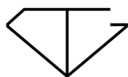


HEAVEN BELOW

by
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RIVERIS 1

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Behind me, the door closes with the familiar click of the lock. I turn around and make sure that the door is really shut. A quirk of mine I formed a habit of up here and can't get rid of. If I don't, I rack my brain for the rest of the day whether the door is closed or not. It's horrible, but the only possibility is to really check it every single time.

I go down the short stairs, turn up my collar, take the goggles from my cap and put them on, but it's too late. The sand has already crept under my clothes and is sliding uncomfortably down my back.

"You should really get used to getting properly dressed before leaving the house, Jim."

David stands, as every morning, at the foot of the steps on the old weathered pavement. His hooded head is pulled between his shoulders, making him even smaller than he

already is.

“You’d think I’d learned that by now,” I reply.

“And it’s not like I remind you every day.”

“Some things never seem to change. Like this eternal sandstorm.”

“Oh, that little bit of sand. Come on, let’s go to the M-Train.”

David is one of the people who are always in a good mood. Every day. I can’t remember ever seeing him in a bad mood. In contrast to me, who can be quite grumpy in the mornings.

We have barely walked ten steps when David pushes his elbow into my ribs.

“Have you really closed the front door?”

“Yes I have.”

“Are you sure? Better to go back and ...”

“Yes, I’m sure,” I interrupt him, and can see the grin through his scarf. “The times you can annoy me with that are over.”

The further we go down the street to the M-Train station, the more people join us. They come out of the side streets and the entrances of the surrounding buildings. We know one another by sight and greet briefly.

“Did you hear about Louis?” David asks.

“No, what?”

“He told me yesterday that the last window in his apartment broke. Now the wind blows even into his bedroom.”

“Damn it. Did he tell you how it happened?”

“The wind had apparently blown some debris before it, and that hit the window.”

My gaze involuntarily moves up the next house. It’s a three-storey apartment house. The façade, once smoothly plastered, is littered with small craters, impacts of swirling objects. The sand gnaws ceaselessly at all corners of the house, grinding off grain for grain, and the wind carries them further into the city, where they then eat the buildings there. Most of the windows here are still intact. The house on the other side of the street is already four-storey, and on the top floor I see more window openings without glass, poorly covered with old sheets or bags, to provide at least a little protection from the wind. The further you go into the inner city, where the houses get higher and higher, the worse the upper floors are decaying. Now in the summer it’s still warm enough, but when the blizzards sweep through the city in the winter, life for many becomes a real struggle for survival.

“Does he need anything?” I ask.

“He says he’ll manage so far.”

“Tell him to talk to us if he needs help.”

“I’ll do that, but you know how difficult it is for him to accept help.”

“We must offer it at least.”

“I agree completely.”

The storm drives us on to the M-Train. We go down the worn and crumbling stone steps into the station. At the bottom, as always, I greet the two guards, whose black uniforms and stun guns visible in their holsters are

supposed to convey a feeling of security. As always, I don't get an answer, they don't even follow me with their eyes any more.

"Is it really so hard to return my greeting just once? It doesn't hurt anyone, does it?"

"I must say I admire your tenacity. Every day you try ..."

"... and someday I'll succeed," I complete David's sentence. "You'll see."

"Above all, I'll see how you'll gaze at the guard with your mouth open, not knowing what to do or say."

"That remains to be seen. I've already made a plan for it."

"Of course you have."

I take off the goggles as we enter the half-dark of the station. Once the pride of Riveris, the old magnetic railroad is now just a shadow of itself. The stations are deteriorating noticeably. Down here, though the sand can't do its slow and steady work, plaster from walls smeared with paint falls off, garbage piles up in corners, collected by the wind and deposited there. Everything is covered by a thin layer of fine sand.

The train is the only public transport in the city. In spite of having several years on the clock, it works perfectly. Regular maintenance keeps it in shape, because the government does know that a functioning transport system keeps everything running in Uptown.

David and I join the queue of the other people waiting. Like pearls on a string we stand on the platform. The draught out of the tunnel announces the approaching

train. I close my eyes, take off my cap, and concentrate on the feeling of the air streaming over my face. Wind without sand, ruffling my black hair.

Almost silently, the train enters the station, only accompanied by the slight hum of the electromagnets, which slow the train evenly to a standstill. It's still almost empty. Ours is only the second stop of the line. We sit down on a free seat and I fix my gaze on a spot between my feet. The train sets off and instantly all the glass panes of the train come to life, showing the usual advertising and propaganda films. They paint a rosy picture to lull people into thinking that with enough diligent work a place in Downtown awaits. I stopped listening long ago. I've never heard of someone who was born above and then moved down as a reward for good work. Neither in my time below, nor in the three years I've been obliged to live up here. That only happens to the guards after a long time of service.

David always has fun watching the people react to the constant stream of information. Some try to ignore it as best they can, as I do, but many do watch and now and then even discussions arise. The opinions can be quite different, but there's never a tangible dispute. No one wants to trigger an incident, at the end of which the participants are dragged out of the waggon by guards at the next station. Not all come back from these interrogations.

Again, David pushes his elbow into my side, pointing with a nod at the window. A newscaster is reporting something.

“... there has been another explosion. The rebels’ target this time was line four. As far as is known, nobody were killed, but some were injured. Until further notice, the M-Train remains ...”

“Line four this time. Well, I’m glad it’s not on our line and we have to walk again.”

“Well, I admire the tenacity of the rebels,” I say so softly that only David can hear me. “They always manage to disturb the flow of normal life with their limited means.”

“I know, but I think it’s pointless. With their actions, they only turn the wounded against them.”

I don’t answer David’s last remark. We have different attitudes towards the resistance to the government, and have had many heated debates, until we recognised that each one of us insists on his opinion and doesn’t converge on the other. Fortunately, this has never affected our friendship.

As we get closer and closer to the final stop, the train fills more and more. Soon all seats are taken and the people have to stand in the corridors. One of the passengers steps on my foot and immediately lifts up his hand apologetically. Just before you think that no more people can fit into the train, we reach the final stop and the people pour out onto the platform. David and I take our time and don’t rise from our seats until most of the passengers have got off.

“Hey buddy,” I say to the guard at the steps leading upwards, only to reap silence once again, and I see from the corner of my eye how David shakes his head.

“Better put on your cap and goggles,” he says.

Right, I almost forgot again.

As we reach the upper end of the steps, the sandstorm blows into our faces with full force. The surrounding buildings form a kind of funnel and make the storm here much stronger than at home. Turning my head to the side, I see the rubbish stacked against the facades of the surrounding high-rise buildings. Whoever believes that life on the outskirts is bad has never been here in the city centre.

We reach the premises of the warehouse where we work. I don't pay attention, stumble upon a raised edge in the ground and fall against the fence. Though it's made of thick metal bars, the impact is enough to rattle the barbed wire on the top of the fence.

“Sod it! Ow!” Dull pain in my shoulder.

Immediately one of the heavily armed guards comes up to me. “Hey, watch out!”

“All right, I just tripped, nothing happened to me.”

“Come on, make yourself scarce.”

“Well, this is a particularly amiable specimen,” hisses David through his teeth, after I pick myself up. “Where do they get these guys?”

We pass the large sliding gates for the trucks in the fence, turn around a corner and see the little queue in front of the security gate.

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They are our four work colleagues, the boys. Sven, Connor, Louis and Antonio live in other parts of Uptown, so take another train line or walk. We always meet them just here every morning.

“Good morning,” David greets the four. His good humour is unbroken.

The four of them greet each other and David snatches Louis and takes him a few steps aside.

“Morning, all!” I say. It sounds more annoying than I intended.

“Hey Jim, did you get out of bed the wrong way this morning, or why are you in such a bad mood?” His expectant face, waiting for a reaction to what he thinks is a brilliant piece of rhetoric, quickly returns to its normal state when my only answer is a slight raising of

the left corner of my mouth. I find his whole demeanour unbelievably revolting. He has no moral standards, he has a vulgar way of speaking in which each phrase is worse than the one before and most of them below the belt. If I didn't have to work with him, if a punch-up wouldn't lead to disciplinary measures and if I weren't a peace-loving person, he would've felt my fist in his face on more than one occasion. He provokes me deliberately, knowing that I would never let it come to a fight. Why he does it, I don't know. When I arrived in Uptown, he wasn't like that, and we got along quite well. But within three months or so, he changed his attitude toward me. I guess it's a sort of protective reaction. He's afraid that I'll dispute his position. He only has a few years left to retirement, and he wants to spend them in a safe job. I don't have proof, but it's my best theory. Because I also just want to do my work here, no more and no less.

As always, we are too early. Not until half past seven do the guards open the gate in the fence. This leaves time for small talk, not necessarily my favourite activity. Fortunately, David handles this most of the time. He's a master and the others are a grateful audience.

"Then come on in, ladies," a bored guard greets us and opens the heavy gate. The guards here with us are the only ones who welcome us. No dumb statues like the ones at the train stations.

I pull my ID out of my jacket pocket. It's the most important thing I own and attached to a strap inside the jacket pocket. Without ID no work and, more importantly,

without it I can't buy anything. It's identification document, access card and payment all in one.

One by one, our small group is processed. The procedure is exactly the same every day: the ID is scanned, bags are x-rayed, we get patted down and then continue our way to the warehouse. The first lorry for today is already at the loading ramp.

Through the entrance door we enter directly into the changing room. Immediately the scent of cold sweat rises into my nose. Although the dressing room is directly on the outside wall of the warehouse, there are neither windows nor any other ventilation, which in my opinion is an absolute misconstruction. The severe smell stays stubbornly in the room and will surely survive mankind.

I open my locker, put my little messenger bag, containing my lunch, into it and get my overall out. I wrinkle my nose. "This could do with a wash," I say more to myself. David next to me looks at me enquiringly, but I just shake my head.

After we've changed, we go into the big warehouse and spread out according to our tasks. David goes to the end of the warehouse, to the large airlocks, and begins to open them one by one. Sven opens the large rolling gate to the loading ramp. Connor and Antonio are already slipping through under the opening gate to open the doors of the lorry. Louis and I go to our elephants. The two and a half metre tall loading robots are still standing in their charging stations in front of the opposite wall. Like almost every day, I notice the disproportionally large grippers at the end

of the mechanical arms. The machine looks as if it is about to topple over at every step. But the exact opposite is the case, it's perfectly balanced. In the heavy-duty shelves six metres above them there are still goods-cubes. Yesterday there was great pressure of work. We had a lot of lorries. The cubes still have to be sent through the airlocks, but the unloading of the lorries always comes first. I get in, and as I sit down, I can see through the gate the second lorry coming.

"I'll take the right, you the left one," I call to Louis, who is also tightening his seatbelts.

"All right."

I press the start button of my elephant and with a hum the electric motor in my back awakens. I grab the two joysticks and leave the charging station with my first step. After the obligatory functional check of the arms and legs of the machine I trudge out onto the ramp. Connor has opened the doors of my lorry and I can start to unload. The first two goods-cubes are marked red. Priority one. They must go through the airlocks first. I get assigned airlock one by David, as I trudge back into the warehouse with the cube in my grappers. The dice fits exactly into it. There is hardly room around it. You have to use the control of the elephant with feeling so that you do not accidentally bump into the sluice and possibly damage it. On my way back I hear the familiar howling of the alarm sirens behind me as David closes the airlock.

Louis and I have quickly cleared the first two lorries, so we have time for a short break. It's strange. You are

so close, but still far away. Every day I work on one of only two entrances to the place that everyone thinks of as paradise, and I know that I'll never get back. Though I'm just a few metres away.

Again I wonder how it could have got so far. A separate city for the elite, only two connections to the top, to let unwanted people out, but at the same time, and much more important, to let no one in from Uptown. When David closes the airlocks at the push of a button, they are evacuated and the vacuum is maintained for a quarter of an hour to kill stowaways of any kind. The airlock can then only be opened from Downtown. When it's emptied, it's closed again at the other end, so that we can reopen and reload it. A despicable but unfortunately effective system to keep Downtown clean and provide it with everything that's made and produced here. Why was there no more protest back then? It surely must have been a gradual development. But presumably this is exactly the reason why it's worked. If we humans are all the same, why is there this division? Because some are more equal than others. They will always think they are better and worthier than others, and they will keep the whole system going. Why don't I try to do something? But as an individual, I won't achieve anything. Should I try to make contact with the rebels? Even if I don't know who I have to address to make contact, I should actually try. But on the other hand, I just want to live my life as calmly as possible. And that's the crux of the matter. Everyone wants that and that's why nothing changes. The need is obviously not great enough.

“Jim, customers,” Sven pulls me out of my thoughts.

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