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Opening extract from
Catalyst

Written by
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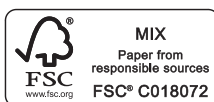
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CHAPTER ONE

THERE WAS A downside to staying in a luxurious high-rise suite in Las Vegas. It wasn't the price. Neil Raines had been on a winning streak lately, and he was glad to blow his spoils on a lavish room for his son's visit.

The problem was, their hotel room's location put them in close proximity to several VIPs staying on the same floor. Every time Tom Raines and his dad went up to their room, they passed through a gauntlet of private contractors guarding the hallway.

So far, Tom had slipped by with a bit of maneuvering.

Today, something felt different as they neared the metal detectors and body scanners waiting for them.

Neil reacted the way he always did to the sight. "This is the problem with the overclass," he blustered to Tom as they neared, a challenging glint in his eyes, voice loud because he clearly hoped one of those VIPs would hear him. "At the end of the day, they're a bunch of pathetic cowards hiding behind their hired thugs."

The security contractors scowled. *They'd* heard.

“We can get another room elsewhere,” Tom said in a low voice. “I’m sick of this, too. I’d rather we stayed somewhere cheaper and you put all this money—I don’t know—in a savings account?”

“Savings account?” Neil snorted. “Yeah, sure, I’ll stash my hard-earned bucks with some thieving bankers so they can pass another ‘depositor’s tax’ to fund their next bailouts. No way.” He clapped Tom’s back. “I’d rather treat my boy right for once.”

With that, Neil thrust his arms up in the air for his pat down, leering at the security guards who closed in around him. Tom lingered a few feet behind him, delving into his pocket for the medical exemption the military had provided to Intrastellar trainees whenever they encountered security scanners—devices that tended to reveal the neural processors in their skulls.

As Neil grumbled, Tom’s mind wandered back to the last time he’d visited his father. They’d had a bad fight. He hadn’t understood Neil’s fear of Vengerov and Neil had refused to explain. Later, Tom got it—after Joseph Vengerov locked him outside in the Antarctic to freeze to death. A few trillion dollars gave a man power over life or death, and Neil had realized that before Tom had.

Tom hadn’t known what to say to his dad to fix things. As it turned out, he didn’t have to. Neil was just as eager to pretend nothing had happened. Maybe he was even trying to make up for something, hence the fancy room, the nice casino, and Neil even woke up earlier so they could grab some dinner before he headed out for the night. He was thrilled to hear about Tom’s promotion to Upper Company, and he, in turn, was eager to tell Tom all about the ghost in the machine who’d blown up the skyboards.

“Guess you haven’t heard much about this in the Spire, huh?” Neil said, chuckling over his drink. “It happened right before you came back.”

Tom swallowed. Hard. “Oh, yeah, haven’t heard much.”

“It was amazing, Tommy. There’s this bright flash overhead, I look up, and every single one of those advertisement boards is lit up with this message: ‘The ghost in the machine is watching the watchers.’ And you know who that’s aimed at—gotta be to the Department of Homeland Security. Maybe Obsidian Corp. Next thing I know, they explode. Every last one of them.” He took a big, triumphant swig of his drink. “You had to be there.”

Tom couldn’t help a grim flicker of pride, hearing that. Apparently, the ghost had deeply impressed his father, which was awesome, because Tom *was* the ghost in the machine. He’d blown up the skyboards.

Neil leaned toward him. “I tell you, the Cocaine Importing Agency’s gotta be crawling up the walls trying to find this guy. Let’s hope they don’t find him.”

“Yeah, I’ll drink to that,” Tom said, raising his soda.

“They ever do, and just wait—this ghost will be found with two gunshots to the back of his head in an apparent suicide.”

Tom’s grin slipped a bit. It wasn’t the most reassuring thing to hear.

And he wasn’t reassured now as they approached the security guards, trying to pick out the supervisor so he could hand over his exemption and get through this quickly. His medical form claimed he needed to bypass the scanning machines due to an implanted nerve stimulator in his skull to treat epilepsy.

Every time Tom used it around his dad, he had to be

Careful. Neil needed to be too occupied to see him slip it to the supervising guard, and he needed to get it back before Neil turned and saw it. Usually he tried to part ways with his dad early, slip back to the room separately. Today Neil had dogged his steps. Today he couldn't avoid it.

If Neil even knew about the medical exemption, he'd demand to see it. He'd find out Tom had been given brain surgery. Epilepsy wasn't the real reason his brain couldn't be scanned—a neural processor was—but even the suggestion Tom had been given brain surgery would make Neil explode.

That would not end well.

Today, Neil passed through the gauntlet in record time, and he turned to look back just as Tom was about to hand over his form. He hesitated. It cost him. A big hand seized his shoulder and steered him forward through the metal detector.

The metal detector buzzed.

Tom tensed up, seeing Neil fold his arms impatiently, squinting his way, seeing two security guards lumber over. A bored-looking woman unveiled a metal-detecting wand.

"Did you forget to remove something from your pockets?" she asked, and frowned as her wand beeped over Tom's head.

Tom squirmed inwardly, acutely conscious of his dad watching. "Uh, no."

She began pawing her fingers through his hair.

"Look, I have a . . .," Tom said softly, reaching toward his pocket, turning his back to Neil, desperate to retrieve the medical exemption.

"Hands out of your pockets," ordered the second guard.

"It's not a weapon," Tom said in a furious whisper. "It's—"

“What’s going on?” Neil demanded, tromping over toward them. “What’s the holdup?”

A third security guard stepped forward to ward Neil off, and Tom again tried to retrieve his medical exemption, but then his cybernetic fingers set off the wand, and the woman ordered his hands up.

And then something happened.

There was a commotion near the computers, and then the entire swarm of security guards descended on Tom at the same time, encircling him, guns out.

“We ran his biometric profile. Step back from him!” one of the security guards shouted to the other.

The woman drew away from him quickly, and Tom goggled at the suddenly armed guards before his brain made sense of it. Neil had been causing them trouble so they ran both their biometric profiles, and they found out Tom’s identity.

And the fact that he was on the terror watch list.

Tom closed his eyes. *Oh, come on.*

“Hands in the air!” someone shouted at Tom.

Tom raised his hands, his mind racing, trying to figure out what to do from here.

“This is ridiculous,” Neil exploded, and suddenly a few of the armed guards turned their attention toward him. “Does my kid look like a terror threat to you?”

“He needs to come with us,” the lead guard said.

“Dad, don’t make a big deal. I’ll go with them for two seconds, okay?” Tom urged, thinking he could clear this up if he talked with one of them in private. One phone call would fix it.

If he could just get somewhere without his father, he could

explain. But the female security guard who'd resumed waving the metal detecting wand over him gave a shriek and leaped back, and Tom saw one of his mechanized fingers come detached where she'd unwittingly tugged it off.

Tom froze.

Neil froze, staring down at it.

"What is that?" Guns reared toward Tom's face. "Some sort of weapon?"

"It's a finger!" Tom exclaimed. "Look at it. All my fingers are fake, okay? See?" He tugged off a couple more to show them. "They're mechanical. That's why they set off the metal detector."

He ignored the way Neil was gaping at him like he didn't even know him, in utter shock.

Tom hadn't told his dad about getting frostbite, losing his fingers. The military was technically supposed to notify his dad of any major surgeries. Amputation of fingers probably qualified.

Better Neil find out about this than the *other* mechanical part of Tom's body.

"Tommy . . .," Neil whispered.

"Let's go. I'll show you. Dad, wait here," Tom said decisively.

Neil was stunned enough to automatically do what Tom told him; and even then, Tom might still have salvaged the situation if he'd been able to take advantage of Neil's shock and slip away with the guards to explain in private. Neil would be upset, but amputated fingers wasn't secret brain surgery and neural computer-level stuff.

But his hair had been mussed by the woman running her fingers through it, the patch of fake skin on the back of his neck

disturbed. As he turned away, eager to flee, Neil demanded, "What is that?" He lanced forward and grabbed Tom's shoulders, thrusting his head down, and Tom jerked away from him, but not before Neil saw it: the neural access port.

His sudden movement set off the security guards, poised for a terrorist incident. Shouts saturated the air and suddenly bodies closed on Tom from all sides, swarming him, bearing him down to the floor.

The onslaught drove the breath out of him, and as Tom's cheek scraped the carpet, he heard Neil shouting in anger, frantic voices calling for backup, that stupid medical exemption still burning a hole in his pocket.

"Let me up. Seriously. I can explain," Tom told them, pinned in place as a mobile body scanner was run over his head, checking for implanted explosives.

"Oh my God, take a look at this," one of the security guards said to the other, waving it over his head. Tom knew what they were seeing: a spiderweb mesh of metal inside his skull.

Meanwhile, another had found the medical exemption in his pocket and was telling the others, "Yeah, it says he got brain surgery on here, but does that look like a nerve stimulator to you?"

Tom dragged his eyes over to Neil, pinned on the carpet just feet away. His dad wasn't fighting now. He was staring at the same image on the scanner they were, his jaw slack, his face chalky, drained of blood.

Tom closed his eyes and started laughing softly, wondering how this could get any worse. He was in serious trouble here. He and his dad both were.

* * *

THE GOVERNMENT AGENTS who arrived to sweep them all up into custody—Tom, Neil, and the security guards as well—weren't from the Pentagonal Spire. They were from the National Security Agency.

Tom recounted the same sequence of events to three different interrogators, and passed days alone in a cell, waiting for his official debriefing. He spent hours on end pacing, fretting over what would happen from here, worrying about the repercussions of this, worrying about what Neil might be saying . . . He'd already missed the first few days of Upper Company at the Pentagonal Spire. Every other trainee had returned already.

He'd give anything to be there with them.

Finally, the day came for Tom to learn the fate of his father, for him to formally meet with the NSA agent overseeing the situation.

Tom's nerves were leaping under his skin and he strode in to face the slim, imperious woman. She looked to be in her forties, with light blond hair drawn into a tight bun, sharp cheekbones, and lips set in a thin scarlet line.

"Mr. Raines," she said crisply, "I'm glad you're here. I have a few questions for you."

Her profile flashed in his vision center:

NAME: CLASSIFIED

GRADE: CLASSIFIED

SECURITY STATUS: Top Secret LANDLOCK-14

"My name is Irene Frayne. We need to discuss your father. Please take a seat."

Tom sat. A distant light bit into his eyes, and he had to blink to make out her face.

There was something distinctly unnerving about meeting an actual NSA agent. He knew they had files on every single person in the country, and a lot of Obsidian Corp. contractors were also full-time NSA . . . He'd even penetrated one of their fusion centers by accident when he'd interfaced with Obsidian Corp.'s systems, so he appreciated the reach of their covert eyes and ears. For all he knew, Frayne had a list of every single embarrassing website he'd ever visited.

Frayne offered him a metallic device, one that resembled a small doorknob, impatience in the sharp planes of her face. "I want you to insert this in your brain stem access port."

"What is it?" Tom said warily.

"I'll ask the questions here, Mr. Raines. Insert it. Now."

Tom felt a stirring of unease just at the thought of interfacing with some unknown device, but he didn't have much choice here. He flipped it over so he could see the prong where the device was designed to attach to his port, then he clicked it into the back of his neck. Tom tried to settle back into his seat, but he couldn't lean his head comfortably back now. He sat there awkwardly, his head tilted forward, shoulders tight.

Frayne, in the meantime, was examining a tablet computer held in her manicured grasp.

"State your full name."

"Thomas Andrew Raines."

"Are you a trainee at the Pentagonal Spire, Mr. Raines?"

"Yeah. Of course."

"Have you ever lied to get out of trouble?"

The question flustered him. How was he supposed to answer that? Hadn't everyone done that at some point? "Wait," he floundered, "you mean, right now?"

Frayne's gaze remained fixed on the screen. The faintest smile touched her lips. "That answer is sufficient for our purposes. Now, let's proceed." She tapped at her screen. Her pale eyes flickered back and forth over something she saw there. Then they returned to him. "I understand neural processors enable photographic recollection. If I feel you're omitting any details, or being less than truthful, we'll have to verify your account with a census device. Do you understand?"

Tom felt the blood drain from his face. Sweat pricked on his forehead and palms. Suddenly he knew what that screen must be, what the thing in his brain stem was doing: she'd asked for two truths and then a question designed to fluster him. It was a lie detector. Maybe something more intricate than that, even, since he had a neural processor that could directly access certain areas of his brain. He wished he could see that screen.

"I understand."

Frayne set the tablet down and folded her hands. "As you've probably discerned, we need to discuss your father."

"Listen," Tom tried, "my dad's—"

"Very opinionated," Frayne cut in. "Out of necessity after your public admission, we filled him in. He knows about the neural processor. Needless to say, he's not pleased. Does this distress you?"

"Yes," Tom said vehemently, and he noticed the way Frayne's eyes flickered to the tablet to verify his words.

Of course it distressed him. He'd never wanted Neil to find

out. He knew his dad had probably gone off on one of his anti-establishment, anti-government rants when he learned he was in the custody of the NSA, and when he'd heard the full story about the neural processor, he must've exploded on them.

"Look, he talks one way, but he never acts on it," Tom insisted. "He doesn't do anything violent, if that's what you're worried about."

"It surprises me he'd allow his son to be an Intrastellar Combatant." Frayne's lips were a flat line. "Then again, you haven't exactly been the cookie-cutter Intrastellar Combatant, have you, Mr. Raines? We have a former trainee in our organization. I believe you know him. Nigel—"

"Nigel Harrison," Tom cut in, glad for a chance to argue with whatever impression she'd formed of him. "Yeah, the guy who tried to blow up the Pentagonal Spire. I hope he's not my character reference here, because I was the good guy there. I saved the day when he tried to attack his own side. Check your lie detector, and you'll see."

Frayne looked at him sharply, and Tom regretted giving away the fact that he'd figured out he was attached to a lie detector. She studied him for a tense moment, then, "We're perfectly aware of Mr. Harrison's past, and I assure you, his behavior is very adequately regulated now."

A prickling sensation moved up the back of Tom's neck.

Yeah, he knew how Nigel had been "regulated." They must have reprogrammed him to suit their needs. All they wanted was a person with a computer in his head, not Nigel himself. Dalton Prestwick had once taunted him with that possible fate, back when it looked like Tom might have no shot at CamCo.

A neural processor could be a terrible thing if the wrong person programmed it.

Frayne folded her arms and leaned back in her chair, her chin tilting up. “Mr. Harrison is a valuable source of insight into the workings of the Pentagonal Spire. Our agency previously had very little direct information from inside the installation. Given the recent disappearance of Heather Akron, a trainee who was supposed to join us, we expect that to change.”

Would she have been adequately regulated, too? Tom wondered cynically. Maybe that was part of the reason Heather had refused to back down from her quest to destroy Tom, destroy Blackburn. She knew what was ahead of her. She thought she had nothing left to lose.

Still, he couldn’t help feeling a chill at the very thought of the girl he’d seen Blackburn murder.

Frayne examined her tablet computer. “The Department of Defense gave me full access to your files. I see that this is your second major security breach. The first occurred when you held unauthorized meetings with the Russo-Chinese Combatant Medusa.”

“I admit that one, but I was cleared by the Congressional Defense Committee. That’s done.”

“You committed credit card fraud against a Coalition executive to the tune of nearly fifty thousand dollars.”

Tom gave a start, surprised they knew about that. As plebes, he and Vik had run up the balance on Dalton Prestwick’s credit card. It was revenge—the man had reprogrammed Tom, after all.

“That wasn’t fraud. My name was on the card. Besides . . .” Tom fumbled for a good excuse, then found it. “Besides, I only

spent that money to help the economy.”

Frayne slanted him a look that told him he was an imbecile.

Tom cracked under it. “Look, he’s sleeping with my mom.”

“Your mother.” She consulted her tablet. “Ah, Delilah Nyland. The dancer.”

“Dancer?” Tom echoed. He’d never heard anything much about her, only that she’d run away from her own home at fourteen and his father had met her in Las Vegas. They’d never actually gotten married, even after Tom was born. “Wait, what sort of dancer?”

Then he thought of that handful of times when he was a kid, when Neil had tried to be nonchalant about handing him some bills and telling him to go hang around a VR parlor for a while. Tom remembered the sort of women who’d tended to be hanging off his dad’s arm.

Suddenly, he didn’t want to know anything else about her. “Actually, don’t tell me. Forget I asked.”

Frayne studied him. “It seems you had a very unstable childhood, Mr. Raines. Coupled with what appears to be a familial predisposition toward antisocial conduct, I suppose this explains some of your adjustment issues at the Pentagonal Spire.”

“I’m not a psycho.”

“And yet you have the distinction of being one of the youngest people on Interpol’s terror watch list. There aren’t many sixteen-year-olds deemed international terrorist threats.”

“I’m classified as a *low level* terrorist, not even a dangerous one. There was this prank of sorts involving these toilets and this club, and the guys in there took it way too seriously, and

one of them must've pulled some strings to screw me over. You're not going to arrest me, are you?"

"I'm well aware the term 'terrorist' has become a very, shall we say, broad label, so, no, Mr. Raines, I don't intend to arrest you. But I can't help observing that trouble seems to follow you. This recent incident is one of a great many." She stroked her long, slim finger over her chin, studying him. "Do you know what your father is facing today? Indefinite confinement."

"He's not dangerous, he's—"

"Not particularly prudent, either." Her eyes narrowed. "As soon as your father learned of your neural processor, he became the custodian of highly classified, sensitive intelligence. We've already reached an understanding with the other unauthorized civilians made aware of your neural implant, but it's quite another matter with someone like your father who has a record of antisocial conduct. He can't be trusted."

Tom knew Neil's rap sheet: resisting arrest, disturbing the peace, assault upon officers of the law, drunk and disorderly conduct . . . He knew Neil had probably already condemned himself with his outspoken political views since being taken into custody. He hated people like Frayne, those he considered "enforcers of the corporate kleptocracy."

"Fine. Let's say my father told everyone." Tom spread his hands. "Who's gonna believe him? He's an unemployed drunk who didn't have the money to finish high school. Just call him a conspiracy theorist, and no one will listen to a word he says."

"But some might. This is a sensitive point in the development of neural technology. We can't take the risk your father might gain traction if he goes public about the neural processors.

Are you aware of the National Defense Authorization Act, Mr. Raines?”

Tom sagged down in his seat, raking his hand through his hair, trying to think of what to do. “I think so. Something about terrorists, right?”

“The law’s language is rather broad,” she said, “deliberately so in order to give someone in my position more latitude in applying it. I could easily construe your father—and I will directly quote the law—as someone ‘who was part of or substantially supported . . . forces that are engaged in hostilities against the United States or its Coalition partners.’ He’s on record publicly agitating against the government, against our Coalition partner companies. I already have grounds to take him into custody as a domestic terrorist. He’ll have no right to a lawyer or a trial by jury. He will simply disappear, and I will do this all legally . . . unless somehow you could reassure me he can be contained.”

Tom sat up, his heart racing, latching on to the single shred of hope she was offering. “Let me talk to my dad. I can find a way. I’ll get him to stay quiet.”

She cocked her head. “I’m not sure of him, and I’m certainly not sure of you, Mr. Raines, but I’ll give you one chance.” She rose to her feet, studying him in an unnerving, unblinking manner. “By all means, show me what you can do.”

CHAPTER TWO

TOM WAS ESCORTED into the interrogation room where Neil sat slouched at the table, forehead leaning on his hand.

This moment had been coming since the day Tom agreed to get a neural processor, but his stomach still swooped, realizing his dad knew everything. Tom had one chance, just one, to convince the NSA he could disarm Neil as a threat to the secrecy of the program.

“Hi, Dad.”

His dad half rose from the table, almost pleading, “Tommy, tell me none of this is true. This . . . this neural processor stuff. It’s gotta be a lie.”

Tom felt a cold pit in his stomach. His mouth felt bone-dry. “It’s true. The computer in my head is the only reason I’d be able to control the drones in space. I had to have it to join the Intrasolar Forces.”

“You mean you left me and you went and got this right after . . .” Neil sputtered into silence. He shook his head again and again. “I should have known. There was something different about you, about your face; I thought you’d matured. I didn’t

imagine . . .” His hand flew to his head. “The roulette table. The roulette! It’s why you knew those numbers!”

“Yeah,” Tom admitted. “That’s why.”

Neil’s gaze sharpened on his. “And Joseph Vengerov knew, didn’t he? He was trying to make some point.” He closed the distance between them in a few strides. “Did he have something to do with this?” Spittle flew from his mouth. “Did he? That cold-blooded Russkie bastard, I’ll—”

“He had nothing to do with this. He only designed the tech for the military. I made the decision to get it. I agreed to keep it from you.”

Neil shook his head in furious denial. “I can’t believe this. You wouldn’t let them do this to you. You wouldn’t be so *stupid*.”

Tom felt heat wash up inside him. “Did anyone tell you about what I can do now that I have the neural processor? Did anyone tell you I speak thirty languages? I know physics. I know calculus. I won Capitol Summit! I can memorize a textbook in my sleep.”

Neil stared at him. “You don’t even sound like my son anymore.”

“Because I’m not!” Tom grew desperate for his father to understand. He paced away from Neil, feeling wired with agitation. “I had nothing going for me before. Nothing! I was ugly and stupid and a loser. I couldn’t do anything except play video games. Everything is different now. The computer made me so much more. So much better. So, no, I’m not the same guy I was before. I’m *better*. I’m so much better, Dad. I could go on and do anything now.”

Neil looked at him, his eyes hollow, the harsh lights overhead bringing out every line etched into his skin. “I never realized how much you hated yourself.”

Tom groaned. "That's not what I'm saying."

"It is," Neil flared. "You must hate yourself to talk this way, and I'll tell you, that breaks my heart, Tommy, it does, because you're a great kid and you always have been."

Tom grew fed up. "Do you really think I was better off when I was flunking out of Rosewood Reformatory? You think I would've been better if I'd just kept playing video games the rest of my life? This thing here"—he pointed at his temples—"it's given me everything. It's opened the whole world to me."

"You had choices before," Neil bellowed. "And now you don't! Do you get that? *They own you!* No one in the world can sell you a lifetime warranty on that tech in your head. You had choices, and you threw them all away!"

"This wasn't a choice! Obviously you can't see that, but this was the only way I could've gone."

"The only way? You gave up your mind, you gave up yourself!" He caught his breath, a ferocious gleam in his eyes. "But I'm not giving up on you."

"What does that mean?"

Neil ripped toward the nearest surveillance camera, determination in every line of his body. He pointed right at the lens. "All right, Frayne! You want me to keep quiet? I will. I'll sign a confidentiality agreement, sign whatever form you want. I won't breathe a word again about you people mangling the brains of those poor kids, but I want my boy back!"

Tom stared at his thin back, realizing what his dad wanted to do. "No."

"I can't get that computer out of your head," Neil said ferociously, "but I can get you out of that blasted program."

Tom rose to his feet, staring at him, his heart pounding so loud he could hear it in his ears. “You can’t do that. They won’t let you do that.”

“The hell I can’t. I’m your father,” Neil shouted back. “You’re not eighteen yet. I had to give them permission to keep you, so now I’m rescinding it. They wanna stop me—then by God, I’ll spread this everywhere. I’ll raise a storm they can’t tamp down.”

“I can’t leave the program if I have a neural processor, and the neural processor can’t come out. My brain is dependent on it. Dad, don’t you get it? If you give them a problem, they won’t boot me out of the program—they’ll lock you away!”

“Let ‘em try!”

Tom realized it, then: Neil was digging in his heels. His life had been one massive war against the world and now he had his greatest reason yet to take to the trenches. He couldn’t possibly win, but that never mattered. Neil would proudly destroy himself before giving up on fighting for his kid, even in the face of insurmountable odds.

Tom wouldn’t let him do it.

“There are brain doctors out there,” Neil was murmuring feverishly. “There are other people who know about the brain. It can’t come out? We’ll see. We’ll just see. But they’re not keeping you. I won’t let them.”

Tom looked up at the surveillance camera and held up a finger, telling Frayne to give him a bit more time before concluding Neil couldn’t be reasoned with. He felt very calm inside, realizing it: he could stop his dad from throwing his life away. He was the only one who could do it.

He just had to erase any reason his father had to wage this war.

The world seemed to go very still around Tom, and he almost didn't hear his own words over the pounding of blood in his ears. "Dad, if you tell people about the neural processor, or you try and take me from the Spire, then I'll go to child protective services, tell them all about my father being a lousy drunk who can't hold a job, and I'll get emancipated."

The words made Neil jolt back around sharply, shock on his face like Tom had unexpectedly jammed a knife in his gut.

"And then," Tom said, his voice feeling very far away, "I'll tell them all about how my dad couldn't get us somewhere to sleep indoors or make sure I got to school more than a few days in a row. That's neglect, which is probably grounds for some sort of legal penalty." It was all true. It was all too close, so he twisted the knife even more. "And if that's not enough right there, then maybe I'll even throw in a few things about . . . oh, I don't know. Maybe about you *beating* me. How about that?"

Shock slackened Neil's face. "I'd never hurt you, Tommy. You know I've never lifted a finger—"

"I know that," Tom agreed, a terrible, deathly calm inside him, "but let's face it, all the rest of that is true, so is it really gonna sound like a huge stretch if I take it a bit further? Mom high-tailed it away from us so fast—that won't look good—and think about all those times you got arrested for brawling with other people. Those are red flags, Dad. On paper, you look like a psycho. So here's your choice: if you try to create a problem for me, I will create a far worse problem for you, I swear it. You can't win this. You can only lose everything you have left."

"I'm trying to do what's best for you," Neil said hollowly. "Why can't you see that?"

“Why start *now*?”

Neil stared at him like he didn't know him. Tom held his eyes, his heart pounding wildly in his chest, throbbing in his ears.

“Maybe you're right,” Neil finally said. “You're not my boy anymore. That computer's done something awful to your brain, because I know my son never would've threatened me like this.”

Tom couldn't speak for a second. Then he reminded himself that this was good. This was what he needed Neil to say. This was the clean break, the reason Neil wouldn't wage the war that would be the end of him.

“I guess we're agreed, then: I'm not your son.” Tom moved toward the door, feeling like some strange robot going through the motions of walking, his legs like unfeeling rubber beneath him.

“This is happening again.” Neil's words were a broken whisper on the air. “This is really happening again.”

Tom's gut clenched. He was leaving his father again. But this time, he knew, it would be much more permanent. There was no going back from this.

He walked out the door.

TOM WAS IN a sort of fog afterward. He felt like he'd just survived some terrible battle and emerged the victor over a field of ashes. He was only vaguely aware of the hours dragging past as he sat in his own cell, arms folded over his chest, staring up at the ceiling.

It was for his own good, Tom told himself over and over, but his brain burned with the devastation on his dad's face. When he tried to resort to his old standby and think of something else, it didn't help at all. He saw Medusa's face instead in

that moment he unleashed a computer virus on her. He'd done it for a good reason. Vengerov had suspected she was the ghost in the machine, so Tom had proven she wasn't—by using Vengerov's virus to incapacitate her and then blowing up the skyboards himself.

But it didn't change his memory of the hurt on her face in that moment of betrayal. He wondered how much he'd have to harm the people he cared about before they were finally safe.

Then he heard the door slide open and grew aware of the thin blond woman gliding back into the room. "Well, I must say, you surprised me, Mr. Raines."

"Did I?"

Frayne rested her hand on the back of the chair across from his but made no move to sit. "I'll allow your father to retain liberty of movement. His conversations will be monitored. He'll be watched. Sometimes he'll have a tail, sometimes he won't. He'll be informed of these conditions to encourage him to keep himself in line . . . though I suspect you may have done enough to ensure that yourself."

Tom laughed softly, feeling bitter. It was a roundabout way to say he'd just alienated his father so totally, the man wouldn't ever want him back—much less go to the trouble of taking on the military for him.

Frayne pressed on her ear, tilting her head to the side. Tom knew she was hearing instructions from somewhere. Her icy eyes moved to his. "It appears an officer has arrived to escort you back to the Pentagonal Spire. You're free to go."

Tom raised himself up, bone weary. "Listen," he said, "do you really have to spy on my dad? He's nobody. He's not gonna

do anything. Trust me, you'd know already if he was gonna go out there and cause problems."

"If your father has nothing to hide," Frayne said, "then he has no reason to worry about being under surveillance. It's as simple as that."

Tom let out a breath and felt some last shred of hope recede. There simply wasn't a word he could say to reason with someone who thought like Irene Frayne.

THE RETURN JOURNEY to the Pentagonal Spire felt endless, even though the Interstice could sweep them across the country at five thousand miles an hour. Tom had been surprised to find Lieutenant James Blackburn waiting there by the vactrain, his arms folded over his wide chest, his scarred face tense beneath his short-cropped dark hair.

They hadn't been face-to-face since Tom destroyed every skyboard in the Western Hemisphere in the name of the ghost in the machine. He could tell with one glance at Blackburn's thunderous expression that he'd already traced it back to Tom.

It was probably the reason he'd come personally.

Tom was not looking forward to being trapped in a tiny little vactrain with him for several minutes. The air felt electric with tension as Tom settled across from him and the metallic car shot off down the dark tube. Blackburn watched him in an unsettling manner as though trying to psych him out. Tom stared back defiantly, his jaw throbbing from clenching it.

Finally, Blackburn spoke, though his tone was carefully controlled. "Should I bother asking why?"

"Why, what?"

“You know why what. Why the monumentally stupid and shockingly public gesture just before vacation? You might as well have waved a red flag at Joseph Vengerov to please come find you. You exposed what you can do to the *entire world*. *That*. Why, Raines?”

Tom let out a breath. “Okay, first off, Vengerov already knew there was someone like me out there. I found that out at Obsidian Corp.”

Blackburn stared at him. “So you chose to paint a virtual target on yourself to make it easier for him to track you down?”

“Look, I’m sorry. I know you’re stuck cleaning up after me again.” Tom eyed Blackburn warily, knowing he had another reason to be upset about increased scrutiny of the Pentagonal Spire. He’d seen Blackburn murder Heather Akron, even though Blackburn didn’t know he was there. Blackburn had things of his own to cover up. “I guess we’re kind of tied together in this.”

“How true,” Blackburn said. “We are bound together by this secret of yours. And I’ve made a decision: I can’t let things continue the way they’ve been going. Time and again, you screw up. You make poor decisions. I can’t trust you. It’s as simple as that.”

It was all the warning Tom got.

Words flashed before his vision: *Session expired. Immobility sequence initiated.*

“Hey!” Tom bellowed as he lost all feeling below his chest and tumbled off his seat to the floor. Blackburn strode calmly toward him, tapping his forearm keyboard.

Tom knew one thing: he had to defend himself. He tore back his sleeve, his mind racing frantically through the programs still

stored on his processor after the war games—but Blackburn’s heavy foot descended on his arm, crushing it to the floor. He tore the keyboard away from Tom and flung it aside.

“You’ve become my biggest liability. I’ve had it. We’re not playing this game anymore where you make a mess, I fix it, you make another mess, I fix it again.”

Tom tried to activate a thought interface and send Blackburn a virus that way, but *Function unavailable* blinked in his vision center. He wanted to scream out in frustration.

“I’ve been thinking about this since I found out about your ability.” Blackburn pulled out a neural wire from the front pocket of his uniform. “That stunt with the skyboards made up my mind. Call it the straw that broke the camel’s back.”

“What are you doing?” Tom demanded.

Blackburn shook his head and whipped out a neural chip, attaching it to one end of the wire. “Trusting you to be careful would be downright stupid. There’s too much hinging on what I’m trying to do.”

He reached down, and all Tom knew was, he had to get away.

“No!” He seized Blackburn’s wrists, trying to force his arms away, desperation giving him strength. But Blackburn had full use of his body, Tom did not, and Blackburn pinned Tom’s wrists together and forced his head down.

He kept Tom in that awkward position as he maneuvered the wire into his brain stem access port.

“GET OFF ME! GET AWAY!” Tom said, his vision dimming, a stream of code flowing into his processor.

“It’s too late. Just relax.” Blackburn settled into the seat next to Tom, and if he hadn’t lost strength in his limbs, he

would've punched him. "I would've slipped this into your download stream in the Pentagonal Spire, but circumstances have changed there. I have to do it this way."

Tom couldn't believe this was happening. Someone was reprogramming him again. "I'll make you sorry for this," Tom promised him even though he couldn't imagine how. His voice shook. "You can't control my mind—"

"I'm not trying to control your mind, Raines."

Tom forced his eyelids back open.

"I'm creating a link between our processors," Blackburn said. He pointed at his temple, then at Tom's. "With a thought, I'll be able to access your sensory receptors and see exactly what you're doing anytime I want to."

"That's it?"

"That's it. I'm just like the NSA only I'm looking from the inside out, rather than outside in."

"Great, so every time I use the bathroom, you're gonna see it?"

"No," Blackburn said. "I won't watch you twenty-four hours a day. Only when I choose to tune in. It's like turning on a television and checking a specific channel. I'll have the capability all the time, but that doesn't mean I'll watch it all the time."

Tom watched the code streaming behind his eyelids. Blackburn had him at a total disadvantage right now; he didn't need Tom's good opinion. There was no reason to lie to him. Tom couldn't change the outcome, even if Blackburn had outright said he was seizing control of his mind like Dalton had. Tom believed what he said.

It didn't make him feel any better about this.

“This neural link,” Blackburn explained, “will let me see through your eyes whenever I’m wondering what you’re up to, and hear through your ears when I want to eavesdrop on you. I’m not a fan of routine surveillance, Tom, but you’ve absolutely necessitated it with your actions. This way you’re never going to surprise me again. The next time you plan to pull a stunt like the one with the skyboards, I’ll be in a position to look at what you’re doing and intervene. Frankly, you’re lucky this is all I’m doing after the trouble you’ve caused me.”

Tom was suddenly chilled, remembering Heather’s face the moment before the transition chamber to the vactrain decompressed. Blackburn had done worse to people. Far worse.

He heaved in breath, trying to calm himself. “You’re not going to kill me, then.”

Blackburn shot him a startled look. “Of course not.”

Tom’s gaze riveted to Blackburn’s forearm keyboard, his every muscle knotted with anxiety. “What now? What are you doing?”

“Now, I’m removing this time segment from your memory and looping the first few minutes of our ride through the vactube so you can live in blissful ignorance.”

“No. No! Wait. No, wait, come on. I won’t tell anyone, okay? We can work something out. Maybe this link is a good thing. I won’t try to undo it.” He threw out every lie he could. He’d say anything to stop Blackburn from erasing his memory of this.

“You’re right, you won’t try to undo it because you won’t remember it.”

Rage boiled through Tom. He felt like his searing fury could burn a message right into his heart, where Blackburn could never hope to wipe it away, a warning to watch for this, to stop

him. Surely if he was this enraged, the next time he looked at Blackburn, he'd know something was wrong.

Somehow. He'd remember. He'd remember . . . he wouldn't forget this, he wouldn't forget this . . .

TOM FOUND HIMSELF sitting there in the vactrain, feeling strange for a moment, feeling like he'd missed something, and when he looked over at Blackburn, he found Blackburn gazing at him intently from the seat across from his.

"What?" Tom said.

Blackburn shook his head, studying his face. "Nothing. Is something wrong?"

"No." Tom felt disturbed. He looked away, faintly puzzled by his own reaction, by the way he felt like adrenaline sizzled through his veins, his heart pounding.

Maybe he was on edge because of the way Blackburn had been staring thunderously at him the whole ride. Weird that Blackburn hadn't even said anything to him—not even about the skyboards. He looked down and realized his forearm keyboard had slipped right off his arm and to the floor. Huh. Tom must not have fastened it on well. He lifted it up and wrapped it back around his arm.

"You haven't asked me about the skyboards," Tom finally blurted, feeling like he was going to explode. "Why haven't you?"

Blackburn rubbed the bridge of his nose. After a moment, he opened his eyes. "So, Raines, why the monumentally stupid and shockingly public gesture just before vacation?"

It might have been Tom's imagination, but it didn't sound to him like Blackburn cared all that much about the answer.