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Opening extract from **Vortex**

Written by
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CHAPTER ONE

“YOU’VE GOTTA SEE THIS watch, Tommy. The inscription says ‘Property of Sanford Bloombury, 1865.’ Imagine that. Some guy was wearing this thing before we even had electricity.”

Tom slid off his virtual reality visor and blinked as his eyes adjusted to the dimness inside the bustling casino. The bright lights of the nearby video displays flashed over the smile cracking Neil’s worn face—and glinted across the gold watch dangling from his hand.

“Huh.” Tom didn’t really get why Neil was showing it to him. “Is this watch thing worth a lot or something?”

“Worth a lot? Tom, this watch has been passed down from father to son for generations. It’s a precious family heirloom, and it’s got a lot of sentimental value. Not to *our* family, of course, but definitely to that banker’s.” He jabbed his finger over his shoulder toward the bald man he’d beaten

at poker a few minutes earlier. “So I hope it means something to you when I say that I want you to have it. Happy fifteenth birthday.”

It took Tom a moment to process his words. “You’re giving it to me?”

He couldn’t remember his dad giving him a present for his birthday . . . not *on* his birthday or anywhere near it, at least. He seized the watch eagerly. The VR visor slipped from his hand, and Neil caught it before it could clatter to the floor.

“This is fantastic, Dad!” Sure, he had absolutely no need for a watch, what with the precise, satellite-tuned chronometer in his brain that measured time down to one two-thousandths of a second. . . . It was one of the many perks of having a computer in his head. Getting a present was still awesome, though.

Neil clasped his shoulder. “Come on, let’s grab some steak.”

Steak. That was even more awesome.

Tom leaped up and followed Neil through bustling crowd in the casino. They brushed past the vanquished banker, who greedily eyed the watch in Tom’s hand. Tom had no scruples about fastening it on in front of the guy, but it might’ve been a mistake being so brazen about it, because he swore he saw the banker’s face tightened into a mask of hostility—and Tom saw the banker wave over some large man who looked suspiciously like some sort of bodyguard or thug.

Tom darted a last glimpse over his shoulder before he and Neil swept around the corner. Then they plunged through the door into the enveloping, dry heat of the Nevada

evening, the startling neon lights of the Las Vegas strip bombarding them from all sides.

Neil surveyed the casino they'd left. "Think the banker's going to send his manservant after us?"

So he'd noticed the ominous sign, too. Tom shook his head. "I dunno yet."

"Walk fast."

Tom didn't need Neil to tell him that; Tom *did* still have some survival instincts from the first fourteen years of his life he'd spent following his dad from one casino to another. As soon as Neil got money, on the rare occasions when he won, *keeping* that money became the biggest task.

The question was, how alert was Neil right now? Tom threw a careful glance down at Neil's legs, and he saw that his dad was moving steadily, no swaying or shuffling. Good. Sober. Or at least, as close to it as he ever got.

Tom turned his wrist to and fro as they threaded through the crowd, the gleaming lights of the Las Vegas skyboards playing over its surface. The mile-wide screens in near-Earth orbit bombarded ads down at anyone within a hundred-mile radius below them—but their reflections in the watch shrank to tiny slivers of light. Then in the shiny surface, he spotted a figure weaving through the crowd behind them. One glance back confirmed it: the banker's manservant was, indeed, tailing them.

Great.

Tom's eyes snapped back to face the front. "Yeah, Dad. We're being followed. Your banker's a leecher."

Neil gave a disgusted snort. "Figures. It's always the Wall Street guys."

There was this practice in the poker circuit now called

“leeching,” where men would hire a few thugs and play the game to win, even if they lost. If they legitimately won, they kept the spoils of victory, and if they lost, they dispatched their thugs to take back the money they’d gambled away. It ruined the game for everyone, because leechers didn’t seem to understand the concept that gambling meant accepting your losses as well as your winnings. They seemed to think win or lose, they were entitled to the spoils.

He elbowed Tom. “You remember how we deal with leechers?”

“I’ve only been gone six months,” Tom protested. He tugged off his watch and let the thug see him giving it back to Neil. “Back of the head?”

“Back of the head,” Neil agreed.

This was the sort of incident Tom hadn’t missed while living at the Pentagonal Spire, training to be an Intrastellar Combatant. There, life was about routine, abiding by regulations, and Tom generally knew what would happen one day to the next.

Life with his dad was like this: chaotic, unpredictable, sometimes dangerous. Tom was almost relieved they were running into trouble, because the first two weeks of his legally mandated time away from the military’s custody had been going so smoothly, he’d half expected a meteor to crash onto their hotel to make up for it. Getting pursued by a hired thug who was planning to rob them, take everything Neil had won tonight, and maybe beat them up, well . . . that was familiar enough. Tom knew how to handle it.

“Go in there,” Neil directed, jabbing his finger toward the storefront of the next restaurant.

Tom saluted him. "See you soon, Dad." He veered from his father's side and headed on into the restaurant, leaving Neil to continue down the street in the press of the crowd.

They'd done this enough to have a basic routine down. Tom waited as the thug trailed to a stop in the midst of the crowd streaming around him, considering which of them to follow. Then he made up his mind and began stalking after Neil again. Tom scanned the room to make sure no one was looking his way, then swiped a heavy napkin holder from a nearby table and plunged back out onto the sidewalk. He began tailing the thug, who was so busy tailing Neil, he didn't notice. They never did.

Through the crush of the crowd, Tom saw the guy swerve after Neil into an alleyway. Tom broke into a flat run. He reached the lip of the alley as the thug closed in for the kill. "Hey! Hey, you!" the man bellowed at Neil.

Neil made a show of spinning around coolly, primed for a confrontation, his eyes glinting with challenge. He gave a small smile, seeing Tom drawing up on the man from behind. "What can I do for you, buddy?"

Tom raised the metal napkin holder for a devastating blow, waiting for the guy to make the first move and officially render it self-defense when Tom slammed him over the back of the head, and Neil jumped forward to pummel with his fists. Tom watched the man reach into his coat pocket, and he knew it was time. He lunged forward, but Neil must've seen something other than a gun in the thug's hand, because his eyes shot wide open and he thrust up a splayed palm. "Tom, no! Don't!"

The man spun around, and Tom saw what he'd taken out.

A police badge.

Tom felt a dropping sensation, realizing he'd almost clubbed a cop. The napkin holder danced out of his fingers and clattered to the ground. The cop tore out his gun and leveled it at Tom. Tom's mouth went dry. He raised his hands and backed away. "Sorry. We thought you were . . . Sorry."

Neil raised his hands, too. "My kid and I thought you came to rob us."

The police officer snarled at Neil, "I'm going to need that watch back. And that money you pocketed tonight."

They both stared at him, realizing they'd been right: he *had* come to rob them. Neither of them had expected the leecher to hire an actual cop to do his dirty work.

Neil gave a derisive laugh. "Private detail duty, eh, Officer?"

Like most everyone else nowadays, cops couldn't really live on their salaries, especially now as automated machines replaced them in standard patrolling and crowd control. An unscrupulous few of them took side jobs like this, serving as badge-carrying servants to the same men who'd given themselves bonuses with what used to be their pensions.

This cop holstered his gun, satisfied he'd established his legal right to steal Neil's winnings. "We all do what we gotta do. Now hand it over."

"You don't seem to get how this works," Neil spat, his hands curling into shaking claws. "Your patron wagered and he lost. He lost to me fair and square. Maybe he's never gotten the memo, but when you gamble and you lose, you actually *lose*. It's a bargain you make for the money you get if you win. He can't just send a pet cop to take it back because the game didn't go his way!"

The cop was unmoved. “Do you want to give me a problem tonight, sir? Do you want this to turn ugly? Because I’ve got no issue with that. Just from the look of you, I’m betting you have prior offenses. That’ll be helpful later when I say you were resisting arrest, or maybe that you were aggressive and left me no choice but to defend myself with force. And maybe your kid came after me, which will be good reason to lock him up, too.” He smirked at Tom. “I don’t think you want this nice-looking boy of yours in there with that bunch. I think you should play nice and give me what I was sent here for, and we’ll all walk away.”

Every muscle in Neil’s body tightened.

Anger simmered in Tom’s gut, too, but he knew there was no standing up to a cop. This guy could beat them both up and charge *them* with the felony. His word would always be taken above theirs in a court. For that matter, even if Tom hooked into a census device and uploaded this memory to the Spire’s systems so someone could view it, and he could *prove* the cop was in the wrong, he and Neil would still end up the ones in trouble for illegally recording a police officer.

Tom reached out and nudged his dad. “Just give it to him.”

With a noise of disgust, Neil delved into the pockets of his worn suit and hurled down the watch and a wad of cash, letting it all litter across the broken concrete of the alleyway. “You’re no better than a common hoodlum.”

The officer swooped down and snatched the roll of bills. “We’ve all gotta feed our own.”

Neil gazed at the man with a burning rage in his eyes, and Tom knew this bomb would explode if he didn’t

intervene now. He reached forward and grasped Neil's rigid arm, then jerked his dad back toward the street with him. But Neil couldn't resist a parting shot.

"You're next, you know!"

The cop swung back up to his feet. "Are you threatening me?"

Oh no. Tom tightened his grip on Neil. "Dad . . ."

But Neil had that reckless light in his eyes, a crazed grin twisting his leathery face, and Tom knew this was a lost cause. "My boy and me, yeah, the corporate overlords already see us as surplus people breathing their air, living on their planet, but you know what? You're a worthless cockroach to them, too, buddy. They *used* to need you to keep your boot on our necks while they emptied our pockets. . . ."

"Dad, let's just go!"

But Neil forged on. "But I hope the next time you look up at a drone in your sky or a patrol unit on your street, you'll realize you're nothing to them, too, and if you don't like it, they've got an automated boot to shove up your—"

The cop crossed the distance between them in two strides, and cracked the butt of his gun across Neil's face, slamming him to the ground. Neil started laughing, raising himself up on his elbows, blood dripping from his nose in dark globs.

"Too close to the truth, *Officer?*"

The cop ripped forward for another blow, and Tom didn't even think about it—he shoved the man back. He knew a moment later that he'd made a mistake, and the cop's Taser jammed into his side, sending an electric jolt tearing through his muscles, locking them up, hurtling a mass of stars before

his eyes. The entire world became a vibrating mass of prickling needles, and his body slipped out of his own control, thrashing to the ground. . . .

Tom came to sprawled on the ground, his palms stinging, his knees burning. He became aware of Neil shaking him persistently.

“Tommy . . . Tommy! You’re starting to scare me. Come on. Wake up, kid. Wake up.”

Tom forced his eyes open, a groan escaping his lip. “Dad?”

“Oh, thank God. I don’t know what that was you just had.” Neil’s face was washed of color, a stark gray. “A seizure or something.”

“I’m okay.” His voice rang strangely in his own head. Everything seemed very far away.

“Well, you sent the banker’s pet running.” Neil hoisted him to his unsteady feet. “I guess he didn’t want to get blamed for killing a kid.”

They began the slow, difficult journey back to the hotel, Tom half draped over his dad’s shoulder. His nose was buried against Neil’s jacket, the smell of stale smoke and alcohol filling his nostrils. Numbers danced meaninglessly over his vision.

Tom woozily tried to sort out what had happened. He’d definitely lost a few minutes, or maybe his chronometer was messed up.

He’d had been tased before, back when he was a lot younger and had started gambling in VR parlors. He lost to this grown man, and he didn’t have the money he’d bet against the guy, so he tried to run away. He wasn’t fast enough. The man caught him, hauled him into this empty bathroom, and tased him over and over again until he was

sure Tom had lied about having money. Then he tased Tom for losing a bet with money he didn't have. He said it was to "teach him a lesson."

Tom had learned his lesson: he stopped losing.

He'd also learned what a Taser felt like, so he knew it wasn't normal feeling this weak, feeling the strange buzzing in his skull, seeing the strange numbers dancing over his vision. It had to be the computer in his head, registering its objection to that electric jolt. He hoped he hadn't messed it up too much.

The neural processor didn't calm its strange seizure of flashing numbers until Tom was lying on his bed in their hotel room, the AC pumping a jet of icy air at him, the television buzzing. Tom could hear Neil muttering where he sat, drinking on the other bed.

Tom lifted his head blearily to see the screen was graced by the newly public Camelot Company Combatants. The Indo-Americans and the Russo-Chinese had worked out a temporary cease-fire, allowing the CamCos to go on publicity tours, where they touted their efforts in the war and their sponsors from the Coalition of Multinational Corporations. The military was also taking advantage of the absence of the younger trainees to open up certain areas of the Spire for a bunch of media events.

Ever since Camco's identities had leaked, they'd become famous. Tom saw strange rumors about them all over the internet, too. "Britt Schmeiser's Weekend of Debauchery"; "Alec Tarsus's Dark Past"; even headlines about the public's old favorite Combatant: "Elliot Ramirez's Forbidden Love."

Now Tom watched the screen hazily, seeing the handsome face of Elliot Ramirez, the Pentagonal Spire's longtime

public CamCo. The dark-haired boy sat easily in the center of the massed CamCos, graciously assuring the reporters that he was pleased to share the spotlight. Snowden Gainey was preening in the chair next to his, and Cadence Grey kept darting nervous glances toward the camera. Everyone was there but . . . Someone was missing.

Huh. Heather Akron.

That gave Tom a dull sense of surprise, because he'd seen a lot of the gorgeous brunette from Machiavelli Division the first few days of vacation. Now that he thought about it, though, she'd virtually disappeared off the public radar the last few days. It struck him as strange. Photogenic and charming as she was, Tom expected her to be one of the foremost CamCos trotted out and shown off to the public.

"Look at those kids." Neil glared at the TV over his drink. "They look like a bunch of plastic puppets. Ever notice how they don't blink so much? Eh, Tom, ever notice that?"

Tom managed, "No, never noticed it." He'd asked his friend Wyatt Enslow to write up a program for his neural processor to randomize his blink rate. He was pretty sure that was one reason Neil hadn't noticed anything too off about his face—Tom had been careful to act as normal as possible. Between that and the hair he kept swept down over his neural access port, he'd been careful so far.

Now the focus of the press segment shifted to the CEOs of corporations sponsoring the CamCos. The show flipped to an interview with Reuben Lloyd, CEO of Wyndham Harks. The weedy little man with an unfortunate resemblance to a rat smiled toothily and spoke into a microphone.

"The entire purpose of the corporate-owned media is to

convince you two plus two equals five,” Neil grumbled. “They call these people job creators when as far as I see, the better off they are, the fewer jobs we’ve got. Ha! Job creators. No. More like the parasites devouring the host. Just look at Reuben Lloyd here, playing up the PR so Wyndham Harks can angle for its next taxpayer bailout.” He sighed, his voice growing strangely flat. “You know, Tommy, you’re the only reason I’ve got any stake in this dump. Otherwise, I’d be glad to watch this whole world burn. I’d rather burn it than let them take it all from us.”

Tom sensed danger in the air: Neil working himself up into a rage after the indignity of being robbed. He tried to think of something to say to distract him, but the screen filled with a glowing image of Joseph Vengerov, CEO of Obsidian Corp.

Tom’s muscles froze.

The news report was fawning, because Vengerov had been named CEO of the Year by the *Institutional Investor* for the fifth time. All Tom could think of was the census device. Those three syllables that nearly doomed him rolled through his mind, *Ven-grr-ahv*. . . . As soon as Lieutenant Blackburn realized Tom knew him, terrible things ensued. Tom almost lost his mind, his place at the Spire, everything. . . .

He was still shaken by the reminder several minutes later after a hasty shower. He swiped the fog from the bathroom mirror, water still dripping from his thin face, matting his blond hair to his skull. The strange little flashes of numbers across his vision center were mostly gone now, so Tom figured there was no real need to do anything about it, even though technically, very technically, he was supposed to

contact Lieutenant Blackburn if he had any problems with his neural processor over vacation.

Blackburn had even given all the trainees a remote-access node to hook into the port on the back their necks. It was there to connect their processors with the Spire's server so Blackburn could examine their hardware from across the country.

Tom fished the remote-access node out of his backpack and weighed it in his hand, considering it, then disregarding the thought. He was about to flick it away again when he noticed the marks on his torso, the bruises over his ribs where he'd gotten tased. Something dark boiled up inside him, his mind flashing over the face of the banker's pet cop. He'd probably handed the money back to the bald banker, who was probably counting it up somewhere.

Tom's fist contracted around the remote-access node.

Maybe he had a use for it, after all.

All the major government servers were linked, so as soon as Tom jolted out of himself into the stream of data leading to the Pentagonal Spire's server in Arlington, Virginia, it didn't take so long finding his way into the server of the Department of Homeland Security.

For a disconcerting moment, he felt strange, detached, a free-floating signal in a void. He was never entirely sure what he was doing when he interfaced like this. It seemed to come so much more naturally to the only other person he knew who could enter machines like this, the Russo-Chinese Combatant and his sort-of ex-girlfriend, Medusa. But today, Tom focused on his anger at the cop, and it sharpened his wits. He delved into the vast chain of zeros

and ones, searching for the pipelines between the DHS and the domestic police drones flying over the United States.

When he located those, his neural processor rapidly sorted through an array of rapid-fire coordinates, and he latched on to the armed drone nearest to him.

A quick scroll through the database of registered gun owners in the area brought a familiar image to mind: Sergeant Erik Sherwin, the cop who'd robbed them. All registered gun owners had tracking chips in their skin, so he zeroed right in on Sergeant Sherwin's frequency.

Thousands of feet above Sherwin, in the darkened skies between Las Vegas and the overhead skyboards, the drone's mechanized gaze captured images of the cop just outside the casino, tailing the banker like an obedient puppy. Tom's vision center registered the images like he was seeing through mechanized eyes of his own.

His plans changed.

Tom felt an evil little thrill, because he'd intended to wreak some havoc on the cop, but now that he thought about it, he really should ignore the hired thug and focus on the mastermind: the bald banker the DHS's biometric database identified as Hank Bloombury, who worked for a subsidiary of the Matchett-Reddy Corporation.

Tom honed in on Hank and stalked him from the casino to his private car, the drone far overhead cutting a lethal path through the sky. Hank's car began to pull out of the strip, but Tom was in control of a police drone—which could link remotely into vehicle auto navigation systems and tamper with them at will. Tom enjoyed messing with Hank's, steering the car back around and directing it toward the hotel he and Neil were staying in.

Hank finally realized what was happening, because he must've engaged the emergency shutoff. The car jerked to a halt; and the bald man popped out from inside it, rubbing at the back of his neck, obviously trying to figure out where he was.

Then Tom pulled off his next trick: he plunged the drone through the night sky, and settled it mere meters before the stunned Hank Bloombury. Tom leveled the Tasers straight at the guy's bald head, and enjoyed the sight of the banker standing frozen in place, his mouth hanging open.

Thanks for sending that cop, Tom thought, and sent a talon of the drone's Taser lashing out, shocking Hank just enough to knock him to the ground. Hank scrambled back to his feet, but when he tried to dive back into the car, Tom sent another flare of electricity that way to block him. Hank tried to run in the other direction, but Tom steered the police drone after him, a relentless pursuer, and zinged him again. Then again.

Hank threw up his hands in surrender and stood there, defeated, as Tom circled the drone around him like a vulture. Certain Hank was good and scared, Tom accessed the drone's text screen and gave the banker an order, knowing it would be relayed via communication screen and a mechanized voice.

"TAKE OFF YOUR CLOTHES."

Hank shook his head, his face flushed like he was outraged. He leaped for his car again, so Tom sent more electricity lashing out. That stopped Hank.

"TAKE OFF YOUR CLOTHES," Tom had the drone order again, *"RIGHT NOW."*

Hank seemed to get the message this time, and he

stripped down. Tom decided it would be worth his eyes bleeding for the payoff.

“NOW RUN. RUN FAST.”

Hank hesitated, so Tom launched the drone toward him, zapping the ground at his feet. The banker began running away, and Tom dogged his steps awhile, zapping behind him every so often, making sure the words “KEEP RUNNING, KEEP RUNNING” were displayed on the drone’s communication screen. Tom kept it up until his drone corralled Hank onto the street near their hotel, then he released the drone from his control, launching it back into the sky.

He jolted back into himself, yanked off the transmitter, and popped out of the bathroom.

“Dad, you have to come outside.” His voice throbbed with excitement. “Right now!”

Neil gave a grunt of acknowledgment but nothing more. His melancholy stare was fixed on the TV like he was in some sort of trance.

“Dad, come on, get up.” Tom seized the remote and flipped off the TV, and then tore Neil’s drink from his hand. *That* got his attention. “Believe me, you want to see this.”

“Give me my drink back,” Neil slurred.

Tom reluctantly handed it back. “You’re going to miss it. Then you’re gonna be sorry.”

“Fine. Fine, I’m up.” Neil was visibly irritated, but he followed Tom outside. That’s how he walked out of the hotel in time to see the naked man arrive on their street, gazing up into the sky, searching for the rogue drone.

“Hey.” Neil straightened a bit. “Hey, isn’t that . . .”

Tom’s lips blazed with a grin. “What a coincidence. It’s

your favorite leecher.” He shoved past Neil to access one of the strip’s emergency phones. Tom informed the dispatcher, “There’s some crazy naked man running down the street. He’s flashing kids and selling drugs and . . . and shouting about a holy war.” He figured all three threats would get a hasty police response.

“What are you doing, Tom?”

Tom shrugged. “I figure he’s so fond of cops, let’s bring him a whole bunch.”

The banker was busy haranguing people for clothes when the armada of cops arrived to deal with the drug dealing, pedophiliac terrorist. Hank Bloombury had never learned to respect to the men and women he regarded as his private goons, and he’d never been on the other end of their wrath. As soon as the cops piled out of their cars, he started bawling them out over their rogue drone, but the police didn’t see any fancy suit, and they had no way to realize this guy was important. All they knew was, he was naked and aggressive, so they swarmed him, nightsticks flashing, Tasers flickering.

As the police brutality began in earnest, Tom raised his eyebrows at his dad. “Well? What do you think?”

Neil scratched at his unshaven cheek, blinking like he was trying to be sure he was actually seeing this. “I think I have no idea how you pulled this off.”

“Let’s just say that the military’s taught me a lot of tech skills. That’s all I can tell you. Classified.”

Neil’s leaned closer, his voice a whisper. “Is there *any* way someone can trace this back to you?”

“Nope,” Tom assured him breezily, even though he wasn’t sure. “They’ll probably figure out I put in the call to the cops, but the rest is a mystery.”

Even to Tom. He wasn't sure why he was different from other trainees with neural processors or why Medusa was different, too. He had no idea why they could interface with machines other trainees could not. . . .

He knew he had a particular skill at something, and his mind danced with possibilities about how he could use it.

"Tech skills, huh?" Neil marveled. "Those military guys are really doing right by you, after all. It blows me away when I think about that." He chuckled quietly. "My kid, actually having a shot in life . . . I never knew it was possible."

There was something different in his dad's face, in his voice now, and Tom swore, Neil seemed almost *happy*. The cops cleared the scene, and Tom felt a deep sense of satisfaction. Obviously his terrible vengeance on the leecher had done its job.

The final night Tom spent with his dad, he couldn't sleep. He ventured out onto the balcony into the neon embrace of Las Vegas. Lights bombarded him from every direction: the streets below, the buildings around, and even from skyboards overhead. Over Las Vegas, there were dozens of mile-wide screens, all competing for attention from the tiny people so far below them.

Tom gazed upward, ignoring the ad from the DHS about hearing a whisper, giving them a whisper, or the ad from Nobridis about how their efforts to get rich off the war were actually beneficial to Americans. All he could think about were the possibilities ahead of him. He planned to be an Intrastellar Combatant who controlled the drones fighting the war in outer space, but now he was thinking he could also be a vigilante or maybe even a superhero.

Why not? He had the power to strike back at people like Hank Bloombury. He wasn't traceable, and everything was digitized now.

Medusa and I could even team up. Tom leaned his elbows onto the rail, thinking of his greatest foe, his sort-of ex-girlfriend, and the deadliest warrior on the Russo-Chinese side . . . the single person he knew who could've pulled off the same revenge on Hank Bloombury that he himself had.

Oh, and Tom grinned at the thought of what he could do to his mom's awful boyfriend, Dalton Prestwick, if he wanted to. Yeah, he'd find the guy in his Manhattan home and have some fun with that. Or maybe he'd do something to that Georgetown mansion of Dalton's. There were so many possibilities, they made Tom's head whirl in giddy circles.

He'd even get Karl Marsters.

No. No, wait. Maybe this was abusing his power. It probably was. So how about he only went after Karl once? After all, if he did the world-justice-vigilante stuff, he probably earned himself the right to follow up on a personal grudge *just once*.

At that moment, a loud roaring mounted in his ears, and with shocking swiftness, a black shape descended from the sky, blotting out the skyboards. Tom's entire body grew rigid, and he stood there frozen in place, as one of the Centurion-grade drones used in outer space began to hover there, right in front of his balcony.

It wasn't a measly little police drone like the one he'd controlled. This wasn't for surveilling individual suspects and subduing them; it wasn't for breaking up crowds. This was built to blow things up in space. And it was close enough to touch.

Tom gaped at it, amazed. He'd never seen one of these suckers up close, not through his human eyes. The sharp, scythelike missile turrets curved toward him in open menace, their blackness stark against the skyboard light streaming about them. After a moment of looming there, the drone's optical camouflaging activated, shimmering its mass into invisibility, leaving only one visible aspect: the pinpoint camera eye, glaring right at him.

Then the instant communication program in his neural processor activated, and words were net-sent right into his vision center: *I know about your drone, Mordred.*

Tom was overjoyed, realizing who it was. If there was one person he'd want to share his triumph, it'd be Medusa. "You saw that?" he spoke, knowing she'd hear him. "Awesome. I've gotta admit it, though: yours is bigger. Where did you get this guy? I want one."

Are you an idiot?

Tom blinked. That wasn't the reply he'd expected. Or hoped for.

Unless you are actively trying to give us away, you need to stop messing around like this!

Tom ignored his sudden, sinking disappointment at her reaction and made a show of shrugging his shoulders. "I know you want to keep what we can do a secret. So do I, okay? But I had to do that thing yesterday. It was a matter of honor. I had to right a wrong. And honestly, Medusa, it's kind of rich calling me a moron for using that drone when you flew in a Centurion right over Las Vegas, of all places."

This Centurion was optically camouflaged when I flew it down. It disappeared off the grid years ago. No one will

miss it. You tampered with the navigation of an active duty police drone. Someone will notice. That is not acceptable.

“What, so I should do nothing, then?” Tom leaned forward, irritated. “I should wait until I’m a Combatant and use what we can do as a *cheat* like you do?”

The drone drew menacingly closer at the implication. Tom knew he’d made her mad, but he stood his ground.

“Don’t you get it?” he said. “This ability we’ve got—we could do anything. We could make the world better. We could be like . . .” He faltered a moment, knowing this would make him sound like a dumb eight-year-old, but it was the only word he could think of. “. . . superheroes.”

This is not a comic book, Mordred. We are not untraceable, and we are not invincible. We only operate in safety now because no one knows to look for us. The next time you pull something this stupid, I will come back and make sure you can’t do it again.

“Like how? You’ll kill me?”

He’d thrown that out there carelessly. He hadn’t been serious.

Suddenly, the drone swept toward him, the optical camouflaging peeling up enough to reveal the guns Medusa was leveling at his head, and something triggered instinctively in Tom as the red laser targeting scanners crept over him, the massive machine searing the air around him. He scrambled back until he hit the door to the balcony, and found himself plastered there, staring right down a gun barrel, his heart pounding furiously, cold sweat prickling all over his body. For a timeless moment, they were suspended like that, her missile turret leveled right at his head.

Satisfied she’d made her point, her drone gave a taunting

wave of its body, and Medusa planted a gibe in his vision center: *That's the idea.*

Tom found himself vividly remembering the moment at Capitol Summit when he'd used her disfigurement just to win. They'd liked each other before that.

He'd changed everything.

"Would it help if I said I'm sorry?" Tom asked her. He wasn't referring to what he'd done today.

No. Apologies are a waste of air, Mordred. Don't do this again.

And then her drone roared up and it shrank away. Soon he couldn't even see the drone's telltale shimmer in the night sky, just a blinding ceiling of skyboards.