stand outside a grody strip mall. One of those random strip malls with a Thai restaurant called "Thai Restaurant," stores with blacked-out windows, and a messy bird shop that's been there for decades. You can't imagine how many birds they sell, but then again, they're probably in the business of cleaning money, not making it.

One of the blacked-out storefronts is CYBER-X PC, a cyber cafe. They are surprisingly still popular even in the age where a solid gaming PC isn't much more than a TV. Full of lost souls leeching off the meager social connection of sitting in the same room as someone who likes the same things as you. Northridge is full of them. Adorned with smoothie bars, home consoles, PC games, and in-house tournaments, all of which CYBER-X PC has none of. It's as bare bones as a PC café can get. Enough reason to stay the hell away from the place if you had any common sense.

Maris suckles a green Gatorade, the color drawing back in her face.

HERO: How is that?

She takes a break from guzzling it down.

MARIS: It's cucumber. I thought it was apple.

HERO: Apple sucks. Cucumber heals you.

MARIS (mouth barely off the bottle): No, it doesn't.

Hero shakes his head and chuckles silently despite himself.

Maris follows Hero into the dark PC cafe. Rows of desktop computers and illegal gambling touchscreens fill the small room. If the lights came on, you'd see the caked dust, nail bitings, and skin shavings covering the keyboards, mice, and monitors, though the lights never do. Nonetheless, the five or so people hunched over their machines seem to be having a good enough time, or at least *a* time.

They cruise right past the sleepy clerk who perks up once his brain catches up with what he's seeing. He chases after them, shouting in Korean. Maris turns to him,

but Hero slaps his paw on her back and pushes her forward.

HERO: Keep walking.

The clerk grabs Hero's shoulder in an attempt to pull him back but just ends up getting dragged along Hero's stride.

HERO: Relax. Relax. I'm here to see Gashapon.

The clerk continues shouting angrily in Korean, wildly gesturing for them to leave. Getting sick of the noise, Hero jams his hand in his pocket and pulls something out, shoving it into the clerk's hand.

HERO: Maybe this will change your mind.

Hero and Maris keep marching on, leaving the clerk to check his prize: a crumpled receipt. He chases after Hero with even more gusto.

HERO (rolling his eyes): Jesus.

Hero turns on a dime and flicks him in the nose, which is as powerful as a full-steam uppercut from a heavyweight boxer. The Clerk arcs seven feet up in the air, pauses for a brief second at his apogee, then slams down on the ground, out cold.

MARIS: You're getting better at that. A lot less blood this time.

It doesn't faze Hero. Knocking guys out is standard MO.

HERO: Stay here and play a game.

MARIS: This place smells weird.

A prostitute snores under a nearby computer desk. Her stockings could be fishnet or just old and worn. Hard to tell over her hairy legs splattered in bruises. It's enough reason for Maris to want to try door #2, so she continues to follow Hero.

MARIS: I'm coming with you.

He knew she would.

HERO: Then just shut up and let me do the talking.

Hero opens the steel door to the back room. It's bare inside. Blank walls and a trap door in the middle of the floor. He casually yanks the trap door open to reveal a staircase. The screeching of metal proves that although it's easy for Hero, it would be a pain the ass for just about anyone else. Trap doors are supposed to be awkward.

Japanese pop music thumps and rainbow lights strobe like there's a magical fairyland at the bottom of the staircase. Hero casually descends the stairs with confidence, which has the effect of encouraging Maris to let her guard down. The rainbow lights don't hurt either.

The bottom of the stairs takes them to Gashapon's office — more brightly lit than you'd expect for an underground lair, and especially compared to the rest of CYBER-X PC. It looks more like a Japanese arcade. Everything smooth and white, reflecting the flashing, colored lights. One second the walls are vanilla ice cream, the next, strawberry sherbet.

Kawaii women in adorable, frilly outfits sit in rows of foldout tables. One might mistake it for a cosplay contest waiting room if not for the women scooping white powder into gashapon capsules, those plastic bubbles filled with toys you can buy for a quarter in machines at laundromats and grocery stores. The walls are lined with dozens of the dispensing machines, filled with Pokémon, colorful keychains, and fake jewelry.

GASHAPON (muffled): Belle.

A girl wearing a pastel blue maid outfit and matching wig launches up and trots to a vault door hugging the far wall. She tugs at the giant wheel, screeching it open inch by inch until it finally pops and the heavy slab of metal swings open revealing Gashapon in a small room behind it. He's overweight, but it's as if his body suffers from the opposite force of gravity, his heft funneling upwards like a piece of upside-down candy corn. Skinny legs expanding upwards to broad shoulders

like he's wearing a shawl of skin and fat. His head sits on top like a melting dollop of ice cream on a cone.

GASHAPON: Hero, is it?

HERO: Glad you opened the door. It looks expensive.

In the small room behind the door, Gashapon sits in the far right of three shallow tubs. One filled with salt crystals, another filled with clay pellets, and one of flat jade. He moves from one tub to the other every so often.

GASHAPON (sneering): What do you want, Ultra Cop?

Gashapon plops into the tub of clay beads, sending a plume of dust up with him.

MARIS: We want answers. And he's not an Ultra Cop.

Hero shoves her aside with so much force that she has to skip on one foot to keep from falling over.

HERO: Don't mind her. She's a bitch.

MARIS: Hey!

HERO: I'm not here on cop business. I'm looking for a bio criminal. Someone using tech too.

Gashapon grows a Cheshire smile and gestures playfully around him.

GASHAPON: And you came here? I'm just a lowly drug dealer.

HERO: Don't be stupid. If I wanted something spread, you'd be the first person I'd call, whether it was drugs or herpes.

Gashapon sneers. His patience already worn.

GASHAPON: Drugs, yes. Information, no.

MARIS: Come on, ya old fart!

GASHAPON: The girl could use some manners. Maybe a couple of years in my prize box would keep her in order. What size is she? Size two?

MARIS: Ew!

HERO: Ew. Listen, bud. Sounds like you know who I am, and if you do, you know I'm not like those other UCs. I'm not looking for trouble and don't give a damn what you do. I'm just asking what you know.

Gashapon sets himself gently onto the jade, his ham-like skin pasting like a sticker on the smooth stone. It does the trick to placate him for the time being.

GASHAPON: I only distribute, and I make a point to do so indiscriminately.

HERO: So, you know who it is we're looking for?

GASHAPON: Perhaps. But consider the fact that whoever you're looking for may have an aim beyond money. They wouldn't need me then, would they?

HERO: That doesn't make sense.

GASHAPON: I don't care what makes sense. Girls, please escort them away.

The Kawaii girls rise from their work and surround Hero and Maris. It would be threatening if they weren't so adorable.

MARIS: Get away from us!

Maris slams her foot into a purple-haired girl's shin who wails out in response.

HERO: Maris! Knock it off!

It's too late. The purple-haired girl pulls a blade from under her frilly skirt with a practiced quickness and swipes at Maris with the speed of a cat's razor paw. That just doesn't sit right with Hero, who if given more than a second to think about it, may have gone with a different reaction. Instead, the bottom of his boot slams right into her chest before the knife even gets halfway to Maris. The girl flies into the wall, sticking to it like a squashed fly from the impact.

Hero knows his mistake before the first scrap of the girl's brain slaps against the white wall.

HERO: Crap! Sorry—

Gashapon's long-barreled pistol is already out and aimed at them.

CHAPTER 7: DON'T LOOK

Thanks to the potent cocktail of child naïveté and drunken confidence, the thought that Gashapon would pull a gun on them never even crossed Maris' mind. She's grown accustomed to the child-sized armor gifted to her by polite society, but in all honesty, getting checked is a vital part of development, especially for a precocious pain in the ass like Maris. But not everyone is so unlucky as to have their cherry popped by a sociopath like Gashapon.

She only sees a glimpse of the gun before time jitters like a flipbook thanks to the sudden onslaught of G-force. Everything goes black as her equilibrium tips and a weight shrouds her like a blanket, though its warmth is a flash in the pan, quickly snuffed out by an impact that leaves an icy coal in her chest.

Suddenly she's back on wobbly feet, feeling her brain in her stomach, vision black from the rush of blood to her head. It takes a couple seconds before sound returns to her ears: explosions like a metronome. *Bam. Bam. Bam.*

As for Hero, everything happens clear as day. He grabs Maris before the first shot ever leaves the barrel and spins so that the first bullet smacks right into his meaty shoulder, followed by a second as his momentum careens them sideways.

Unable to regain his balance without spinning back around and turning Maris into the world's cutest bulletproof vest, he dives to his left, slamming onto the ground with her cupped in his arms like she's in a baby seat. Another bullet smashes into his back as he launches back to his feet and lifts Maris up with him.

He curls his upper body over her like a willow tree, quickly feeling a jab of pressure in his side, then on the opposite side, until jabs rain on him from all angles. It's the Kawaii girls, their blades not sharp enough, nor their nubile frames strong enough to break his skin.

Maris regains her wits, but only enough to cover herself under Hero's shade, hoping it will all end soon. It will, and Hero knows it. It will end easily because he's incredibly good at ending things like this, but there's nothing good about what he's about to do. All he can muster in the chaos are two spittle-filled words muffled by scuffling feet and gunfire.

HERO: Don't look!

He's not protecting her from seeing something that her young, impressionable mind shouldn't see. He's protecting *himself* from her seeing what he's capable of, and just how damn good he is at it.

Maris only catches a blur of motion out of the corner of her eye. A streak of purple slams against the ground then launches back upwards, leaving a dot of red on the floor before coming down again and leaving a circle of red, repeating over and over like a strobe until the floor shines with a puddle of blood. A twisted mass of flesh plops on the puddle in a way that suggests if it were

to be lifted again, it would fall apart like slow-cooked meat off the bone.

Maris ducks down with her hands over her head, not wanting to see the rest. The sound is more than enough. Wet snaps, like tape being ripped off a box.

The sound fills her nose with the smell of fresh pizza.

One by one, the ambient sounds of life disappear from the room, punctuated by wet snaps until they mute entirely. The atmosphere feels emptier, even though nothing physical in it has been removed, only rearranged and liquified.

She hears Gashapon choke on his words, screaming for his life before a loud thud shuts him up. Now all she can hear is the sound of her hyperventilating lungs, amplified in the cocoon of her arms. She slowly lowers them and turns her head, curious to see the monster under the bed, but Hero palms the top of her skull like a basketball and holds it in place.

HERO: I said don't look.

He grabs the back of her neck like a mother cat and practically drags her up the stairs, out of the once-white room, now looking like a butcher shop. The beautiful, meticulously dressed bodies left strewn about the puddled floor like twisted Laffy taffy.

The PC cafe is cleared out by the time they get back upstairs. The sound of gunfire and screams will do that to a place, even one like this. Maris remains in a daze. The night at the pizza parlor comes back into focus for the first time since it happened. It hasn't felt real until now. The violence. It feels like watching a magician saw a woman in half, then seeing how it's done — that it's only a trick — except in reverse order. Suddenly, she can feel the void of energy left in that pizza parlor, the storage facility, and now the complete absence of life from Gashapon's lair. She doesn't need to have seen it to know

with certainty that everyone in there is beyond dead. It's a feeling as real as rain tapping her skin.

They're all dead like her mother's victims. The victims her mother tore pieces out of with her bare hands. The woman she still loves with all her heart. Perhaps it's the only reason she doesn't recoil from Hero's touch. To deny him his violence would be to deny her mother hers. It's too complex a thought for her to grasp in words, now or possibly forever, but it clouds her mind so much that she's not aware of herself until she plops into the passenger seat.

HERO: You idiot!

She gulps down an attempt at a response, her usual sass drowning amidst the waves of a panic attack.

HERO: You're a real piece of shit, you know that?

MARIS: You can't say that to a kid!

HERO: Fuck you.

She's used to going toe-to-toe with just about anyone, but for the first time, someone's thrown the kid's gloves off and she doesn't like it. She's not equipped for it, especially not enough to trade barbs with a 6'5", 260-pound Korean man saying the most forbidden of curse words.

MARIS: Whatever. We made it out, didn't we?

HERO: You're a real pain in the ass. You know that? Your mom was lucky. She probably didn't even die. She probably ran off on you.

MARIS: You're an asshole!

They spend the rest of the silent car ride having two very separate, very loud arguments in their heads with each other. Fever-inducing anger batters around their bodies like rats looking for a way out of the hull of a sinking ship.

He skids into his parking spot and bumps into the parking-stopper like a boat hitting the dock. He nearly tears the door off its hinges as he storms out of the car

into the apartment, but Maris has no intention of following him. She curls up into the seat and squeezes her eyes shut, heart racing, not an ounce tired but needing to make her point all the same. She refuses to move so much as a finger, as to not give Hero even a hint that she might crawl back to him.

She presses her cheek against the scratchy car seat. The fibers stick together, hardened into little spikes from stains left uncleaned.

Why did I have to find the worst Ultra Cop in the world? I hate him.

She daydreams that he's standing at the top of the banister, staring down at her in concern like her mother would. She can practically feel his gaze on her, and her lips curl into a smile knowing it's true. Knowing he's standing there apologetically, waiting for her to forgive him. One day she'll learn that things never work out how you imagine them. She opens her eyes, and unlike the vision in her head, the second story banister isn't even visible from where she lays her head.

Her eyes widen like saucers at what she does see. The driver's seat glistens. Soaked in fresh blood.

Hero cranks his neck to check his wounds in the bathroom mirror. Pain competes with his flexibility for which one's going to stop him from getting a good look. He can see streaks of blood rolling down his back; Thick humps of red gliding downward like whales breaching the water.

His wounds aren't exactly bullet holes. He's too strong for that, but then again, Gashapon's 450 wasn't exactly your average gun. Gashapon knew what to carry. The heavy-caliber bullets may have bounced off Hero's back, but not without gashing him open first. All said and done, it looks like a bear slashed his back.

Hero coughs blood into the crook of his arm.

HERO: Stupid kid.

He splashes sink water on his back, mostly missing, then wipes his hand across the mirror, smearing it pink.

HERO: She's gonna get me killed.

He trudges into his room to find Maris asleep in his bed. A wave of relief rolls over him, though he doesn't understand it. He doesn't really want to either.

He spends ten minutes looking for the vodka Maris stashed somewhere when she cleaned. He finally finds it and sits on the couch with it. It's not a night for cups. He gulps straight from the bottle. It burns down his throat. Everything burns.

Skid Row's usual hum of survival is replaced by the howl of silence. The shredded tents look as if a tornado of knives had threshed through the circus of homes.

Strips of Elia's tarp flutter in the wind, scattered and mixed with the debris. She's four days sober to the day, celebrating by scuttling somewhere in the shadows, though she's not Elia anymore. No one here is who they once were.

CHAPTER 8: SLIDE

The night brings another visit from Kipher's ghost, but not through the clouds of Hero's cigarette smoke. Instead through the burn in his throat. An invitation sent from the unignorable stationery of a bottle of Stolichnaya. Each sizzling gulp communicates a disparate part of Kipher's message — random fragments, dissolving as quickly as they form, forcing Hero to drink more and more, chasing after the precious words like they were messages in bottles. The more he desperately paws at the water to grab them, the more they bobble away in the waves of his own creation.

No time for paper, he scribbles straight onto the coffee table, documenting everything as quickly as he can, only setting down the pen to pound back more Stoli to reconvene with the dead once again. By the end of the bottle, the coffee table is a mess of incoherent scrawling, as if Korean hangul characters had exploded onto it, fragments of them sprawling everywhere, losing their meaning unbound by the constraints of order.

Hero had been attempting to write in English. All the same, the message is clear. To Hero at least. Pleased with himself, he welcomes the hangover that's already jangling the keys outside his brain's door, ready to stumble in to roost. A sign of hard work, not degeneracy in this instance. Like sore muscles after a workout.

The hours slip away, lost. Witching hour memories plummeting to their deaths after falling through the holes in his brain. Forgotten like ancient travelers who took the wrong step on their journey through the wilds.

It's daylight in the blink of an eye. Hero sits up on the couch, head pounding so hard he wishes he could zip open his skull and massage his brain. He's struck by the fear that he might try one day, given enough vodka, whiskey, or whatever else is on sale that day, though the worry dies quickly. There's enough to be afraid of as is.

His clothes stick to him, and he can smell his own stink: blood and sweat, like a butcher shop 24 hours into a blackout. The sound of sprinklers outside inspires him to wash himself, but as he stands, the sound reveals itself to be the shower.

He presses his nose against the bathroom door, incapable of doing much else at the moment. Down. Up. Back. Forward. Every direction hurts. Especially forward. Is she even in there? She could easily have turned the shower on for a concealed getaway. It seems all too reasonable to him. He wouldn't want to sleep under the same roof as him either. Not after what he did last night. He prays to the nothing that he believes in that she's there. They have work to do. So much work to do.

HERO: We're going out.

His voice surprises him, like it's coming from under a pile of rubble. It's met with no response. Perhaps he's right and Maris doesn't want anything to do with the monster responsible for the Kawaii bloodbath.

HERO: Get ready!

The water squeals off.

MARIS: I am! God, you stink! I can smell you from in here, you know?

Her sassy tone sends a wave of relief over him. For a moment, his headache subsides, but it comes back so quickly that he's not sure if it was ever even gone. He presses his nose against the door, enjoying the faint scent of soap and steam, but she yanks the door open, causing him to stumble forward, crashing into the shower with the grace of Chris Farley.

Maris leans against the dewy bathroom wall wrapped in a towel that looks more like a blanket on her.

MARIS: I don't have any clean clothes.

Hero lays contorted in the tub. Thanks to his hangover, he's just as uncomfortable as he would be standing anyway.

HERO: Ugh... Borrow some of mine.

MARIS: Look at you. You're a moose.

HERO: Then cut 'em up and sew 'em or something.

Maris glares at him, cycling through a dozen comebacks, settling on marching over and turning the shower on.

HERO: Hey!

She stomps out into the living room.

MARIS: Where are we going anyway?

She's gone and out of earshot before he can answer. The cold water slowly warms as it taps against his clothes.

A baggy shirt hangs down to Maris' knees, covering a pair of hero's shorts cinched tight around her waist, looking more like pants on her. The added heft and odd shape of the outfit gives her a unique look that appears

almost intentional. Hero stands in front of her, freshly showered, his hair fluffier than normal after a good wash.

The baseball field gravel crunches loudly under their feet, amplified by the silence of the empty park. There's usually a couple of homeless people around, but not today. No one notices that they've disappeared almost everywhere. Why would they? You don't look a gift horse in the mouth.

HERO: If you want to hang around me—

MARIS: I don't want to hang around you.

His headache begs him to avoid any argumentative detours, so he continues.

HERO: If you're going to be around me, you can't be useless. You've gotta learn how to be like an Ultra Cop.

MARIS: Does that make me an Ultra Cop in training?

HERO: No. Of course not.

MARIS: Oh, right. Because you're not an Ultra Cop.

HERO: That's not why!— Just shut up and listen. Maris squints up at the sun.

MARIS: We should have worn sunscreen.

HERO: I'm gonna kill you if you don't shut up.

MARIS: That's not very hero-like of you.

Blood dribbles out of Hero's ears. Maris is wise enough to let up, momentarily.

MARIS: Ok. Fine. Go.

HERO: If you're going to be like me—

She rolls her eyes.

HERO: No commentary! Not even with your stupid face.

She gives him a blank look in response. He regains his composure.

HERO: If you're going to be like an Ultra Cop, you need a special move. I have my Apocalypse Punch—

MARIS (Matter-of-factly): The move that destroyed that building and killed all those people?

His face tightens to an expression she's never seen on him before. It sends a chill of shame down her spine.

MARIS: Ok, yeah. I get it.

He nods, extinguishing her shame.

MARIS: So, I should have a special move.

Maris flails wildly, looking far more impressive in her head than the messy tangle of limbs that it actually is.

MARIS: How about a flying kick? Or a super karate chop?

HERO: No. You're too weak.

She freezes in place, now *her* eye twitching and ears bleeding.

HERO: A little runt like you needs to evade.

MARIS: Evade? What kind of hero move is that?

HERO: Shut up and just try it. Go over there.

Maris skips over to home plate.

HERO: All right, you run at me and slide under my attack, like a baseball player. And you better do it, sunshine, because I'm throwing a real punch.

She knows him well enough by now to know he's not bluffing. In a world where the most stressful thing in a ten-year-old's life should be show-and-tell, nerves creep up her chest like a rash. She gulps, trying to play it off as an annoyed sigh, then snaps into focus. No home. No mom. An inevitable zombie future. All she has left is her grit, so she digs her toes into the gravel and darts towards him.

Hero takes a second to appreciate her speed before rearing his arm back for a punch.

HERO: 1% power... Apocalypse Punch!

The hair on her arms stands and her hair frizzes from the sudden force emitting from Hero. Her eyes bulge in fear and amazement at the phantom force she's headed straight towards. She glances down at the gravel below

her, passing like shooting stars through the dust clouds of her feet. The glowing meteor of his fist stares at her with evil intent as it grows ever closer.

She's not sure if it's her reflexes, or the effect of staring death in the face, but her legs give out from under her and her knees carve into the ground, grinding to a pathetic halt in front of him.

MARIS: OWWWWWW!

Maris flips over to expose her shredded knees, peppered with gravel. Hero stares, his fist still up for his stillborn punch.

MARIS: That hurt! Why'd you make me do that!

HERO: Stop crying, sunshine. You were supposed to slide foot first.

MARIS: How am I supposed to know that?!

HERO: It's your job to adapt to the situation. Find a way.

He brushes her knees off, smearing blood and stone across her legs.

MARIS: Stop!

HERO: Don't be such a baby.

He grabs her kneecap to hold it still, but she kicks his hand away.

MARIS: Don't touch me!

HERO: I'm trying to help, you brat!

He reaches his hand out to help her up, but she ignores it and launches up on her own. Tears in her eyes.

MARIS: Don't touch me, you loser!

She stomps away with a limp. The sight fills Hero with self-disgust, unrivaled even by the blood-soaked dresses and mangled corpses of the Kawaii girls.

Scraped knees and broken promises make monsters just as easily as death and destruction.

The car ride home is silent except for Maris' occasional sniffles. Upon getting home, they find comfort in the routine of walking into the apartment and ignoring each other. She sits directly at the kitchen table, shoulders hunched, doing nothing more than existing. She's putting on a show of misery. A show that her mother would always buy front row seats for, met with rave reviews.

Hero is only inside for a second before stomping out the door. She's relieved as much as she hates to see him go. No longer a witness to her pain. Her belly whines. At least with him gone she can do something about it without breaking her performance. She gives the cupboards a perfunctory check. She already knows there's nothing there. She quickly sits back down, not wanting Hero to return to see that she's moved from her spot, as if staying in the same spot would better convey her anger towards him.

Twenty minutes later he barges in with two Steel Reserve XXL tall boys in each hand — the strong stuff — and a styrofoam container of Chinese food balanced on the crook of his elbow. Noodles drape over the side of the container, slapping against his arm. The thick smell of orange chicken coats her nostrils.

He plops down at the coffee table, flips open the lid, and digs his fork into the container, taking a big mouthful. He hasn't even started chewing before he stands back up and takes the tall boys outside with him. Maris watches confused and hungry. The orange chicken glistens on top of the noodles like diamonds.

She bends the blinds down to spy on him. He's leaning against his car, chugging a Steel Reserve. At 13% alcohol, it's more hard liquor than beer — which is what they call a malt beverage. It's a guaranteed headache in a can, but Hero's hoping he can bargain a couple hours of peace before that happens.

She looks back at the food. *Why would anyone leave good food like that?*

She watches him drink the first can, which doesn't take as long as it should given its size and the strength of the poison inside. All while studying the slow, subtle transformation that occurs. The first half of the can, he's just getting through it, leaning against the car, feet planted on the ground. By the time he crushes it in his hand, he's shuffle-stepping around his car, dancing to music only he can hear.

Maris wants to keep watching the odd, lycanthropic transformation occurring before her eyes, but the whine of her stomach has crawled up her spine to become a pain in the back of her skull. She can't take it anymore. She decides to have one bite.

He said it himself after all...

It's your job to adapt to the situation. Find a way.

She sets herself in front of the food, carefully studying the tray, fearing Hero might have a photographic memory and know exactly what state the food was in before he went outside. She counts nine chunks of pepper chicken, which means she can have one along with a single twisted fork of noodles without him noticing. She twists a clump of noodles onto the fork, looking like a wig hanging off a broom, and shoves it in her mouth. She follows it with a big ball of chicken, stretching her cheeks out like a chipmunk.

She chews it at the window to make sure Hero doesn't catch her in the act. Luckily, he's still bobbing around his car like a moth at a light, talking at passersby who quicken their pace upon finding themselves in his spotlight.

She can hear him faintly through the window:

HERO: Arm wrestle me! Come on! I'll go easy on you!

It looks like she has time to steal another bite, so she hops back to the table and takes another forkful, gleefully devouring it. She looks down at the container: visibly emptier.

Her heart races.

He's going to be so mad. He's already mad. He's mad at me. That's why he's outside. He doesn't want me around. He wants me gone. I ate his food. He's going to hate me more. He's going to leave. He's going to die.

When Hero finally stumbles back inside, Maris is feigning sleep on the couch. Under her logic, he can't make her leave as long as he thinks she's asleep. With her eyes squeezed shut, her ears follow the crinkle of a plastic bag that follows his stomping steps into his room.

She relaxes upon hearing his bed springs ache against his weight. She can sleep comfortably now, but her heart spikes at the sound of him heaving off the bed seconds later. She squeezes her eyes closed, hearing the crinkle return along with his heavy steps. She can feel his gravity hovering over her for a second before something light plops on her shoulder, followed by the slam of his door closed. She's afraid to look. *What if it's a bomb?* With her eyes still closed, her hands prod it, feeling a tiny flap of cardboard, followed by soft fur. She opens her eyes and grabs it. It's a cheap, rainbow-colored teddy bear with the tag still on it. \$2.99 Great Value.

She hugs it tight to her chest, the cardboard stabbing against her, but she doesn't care. It's the softest thing she's felt in days.

Hero lays on his mattress feeling sleep crawling over him. The kind of sleep you only get after a good day's work.

It's your job to adapt to the situation. Find a way.

CHAPTER 9: RAINWATER

Rain taps against the cheap metal gutters like a snare drum. The sound is joined by the percussive crackling of two mouthfuls-worth of leftover Chinese food on the stove. The rain makes time feel at a standstill, safe to let your guard down — to let your feelings out — because they'll be washed away with the water.

Maris sits at the table, prancing her teddy bear on top of it, imagining the table is a long stretch of desert, and the bear is finding his way back home. The tag still hangs from its ear, as if she's expecting it to be ripped from her hands and returned to the store at any moment. She hadn't even thanked Hero for it, afraid that even the reminder would instigate him to snatch it away. She's thankful just the same.

Hero pushes the mass of MSG around the pan with a spatula. Whatever plans they had for the day have been crushed by the surprise rain, though it's come at a good time. Their old-school gumshoeing has hit a wall, plus the body count is getting a little too high. Not that Hero feels all that guilty about killing a bio-weapons

scientist and a drug-dealing pimp. He does, however, feel bad about turning Gashapon's girls into pulp, but then again, those girls had tried to kill Maris. Not to mention Gashapon had fried their brains beyond repair. They were never coming back. Better off dead.

He dumps a clump of the food onto a plate and the rest into a stained coffee mug, sliding it across the table to Maris. They're done eating in less than a minute. They both know they're still hungry. They both know it'll have to do for now, so they don't mention it.

Hero considers turning on the TV, but he's not interested in whatever haze of gray that's playing on basic cable. Who wants to go digging around for a remote just for that? He settles on lighting a cigarette at the table. Three minutes of entertainment, if you want to call it that. Maris escapes from the smoke over to the couch. Hero hadn't even considered the smoke might bother her, and still doesn't as he stares at her through the fog billowing from his lips. She's gazing at a long strip of photo booth pictures.

HERO: What's that?

MARIS: Me and my mom.

HERO: Can I see?

She nods and walks over, handing Hero the strip.

MARIS: Be careful with it.

He cradles it in his palm like a baby bird, studying the two smiling faces, funny faces, duck-lip faces. The same face, years apart.

HERO: She's beautiful.

MARIS: Yeah. She was.

Hero notices the pregnant silence that grows between them. He'd usually ignore that kind of thing — he could give a shit about the kinds of things that people leave unsaid, wanting to be said — but something itches at him this time. The kid needs it. Whatever *it* is.

HERO: What's up?

She hesitates.

HERO: Come on.

He can't recognize his own tone. A softness that feels unnatural only in its novelty.

She takes a moment before continuing.

MARIS: I hid at first. When it all started. When my mom...

Hero catches himself gripping the photo strip. He forces himself to relax as she continues.

MARIS: She didn't come after me. Maybe at first. I dunno. Maybe she did. Maybe she would have. I dunno. I hid under the table. She went after everyone else. And those people became like her. And they went after people. Until they were all like her.

Hero feels out of his body, like he's watching himself listen to her.

MARIS: She was the only one there when the cops came. She chased the others away. She protected me.

HERO: Protected you?

MARIS: I don't know, ok?!

HERO: Hey, hey. It's OK. I'm just trying to understand.

MARIS: Maybe she didn't. I dunno. She... I was under the table. She was there the whole time. She didn't come after me.

Hero watches her face burn bright red. Almost purple. The poor girl has got so many damn feelings in her, he's not surprised her skin doesn't rip apart and flood them all out.

MARIS: She didn't... the cops came and they...

With her on the verge of tears, he grabs her by the shoulders — almost presses her to his chest — but he's got no muscle memory for that kind of tenderness. Doesn't know how to do it. But he does his best.

HERO: She protected you kid. Because she loved you.

MARIS: I just don't know why she did all that. Why did it have to happen...

He watches her fight to keep it together. He prays she does. He doesn't have what it takes to handle it if she doesn't.

But she's better than him. She keeps it together. As much as she can. But he's still gotta step up. He's gotta say the right thing, but he doesn't know how to do that, so he says what comes to him.

HERO: I didn't know there was a kid in the building. There wasn't supposed to be. Damn place was condemned. Thought it'd be easier to level the place than chase that fucker around for an hour. He was a Super Criminal. He could handle it.

Maris' complexion fades back to normal as she listen.

HERO: It was a while until they found the body. Buried in the rubble under his blanket. All alone.

Maris: The kid?

He nods.

HERO: It wasn't good, sunshine. Wasn't good at all. That's when they kicked me out. Took my badge. But the force let me off easy all things considered. They were just happy there was no family that could sue. Saved the property owners on the demo of the place too. The guy even sent me a fucking Christmas card for Christ's sake. But people. People didn't let me off easy. Never have. Not that they should, I guess.

He reaches for a drink that's not there, then pulls his hand back embarrassed.

HERO: Everyone kept asking me why I did it. Like it was something I wanted to do. Like I wasn't just being a fucking idiot. They never once asked why a kid had to sleep in a condemned building. It doesn't matter anyway. Doesn't matter if I meant to do it or not. I still think about it. Everyone still thinks about it. If they know

who I am, that's all they see. You know, old people always say that you should just live your life because no one's ever thinking about you as much as you think they are. Well, they do think about you. When you're a fuck up, they do.

They lock eyes. Two wounded deer.

Maris cocks her head to the side.

MARIS: Is that supposed to make me feel better? Because it didn't.

He coughs blood, annoyed, but at least it means she'll be all right. At least for the night.

He sets the picture down on the table and snatches the bear held tightly to her chest. Her heart pings.

He's going to take it back.

He heads over to the living room closet. Junk tumbles out as he opens the door, as if he'd once shoved a dumpster full of crap in there and closed the door behind him, never thinking he'd have to open it again. He digs through the tangled mound, making a mess of the living room. Hell, that's what rainy days are for.

He yanks out a wooden board with a hole in it.

HERO: Check it out.

MARIS: What's that?

HERO: Cornhole.

MARIS: Cornhole?!

HERO: It's not as weird as it sounds.

He leans the board against the far wall and comes back over to her.

HERO: Watch.

He underhand tosses the bear, missing the hole.

HERO: See? Cornhole.

MARIS: That still doesn't make any sense.

HERO: No, it doesn't.

She retrieves the bear and rears her hand back for an overhand throw.

HERO: You wanna throw it underhand.

MARIS: Why?

HERO: It's better.

Despite the advice, she overhands it straight into the hole like a rocket.

HERO: Well, fuck me... First person to ten.

Her face lights up, and in that instant, a bomb could have landed right there, vaporizing them into nothing more than the energy of that very moment, and thousands of years later you'd feel the joy in that very spot.

Maris bops along to Jackie Chan and Chris Tucker singing "WAR" as the credits roll. They only picked up the movie halfway through, but Maris was hooked just the same. It's *Rush Hour*, after all. So much for there being nothing on TV, but with the credits rolling, there's nothing left to distract them from their growling bellies.

HERO: You hungry?

Maris nods.

Hero lumbers up from the couch and grabs his keys. The rain has passed, leaving the sidewalk darkened and lush. It'll be cooked back to normal by the sun soon enough.

HERO: Then let's eat.

The line for Dave's Hot Chicken wraps around the building. The newest trend on the scene. As Hero will shortly note, most of the people in line want something trendy more than they want something spicy. Maris could care less about being trendy.

MARIS: I don't want something spicy.

HERO: Then don't get the spicy chicken. But you have to get the spicy chicken.

MARIS: Is it spicy?

HERO: It's spicy chicken.

MARIS: Why do we have to wait in a line? Is it really good?

HERO: It's just OK, but people think it's cool to wait.

A twenty-year-old knockout in a wide-brimmed hat looks over her shoulder and sneers at Hero.

MARIS: What's *her* problem?

HERO: She must not want hot chicken either.

Hero's got a bit of a disguise on. Baseball cap and big collared coat to help hide his face and obvious frame. He doesn't want to ruin the day by someone spotting him and calling him a killer.

Standing behind them, a middle-aged man wearing a neon fanny pack leans towards them.

FANNY MAN: That your daughter?

HERO: Huh?

FANNY MAN: Is that your daughter?

HERO: What's it to you?

FANNY MAN: I was just asking. My daughter hates spicy stuff—

"What's your problem, man? Back off."

Hero tunes out the fanny pack man as his ears pick up a scuffle near the front of the line.

"Holy shit!"

Glass shatters. Screams rise like a wave. A symphony all too familiar to Hero. The opening notes to violence.

HERO: Stay here—

A streaking blur screams past them, taking the brimmed-hat woman with it. By the time Hero tracks where they've landed, the woman is on the floor. A man straddles her, clothes soaked with grime, and skin jagged

with circuitry, glistening in the sun. He leans his full body weight down on his thumbs, digging them into her eyes as she kicks and screams.

Techno-zombie. Son of a bitch. It's a God damn techno-zombie.

Usually quick to step into a fight, Hero is frozen in disbelief. Paralyzed from actually seeing the monster in the closet. A wet pop snaps him back to reality. The wet pop of the techno-zombie's thumbs digging inches further into the woman's skull.

Hero launches into action and soccer kicks the zombie, sending it flying across the parking lot, wrapping around a pole, but it's too late. The woman convulses, blood gurgling like a fountain from the holes in her face.

Hero snaps his gaze over to Maris. Her blanched face confirms it. She's seen this before. This is it. Everything she's been warning about.

The crowd rushes to the dying woman's aid, but Hero stands between them.

HERO: Stay away!

He kneels in front of Maris.

HERO: How does it spread?!

She's got a thousand-yard stare.

MARIS: What?

HERO: How does it spread?!

MARIS: I... I don't know.

He snaps his gaze back to the woman. The corner of his eye catches movement from where the monster slammed into the pole. It launches up to its feet, standing frozen, save for its head that swivels left and right like a sentry. Just as quickly, it snaps to the left and sprints away.

HERO: Get in the car.

Luckily, Hero's car is double-parked nearby in the tiny parking lot of the strip mall.

HERO (to the crowd): Who was with her?

Silence.

No one. She was there to take social media pictures.

Hero hates himself for what he must do, not sure if he even has to do it, but he's never had a problem with risking being the bad guy.

He turns to the woman's still writhing corpse.

HERO: Apocalypse punch!

His toes smash into the concrete. A blinding, red light flashes, forcing everyone to turn their heads away, feeling heat splash against their cheeks. When they turn back, the woman is gone, a stain of red and blackened ash in her place.

Maris' jaw hangs open as Hero runs up to her.

HERO: I know.

He swoops her up under one arm like she's a bundle of sticks and hauls her to the car.

MARIS: What are we doing?

HERO: Chasing that thing.

He throws her in the car through the driver's side and gets in. Her senses snap back to her.

MARIS: Why is it running?

Hero peels out of the parking lot and slides into the street, his car rocking back and forth like a boat in stormy waters.

The zombie screeches past people on the sidewalk, more interested in running than attacking at the moment. Hero cruises along, keeping up speed. It wouldn't be hard without any other cars on the road, but mid-day he's forced to swerve in the opposite lane to keep up.

MARIS: Hit him!

HERO: We gotta keep it alive!

MARIS: Why?

HERO: A wounded animal always goes home.

Hero wants to find out where the thing came from, though he's perfectly willing to smash his car into it if it

decides to go after anyone else. Luckily, it's making a straight shot South.

HERO: Downtown.

Just as Hero considers their luck, he sees a cop racing towards them through the rearview.

HERO: Shit. Cops.

Luckily, Hero's not driving his famous vehicle, though getting tailed is still a big problem when almost every cop in the city knows who you are, or at the very least can easily describe a six-foot-tall Korean who looks like a pro wrestler. As the cop closes in on them, Hero's gotta think fast.

HERO: Get down!

He shoves Maris down in her seat and yanks the wheel. His Civic screeches sideways to a halt then BAM! The cop cruiser rams into its side, crunching into Hero's door.

Hero stays ducked down, though the cop is way too woozy to make out Hero's features anyway. He smashes his elbow into the side of his door and the energy flows through to the grill of the cop car, splintering the entire engine block and knocking the Honda loose enough for Hero to grind his car away from it.

MARIS: Isn't that illegal?

HERO: This whole shit is illegal!

The car lurches away, struggling before hitting its speed again. Thrills like this don't come often anymore, so despite the trail of pain, sorrow, and bruises left behind, a grin cements on Hero's face.

Keeping up with the creature becomes impossible as they get closer to downtown. At times they only have the screams of passersby to guide them along the way, until they've lost him completely — well, maybe not

completely. There are only two places it might have gone. One of them is Little Tokyo, but that place has been protected for years. Hero can't even step foot there without feeling a little pressure in his head, as if the ground itself can sense the destruction he might bring along with him, ready to attack him if he dares try. Ultra Cops are strong, but old school magic can't be beat. Even though there's no telling if magic even works on whatever the hell that thing is, it's more likely its home is in Skid Row than the magic-fortified Little Tokyo.

HERO: If it's in Skid Row, we'll know right away. Those people don't take any shit.

Hero speeds towards the long-forgotten zone of piss-soaked concrete. It's the one place that's easy to get to since all the cars are going the other way. No one dares make the wrong turn that'll send them driving down camp street. They'll tell you it's fear, but Hero would more accurately diagnose it as shame.

The Honda crawls to a stop on Camp Street. It's quiet. The tents and cardboard boxes are deflated and crushed into the ground. Not a good sign.

He shuts off the engine in the middle of the street.

HERO: Stay here.

MARIS: No way!

HERO: Fine. Just give me a second.

Metal screeches as Hero knocks his door open and gets out. He slams it shut, then kicks it in, bending the metal of the hinge, sealing it shut.

MARIS: You're breaking your car, weirdo!

Hero strolls to the other side, hesitating for a moment since it's the only clean side of his car left.

HERO: Screw it.

Hero kicks the hinge in, then tugs at the door to test it. Nice and sealed shut.

MARIS: Hey! What gives?!

Hero walks away, a nagging itch in his skull telling him he might not make it back. He shakes the itch away and pounds the pavement into skid row with nothing but chance as his guide. Too bad chance and bad luck have a good way of making bed fellows.

He runs down the street directionless. It's quiet. So quiet he wishes there were screams just to fill the silence. The silence gives room to all the thoughts he's been burying for the past couple of days. When he joined Maris on this crusade, only a tiny part of him believed her. Now he's facing the fact that this is all real. These things kill, and if Maris' story checks out, it's contagious to some degree. Who knows how much, but the charred stain of the woman in the brimmed hat proves that he isn't taking any chances.

He's gotta do something about it, at least until the Ultra Cops come back and he can find one he actually trusts. Maybe Harry Dingo. He's an asshole, but he's not a narc. There's always Illusifer. If his fortune-telling isn't a scam, he already knows about what's going on. *Yeah, right. That's why he's partying on some island right now.*

No... This is all Hero for now.

Yep, she's definitely going to get me killed.

A can rattles in the distance. Muffled. He follows the sound. All the buildings are locked, boarded up, or pitch-black inside. The sound takes him to a bread shop with a big display window, painted black. Luckily, time has chipped away at it, dappling it with holes, much like Hero's alcoholic brain. He presses his nose against it, heart racing. Funny thing about being a Mack Truck of a man is that you still feel fear, you just bury it because everyone expects you to.

His eyes strain to adjust to the dark. He holds his palm up to the window. Dust on the floor kicks up, and the glass on the window trembles slightly as his hand illuminates red ever so slightly.

The red-light glistens against something curved in front of him behind the window. His eyes trace it slowly, careful not to dart his eyes around too quickly, lest they lose focus. They reach something glinting at him, pinkish white.

An eyeball.

He quells a gasp. A face stares back at him. Behind it, rows of bodies stand perfectly still. All staring but not looking. Empty expressions like being asleep with your eyes open. Running would be understandable, but there's no immediate threat so he takes a moment to get a better look. Mangled faces. Electronics protruding from pink, puss-soaked wounds.

Level the building.

Something stops the thought. Beauty. It's a woman standing before him. She looks so familiar.

Is it that she resembles the woman from the hot chicken restaurant? No.

That's not it.

His heart stops when he realizes exactly who it is. Maris.

But not.

It's Maris, years older.

It's Sadie.

Hero yanks the door open, tearing metal along with it.

MARIS: Don't ever leave me in here like that again! Did you see anything? What happened? Are they here? What took you so long? What's happening?

Hero settles in his seat, thinking hard about what he must do. He no longer feels like the man he was ten minutes ago. A new weight tugs down on his shoulders. Was apathy his superpower all along? He never would have guessed how easily it could be taken from him.

Apathy is a hole waiting to be filled, like rainwater in potholes.

HERO: I didn't see anything. I'm pretty sure they're here though. We should regroup.

MARIS: Good idea.

CHAPTER 10: HEADSTONES

There's an old saying, "When all you have is a hammer, everything looks like a nail." Similarly, there's a saying used by many Angelenos: "When all you have is an Ultra Cop, everything looks like a Super Criminal."

The news chalks up the massacre at Dave's to a new Super Criminal duo on the scene. They give it a whole two-minute segment before moving on to a story about some bisexual baseball player. Any more attention than that would reveal the holes in their paper-thin explanation, but as far as the 7pm news goes, that's perfectly fine. It did the job as intended: to sell the emotion they wanted to sell. Usually, it's fear, but not in this case. The opposite, in fact. They're selling two minutes of pure-processed comfort. A Super Criminal on the loose? That's nothing to worry about. That's why we have Ultra Cops. It'll be taken care of by Monday.

The news fails to mention the odd string of other random attacks across the city, all conspicuously occurring at the same time as the hot chicken incident. Some psycho maiming some random stranger, only for

them to get right back up a minute later and run off together.

The news isn't talking about it, but the people sure as hell are.

Things are happening fast, and Hero knows it. He's no stranger to the stench of death in the air, but it turns his stomach now. A symptom of having more to protect than to punch. He almost forgot how it feels — the burden of companionship — but now he's feeling its full weight on his shoulders.

Maris spends the rest of the night chattering away, slurring out theories till her very last sliver of consciousness. Even in her deliriously tired state, she's got the situation pinned down more than the evening news, and probably even more than the cops.

Probably?

Definitely.

Someone's controlling these zombies. Not only that. They're getting better at controlling these zombies. As Maris' theory would state, they started with programming. Now they're at remote control. You don't grow a wifi router out of your face and not use it, after all. Not to mention the way the creature moved. Even your typical brain-hungry, deadhead zombie shows more agency than what they chased downtown, at least based on Hero's own personal run-ins with the undead. Unlike *those* undead, resurrected through Frankensteinian science, Maris has deduced that whatever's infected these zombies is contagious, though it's still unclear exactly how. Bites. Saliva. Blood. The circuitry. It could be anything. What they *do* know is that it's not worth risking finding out. They have to destroy every last one of those things to be safe.

She's right about all of it, but ultimately, she's missing a vital piece of information — the key piece of information that changes it all: That her mother is alive.

That she's one of those things and they will have to kill her for good.

Who cares? She's already dead. Been dead for days. Killing a ghost should be easy, but Hero knows it isn't. He knows because ever since the chicken shop, he's been terrified of running into Kipher, turned to one of those things. Nevertheless, at least he knows he could throw the game-ending punch if it came down to it. Maybe Maris could too, given enough time to bake all her grief into a hardened shell, but as is, she's had to settle for dumping all the ingredients into a box and taping it shut. All that grief is still rattling around in there, making a mess that she'll have to clean someday.

Her head hangs crooked off the couch, the corner of her mouth glistening with drool. Hero nudges her into a curled little ball.

Then he leaves into the cool night air.

The dawn sun paints the apartment in a dull, pastel yellow — or grey, depending on what mood you woke up in. Two of Hero's thick knuckles nudge Maris like the hoof of a curious deer. Her lips smack awake and her eyes peel open.

HERO (soft): Put a sweater on, sunshine. I got something to show you.

MARIS (half-asleep): Don't call me that...

Tiny droplets of water cling to every surface in the cemetery. Headstones, blades of grass, and even the jittering squirrels are wet with a morning sheen.

Hero and Maris' feet crunch against the crisp grass, adding to the symphony of morning sounds.

MARIS: What are we doing here?

Hero guides Maris through the oaks to a corner of the cemetery tucked away from the main thoroughfare. They approach a jagged block of concrete cratered into freshly torn ground.

MARIS: Rocks?

HERO: Just look, kid.

Maris stares down at the jagged chunk of concrete. Chiseled into it, messy yet legible: "Sadie Barrow, mother to Maris Barrow."

Maris stares blankly, taking a moment to process it as it penetrates the early morning fog in her brain, eventually boring through the crust that's started to form around the memory of her mother's death.

The emotions creep up on her like water in an old set of pipes, creaking and grinding from deep inside somewhere, puddling out into rusty droplets before the stream breaks through. She snaps onto Hero's leg, hugging it tightly. His jeans darken with tears where her face presses against his thigh. He grimaces uncomfortably, but he loves it just the same.

HERO: Don't hug me, dummy. Put a flower on it.

He pulls a bent, soggy flower from his pocket and places it into her moist little palm like soft soil.

She steps up to the makeshift gravestone with purpose, as if she's part of a procession with millions watching. She falls to her knees, placing the flower gently down in front of it.

MARIS: Thank you.

Hero isn't sure if she's talking to him or Sadie. He doesn't care either. Who needs a thank you when you've got a little girl's glow to know you've done right for the first time in a long time?

They stay until the sun starts to burn their cheeks, and the morning dew is nothing but a memory. Like it was never there to begin with.

What's the difference between an Ultra Cop and a Super Criminal? It's intent. Intent to do good, or to do harm. The same tool, used for starkly different purposes. As for what separates an Ultra Cop from everyone else, it's no different than what separates you from a 6'10" Adonis who can bench press 550 pounds. In many ways, you're the same — bone, muscle, blood — but you're not *really* the same. Arguably not even the same species. That's all it is, just on an extreme level.

The thing is, even Super Criminals generally find it grotesque to use their powers on anyone other than Ultra Cops and bank safes. It happens but it's always frowned upon. Times have a way of changing though. Perhaps that's what's shaken the public about the string of recent vaporizing deaths that have now peppered the city thanks to Hero. Perhaps it's just something everyone could sense but not put a name to. The last thing anyone needs is Ultra Cops and Super Criminals going loco on the public.

The Ultra Cops on Island Yukio could care less as they get drunk, snort coke, and cheat on their significant others.

The debauchery rings at such a fever pitch that the grimy package left on the doorstep is assumed to contain more cocaine, delivered by one of the few drug mules the Ultra Cops trust with discretion, not the jagged flash drive that drops out of it into the palm of Blue Arron.

Maris made tacos. She claimed she could make them better than the taco truck. She couldn't.

Their faces contort as they struggle to chew the unseasoned, rubbery pork. They stare at each other like two cows grazing on garden hoses. Maris snorts a laugh.

MARIS: This is so good. It's like the best taco ever.

Pork tumbles out of Hero's mouth as he smiles a mile wide.

HERO: Best I ever had.

He huffs such a laugh that bits of tortilla and pork blast across the table, peppering her food. She looks down, snorting.

MARIS: Even better!

They lose it. Red in the face laughing. Neither of them sure if they're laughing because it's funny or because of just how tragic the situation is. Neither of them cares.

But happiness is a foreign object entering their bloodstreams. It's not long before their immune systems kick in and notice the intruder. Like the cool chill of a ghoul passing through the room, the guilt of happiness washes over them and coats them with its filth, and their laughter flickers its last dying light.

HERO: Let's watch a movie. I'll order a pizza or something.

Maris nods, sobered by the same mysterious yet familiar fog of sorrow. She wipes the table as Hero lumbers to the couch. He taps the TV on and plops down on the couch while scrolling through his phone for a pizza number.

The picture comes on before the sound. Red and orange bounces off Hero's skin like a campfire, then the sound kicks in at low volume from the loud action movie the night before.

REPORTER: ...are dead.

Hero looks up from his phone at the TV and is hit with an info dump that freezes him in place.

Helicopter footage shows Island Yukio, half sunk, half coated in blood. Ultra Cop bodies strewn everywhere. The ones that aren't already dead are tearing themselves apart, ripping chunks out of their own bodies, or fileting their own flesh off with laser vision.

*UNFATHOMABLE VIOLENCE AT ISLAND
YUKIO*

REPORTER: I repeat, what we are seeing is that many, if not all the Ultra Cops, are dead in what appears to be some sort of suicide pact.

The camera zooms in, jittery and blurry before steadying enough to focus on Blue Arron sitting on the ground, dead-eyed, smashing his fist down on his foot all the way up to his leg, each punch turning its target into mush held together by his blue outfit, like a blueberry sausage. Protrusions in his skin glint in the sun. Microchips.

The dishes clack together as Maris stands on her tippy toes to rinse them under the sink, oblivious.

MARIS: What should we get on the pizza?

Hero's organs feel like they're floating in his body like jellyfish in an aquarium.

HERO: Anything you want.

He turns the TV off. He'll give her one last night of good sleep. After that, he knows he can't make any promises.

HERO: There's nothing good on. Let's play cornhole instead.

MARIS: Yes!

One might think that the worst-case scenario would be for someone to weaponize the Ultra Cops. To turn them into zombified killers. While that's far from what anyone would call an ideal situation, there's a flawed simplicity to that direction of evil. Consider the

difference between drowning in water and drowning in the vacuum of space. The difference between the two is simply hope. As long as there's an Ultra Cop, things might still work out. They'd find a way to cure themselves. They'd find a way to fight it. They'd find a way to win. They're Ultra Cops. That's what they do.

As the last Ultra Cop pushes her fingers into her neck, ripping out her carotid artery with the nonchalance of pulling a bottle of Coke from the cooler, Tetsuo has destroyed the hope of breaking through the water's surface. Paddle and kick all you want. The only direction is deeper now.

CHAPTER 11: SOIL

The temperature boils inside the packed briefing room. The Ultra Cops' corpses aren't even cold yet and most of the cops have already adopted bulletproof vests. They might as well shove lucky rabbit's feet in their pockets while they're at it.

Officer Cage melts in his suit jacket. In the past, he'd wait to take it off until after Kipher, as if the old man was aware of some secret decorum Cage was ignorant to. He continues to keep it on, feeling like taking it off would be another nail in Kipher's coffin. One more notch in the belt of reality.

The Chief stands at the front of the room. He wears a small, white curtain of a mask draped over his face. A less savvy onlooker might assume the chief is a caped crusader, hiding his identity from the world in the same way that many Ultra Cops have been known to do. The reality is far less interesting. He simply doesn't want the glare of the projector blasting in his eyes. Nonetheless, Cage can't help but feel like he's watching an Ultra Cop holding court. Kipher used to call the Chief

“Captain Mayonnaise” whenever he wore the mask, for reasons that must have made sense to him and him alone. Now we’ll never know.

The Chief’s shadow casts across a grid of photos projected on the wall. All retired Super Criminals. Possible suspects in the recent string of LA killings. They’re all big stretches. It’s highly doubtful that Silman the Ape pulverized a self-storage owner into liquid. Not that Cage is so naive to think Orion was only dealing in storage units. Not to mention the culprit was somehow able to be in many places at one time in their most recent attack, a fact that’s being ignored for convenience’s sake.

Regardless, Cage can’t figure it out. Even though Orion’s murder matches the woman outside the chicken shop, the two stories barely make sense together. Half the witnesses cited a zombie — like the many other recent attacks — while the other half said it was a father and daughter who killed her. Cage isn’t happy to hear either of those suspects, especially not in conjunction. It reminds him all too much of that little girl who slipped away on his watch.

Then there’s the horror scene at Gashapon’s. Different than the others. Whoever killed the drug dealer and his concubines wanted it to hurt, but that’s no reason to think it wasn’t the same person.

Unfortunately, there’s only one guy that explains every piece of the puzzle, but Cage keeps it to himself for the time being. Kipfer taught him that. Don’t give a painter an extra color until you know what they’re painting. His gut tells him that Hero’s involved in all of it somehow, but even if Hero did kill Orion, Gashapon, and the woman, Cage isn’t so sure it ends with him. Hero’s most likely just one of the many moons drawn in by the gravity of the real mystery: the death of the Ultra Cops.

Cage is certain that whatever happened to them is connected with that first night at the pizza parlor,

dissuaded only by the fact that nobody's talking about the connection, least of all the Chief. That investigation went straight to the FBI, allowing everyone to delude themselves into thinking the problem is far away from Los Angeles.

The briefing ends without any real momentum. Increased police presence and that's about it. It amounts to "Keep your eyes open."

Isn't that a given?

Cage power-walks towards his office, a cramped little number full of evidence boxes that have since become permanent furniture. Babbie beelines in his direction before he can get there. She's the Chief's assistant, though that title doesn't do her justice. She's been known to hit the streets with her long barrel, single-shot pistol, putting baseball-sized holes in perps. Her bare feet press into the dirty linoleum floor coated in grime as far back as 1981, causing Cage to shudder. It always made him uncomfortable seeing her walk around like that, starting the morning by taking her clean feet out of her heels and slowly blackening them throughout the day.

She plants herself in his path like a stop sign and taps her dirty toes against his shin.

BABBIE: Chief wants you to check out that old Ultra Cop, Hero What's-his-face.

A wave of disappointment and pride hits Cage. *At least the Chief and I are thinking the same thing.*

CAGE: I know him. Why?

BABBIE: Random people exploding.

CAGE: Right. I'll check it out.

He'll stop by Hero's on his way back. After he checks out Skid Row.

Why?

Just a hunch.

The homeless have been disappearing, and if they're not there, then where the hell are they?

The sun shines on Los Angeles. The type of weather that makes a good day of spending two hours standing in line for a TV show-themed burrito at a trendy pop-up. The kind of day that makes people ask, “why don’t we hike more often?”

Despite the weather’s valiant attempt at seduction, the streets are empty. News of the Ultra Cops’ deaths may as well have been a toxic air notice. It worries Cage. He’s always tracked the city’s pulse by how long it takes him to get around, and the pulse isn’t good. Getting anywhere takes forever in Los Angeles. That’s normal and healthy. That’s because Angelenos always have somewhere to be. It takes quite a force to tear them away from their selfish pursuits. Unfortunately, Cage’s cruiser glides past Little Tokyo towards Skid Row in record time.

He hates Skid Row. He doesn’t like dealing with the people. He knows it’s wrong to feel that way, but what can you do? The smell of piss-covered jeans is the same regardless of the unfortunate circumstances that got them that way.

He parks his cruiser in the middle of the deserted street. No other cars appear to be coming down this way anyway, and even if they did, this is the kind of street where swerving out of the way of an abandoned car is welcomed and encouraged.

The lack of people is alarming, but it’s not like it’s something he could bring up to the Chief.

Everyone at Skid Row has mysteriously disappeared.

“Good.”

His footsteps bounce off the surrounding buildings like a metronome. Even with the wide, empty streets,

there's a constricting feeling, like the two buildings beside him are giant waves about to crash down on him.

As he walks further, his ears pick up a faint sound. A crackling chatter so faint that it could just be the beginnings of a migraine, or an auditory memory so old and forgotten that it's nothing but dying shards of sound now. But it's not. Whatever it is, it hits him like nerve gas. His palms sweat, his hair stands on end, and his heart races. It's one of those feelings that comes over you so fast and urgently that it makes you feel ten seconds past reality — a bullet already pierced through your skull while your body and brain slowly come to realize it.

Not knowing what else to do, he reaches for his gun. Not a great habit, but hell, when you have a gun, you get used to using it. His class ring clacks against the butt like a drum roll thanks to his shaking hands. He grips the gun tightly, hoping the cold steel will steady his hand. It doesn't. They've never shaken before. A point of pride for the young detective. Now he wonders if that's only because he's never been in a situation deserving of it.

A low rumble emanates from the former bread shop to his left. A big storefront with blacked out windows.

Would anyone know if he just turned and ran, ignoring it and leaving the possible danger behind him? No, and outside of machismo-driven, beer-fueled conversations around the bar, most would tell him it was the right call, but he's not here to turn around. He's here to shine a light on the monster he knows is waiting for him under the bed.

He checks his palm. Glistening wet. He wipes it on his slacks and regains his grip on his gun just as his radio crackles to life.

CHIEF: Shit's going down. Get to the Sherman Oaks mall right now!

Cage doesn't even respond before he's turned the other way running back to his car.

Thank God.

Hero lets Maris make the discovery about the Ultra Cops on her own. She's a mile a minute, a panic attack clashing with her type-A need to control the situation.

MARIS: We're so screwed! What are we gonna do without the Ultra Cops?

HERO: I'm an Ultra Cop.

MARIS: *Was*. And you can't even fly.

His third tall boy cracks open, sounding like a magnum being cocked. The 13% alcohol concoction smells like pickles and pennies as he brings it to his mouth.

MARIS: Can you lay off that stuff? We need to focus.

HERO: You're coloring.

It's somewhat true. Maris has planted herself on her knees in front of the coffee table, scrawling on a piece of paper with red, yellow, and lime-yellow crayons (it's all Hero had lying around).

MARIS: I'm not coloring.

Hero knows this, but the alcohol causes his words to tumble out of his mouth like newborn fawns. All the confidence to stand and prance without any of the grace.

MARIS: I'm making a map, lardo.

In the past six hours, she's taken to calling him lardo. It hasn't bothered him until the tallboys started casting their spell, making enemies out of shadows.

HERO: Shut up with that lardo crap.

MARIS: Whatever, lardo. Look. I've tracked all the recent attacks. They all come from Skin Row.

HERO: *Skid* Row. We already know that.

MARIS: No, you *thought* that.

Despite the tender sting in the back of his head signaling an oncoming headache, Hero takes three big gulps of beer, hoping each gulp will be an eraser swab on his headache. It never is.

MARIS: Now we know. So, we go down there, and you do your punchy thing.

That's exactly what they should do, but Hero's avoiding it. Avoiding Sadie. Avoiding all the inevitabilities that come with her.

HERO: You can't just draw on a piece of paper and say you figured shit out.

MARIS: What have you done? Gotten drunk and pooped like four times?

Her accurate observation makes the walls close in on him.

HERO: I'm not drunk, you idiot.

The words come out more slippery than he intended, but he can't regain the balance on his emotions. She shakes her head dismissively, setting off the emotional nitroglycerin sweating out of him. He hurls the brickish can across the room, smashing it into the sink, breaking glass and exploding fizzing poison into the air. Maris jumps. A cocktail of shock and fear coats her face, but it's not at Hero. It's at what she sees on the muted TV.

Helicopter footage shows the police swarming a mall parking lot in full force. A half-circle of swaying bodies stands around a man in a trench coat. Their skin is jagged, flesh turned pink with circuitry poking through infected wounds. The man in the trench coat waves his arms around, making some kind of speech that the news cameras can't quite pick up.

MARIS: Who is that?

HERO: That's him.

MARIS: Who?

HERO: The big bad.

Hero darts to a junk drawer, rifling through it sloppily. Dead batteries, plastic utensils, and vestigial keys rattle inside.

MARIS: What are you doing?

He pulls out a single, bright red key.

HERO: Going there before those cops do something stupid.

MARIS: Like let him get away?

HERO: Like shoot him.

MARIS: What? Don't we want him dead?

HERO: We want to know what the hell's going on, and you don't show up at a mall and standoff with the cops expecting to see tomorrow.

He jams his feet into his shoes as Maris follows suit.

MARIS: I thought you said we couldn't drive the car anymore?

HERO: *We're* not doing anything. And I'm not taking the car.

MARIS: No way! I'm coming with you.

She stands in front of him, posturing like she's ready for a bar fight. He's centimeters away from an emotional tripwire triggering him into shoving her out of the way. An image flashes in his head of her body falling wrong, hitting her neck against the couch, snapping instantly. The thought lasts less than a second, but it makes him feel sick for even thinking it. She's so small, so fragile, and she has no business being anywhere near monsters.

HERO: You're staying here. I don't need you getting in my way.

He doesn't give her a chance to protest, spinning out the door and slamming it behind him before his shoes are even tied.

He stamps down the stairs. The Honda sits in the parking lot covered in a bedsheet. He turns the corner to

the back of the building where a cow-sized, rusty metal container is chained to the wall. Not that it needs the chain. The container looks like it weighs half a ton. He pushes the key into the lock causing the entire sidewall to pop off and slam to the ground, revealing a bright red motorcycle inside, beefy and thick. It looks like a big red bullet with a seat. A decal on the side reads "UC 201" in thick white letters with the LAPD logo scratched out beside it. He drags the beast out of the box and swings his leg over it, conjuring the engine to life like a horse neighing on the first mount.

HERO: Been a while.

He rips the gas, going from 0-60 in less than three seconds, whipping around a corner in a maneuver that would make Evel Knievel lose his lunch.

Cage stands behind the makeshift barricade of police cruisers in the empty mall parking lot. Everyone from first-day rookies to retirement-ready old-heads drape against cruisers with their guns pointed at the man and his retinue of swaying corpses.

His name, as we know, and as he has since declared to the police, is Tetsuo. His Caucasian features suggest that it's a self-given name. Perhaps one of the many young men lost to the culture war, who found refuge on the internet where they could become anybody except themselves.

He smiles, tickled by the wires slowly inching through his brain like tree roots in soil, but also by the joy of his plan coming to fruition. He's eager to finish this. The Ultra Cops are gone. That only leaves one other person that could stop the coming nightmare: himself.

He speaks deliberately with waving gesticulations. His arms seem to flow over a current of passing code only

he can see. His speech, meticulously written over years, flows out of him with rehearsed precision and spontaneous passion.

Future civilizations will find my words clawed into concrete by doomed souls desperate to share their end.

This is Tetsuo's 72 virgins moment. He can die and ascend. The electric current of his being will live forever in the circuitry. To paradise.

CAGE: What's he been saying?

CHIEF: Bunch'a nonsense. Sounds like a poem or something. Can't really hear him.

Tetsuo, ignorant to his failed message, moves forward with the plan. He digs his hand into his pocket, prompting the cops to play their part just as expected, as if on marionette strings.

I love reliable code.

A rookie voice cries out, "He's got a gun!"

Tetsuo's empty hand emerges from his pocket in an overly animated, almost cartoonish gesture of pulling out a gun. The Chief chokes on his own spit, missing the split-second chance to command a hold-fire before the rookies begin the symphony of bullets that give all the other guns permission to sound off. Barking dogs, barking at each other as much as anything else.

Crack. Crack. Crack. SHOOM! SCREECH! FWAP! FWAP! FWAP!

A roaring red streak flies past Tetsuo, leaving a big black blob in front of him as it continues off into the distance with a crash. Bullets smack into the blob. Not a blob. A body.

Hero's broad shoulders shield Tetsuo from the volley of bullets smashing into his back. Tetsuo looks up at him in shock. It's the first real human emotion he's felt in months, and it scares him.

CHIEF: Hold your fire!

The crackling gunfire trickles to a stop. Hero's shoulders heave up and down as his lungs work through the pain. The techno-zombies stand just as they did before, undisturbed, even as stray bullets pelt them.

HERO: You ain't getting off that easy. Tell me how to end this!

The processors in Tetsuo's brain take back control, seeing things clearly, calmly.

TETSUO: Only the source can end this. The root killed. I am merely he who sowed the seed.

Hero can't help but find it ironic that a guy who looks like his mom banged a Dell is using a gardening metaphor. If anything, it proves that the guy isn't going to give up info easily.

HERO: Then let's have a chat.

Hero grips the back of Tetsuo's trench coat like a mother cat grabbing a kitten's neck and sprints off towards the mall, bullets hailing at him in response. Most of them miss as he gets there in no time flat thanks to the added adrenaline surge. At the front entrance, he hurls Tetsuo up like a supernova garbage bag, sending him sailing up and disappearing over the roof.

Hero bends his knees like coils, his butt only millimeters from the ground, then launches upwards, needing to grab the ledge and pull himself up to make it all the way to the top of the single story. He strains, reminding him that those bullets did damage.

HERO: Ok, asshole. We don't have a lot of time and you only have ten fingers. Which one should I break first?

Hero trudges over to Tetsuo cowering next to a vent unit. There's a certain pleasure Hero gets from seeing the man's body twisted in fear. That pleasure dissipates as he realizes it's not fear. It's the impact of extreme momentum. Tetsuo's head lays smashed against

the vent unit, bent backward at an angle that would make a contortionist blush.

Dead.

HERO: You fucking idiot...

BOOM!

Thunder rocks every molecule in the air. Hero looks up at the sky, clear and blue.

Not thunder.

The high-caliber bullet smashes into his neck, shattering into a dozen tiny pieces on impact, splitting his neck open like a portal to hell.

Hero had never even considered the sniper positioned far behind the other police.

Sound disappears and his vision turns to a fisheye lens passed through a toddler's snotty nose. Nausea infects every cell of his body. He just wants to lay down. If he could only lay down. But he has no idea where down is. Everything feels like down as he trips over the ledge and falls toward the ground.

As his heavy body crashes into the concrete, he sinks into it like water as it crumples under him, screaming and whining.

CLUNK. CREAK.

Maris steps out of the Honda and peeks up just long enough to check on the large man embedded in the roof of the car before getting back in and hitting the gas.

CHAPTER 12: WORMS

Maris speeds away from the mall like she's playing an arcade racing game with plenty of quarters to spare. Not that a speedy getaway is completely necessary thanks to Tetsuo's posthumous program. The moment his neck snapped, his brain's dying electrical charge sent a signal to his retinue of techno-zombies, bringing them to life. It must have been one hell of a sniper to make that shot with a pack of demons rushing their friends. Too bad they hit the wrong target.

Maris has enough sense to drive a couple miles away from the mall before stopping below an underpass so Hero can get in. She can't wait to see him. Can't wait for his praise.

She pulled it off.

Somehow.

She saved him.

She pops open the door and leaps out, bouncing on the balls of her feet to peer up at him.

MARIS: Get up, lardo! We gotta get outta here!

The metal whines as he pries himself from its grasp and falls on his hands and knees, blood flecking the ground around him.

HERO: Can't... go... home.

He wheezes, his chest rattling like an empty paint can. Congealed masses of blood and puss slip off his wounds and slap on the concrete like afterbirth as his enhanced immune response works overtime. Maris' hands go numb at the sight. She's seen him bad. Flat on his ass drunk. Even shot up before. But that night at Gashapon's gave her the false sense that Hero could survive anything. The sagging mass in front of her proves otherwise.

Her voice shakes. She can't even muster to hide it.

MARIS: Are you ok?

HERO (wheezing): Shatto lanes... Now.

MARIS: We need to get to a hospital.

HERO (wheezing): No... Know it's me.... Hide.

He heaves himself up to his feet, his top-heavy mass almost sending him tumbling forward. He has to brace himself against the car to make it to the passenger side. Maris watches like it's a wildlife video. The kind where you're glued to the TV, praying against the natural order.

HERO (slurred): What're you standing 'round fer? Get in!

She does as she's told; afraid he might fall apart in front of her if she doesn't. She's back in the driver's seat by the time he's tugging weakly at the passenger door. To his credit, it's so badly bent that any normal person would have a hard time opening it, but this is Hero we're talking about, and he can't even make it budge.

HERO: Open'it!

Maris reaches over, feebly attempting to push the door open with outstretched fingers.

HERO: Com'on!

The pain, anger, and panic in his voice injects jet fuel in her attempt. She spins to her right and kicks the door open with both feet, sending it swinging out in front of him. Hero practically spin-dives into the seat like a one-winged airplane as the car rocks and creaks under his weight.

HERO: Shatto. Now!

A note of pride strikes Maris for knowing where he's talking about, but it's quickly muted by the coppery smell of blood. It's a smell so baked into our DNA that even a child knows to fear it. She stretches her leg to smash the gas pedal and tear back down the road, but she hasn't the sense to wonder why the cops haven't followed them.

The car creaks into the underground parking structure of Shatto Lanes, a 70s bowling alley with thin, matted carpet stamped down by thousands of feet over the decades. A home to old arcade machines and a cheap bar built for local alcoholics to hide their painful thoughts behind the droning clack of pins. It's a quiet afternoon. Between the odd murders around town, the Ultra Cop's death, and the standoff at the mall, rumors are flowing. The staff would rather go home than gamble their lives for \$9.15 an hour plus tips. It doesn't help that the owner already caught a plane to Maui at the first sign of trouble.

Hero doesn't plan on bowling, if that much isn't obvious. Shatto Lanes is home to more diversions than arcades, billiards, and bowling. As the car chugs through the yellow-lit structure, Hero points a limp hand towards a ramp leading further down. Maris follows it, using every muscle in her arms to tug the unpowered steering wheel around the downward loop.

HERO: Car wash...

She doesn't ask any follow-up questions, feeling his tension coiled next to her like a watermelon bound by a hundred rubber bands. The car grinds towards a grey-haired scarecrow of a man posted at an A-frame sign advertising a \$9.99 car wash in front of a blockade of cones leading to yet another ramp further down. The man grins once he sees it's her in the driver's seat — a spider watching the fly buzz closer to its web — but his face straightens and blanches once he spots bloody Hero slumped in the passenger seat. He rushes to the window.

MAN: Hero?

HERO (weakly): Let us through.

The man quickly moves the cones out of the way and waves Maris in, as if he were suddenly a waiter at a 5-star restaurant serving the command of a Hollywood star. The car lurches forward past the cones into a steep drop-off deeper underground.

The ramp downward goes much further than Maris expects. The dot of light in the rearview gets smaller and smaller until it disappears. Her sweaty palms grip the wheel tightly, and just at the moment where her senses start to tingle — the first sign of her body sensing something wrong before her brain does — the ramp opens up into a warmly lit parking lot. Despite being underground, it looks like a summer's night. Similar to the Venetian in Vegas, the brightest minds in the world got together and found a way to make the fully enclosed indoors feel like the outdoors, completely overlooking the fact that the real thing takes a whole lot less effort. Then again, places like this deserve to be buried in the dark.

The artificial light isn't the only falsehood. Tall fences and faux vines cover the concrete walls, adding the extra illusion of privacy to the already private underground lair. The far wall wears the facade of a chateau, including a fake, glowing window, as if a warm fire flickers inside. All in all, the door is the only real part,

though the manufactured moonlight does just enough to trick the eyes into thinking it's all real. Just don't get too close. That's when you can see just how ugly it actually is.

Maris parks crooked in one of the many empty spots. It's a slow night, but there are still a few cars scattered about. To be honest, it's not a bad place to hold up while techno-zombies run around at ground level.

As if expecting them, an elderly man emerges out of the chateau just as they park. He walks straight and strong despite his gaunt, withered frame. His red robe flows behind him, looking ceremonial yet couture, like a monk mixed with Hugh Hefner. Maris has no way of knowing, but the guy looks just like Kipher if he'd had the fortune of living a couple more decades.

MARIS: Help!

Maris darts out to the passenger side, planting a foot against the car to yank the door open. The elderly man shudders for a brief moment upon seeing Hero but catches his cool as quickly as he loses it. He whistles. The sharp sound bounces off the walls, immediately conjuring a tiny, young clone from the chateau.

PARK LE MIEUX: Get him in a room immediately. Prepare a pepper bath. Put *her* in room 12.

Hero lifts his head, muscles trembling.

HERO: I'm not *that* weak. Same room. Any funny business, I'll take it as a dare.

His fist pulses a faint red glow. He might be busted open, bleeding, and barely conscious, but he's still got enough juice to turn everyone there into gelatin. Park Le Mieuh silently concedes, though the threat rolls right off him anyway, simply testing Hero.

PARK: Who's the girl?

HERO: She's off-limits.

Park smiles. His age shows in his teeth. Thin and yellow.

PARK: No one is off-limits, Hero. You know this.

Park Le Mieux turns to his assistant.

PARK: Get them anything they need. And let everyone know, if anyone touches the girl, we've got the last remaining Ultra Cop under our roof.

The chateau opens into a beautiful, salmon-colored lobby. The smell of jasmine fills the room, indoor plants crawl up the walls, and a pitcher of cucumber water coated in cool droplets of condensation sits in the corner. The assistant leads them quickly through the room, past a heavy vault door that takes several tugs with his foot propped up against the wall to open. Luckily, there's a copper pad bolted to the wall meant for just this purpose. Maris can't help but remember a lesson learned only days earlier at Gashapon's: Beware what's behind tricky doors.

As soon as the door groans open, the sound of screaming and crying seeps into the room, growing louder as the door inches open like a volume knob for torment. It opens into a hallway where the walls, floors, and ceilings are an unpainted grey concrete dappled with dark stains: the rotten insides the facade so desperately tries to hide. They march down the long hall, passing steel doors laid out like hotel rooms, turning corners until finally stopping at a door where Park Le Mieux waits, inexplicably there before them. The door has a slight bend in the middle as if someone had punched it from the inside and it opens into a hotel-like room. Not 5-Star, but a welcome and surprising improvement from the hallway.

Hero looks a bit better, but much like the room to the hallway, it's more due to comparison than him being in good shape. He stops next to Park, finally able to talk without a thick wall of pain and disorientation between them.

PARK: I didn't see you at the funeral.

HERO: I didn't see you either.

They chuckle at the inside joke that neither Maris nor we understand.

PARK: You can stay as long as you like, but once you leave, you can never come back. Ever. And as always, you are more than welcome to have as much to drink as you like in the worm room.

HERO: Not tonight.

PARK: Of course. Never.

And with that, Park closes the door behind him.

Hero trudges to the bed and gently sits down, as if trying to prevent his healing wounds from rupturing. Maris watches him from the door, nervous as a cat in a new home.

MARIS: He's a bad guy, isn't he?

HERO: People are complicated.

MARIS: No, they aren't.

HERO: He helped us, didn't he?

MARIS: Maybe he helped us because he wants to hurt us.

HERO: Shut up, kid. He's my friend.

MARIS: No, he's not.

HERO: He's somebody's friend.

MARIS: Friends don't make you good. Even Hitler had friends.

HERO: I said shut up, kid.

A bottle of Gunshot Vodka waits for him on the nightstand. The infamous label features a revolver barrel pointed up the neck, inspiring many to drink straight from the bottle to give the appearance of putting a gun in their mouths. Intentional or not, it made for one hell of a free marketing campaign. Hero grabs the gun and twists it open.

MARIS: You're drinking?!

Hero peels off his shirt and pours the Gunshot vodka all over his neck and back. He groans, putting the gun up to his lips and taking the bullet down his throat.

MARIS: Do you need me to stitch you up?

He sneers at her, taking three big gulps of vodka. All she wants is a thank you, or any sign that tells her she's done right, but he's not giving it. He just drinks the bottle as if he's trying to win a race.

She stares at his shirtless body, watching his wounds slowly heal right before her eyes. The points at the top and bottom of each gash slowly disappear until the wounds are nothing more than tiny holes that eventually disappear as well. His gaping neck wound trails slowly behind.

She has a million questions but she's afraid to ask. Afraid to even move, not sure if Hero will snap or simply disintegrate into ash. All she can do is watch him as he downs the bottle. At least it seems to be healing his wounds, or perhaps they would have healed either way and the alcohol is just a way to hold onto the hurt for a little longer as the wounds stop aching and the hangover takes its shift.

Hero inspects the dwindling bottle, unable to tell if there's a couple of shots left or only a drop.

HERO: Go get me some more.

MARIS: Why don't you do it?

HERO: Look at me!

She isn't trying to be a brat, just trying to avoid venturing into the strange building alone, but with a hundred and five-degree fever and leaking bullet wounds, who has time for a child's nuance? She gets up and heads to the door, pausing, hoping he'll change his mind, but her fingers work the lock without a protest from Hero.

She takes one last look at him before stepping out into the hall, the symphony of screams and laughter rising as the door opens. Hero tips the bottle onto his lips,

sucking the last remaining drops out like a baby with its bottle.

The door clicks shut, leaving her out there alone, not remembering which way they came from. The hallway is darker than before. The night lights must have come on.

MARIS: You fight zombies. You can handle this. She chooses a direction and power walks down the hall.

A door opens and slams shut behind her in the distance. She turns, but it's nothing. Just an echo from a faraway door. She turns back — oof! Her face plants right into a man's soft belly.

BELLYMAN: Whoopsie. You OK?

She looks up at the pear-shaped man in slacks and a dress shirt looking like he just stepped out of his job at a low-level insurance company. His belly stretches the buttons near their limits, revealing little ovals of freckled flesh.

MARIS: Sorry!

He kneels in front of her with a thick-cheeked smile.

BELLYMAN: It's OK. What are you doing out here? This is no place for a little girl.

MARIS: I'm looking for something.

BELLYMAN: Aren't we all?

He laughs to himself.

BELLYMAN: You shouldn't be walking around here alone. One wrong turn and you could be in trouble. What are you looking for?

MARIS: Vodka.

BELLYMAN: Vodka?

MARIS: Yeah. Vodka.

BELLYMAN: That's a strong drink for a little girl.

MARIS: I can handle it.

The retort throws him off for a second. She's about to apologize for the comment — something she wouldn't normally do, however, being in a dark hallway in a dark place has thrown her off her game.

BELLYMAN: I know where they keep it. Come with me. I'll show you.

He turns to the direction she was headed, which is enough to get her to trust him — that and the whole being off her game thing. He turns back to smile at her every so often until they reach a door like any other door.

BELLYMAN: Here. They have whatever you want in here. Vodka, juice, candy.

MARIS: In there?

BELLYMAN: Yeah. This is where they keep it all. You're going to love it.

He jabs his key into the door and opens it. The smell of shit and copper floods out—

TRONCE: Everything OK here?

Maris looks back to see a kind-eyed, bearded man in his late thirties standing by a door down the hall. He reminds her of a painter she used to watch on TV. A third-grade teacher to Bellyman's insurance agent.

BELLYMAN: Mind your own business.

TRONCE: Not her.

BELLYMAN: Park doesn't care—

TRONCE: I care.

A major shift in trust happens. Maris realizes that if she's gotta put her money on safety, she better trust the other guy. She slowly backs away from Bellyman.

BELLYMAN: Come on. Don't listen to him.

He's smart enough to quickly realize he's lost.

BELLYMAN: Fuck you.

He slithers into his room, slamming the door behind him. Maris runs up to Tronce.

MARIS: I was just looking for vokka. I didn't know—

TRONCE: It's ok.

Tronce eyes her up and down, calculating just how much help this girl needs. Wondering if he sends her back where she came from, is he just sending her to a different lion's mouth? Then again, Tronce only has so much good man in him tonight.

TRONCE: Go back to your room. I'll tell someone to send it there, OK?

MARIS: I don't know the room number...

TRONCE: I'm sure there aren't many little girls staying here. Park will know where to send it. Can you find your way back?

She nods, thinking about the bent door.

TRONCE: Then go. Quickly. There're a lot of bad people around here.

She nods again before quickly turning and running back to the room, but she stops and turns back to him after a few feet.

MARIS: Are you a bad person too?

Tronce smiles everywhere but his eyes.

TRONCE: I try not to be.

Hero groans when he sees her without the bottle.

MARIS: A guy is gonna bring it.

HERO: What guy?

MARIS: I don't know. Some guy.

HERO: Jesus Christ.

He lumbers up. His gaping wounds have since sealed into pink splotches, though he's nowhere near 100%.

MARIS: What are you doing?

HERO: Stay here.

He slams the door behind him. Any other day she might have chased after him, but the terror of Bellyman

has finally settled in. Her imagination races with what he would have wanted to do to her. All her thoughts are terrible, yet still nowhere near the actual terrifying truth.

Time crawls by with Hero gone. It isn't until there's a knock on the door that she feels the faintest relief, but she quickly realizes it's not him. Hero isn't a knocker, and when he is, it's more like a bass drum than a snare's tap.

The door glides open and the assistant from earlier steps in holding a fresh bottle of Gunshot. He scans the room dispassionately.

ASSISTANT: No Hero?

Maris shakes her head.

ASSISTANT: Must be in the Worm Room. I'll leave it for him. I trust you won't drink it?

Worm Room? An idea strikes her before he can even set the bottle down.

MARIS: You should drop it off to him.

ASSISTANT: There's plenty in the Worm Room—

MARIS: OK. Your funeral.

That's enough to change his tune. He leaves, falling right into Maris' trap. She has no idea where the Worm Room is, nor does she want to wander around looking for it after her run in with Bellyman. Luckily, the assistant will lead her right to it. She stealthily follows him down the hall, keeping her distance, only turning corners after he's done the same. Once she discovers which door he intends to go in, she turns back and waits in her room until she can assume the assistant has retreated to wherever he stays between duties.

She makes her way back to the mysterious room, quietly peeling the door open a crack to peer in. It's dressed like a hazy, dive bar. A scentless layer of smoke hangs in the air. Sticky, red pleather seats and even

stickier lacquered tabletops dot the center. Classic rock drones from an old Jukebox.

Hero sits at an untended bar with a half-empty plastic bottle of whiskey in front of him. That's what gets stocked in the worm room. It makes you angrier than the good stuff. The Gunshot sits next to him untouched.

Three men tremble on the other side of the room like a pack of chihuahuas staring down a Pitbull in the middle of a snowstorm. She recognizes one of them. He's the man who rescued her earlier.

Hero chugs the bottle, swallowing a good 1/8th of it before slamming it down on the bar and turning to the three men with his drunken, trip-wire stare causing them to shake and gyrate even more as if on cue.

MEN (in unison): We are worms.

They fall to their knees, trembling as they crawl towards him, heads hung low like an over-the-top Kabuki theater act.

MEN: We are worms!

Maris watches in stunned silence as the men lick the dirty ground, lapping up flecks of dirt and grime, weeping.

MEN: Please. We are worms!

They crawl closer, bodies contorted in submission. It sickens her, but before she can even begin to understand why, Hero launches off the bar and kicks one of them right in the gut.

MAN (coughing): Thank you!

The man paws at his crotch as he writhes in pain.

TRONCE: Please! Me! Me! I'm such a pathetic worm!

Hero's boot lands right in Tronce's face, instantly smashing his teeth every way other than how God intended. Tronce cups his mouth like he's holding a mouthful of red puzzle pieces between his lips. His other hand shoves down into his pants.

TRONCE (mouth oozing): Tzank yuuu. Gweee argh wurmmss!

Hero lifts his foot, ready to smash the man's spine, but Maris can't take it anymore. She runs in and tackles his leg, hugging onto it.

MARIS: Stop!

Seeing her sobers him up instantly.

HERO: What the hell are you doing here? Get out!

MARIS: You're hurting them!

HERO: They wanna get hurt!

MARIS: That doesn't make it right!

HERO: It's what I do!

Her tears soak through his jeans as she squeezes his leg tight.

MARIS: This place is turning you into a monster!

HERO: I always was a monster!

MARIS: Not to me.

He feels like he's been punched in the nose.

Pressure hits his sinuses. Every shade of color changes. Every speck of grime magnifies.

Why am I doing this?

Because I've done it before. It's all I know.

My programming.

Something clicks. The door. Park stands in the doorway holding two sets of fresh, matching clothes folded in two neat piles.

PARK: It's time you leave, Hero. I think you may be needed elsewhere.

Someone needing Hero has always been a bad sign. As bad as things are in this room, they must be worse out there.

CHAPTER 13: DIMPLES

Back in their room, Hero and Maris throw on their matching, dark blue jumpsuits in silence. Her's bunches up against her tiny frame but otherwise fits well, while Hero's hugs his body like cellophane. Despite being simple coveralls, they look like color-coordinated costumes for two partners on patrol. Maris would relish the image, but too much has soured. She can't understand what those men were doing writhing on the ground, begging to be hurt. She can't understand why Hero would oblige.

She steals glances in hopes for an answer, but he does everything he can to avoid her gaze. Some night, years later, she'll startle awake with the sudden realization that it was shame that drove his eyes away, not anger. Hero gave the wheel to shame well before they met.

He cinches his waistband and leaves the room without a word. So much for them being a team. She follows him out to the hallway where Park La Mieux awaits them.

HERO: Kicking us out already?

PARK: It's bad up there, Hero.

HERO: I'm not used to you caring so much about other people.

PARK: And I'm not used to it being so bad up there.

HERO: We've only been here a couple of hours. How bad could it be?

Park gives a look that's equal parts "you don't want to know" and "the conversation's over."

PARK: Goodbye, Hero.

And with that, Hero marches down the hall. Time to get to work, but before Maris leaves, there's something she needs to know.

MARIS: That man in the Worm Room... is he OK?

Park's lips curl into a smile, showing his thin, yellow fangs.

PARK: He's in absolute heaven.

It sends a chill down her spine that propels her after Hero. This is the safest place in the city and it's a complete nightmare.

They come out to find the assistant waiting by a bright red Ferrari 308 GTB bubbling idly in the parking lot.

ASSISTANT: Mr. La Mieux has gifted you his private vehicle.

HERO: Jesus. Then it really *is* bad.

A second assistant scuttles out of the building carrying two K7 machine guns, handing one to the other before taking guard at the door. They no longer seem like the same deferential men now that they hold hunks of metal death in their arms.

ASSISTANT: You really should go.

HERO: Come on, kid.

MARIS: Where are we going?

HERO: You know where.

Hero squeezes into the driver's seat next to Maris, in the bucket seat next to him, like a tiny egg yolk inside a shell. He feels a lacquer-smooth confidence one can only find after a good buzz, right before falling entirely into alcohol's spell. He coasts on the feeling, but with no more fuel to keep his momentum, it's only a matter of time before he careens back towards sobriety. Until then, he plans on enjoying the ride.

The car leaps out of the ramp like a spaceship leaving dock, blasting past the car wash attendant as he pops a stray techno-zombie in the head with a 9mm. The roots of this disaster have already begun to spread underground to the darkest of human soil. How much have their flowers bloomed above ground?

The tires whine against the garage concrete, as if it was designed to scream in protest at even the slightest excess of speed. The screech of tires swirls into a symphony of screams as the car slides out of the parking lot to reveal the chaos of the streets: Angelenos being chased, run down, and torn apart. The real Angelenos. The ones who keep the city fed and the children cared for. The ones who only have barred windows to hide behind, not gated communities.

HERO: That freak said something about killing the source.

Her eyes light up, joyless.

MARIS: The hive.

HERO: The hive?

MARIS: It's got to be the hive. It's where they all come from.

HERO: Sure, the hive—

HERO/MARIS: Downtown.

Hero gives the slightest of nods as he jerks the wheel to avoid a corpse in a blue apron.

MARIS: You're not dropping me off at home?

HERO: You're in this now, kid. Whether you like it or not. We gotta end this thing.

MARIS: I'm ready.

No, you're not.

HERO: Good. It ain't gonna be easy.

The LA traffic has gone from its usual grid of impenetrable lines to a chaotic crochet of different directions. Luckily, the Ferrari's low, shovel-like body tumbles techno-zombies over it like it was made for this. Park won't be happy, but then again, you don't lend a car to Hero if you want it back without a scratch — or at all.

By the time they reach the outskirts of Skid Row, the Italian piece of trash wheezes and whines. Sports cars are great as long as you don't drive them.

Techno-zombies come and go from Skid Row like ants, not as interested in attacking as they are returning to the hive after performing unspeakable acts of violence or leaving to commit them. Hero shuts off the car, replacing the sound of the bubbling engine with the distant echoes of scampering feet, sirens, and helicopters.

He flips the glove box open. Sure enough, a luger pistol rests in it.

HERO: You know how to use that thing?

MARIS: I think so.

HERO: Aim for the head. I don't think they'll go down if you don't.

She grabs it like a toy, pointing it at Hero's head with innocent carelessness.

MARIS: Like this?

He snatches the gun away from her and throws it back in the glovebox.

HERO: Never mind.

He climbs out of the car like a mole emerging from its den, leaving Maris red faced and embarrassed. She follows him out just as a pair of headlights bathes them in light.

HERO: Who's the idiot stupid enough to come out here?

The door clunks open and Detective Cage emerges from its light.

CAGE: You've been busy today.

HERO: What the hell are you doing here?

CAGE: A hunch.

Cage catches sight of the girl and his brain explodes from the uncanny intersection of missing pieces.

CAGE: Son of a...

HERO: Long story. You here to stop us?

CAGE: No. I'm guessing we're here for the same reason.

Maris studies Cage, impressed that the cookie idiot was smart enough to solve the mystery.

HERO: Stay close.

Maris and Cage jog to catch up as Hero marches onward.

CAGE: What happened back there at the mall?

HERO: Long story.

CAGE: You got a lot of long stories. You'll have to catch me up.

HERO: Is that an official police order?

CAGE: No.

HERO: Then fuck off.

MARIS: He was trying to be a hero, that's all.

CAGE (baby-voiced): Is that right? And how are you? Are you doing OK? I'm a police officer, so you can tell me anything.

MARIS: Is that an official police order?

CAGE: You're going to tell me to fuck off, aren't you?

They keep their surefooted stride, forcing Cage to keep up with their pace.

CAGE: Looks like you've been hanging around this guy too much.

Hero walks like he knows exactly where he's going. That's because he does. If Cage's head was out of his own ass, he'd know too, because they'd both been there before. As Hero leads them, Cage recognizes the building with the large, blacked-out storefront window.

CAGE: What's the play here?

HERO: We destroy it.

CAGE: Destroy what?

MARIS: The hive.

CAGE: The what?

HERO: Where they come from. We destroy that, we destroy them.

CAGE: What makes you so sure?

HERO: You got a better plan?

CAGE: I can't just let you level a building.

HERO: You don't have to let me. I'm doing it. I got one good punch left in me. Enough to take that building down.

MARIS: Then what?

HERO: Then I need a burrito and a long nap.

MARIS: Like forever?

HERO: No, but close.

CAGE: It's a bad plan.

HERO: I get it. You can already feel your wrist hurting from all the paperwork, but that building's going down one way or another.

CAGE: What if there's civilians in there? You of all people should know—

Hero stops. Cage tenses. He was hoping to strike a nerve, now he's wondering if he's going to regret it.

HERO: There's nothing human in there. Nothing that wants to be alive anymore.

CAGE: What if you're wrong?

HERO: Then at least I'm used to it.

CAGE: We have to check it out first.

MARIS: You want us to go in there?!

CAGE: Where'd all that courage go, little one?

She growls at him.

HERO: Easy, sunshine. We don't have to listen to anything this guy says—

Officer Cage grips his gun in both hands and runs across the street straight into the building.

Of all the times to grow a pair...

HERO: Stay here.

MARIS: No.

Hero chases after him with Maris at his heels.

The building would be a creep show even without the scuttling echoes and shadows crawling the walls like water ghosts. Dried trash and decayed newspapers scatter about, like Autumn leaves fallen from trees of sad stories never told. Mysterious stains and the bare-most signs of life in every corner.

Cage positions himself halfway up a staircase, looking for any sign of motion.

CAGE: One ran past me. Not close, but it didn't seem to care I was here. It went up there.

Hero gestures up the stairs.

HERO: After you.

CAGE: You're the Ultra Cop.

HERO: *I* wanted to level the place.

Maris sighs and plods up the stairs past them.

MARIS: You're both wimps.

CAGE: Hey! Get back here!

She disappears around the corner up the stairs, compelled by a foolish voice she hasn't learned to ignore

yet. Both Hero and Cage lunge up the stairs after her, their feet planting on the same step in unison. Bad move. The steps sink like putty under their feet. The wood shrieks like a banshee as the whole staircase comes down with a crash, leaving the windows wobbling like instrumental saws and a cloud of dust explodes through the room.

Cage and Hero cough as Maris' muffled voice calls out to them from above.

MARIS: What happened?!

CAGE: You OK?

HERO: No.

The staircase wreckage pins Hero against the floor. Shrieking cries bounce off the walls from above.

CAGE: Shit!

Cage pulls at the chunk pinning Hero down but it's not budging.

HERO: Just go help the girl. I'll figure this out.

Cage runs off in search of another way up.

CAGE: Stay right there! I'll come get you.

On the second floor, Maris stands at the top of the stairs looking down at the black mouth with jagged wooden teeth that was once the staircase. The shrieking grows louder and the footsteps closer.

MARIS: Easy for you to say!

The upper staircase rumbles with bodies racing down it. They're coming. She darts further in looking for cover. It's all pillars and empty space, but it's too late anyway. Out of the corner of her eye she sees a techno-zombie dead set on her. Her body moves before her mind can process, pushing her tiny legs with all her might as the zombie gains on her with a speed disregarding the limits of the human body.

She looks back to see the source of the pounding footsteps behind her. The overwhelming energy of the creature bears a physical weight over her. As her head

turns, its fingers reach for her eyeballs. So close that closing her eyes would trap the jagged metal tip of its finger like a Venus fly trap in her eyelashes. She turns, feeling her hair waft across its fingertips, tugging and entwining with it. She covers up, her body not knowing what to do now except die.

Thud!

Cage slams his foot right into the techno-zombie's chest with so much force he launches himself in the opposite direction. Cage smashes on his back, blasting shots in the creature's head before it even hits the ground.

He scrambles up uninjured thanks to a weekend pro-wrestling workshop that taught him how to take a fall. He reaches his hand down to Maris, who to her surprise, isn't dead.

CAGE: Let's get out of here.

Cage feels something over his shoulder. A snarling mouth, drooling and fizzing with computer acid.

He spins, but he can already feel its breath on his neck—

BAM!

A hole smolders in its head as it falls in a heap at Cage's feet. Cage snaps his gaze back to Maris. The luger pistol smokes in her trembling hand.

CAGE: Good shot.

A rush of screams come from every direction like the Rolling Stones just stepped on stage at Madison Square Garden. A pile of techno-zombies tumbles down the stairs just as another horde trips over themselves in the other direction, desperate to kill.

Cage grabs Maris and hoists her up to his chest like a mother ape holding its child. He runs straight for the window, blasting bullets into the glass until it shatters just as he shoulders into it.

The fall isn't slow. It's a rapid slideshow; midair, spinning, then smacking into the ground. The cushion of Cage's body saves her bones but not her senses.

Out cold.

She's jostled awake by Cage's body convulsing in a coughing fit. Her vision slowly returns, dappled in black spots like a mass of ink slowly separating in oil as she blinks it away.

Someone's walking towards her. Just a silhouette in her concussive haze.

Techno-zombies lay torn apart at their feet. She thinks it must be Hero, but the silhouette thins as it gets closer. Too skinny to be Hero. Maris picks herself up off the floor, keeping her eye on the blurry figure as it approaches.

It's a woman, shuffling carefully towards her, reaching out. Maris rubs her forearm on her eyes, wiping away the final blotchy cobwebs. Her throat tightens so tightly it could press a speck of Oreos into a diamond.

Her mother stares back at her, skin jagged and puss-crusted, infected with circuitry, but her eyes sag with a recognition of what she once was, reflected at her in the form of her daughter. Both of their lips quiver. Their mouths tighten, forming their shared dimples high on their cheeks.

MARIS: Mom?

Sadie stumbles back, startled and afraid, mustering a wet croak in response. Maris feels a warmth wrap around her, from her back over her shoulders, like a blanket. It grows to a stinging burn in seconds—

HERO: APOCALYPSE PUNCH!

Hero glides past Maris, fist out like a javelin. Everything in front of him illuminates in a brilliant red

light, everything soft disintegrating into dust. Paper, paint, wood, flesh, atomized in a second. Sadie disappears into vacant air as Hero torpedoes past where she once stood, fist hitting concrete. There's an explosion, then nothing but the silence of destruction acknowledged.

CHAPTER 14: GRAVE

A tsunami of dust plows out from the empty space where the building once stood, leaving a thick haze behind it. Aside from the rich atmosphere of asbestos, concrete dust, and pulverized bodies, the air smells hollow, less oxygenated. Even sound is muffled from the lack of molecules crashing into each other.

Cage wheezes air back into his lungs, rolling side-to-side like a turtle on its back. A stark contrast to Hero who lets his chest rise and fall peacefully, content with laying there for as long as anyone will let him.

That's not very long.

Maris slams on him, pounding her fists on his chest with the force of limp noodles.

MARIS: You killed her!

He considers playing dumb, but he doesn't have it in him. He knows exactly who. He even witnessed Sadie reaching her hand out to Maris. He saw the glimmer of recognition in her eyes.

And he ignored it so he could punch something and be the hero the only way he knows how.

He sits up, tumbling her exhausted body off him like a dry leaf.

HERO: I had to.

MARIS: No, you didn't!

HERO: I told you this was gonna be hard, kid!

MARIS: She saw me!

HERO: She was "the source," you idiot! She was the hive! The first one! Get it through your head!

MARIS: She protected me! Like before!

HERO: No, she didn't. She never did.

MARIS: Yes, she did! You said she did!

HERO: I was lying. She's just one of those things.

MARIS: You're wrong!

HERO: Stop being such a baby.

MARIS: I'm not a baby!

She cracks her fist across his chin with a wet pop. Before a speck of spit even flies off his lip, he snaps and shoves his boot into her chest, sending her flying back, tumbling into the ground. He watches her body ragdoll across the concrete. A lump of icy coal forms in his chest that melts as soon as she bounces back up to her feet unharmed, though the look in her eyes is worse than any bloody nose or scraped knee. Some things don't need an atomic punch to be destroyed.

MARIS: I. Hate. You.

She scrambles away, disappearing into the hazy night.

HERO: You should be calling me a hero!

Sure, he says it, but he doesn't believe it. He doesn't feel like one. He doesn't feel like anything. Her sudden absence crushes him like a black hole.

In the calm of his destruction, all he wishes is to be back at the bowling alley, side by side with his partner, putting on their matching outfits, ready to take on the world. He wishes for bad tacos and cornhole on a rainy

day. He wishes that she'll come back out of the fog flashing their hand signal, saying "gotcha, idiot."

He stopped believing in those happy endings a long time ago, though he still wishes for them all the same.

He lumbers up, glancing over at Cage who seems to be roughed up but nothing a night in a hospital bed won't solve.

HERO: Get up, dummy—

His hearing stutters and he feels a warm breeze from above. With a large pop, he's illuminated in yellow light. *Maybe I'm dead, after all.* Something hot slaps onto his shoulder and sends a ripple of pain down his spine. He falls to his knees, shaking uncontrollably, remembering the specific brand of pain right away. An Anti-Super Criminal squad emerges from the haze, weapons drawn. *FOONK!* A metal hexagon blasts out of a rifle and slaps onto his thigh, pumping electricity through his body until his vision goes black and he's lulled to sleep by a pain that's at least softer than watching Maris walk away.

Hero peels his cloudy eyes open. Nausea rolls over his body. Other than his bass drum heart, it's quiet. He recognizes his surroundings. He's in the police station, strapped down in Super Criminal restraints. On a normal day, he wouldn't have a problem busting out of them, but today he's spent. That's fine. He's earned his paycheck for the day. And a long nap.

He scans the room, expecting to see some familiar faces, but the station is empty except for a string-bean rookie peering out the blinds. Hero's voice comes out as a dry croak.

HERO: What's going on?

The rookie spins in surprise, pale as a sheet,
visibly nervous.

HERO: Don't worry, Rook. I'm not gonna hurt
you. Where is everybody?

ROOKIE: I... I don't know.

HERO: What do you mean you don't know?

ROOKIE: They all left. They told me to stay here.
I swear.

HERO: Relax. Everything's gonna be fine.

Hero lets his body melt into the bed, relaxed.
Being locked up is bad, but not as bad as the nightmare of
an hour ago, though he's surprised to see the rookie is still
spooked, glued to the window, hand hovering the butt of
his gun.

HERO: Relax. Those freaks are done. We shut
'em down.

ROOKIE: What are you talking about? The city is
crawling with those things!

HERO: No, you got it all wrong. We stopped
them.

The rookie simply shakes his head, quickly
turning back to the window at the sound of a bottle
rattling somewhere outside. An explosion follows in the
distance.

A TV hung in the corner shows helicopter footage
of the chaos. Worse than before. The city is on fire.

Little crumbs of people — men, women, and
children — swarmed by fire ants.

His heart breaks.

Not because they failed the city.

Because he failed Maris.

He let her go out into those monster-infested
streets.

And he knows he'll never see her again.

No one will.

Just another dead kid buried under his rubble.

CHAPTER 15: PROGRAMMING

After shit went down at the mall, the chief issued an immediate stay-at-home order. The threat of both the zombies and Hero proved more than enough to prompt such an extreme response. It would have worked too. In his experience, getting people to stay inside usually helps *any* situation, though in this case, he had a specific hunch that the maniac zombies might only be attracted to what they could see. If everyone stayed indoors, he expected that one of those things would simply walk right past any household wise enough not to draw its attention. Unfortunately, his theory never got the chance to be tested.

The stay-at-home order prompted a surge of panic buying. The city rushed out to stock up for what they feared could be days, weeks, or even years, but ironically only needed to be about 24 hours if the orders were obeyed. Tetsuo accounted for this, delaying the release of his main force of techno-zombies for several hours after

the mall incident, ensuring the stores and streets would be full.

Programming a techno-zombie to do exactly what you want is difficult. As for people, you don't even need to program them. Not when they're so predictable.

The cops were overwhelmed before the main onslaught of techno-zombies even arrived. Fistfights over Jiffy peanut butter. A woman stabbed over diapers she didn't need. A gang shooting over turf at the Dollar Tree. Yet none of that chaos dissuaded people away from their quest for cans of Chef Boyardee.

But once the techno-zombies arrived, the people would have done anything to go back in time and stay home instead.

Grocery stores became blood baths. White tile floors stained pink. Moms and Dads never making it back home.

Tetsuo didn't even need to program the final masterstroke of his plan. It was already programmed in us.

CHAPTER 16: GHOSTS

ROOKIE: No one's answering their radios anymore.

The nervous rookie hasn't left his post at the window, obsessively peeking past bent blinds like a nosy housewife in search of neighborhood gossip.

ROOKIE: Maybe I should go out there.

HERO: You should let me out.

ROOKIE: I'm not letting you out.

HERO: Why?

ROOKIE: You're dangerous.

HERO: Everything's dangerous right now.

The Rookie ignores him, psyching himself up.

ROOKIE: I should go.

Hero already tried breaking out of his restraints after learning that his super-powered punch failed to stop the zombies, but it turns out he doesn't have it in him. Not in his condition at least. Even with a good night's sleep, a burrito, and a beer in his gut, it would take a considerable amount of effort. He's well past "considerable amount of effort," especially after knowing the one thing he loved in this world has disappeared into the zombie-infested

streets of Los Angeles, never to be seen again. All he can hope is that the situation gets so bad that the government up and nukes LA, hopefully aiming the tip of the warhead right on the bridge of his nose so he could watch himself explode, even if only for a fraction of a second.

But even as he wishes ultimate destruction on the city for no other reason than to end his own suffering, what he wishes more is for the rookie to stay right where he is and avoid the same fate that Maris has suffered: venturing alone into the night to be ripped apart by those things.

The rookie slips on his jacket and clips his belt around his waist with his rattling hands.

HERO: Don't do it, kid.

ROOKIE: It's my job.

HERO: Look at it out there. The job's over.

The Rookie remains dead set on playing the role of a soldier.

HERO: You got a family?

The Rookie shakes his head.

HERO: Maybe you will one day. Maybe they'll be worth sticking around for.

The Rookie shoves his gun in his holster. His dry lips paste together.

ROOKIE: Just stay here. Someone will be back soon.

HERO: I'm begging you, kid.

The Rookie pushes past the bullpen doors and that's the end of his story. Hero watches as the doors swing closed and the Rookie's fresh-shoed footsteps dissipate down the hall. Even as the footsteps have long since gone, he stares at the door, hoping the Rookie will pop back in, overcome with better judgment. Instead, he spots four pink tendrils curl around the door and slowly push it open.

What emerges from the door makes his heart stop.

He can't believe it.

1 hour ago.

Even after a two-hour long jog through zombie infested streets, it's not until halfway up the apartment steps that Maris realizes how strange it is that she's going back there of all places. Then again, she has nowhere else to go. Her mother's apartment had already been rented out to someone new. Hero let them drive by it once to check.

Then he killed her.

Even with the lack of options, she's annoyed with herself for coming back. She couldn't get away from him fast enough, only hanging back long enough to watch him get snatched up by the cops before leaving Skid Row.

Good. He deserved it.

The only reason she wasn't mauled on her journey was a mix of dumb luck and the gift of being small. There are even more techno-zombies roaming the streets than when they first got to Skid Row. She has no choice but to find brief refuge in the apartment. It's up to her to fix this now. Alone. The source wasn't in that building. It wasn't her mother. It's something else.

He killed her for nothing.

She jams her pink key into the keyhole. Hero made it for her since she could never find the right key on the mass of metal that made his keyring. She squeezes inside, quietly closing the door behind her and shutting the blinds. She's gotta think. Gotta fix this. She snatches a cold, greasy clamshell tray of Chinese food from the fridge. Hero had said that they should only eat half. That way they'd have some for later when they got back. Now that feels like a million years ago.

He killed her. And now he's gone too. For nothing.

She plops down on the couch, shoveling a chipmunk's envy of cold General Tsao's chicken in her cheeks. She clicks on the TV for intel. Her hardened heart doesn't bother holding hope that the situation has gotten better. The news confirms as much. The story has gone national. Cell phone footage plays unbelievable images of violence over the anchor's shoulder. Maris has already seen the very same images for herself, on more occasions than her tiny heart deserves, but they remain unbelievable, nonetheless. The blurry phone-camera renderings of the zombies' microchip-ridden flesh look almost cartoonish, save for the palpable gargling screams from behind pixelated rectangular clouds of red. It reminds her of the adult Japanese cartoons Hero would show her.

Never again. Friends watch things together. They don't kill each other's parents.

Aerial footage shows long ribbons of red lights trailing out of the city from every freeway. People are making a mad dash to Santa Ana in one direction and Thousand Oaks in the other. The techno-zombies apparently haven't reached there. Yet.

MARIS (mouth full): Idiots. They'll just be right behind you.

The footage cuts to a police barricade in Thousand Oaks where people sprint towards it like it's a finish line. The Thousand Oaks cops are more like EMTs with guns than soldiers, but help is help when there are monsters chasing you. The video would be no different than the others, ending in cheeks being ripped off of faces and people begging to be killed while creatures wishbone their legs apart, but in this video, the techno-zombies simply stop twenty feet before the barricade, never stepping past an invisible line they've seemed to have collectively agreed upon. Footage at Santa Ana shows the same

inexplicable occurrence. Even the corpses that are intact enough to jerk up off the ground, reanimated, stop at the same invisible point.

A map outlines the traffic congestion across all of Los Angeles County, marking the barricaded safety points. Something stands out. A pattern. Maris leaps off the couch and traces her finger between Santa Ana and Thousand Oaks. The safe zones are nearly the same distance from Skid Row. A perfect circle.

The source — whatever it is — is still there. But it's not a person. That's because it's an antenna. It must be. As her brain computes all this information, in what we can all agree is an impressive line of thinking for a 10-year-old, she clutches her rainbow teddy bear in her hands, never even realizing she had been holding it ever since she walked in. It's the same bear Hero gave to her. She had already saved up \$1.25 worth of loose change to buy a matching one to put on her mother's grave. The grave that only exists because of Hero. The only person who cared enough to make her one.

The one who took her in from out the cold.

The one who paid the extra buck to get her a pink key.

The one who started getting fried rice on his Combo C because she hates chow mein.

She realizes she was never meant to do this alone.

No one is.

He killed her mother, but he's her Hero, whether she likes it or not.

Hero has always been a firm believer that nothing ever goes the way you imagine. Once you play out the fantasy of walking into a liquor store, buying a lotto ticket, and scratching a fifty-million-dollar winner, it's a

guarantee that all you'll get is a free ticket. Once you envision heroically kicking a mugger's knife out of his hand to stop him from robbing you, you've just ensured that the thief will hack your bank account instead. Reality is a pale gray compared to the visions our hope conjures. That's not the case here. Hero had imagined Maris strolling into the police station with a sassy remark a dozen times and now here she is doing just the same.

MARIS: I thought he'd never leave.

HERO: Maris—

MARIS: Shut it. I'm still mad at you. At some point I won't be, but right now I am, and right now we have work to do.

He gazes at her as she glances in the cell to check the lock on the restraints before digging into a nearby desk in search for the right key. He sees her, as if for the first time, in the radiant light of clarity. Every pain and ache in his body turns to a sweet reminder of existence. An existence with her. Despite all the screams, fires, and dead rookie cops, everything is OK because she's OK. If Maris can make it out of this, Hero can live with whatever other tragedy unfurls from this nightmare. He wishes he could bottle the moment and keep it with him forever, but Hero knows better than anyone that you can't take anything with you. You can only leave things behind.

HERO: What's the plan?

MARIS: Back to Skit Row.

HERO: Skid.

MARIS: Whatever.

MARIS: The signal's coming from there. You were wrong about what it was.

There's extra punch in that last sentence, deservedly so. He lets her have it. How could he not? Nonetheless, the comment sparks the necessary revelation in his head.

HERO: It's an antenna.

MARIS: Duh.

HERO: Who the hell needs me when we got you?

She finds the microchip key and jams it into the cell lock, dodging out of the way of the heavy-barred gate as it swings open, then plunging the key into the lock in his chest. The restraints blip green before releasing with a hissing sound. He shimmies them off, rubbing his shoulders and wrists as he hops off the bed.

MARIS: *I need you.* Who else is going to keep me safe from the zombies?

Her rhetorical question rattles in his brain like a .22 bullet. It's up to him to be her hero, no matter the cost.

HERO: I am.

He shoves her into the cell and snaps the bars shut.

MARIS: Hey!

She bangs against the bars as Hero marches away.

MARIS: I'm going with you! I have to!

He keeps his stride. If she hates him, that's OK. As long as she's safe. He remains stalwart in ignoring her pleas, almost reaching the door before he's stopped in his tracks by the heavy click of a cocking gun.

HERO: Park's Luger. You're not going to stop me with that.

He turns to face her and a sea urchin-shaped lump forms in his chest. She's got the Luger pressed to her temple.

It looks like an oversized prop next to her tiny head, but it's no prop. One twitch of the tiniest muscle could turn her head into jelly.

HERO: Easy. Put that down.

MARIS: No. Not until you let me out of here. I'm coming with you.

How quickly a plan turns to shit once a ten-year-old puts a gun to her head. He was a fool to think he could actually do it alone. There's no question. He needs his sunshine.

He runs right to the cell, and with the remaining vapors of his strength, rips the bars off the wall with a single tug. As the gun falls away from her head, he wraps her in his arms. Her tiny body finds a home in the grotesque curvature of his muscular body, and she explodes into tears, still feeling the weight of the gun in her hand even though she's since dropped it.

HERO: Don't do that. Don't ever do that.

She nuzzles her folded arms into his chest, letting him envelope her. If ghosts, spirits, energy, or whatever else you want to call them are real, then surely at least a part of Sadie joins their embrace, helping swirl their energies into parts inescapable from each other, like the smell of home cooked food on your sweater, untraceable to you but profoundly clear to everyone you meet. Invisible yet undeniable proof that someone cares.

With his cheek pressed to her forehead:

HERO: Let's do this, partner.

Getting to Skid Row isn't without its peril, but with Hero able to send the techno-zombies flying with a single punch, it's doable. Though he keeps it to himself that his arms are getting exponentially tired with each punch. Everything is getting more tired. He's simply not the same man he was hours ago.

From the arching ridge of the freeway, packed with cars that have been abandoned or become coffins, it's clear where they need to go. It's also clear why their trek there is so deceptively easy. One of the buildings sprouts upwards with techno-zombies crawling up it like ants, piling metal on top of metal, gluing it all together with their own bodies. They climb as high as they can before piercing their bodies with poles and shrapnel. Creating a super-antenna.

MARIS: I remember that building. It's twice as tall as when we left.

HERO: Twice as strong.

MARIS: You have another Apocalypse Punch in you?

He doesn't answer.

The building is built like a tiered cake, each subsequent level smaller than the last, surrounded by a high chain-link fence, culminating to a shack at the topmost layer. Tetsuo's central command, perfectly fortified. The vertical sliding door is open, letting the night air cool the furnace heat from the stacks of computers inside.

A wall of monitors switches rapidly between different feeds, all POV shots from techno-zombies whose ocular systems have been infected by wires and conduits. In the middle of the room sits what looks like a heap of computer junk, though if you'd have watched that heap in a timelapse from a week earlier, it would show a normal man sitting on a chair, his body slowly protruding metal, oozing mechanical waste, and growing tumors of technology until no longer being recognizable as a human being except for the brief glimpses of puckering red flesh between piles of circuitry. This is the real Tetsuo. His puppeteering act at the mall just a diversion to keep any would-be heroes off his scent. How else would he be able to enjoy what he created? Fear and utter despair. He breathes it in like oxygen.

The roof above him rumbles with techno-zombies piling onto each other, adding to his antennae. Once they reach forty feet, every additional foot will spread the signal exponentially. Unbeknownst to Hero and Maris, the signal has spread past California into Nevada by the time they get to the front of the building. Tetsuo has been

watching them the entire time, testing Hero's strength against sacrificial techno-zombies. It's clear that Hero has nothing left.

Tetsuo watches them enter the building. Listens to the girl's little theories on why nothing's attacking them — well-considered, but ultimately wrong. He listens to the big man fertilize her mind with questions. Their minds almost working as one. Connected, not through wires or WIFI, but something else. Tetsuo can't understand it. He's never experienced it before.

He watches the big man stop and kneel to face the girl. Hears him speak with a crackle deep in his throat; "I need you to know... I need you to know that I love you, sunshine."

And her chirpy voice replies with confidence, "I know you do. I love you too, lardo."

It's not until they've scaled halfway up the levels of the building that he unleashes every single techno-zombie on them.

The screaming growls of the techno-zombies behind them sound like static. It was so quiet before, except for his subwoofer heartbeat from finally telling someone he loved them — what he should have told Kipher so many times before. That rhythmic thud is replaced by his pounding footsteps.

Hero crunches pavement as they race through the spiraling labyrinth of the tiered building, but Maris struggles to keep up. He grabs her wrist and pulls her at his stampeding pace. Her legs lift off the ground and trail behind him like a light stream.

Can't let her die.

The zombies flood behind them, scrambling over each other, forming a singular mass of bodies, like a giant

worm made of people, choking its way through the corridors. Slow. But not slow enough.

Hero tears around a corner so fast they slam into the chain link fence. It bends and cups around his body. Maris just bounces off like a tennis ball. There's no soft here. Every inch a fight. Her grip holds. No complaints.

Hell of a girl.

They've got speed and heart on their side. It gets them on track to the ladder to the next floor. Only forty feet away. After that they'll be on the same level as the shack.

HERO: Let's go! Let's go!

He clutches her hand, sprinting towards the ladder with her in tow.

He can see it.

She grabs on him like a backpack. He speeds up the ladder like a firefighter. One straight shot to the shack. He throws her over the final fence guarding the entrance. She slides right into the shack and puts an end to this all.

Things never happen how you imagine them.

MARIS: Look!

Before they're anywhere near the ladder, the mass of zombies on the tower flows down like water. Their slithering mass comes roaring down off the antennae towards the ladder, choking up at the small entryway of the gate at the top. They're blocked. For now.

Hero pulls her the only other way, around a corner, forcing them down a dead end. The next level is 30 feet up with no ladder. His legs can't jump that in his condition, and there ain't no time for a plan B. The grating sound of stampeding metal feet edges closer.

MARIS: What?! No! There has to be another way!

Maris searches desperately as the procession of techno-zombies roars closer from around the corner.

Hero stands uncharacteristically calm, staring up above them at the final level 30 feet up. She shakes him by his pant leg.

MARIS: What are you doing, doofus? You expecting to fly?

He turns to her.

HERO: No. I can't fly. Never could.

In the distance, they hear the whining cry of the fence bend and snap, followed by the rapid plops of bodies. More zombies to join the slug-like procession of bodies rounding the corner. A wall of them, like a writhing blob of menace.

MARIS: What are you talking about?!

He kneels in front of her and puts his heavy paw on her shoulder. One last good look at her is all he needs. Better than he ever deserved.

HERO: I can't fly... but you can.

He grips her by the collar like she's a baby kitten and hurls her with all his might straight into the air. Time freezes as she lifts off, rocketing up off the ground.

He watches her sail up into the air beautifully, her poise and grace against the wind and ruckus a microcosm of who she is. He's happy for it to be the last memory of her. A last memory strong enough to hold the weight of every memory before it.

For Maris, no time passes between Hero grabbing her collar and her landing with a thud on the top-most level. Her momentum makes her little body roll and tumble until she braces herself to a stop, coughing blood.

MARIS: No! Hero!

She scrambles to the ledge, looking down at him as he digs the balls of his feet into the ground and raises his fists. The unstoppable weight of techno-zombies charges at him.

HERO (over his shoulder): Go. You're the hero of this story. Not me.

She won't go. She can't. He knows this, so he turns to her with a smile. A real smile that even a river of tears down his cheeks couldn't wane. He holds his two fingers up in a peace sign. Their sign. He looks like he belongs on a cereal box. He looks like being warm, and safe, and with mom. He looks like the Hero she's always seen in her mind.

She sleeves away her tears and sticks her two tiny fingers up back at him, hoping she can make him feel like everything is OK, just like he's making her feel. And she does.

One last look at him is all she needs. Less than she ever deserved.

She launches herself up and takes off down the long stretch toward the shack.

Hero rears his fist back, bracing for the screeching inevitability speeding towards him.

The cloud of gnashing bodies descends on him just as he hurls the hardest non-superpowered punch the world has ever seen.

A punch that could save a kid in an old, abandoned warehouse.

The wave of techno-zombies overtakes him, leaving nothing but his ghost behind.

Maris wails as she jets across the roof. It's one last long corridor leading straight to the shack's door, surrounded on either side by chain-link fences, made impossible to get to by Tetsuo, but she got there. Thanks to her Hero. One last chain link tunnel to victory.

She sprints to it, but a horde of techno-zombies smash against the fence on either side. More and more of them gather as the fence begins to cave inward. She keeps her roaring pace, but the math doesn't add up. That fence is coming down.

Hero's words play in her mind:
You have to adapt. Find a way.

She spots what she needs. As she runs, she soccer kicks an old, rogue paint can across the floor, coating the ground in a river of slick paint. The fence falls. 60 degrees. 45 degrees. They'll smash down on her just as she gets to the door, but—

MARIS: Sunshine slide!

She drops down legs first, sliding across the paint-slick floor right under the crashing fence and into the control room. She leaps up, pulling the sliding door down just as the techno-zombies smash into it.

They swarm the shack, pushing against each other and climbing onto the roof until the shack is just a mountain of bodies desperate to get inside. They pile on until one of them is bound to be the straw that broke the camel's back. The metal of the shack whines under the pressure.

A burst of light and a muffled bang flashes through the cracks between bodies.

Then they stop. Everything goes still and quiet.

Layers of them begin to tumble off the mountain. Lifeless carcasses clicking and clacking against each other as they fall.

Inside the pitch-black shack, Maris gulps breaths. The luger is hot in her hands. She drops it and breaks into tears.

Tetsuo is lifeless except for the smoking hole in his head. His energy lost in the circuitry forever.

Cage's cruiser skids to a stop in front of the building. His urgency vestigial to the changed mood. He awoke in the hospital. Escaped off the roof past hordes trying to get in. The hospital was safe enough, but he knew where he had to go to stop this. Now he sees why it was so easy to get there. Something happened on the way.

He steps out of the car, surveying the scene. Nothing moves. Even the usual floating trash lays still. Then he spots something.

CAGE: What the hell?

Maris' tiny body trudges out from around the corner. Cage's concussed brain can't react as fast as appropriate, so he can only stare as he slowly puts together what he's seeing. She marches straight to his cruiser, head hanging low. She opens the door and gets in, sitting silently in the seat. Cage looks out around the corner, waiting for a hulking shadow to crawl across the ground and reveal Hero. He knows it's not going to come. Things never happen the way you imagine them. They just happen the way they are supposed to. He frowns and slinks back into the cruiser.

He sparks up the car and crawls away from the scene. Maris holds in her tears, wishing she was invisible. She squeezes her eyes shut to keep them at bay. The best she can do.

The glovebox flips open and a tiny pack of tissues with a smiling sun on the package lands on her lap. She picks at the package as they continue chugging through the ravaged downtown streets in silence.

The rising sun kisses the hood of his cruiser and washes across their faces.

CAGE: Fuck it. You need a cookie.

She sneaks a smile before bursting into tears and falling into his lap, crying all those tears she had tucked away.

CAGE: Yeah... a cookie sounds good right now.

He rubs her back, feeling an energy swirling between them that could only be ghosts.

THE END

ABOUT JOE CABELLO



Joe Cabello has written comedy & horror screenplays, comics, and post-it notes. Beware saying his name five times in a mirror, lest you want him to appear, asking for gas money reimbursement.

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