



## Chapter 1

Away from the bustling metropolis of Mexico City, a convoluted laboratory was nestled between the secluded underground tunnels. Though the secrecy gave an impression of something very important, the laboratory had been an originating point of a number of scientific marvels that had left humans thinking and profiting. Yet, the journey hadn't been completed, as the hazards were still present in society, persistently attacking the well-being of the human race.

Sheltered within the lush green forest that perhaps was among the few green belts left in the city, the laboratory loved to keep its presence obscured from the general public. Reflecting on the dangers that might arise from the hazardous experiments being carried out inside, the main scientist himself had chosen the place suitable for his invention.

It would give him a carefree gateway to practice whatever his heart wanted without worrying about anyone interfering with his work.

The laboratory remained always sealed, and the automatic sensor doors were designed to be unlocked with the sight of a familiar face registered in the chip memory. In case of any intrusion, the laboratory's alarms were set to hoot so wrathfully that they could forever leave the person haunted. Even the thought of attempting to see what was happening inside would give someone a shiver down the spine.

As the metal door groaned open, a secluded area demonstrating a captivating chaos unfurled in front of the eyes. The secluded place that seemed silent from the outside would be humming with the sound of computers persistently analyzing the data. Their noise mingled with the sound of bubbling liquids in the glass beakers, creating discordant harmony that echoed through the room.

The spectacular combination of beeping machines and whirring ventilation systems formed the backdrop, creating an environment of urgency and productivity. Moreover, with automation so common these days, robotic arms were seen working tirelessly in harmony with human researchers.

The laboratory generally remained irradiated with a faint blue light, falling distinctly on every carefully chosen object, be it modernized equipment, glass jars, containers, new technologies, and many other things. The once-polished laboratory floors were now marked with the irremovable stains of various chemical splatters, telling a story of the limitless number of experiments conducted in this sanctuary.

The sterile counters usually remained cramped with papers, disorganized test tubes, sometimes broken and tainted too, laptops covered with sticky notes, stationery items that the scientist would use once and forget to use later, and other objects that facilitated the scientist in his experiments. The number of things placed on the counters and tables displayed that the person working in this meticulous laboratory preferred its chaotic organization. Rather than picking out things from their designated place, he found grabbing them from the counter easier. Moreover, the air within the area was full of emissions of

advanced machinery working relentlessly, the colorful fumes arising from the test tubes containing discrete colored liquids, and a faint scent of ozone was thoroughly spread in every corner.

Moreover, curious rats and other creatures in the underground world darted playfully through the laboratory as if they, too, were intrigued by the wonders unfolding around them. Some rats were reserved to conduct experiments on them. However, some found their safe haven inside the laboratory's warm walls.

Since the scientist was too busy with his work, he seldom got the chance to see how many rats had eventually started their families inside the secluded world of this laboratory.

*Morning – 09:00 a.m.*

The day was beautiful as the sun glowed high in the sky, replacing the freezing ether of Mexico with its warm blanket of comfort. Still, the clouded air inside stood as resistance in front of the sun's miniature desire to spread its rays around the world.

Yet, the laboratory somehow got to receive a few delightful sunrays peeking through the glass windows that were by some means left uncovered with the blinds. It glowed in the laboratory and disturbed the usual setting of blue fluorescent light, which was established thoughtfully to facilitate the scientist in viewing the holographic screens clearly, without any reflection. "Who left this window opened?" A hoarse voice containing seething anger exclaimed from one corner of the laboratory, mingling with the humming of machinery's noise. Suddenly, the blinds automatically dropped on the uncovered glass window, slowly blocking the comforting and warm sunlight. Once again, the dim

lighting setting was brought back. “Incomprehensible coding displaying on giant holographic screens.” Amid the organized chaos of the underground laboratory, there stood Professor Joseph Lorensky, a man with roots deeply planted in Poland, Europe. In his sixties, he bore the wisdom of years of scientific pursuit, and his weathered yet handsome features held an air of distinguished determination.

His bright blue eyes were a reflection of the vibrant energy that burned within him, driven by an unwavering resolve to bring about profound change through groundbreaking technology.

“I have to do this today. I must finish this work today. I can’t believe it!” Professor’s murmuring voice, gritty and unyielding, arose from one corner of the laboratory as his absolute focus was on the two glass test tubes in his hands.

Dressed in a crisp white lab coat adorned with smart patches, Professor Lorensky cut a striking figure. He had his round-frame eyesight glasses placed on his nose all the time because he hated losing them, as losing would mean investing his precious time in finding them or in making a new pair. His motivation to bring his vision into reality had driven him to invest every second of his life in working for the progress of his groundbreaking technology. He knew his technology would bring innumerable advantages to humans in this saddening time of environmental catastrophe.

As the professor stood before the laboratory’s cluttered workbench, he was entirely consumed by the task at hand. His eyes were locked onto the holographic data projected before him. He darted back and forth between the manual and the array of glass containers filled with various liquids. Each drop

mattered; considering the precision required, his movements became a delicate ballet of meticulousness and determination. His brow furrowed in deep concentration as he meticulously assembled a series of delicate glass tubes and intricate circuitry. The professor's face was etched with lines of both exhaustion and resolve. His eyes were shining with a fierce determination that bordered on obsession. His unkempt hair stood on end as if charged with the same electricity that permeated the room.

Sweat glistened on his forehead, evidence of the intense focus that consumed him. His white lab coat billowed around him. The weight of years of tireless work hung in the air as if the culmination of his life's purpose rested upon the outcome of this moment.

He moved with such agility, his hands a blur of motion, while his eyes remained unyielding in their focus. The atmosphere in the laboratory seemed to hold its breath as if nature recognized the gravity of the situation. With bated breath, the professor inched closer to the tipping point, the crucial juncture that could mark the fulfillment of his life's ambition. The concoction he sought to create was a fusion of cutting-edge technology and his unwavering vision for a sustainable future. In a heartbeat, the pivotal instant arrived. As the professor deftly mixed the final elements together, a hushed silence enveloped the laboratory. Time seemed to slow as the molecules of the liquids danced before his eyes as if they were aware of the momentous potential held within them. Then, it happened. The professor watched in shock, amazement, and pride as his experiment transformed from a theory into a reality. He started clapping like a child as he watched his experiment come to life.

“Eureka!” Professor exclaimed with joy.

A brilliant glow emanated from the glass container, a mesmerizing light that pulsed with a life of its own. The professor’s eyes widened, and his breath caught in his throat. In that heart-stopping moment, realization dawned upon him—what he had been pursuing for years, a feat that had seemed so distant, was now within his grasp.

Electricity coursed through his body, a shock of disbelief and overwhelming joy. His hands trembled, and the manual slipped from his grip, falling unnoticed to the floor. A triumphant smile crept across his face, blending with tears of profound emotion. The laboratory seemed to come alive, its hum of activity intensifying as if in celebration of this pivotal achievement.



## Chapter 2

In 2075, as the Earth found itself in the grip of catastrophic global warming, it shifted on the x-axis gradually and rotated slowly. As a result, the Earth's rotation time increased from 24 hours to 36 hours. The planet's temperature had increased to unfathomable levels due to the slowed rotation and tilting on the axis, turning it into a burning wasteland. Fewer survivors clung to what was left of life while adjusting to the adverse environment that had now become their reality.

Life, as it had once been, colorful and lively, was a distant memory as the sun's unrelenting flame scorched the landscape. The few remaining people, mere shadows of what they once were, were compelled to look for safety in the hours just before morning. Temporary relief came in the form of a modest temperature drop in the early morning hours, which gave them a narrow window of opportunity to go outside. A thick, ethereal fog shrouded the landscape in this world of heat and gloom. It stuck to everything, providing an appearance of moisture in the otherwise dry and desolate landscape. Therein lay the bleak prospect of survival. The people had gone to incredible lengths to gather this priceless treasure because every droplet contained the essence of life.

***August 3rd, 2075 – Saturday***

***Moments Before Sunlight – NEW YORK***

As the delicate yet delightful predawn sunbeams exuded over the horizon, the formerly dark and mysterious sky improved into a leaden twilight with tinges of faded pink scattered shambolically.

The short-lived night was jam-packed with stubborn humidity and promised to turn into a hellish, scorching day. However, only in this moment of peace could the Earth's inhabitants relax for a while. The predawn twilight brought ease as the temperature dropped and chilly morning fog appeared, filling the lifeless valleys for one brief hour.

Shortly, it enveloped the area as it gathered strength, covering the outlines of deep, trash-choked valleys and the beds of dried-up rivers in a thick, pale blanket.

But as the sun rose, it irradiated the blue facets of the sky, gradually diminishing the steely appearance. The hotness of the developing sunrays evaporated the meager crumbs of morning fog that clung to every grain of sand, spreading torrid heat and humidity in the atmosphere.

It was mainly at this moment that the inhabitants craved the entire day. Even the metropolis' most indolent residents could sense the significance and relaxedness that existed in those few minutes of morning fog. In addition, the morning fog served as their vital water source—enough for one day's survival but requiring an exhaustive assemblage procedure. The intricate and tiring efforts for collecting dew had a small window in the long day. The survivors set water traps that catch and store dew and humidity in the early morning. Skilled water gatherers and larger families collected more water than the average person. As soon



as the last sun's rays left the polluted land of Earth, people came out into the open. They moved like ants in this compacted Earth to gather water before anyone else could. They carried their canvas bags full of moisture-resistant materials, primarily plastic sheets, which they used to construct all manner of cunning apparatus on the ground.

People hammered stakes into the ground that had dried out from the day's heat and covered them with plastic sheets at night. Then, while the early morning twilight persisted, they scraped a few drops of life-giving moisture together and placed them in whatever vessels they had to catch the fog. Everywhere, there was labor, and people had arrived to lay their traps for the dew.

Every member of the family, no matter how big or small, was instructed to collect water through the defined means and methods. Everyone worked collectively on the land equipped with a simple mechanism to catch the morning dew.

Everyone worked in the designated place, helping and supporting one another. Every ablebody was tasked to collect water in their little window. It was a necessary measure employed to ensure the survival of everyone in the restructured society.

They all worked as one unit, accepting the significance of unity and collective good. They worked and lived like a big family, where the strong supported and cared for the weak, and everyone worked together. They were all survivors, and that was what kept them united. It was a cycle that repeated daily in the lives of the underground people. They would go out before dawn

and collect water before the sun dried everything again. Even though the people worked as a single unit, the oppressive government worked against them. The tyrannical rulers would disturb the water gatherers whenever possible to keep the people subservient to the cruel rule.

The servants of the oppressive rulers would often interfere and disrupt water collection. As the process of water gathering was subjected to time and fog being available in limited quantity, the smooth and undisturbed process was pivotal for water collection.

Therefore, the water gathers tasked raiders to distract and divert the government from the areas where people gathered water. They would rush out before dawn and intercept the servants of the oppressive government before they could disrupt the water gatherers. Their lives were difficult, but they adapted and united to survive the testing times.

Every dawn, the water gatherers would appear through the Grand Canyon's opening and collect the entrapped dew from the earth. They would get dusty and dirty in the process, working over the barren and dry land. But it remained a necessary cost for survival. Sometimes, it would even become an adventure for those on their first expedition. Somehow, the troubled state had united them to become one supportive unit.

Now that dawn had arrived, the mighty sun sprinkled its intense heat, augmenting the Earth's temperature. Mornings no longer began with the gentle and serene chirping of birds as in the past; instead, crows began to caw loudly, their wings spread out to show that they were free, still alive, and modern-day Tsars

of the skies. With their wings proudly stretched in the air, they were accompanied by small, nearly invisible bald crows that flew high in the sky. The crows were the huge raptors that skillfully sailed above the gorge encircling downtown Manhattan.

Meanwhile, the once copiously flowing waters in the East River along with Harlem and Hudson had evaporated; the land now looked shriveled and patchy. Moreover, the picturesque expanse, a reservoir of life, now offered a vacant area for the spires of Manhattan's skyscrapers, which stood atop a huge pedestal of granite hunks.

The serene valley, which earlier belonged to the Hudson, had coincidentally plunged thousands of feet deep in places, making the skyscrapers look taller and more magnanimous than it was before.

The gust of wind, relentless and unyielding, breezing from the ocean had precisely swept away the accumulated dry silt, sand, and clay from the granite slabs of the canyon's ledges, leaving behind a polished surface that accentuated the monuments of humanity's once-thriving civilization.

Moreover, from the bird's vantage point high above, New York's iconic skyscrapers appeared like somber gravestones, marking the memory of a bygone era in some ancient, forgotten cemetery. The absence of life and the silence that engulfed the city was palpable, making the stillness of the scene almost haunting. Yet, amid this desolate landscape, the bird's keen eyes discerned a flicker of movement. Along a narrow ledge that traced the path once traveled by the Staten Island Ferry, a courageous figure marched confidently toward the salt valley

that had long been known as the East River. The abyss yawned beside them, a chasm of uncertainty and danger, while the sheer cliff wall loomed on the other side. The torturous path they traversed was barely three feet wide, narrowing to a mere inch in certain treacherous sections.

As the bird circled overhead, curiosity consumed its avian mind. *Who was this solitary individual, venturing forth with unwavering determination in the face of such difficult odds? What was their purpose in this bleak world, where the remnants of a once-vibrant city lay in solemn repose?*

The traveler, shrouded in a short, hooded canvas jacket and matching pants, expertly blended with the rugged landscape surrounding him. The color of his attire had been precisely selected to mimic the hues of the rocky landscape, ensuring his inconspicuousness.

Despite the absence of any military insignia, his movements had an unmistakable air of discipline and precision. His clothing, although devoid of any overt emblem, concealed an aura of readiness, and the matte-black sunglasses with faintly yellow lenses that concealed his eyes added an enigmatic touch to his appearance.

To navigate the treacherous path strewn with sharp stones, the traveler relied on lightweight rubber-soled moccasins that shielded his feet from the jagged edges. Each protruding stone seemed to conspire against him, eager to cause harm. Some sought to cause harm to his feet, while others appeared with the hope of tripping him. Even those stones that simply existed were enough to unsettle him, with their hidden dangers lurking

beneath their unassuming surfaces. Yet, amid this chaos of hazardous obstacles, the traveler found a semblance of order. His movements adapted swiftly, alternating between bursts of speed and moments of careful precision. From a distance, his motions might have appeared erratic, but only those who had walked on railroad ties could truly appreciate the intricate dance of balance and coordination required.

Every stride had to be precisely calculated, each step a different length, to avoid slipping between the ties and facing the unforgiving gravel that tested one's pain threshold. The tie ahead became an obstacle to conquer, demanding extra exertion to surmount, and the process repeated itself relentlessly.

In such moments, the traveler yearned for the expansive solitude of a desert, where the soft, shifting sands offered a different challenge as they enveloped his feet with each step.

With unwavering determination, the traveler persisted along the dangerous path, and his mind focused on a purpose known only to him. Perhaps it was the allure of the salt valley beyond the cliff walls that drew him closer with the promise of answers or redemption, or maybe he was driven by an unyielding quest to uncover fragments of the past to salvage remnants of a lost civilization and piece together a narrative long forgotten.

Despite his enigmatic appearance, the traveler's attire offered no definitive clues regarding his occupation. The absence of apparent markers hinted that he was not engaged in gathering water, for he hurried through the misty morning with an air of self-sufficiency. He apparently possessed enough water to sustain himself without such mundane chores. Instead, his

countenance bore an uncanny resemblance to a man driven by purpose and mission, but it remained unclear what mission made him walk through the deserted lands.

As the crimson sun appeared gradually above the horizon, its upper half glancing through the morning mist, the tranquil dawn tried to oppose the impending heatwave. Little did it know that the sneaking sun would soon turn the land into a scorching furnace, and temperatures would soar to a blistering 155 degrees Fahrenheit.

The mist gradually dissipated, resulting in the water gatherers seeking shelter against the scorching sun. From a vantage point high above, it resembled a bustling march of workers from the fields toward the shed.

Among them, the traveler concealed himself at a distance, monitoring a device akin to a diver's watch. The holographic screen demonstrated a complex array of data. A 3D vector displayed distances and altitudes, catching his attention with a solitary green dot. But the four people, appearing in red dots, walking briskly through the blue projections, caught his focus.

With deft gestures on the screen, the traveler brought the moving red figures into sharper view as he attempted to utilize a telescopic-like infrared sight. The scanner calculated his trajectory and speed, estimating a nine-minute trek to his target.

After calculating the distance between him and his target, the traveler lunged toward the walls of the grand canyon and entered the shade provided by the rusted drainage pipes sticking out of the wall. These drainage pipes had dried after the drastic shift in the world's reality, causing them to be abandoned and

completely useless. However, they were still useful to the traveler, providing shade and concealment from the curious eyes. Once inside the secrecy and shade of the large, rusted pipes, he swiftly retrieved a small metal box from his pocket, and he opened it to reveal luminous oval capsules filled with a vivid blue fluid.

Before taking one of the capsules out, he looked around with squinted eyes to ensure he wasn't in the sight of anyone. He turned his head in every direction, assuring his secret remained his own. Once assured of complete privacy, he swallowed the blue capsule he had taken from his metal box.

As soon as the capsule entered his body, the effect gradually showed. Slowly and gradually, his clothes became drenched because of his transforming body. His skeletal structure began to lose its form, and the clothes on his body began to pass through him. They fell on the floor, completely wet, as the traveler had no solid form left. The normal human had completely transformed into a rippling body of water.

As swiftly as the traveler had transformed into water, he began to dissipate into haze. His watery body began to transform from liquid to gas, changing from the head and gradually transforming his entire body until he changed completely.

After transforming, the bluish haze moved swiftly through the pipes toward the water gatherers. It lacked any definite shape and appeared like a cluster of water flowing here and there, its waves fearlessly in the air. Like ripples from a stone cast into a pond, waves of white fog radiated outward. As bewildered as they could, the water gatherers watched as the fog thickened

rather than getting dispersed like usual. Suddenly, a courageous dweller attempted to approach it with his plastic sheeting, but his soul froze as he was about to strike the fog. Right before their eyes, the fog slowly began to collect in itself and form a puddle of water. The courageous dweller and the rest had stopped in their tracks, watching intently what was happening in front of their eyes. Gradually, the fog thickened into the water, and the water slowly began to take a shape that no one could fathom.

A human appearance began forming in the blue haze from the puddle of water. From the mist emerged a figure, first a face, then a neck, shoulders, and arms. But the water taking the shape of a human was still ambiguous; some were scared, and others were shocked to see what was happening.

Many of the water gatherers began to run as fear mingled with awe at the sudden arrival of the enigmatic stranger. Unperturbed by the observers, the traveler's gaze fell upon a girl standing among a group of women.

"Carina, we need to go!" The man's voice muffled under the water, making it inaudible for Carina to understand. She knew that the watery figure was trying to communicate, but it was suppressed under the muffling effect of the water itself, making it quite difficult for her to understand.

The figure moved closer to Carina, but she took a step backward. She was uncertain about the intention of the being, and it was also impossible to understand. "I beg your pardon?" The girl's raised eyebrows demonstrated the skepticism brimming in her soul. She locked her gaze on the enigmatic figure that seemed to take on human form from the mist. The timbre of



his voice provoked a strange feeling in her as if of something long forgotten, forcing her to tear herself away from her work. Subsequently, water filled up the stranger's body like a glass carafe. It began to sparkle as the sun rose over the horizon, reflecting the stunned faces of the people standing around.

The rest were exchanging looks and whispering with their parched lips. The children began to pant from the dust and heat, coughing hoarsely as the sun rose in the distance. They hid behind their parents.

"We have to go. The sun's already on the horizon!" A hushed but resolute voice emerged from the crowd. It appeared like a call to action in the face of the impending heatwave as the temperature in the tunnels rose.

Moved by the scene, the stranger squatted down and offered something to a young child. The delighted shriek of the child was like a pebble causing ripples through a pond as it drew everyone's gaze. In the boy's hands was a frozen icicle, a rare treasure amid the relentless heat.

Unexpectedly, the stranger soon heard the rising chorus of children's voices, a chorus of requests for their icy marvels.

"Can I have one too!"

"Me too!"

"Mister, can I have an icicle too!"

With an air of magic, the man conjured icicles seemingly out of thin air and distributed them to eager hands. But in reality, he was absorbing the moisture from the atmosphere and using it, at will, to create the icicles. It was nothing short of a magic trick to

the children and even some adults. However, his hand soaked the moisture from the air and then froze it to make icicles for the children.

“Thank you!” Echoed through the air as children dashed off to share their newfound treasures. Within seconds, the words “magic icicles” roared through the entire tunnels, causing crowds of water-gatherers to rush toward the mysterious man. Curiosity and amazement drove many people toward the man. In contrast, the mysterious man who could create icicles from just his palms continued to use his abilities to astonish the people.

Turning to an empty water bucket, the stranger stretched out his hand, and water flowed like a torrent, swiftly filling the parched containers of the water gatherers. Everyone was amazed by what he could do, but they didn’t understand that the mysterious man was absorbing all the moisture and humidity in the area to gather all the water. He was able to control water through the changed properties of his body, giving him unnatural abilities.

Then, his attention returned to the girl. He slowly moved closer to her again, but the girl trusted him for some reason. His muffled voice called out to her, but this time, she could understand the words he was trying to say.

“Please, you have to trust me, Carina.” His muffled voice was inaudible for many, but Carina could understand it. Suddenly, her eyes widened with surprise and shock, sending shivers down her spine. The person in front of her was not completely unfamiliar. He reminded her of someone she knew, someone she could trust, the warm feelings that she once had flooded back to her of

the past. Feelings that had long vanished in the memories of time before the crisis had taken over their lives. The feelings, however, caused memories of the 'good days' to flush her entire being.

"Daniel!" She whispered the name in a manner that reverberated from inside of her subconsciously. Her surprise was evident from her eyes and trembling figure as if she feared her wish would come true. But it was exactly what she had thought it to be.

The watery figure man neared him a step more, confirming that it was the man she knew. Even though the water figure was still difficult to decipher, her instincts told her who it was. She felt as if the figure had smiled, and the thought made her ecstatic and flushed with happiness.

The moment was filled with inexplainable joy, yet a million questions raced through her mind. Carina continued feeling every emotion that the beautiful moment required her to feel. Even though everyone was happy with what the mystery man had provided them, they couldn't fathom the happiness that Carina felt.



## Chapter 3

“We don’t have time for this right now, Carina. We need to leave!” Daniel’s urgency broke the silence. “You’re in danger. We have to get moving.”

In the distance, four marines clad in imposing titanium drones appeared. They charged in their direction, with little regard for the water gatherers, and shoved them aside. In response, water gatherers stood in silence and complete hopelessness. Even though there were many, they couldn’t retaliate against the armed marines.

“Run!” Daniel’s voice remained firm as he continued to hurry Carina toward the salt desert. It appeared like a desperate escape in the face of impending danger.

With a note of pressing question in her tone, Carina said, “So, what is the plan now? Where are we headed?”

Surveying the surroundings, Daniel noticed the riverbed sloping downward as it led to the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge, creating a sort of hill beneath their feet. Suddenly, something came to Daniel’s mind as he smiled mischievously and turned to look at Carina.

“Can you skate?” Daniel’s question was unexpected.

“Yes! But... why?” Carina replied.

“I have an idea.”

Without warning, he collapsed to the ground, becoming a cascading waterfall. Before the surprised gatherers, who hadn't witnessed such a volume of water in ages, he flowed downhill toward the bridge. Then, the flowing water froze in a breathtaking display, transforming into a smooth, icy surface. Daniel had become the ice beneath Carina's feet. As bewildered as anyone, Carina began to slide but managed to keep her balance, descending the slope with an exhilarating speed. The excitement brought Carina enough joy that her laughter rang out like a child's. Ahead of Carina, water tumbled and promptly froze, while behind her, the ice melted, evaporating into steam. The soldiers were left astonished as Carina quite literally slipped away.

"Sergeant, the target has disappeared!" The leading private exclaimed, brandishing his radar device. He signaled the marines to stop by raising his left fist in the air and arm bent at the elbow in their imposing drones. Resultantly, two of them knelt as if digging in something. They aimed weapons at either side.

"That's impossible!" The sergeant barked. Clearly, frustration was imprinted across his face. He snatched the field scanner from the private's hand and rewound its recorded data. The holographic video displayed a red dot next to the green tracking point, and suddenly, both vanished.

With mounting irritation, the sergeant switched the scanner's target to the enigmatic blue hologram. Rewinding further, he realized that their elusive quarry was somehow fluid, like water, who had snatched their target out from under their nose. Fuming, he pressed a button on his tactical helmet. "Base, we have lost the target. Further pursuit is impossible. Please

advise.” The captain’s face contorted in ferocity at the command center as he watched the baffled sergeant on multiple monitors. Orbiting satellites continued to track the unfolding drama through their powerful telescopic lenses. “How?!” The captain roared. “You can explain this to the authorities! Commence visual search in accordance with the Hunt Protocol!”

In the Marines’ tactical helmets, the commanding officer’s voice rang out urgently, spurring the four soldiers into action. They sprinted through the sandy canyon like Olympic sprinters running as fast as they could. It felt like the captain’s voice was being broadcast through the sandy canyon, but that was just their helmet earpieces working overtime.

“Close off the Verrazano sector immediately! All rapid-reaction teams deploy to the area to scan the civilians! Satellite monitoring crews, I want a complete visual scan of the vicinity beginning when the target disappeared!” The commanding officer shouted, creating an environment of urgency in the canyon.

“What protocol was that, sergeant?” The breathless private inquired, holding the scanner before him.

“The captain intends to use dogs to catch our target,” the sergeant replied tersely.

“Are there really any dogs left alive?” The private barely had time to express his surprise before the ground trembled beneath them like a fully loaded freight train was going by. A gust of wind nearly sent him sprawling, and two quadrupedal robots that resembled massive Dobermans narrowly missed him by an inch. Granite fragments and sandy dust flew in their wake, marking

their path. The trail dragged in a way, indicating where they had come from and where they were going. These robotic dogs, made with metal, were equipped with sensors far superior to the senses of their biological counterparts. An ordinary dog's ability to smell is tens of thousands of times sharper than an average human. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, they were considered the ideal bio detectors. With their powerful processors, these modern robots were far superior to the biological dogs.

Their noses could detect thermal trails and the scents left by human bodies. Programmed for pursuit, the machines usually choose the shortest route to their target, not paying the slightest attention to meaningless obstacles—people, for instance.

The sight of these machines struck terror into anyone who saw them. Their movements were uncannily graceful, mimicking real animals running effortlessly, going for a casual run, shoulder to shoulder, jockeying for position.

Only their gleaming silver exteriors betrayed their mechanical nature. Their behavior and posture were indistinguishable from living creatures. The massive dogs halted at the spot where Carina had last been detected.

One of them discovered her kerchief, examining it with precise scrutiny, scanning its composition, weight, last wash date, and even the detergent ingredients until the “dog” had data on its composition (20% wool, 80% cotton), weight (152 ounces). To an observer, it appeared entirely natural. It had stumbled upon something, tugged at it with its teeth, ripped it to ribbons, lost all interest, and stood there sniffing to pick up the trail. In reality, the robot's central computer queried a police database

and retrieved detailed information about the kerchief's origin, purchase, and its link to Carina. The date of sale, credit card number, and owner's name flashed like a kaleidoscope. Simultaneously, data came in about the detergent powder, and though the credit card numbers and points of sale were different, the computer did manage to find one point of overlap.

The same last name reverberated. Joseph Lorensky bought the kerchief in Mexico, while Carina Lorensky paid for the detergent in New York. The date and time when the detergent was purchased were linked to a video recorded from a surveillance camera in a Brooklyn shopping mall. There was a closeup of the girl's face. The identifying features of her face were cross-referenced with an American citizen's ID.

The machine's electronic brain cross-checked them against data downloaded through satellite on the movement of human targets throughout the sector, then Carina's image from the shopping center was converted into a hologram and cross-checked with the identifying features of the projections of each person who had been on site when she disappeared.

Once the mechanical dogs had found a 98% match, they plotted a new route based on the data from their olfactory centers and the thermal trail left by the human body and then continued their pursuit. The pair, Daniel and Carina, slid down the deepening riverbed toward the Atlantic Desert as their path was illuminated by the rising sun. The heat intensified, warming the Earth increasingly, causing a faint, shimmering haze that blurred the horizon. It gradually erased both the canyon and the towering spires of Manhattan's skyscrapers from view. Amid their desperate flight across the desert, Daniel's mind



momentarily flowed to a time when their world was filled with simpler pleasures and a gentler reality. They had once walked alongside one another on a sandy beach just as the sun rose, casting its warm, horizon-dissolving glow. But that beach had been different, caressed by a fresh sea breeze, and the ocean's waters were an emerald expanse adorned with the frothy crests of playful waves, not this desolate landscape of salt and sand. In those days, the Atlantic Desert was a real ocean, deep and unpredictable. Its rhythmic waves were used to create an atmosphere of romance.

His memories transported him back to when he had feelings for her. The time when they had long walks on the beach, talking about life and the future. However, today's beach was entirely different from the one Daniel and Carina had walked on ten years ago. Its charm and beauty had faded away. Daniel looked into her warm, brown eyes, shining with laughter. Carina always found amusement in Daniel's simple humor, observation, and ability to see beyond the bare picture.

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Carina was about 18 during those cherished beachside moments, and more than a decade had passed since then. A lot had changed, but Carina remained the same, holding on to her curiosity and innocence. Unlike when they had walked together on the beach, they were running emphatically from the approaching danger. Surprised, Carina wasted no time and bombarded him with questions.

"Where are we going? And who are we running from? What will we do when we get there?"

“I’ll explain everything as soon as we’re safe,” Daniel replied resolutely.

“Safe from what? Are they after you or me?” Carina persisted. “You do realize that we’re heading into the desert, right? We have to turn around. We don’t have water.”

“Just calm down and trust me!” Daniel urged as they reached a massive, rusty barge partially buried in the sand.

“I’m tired, I can’t keep going! I won’t move from this spot until you tell me everything!” Carina declared, coming to a stop. Daniel had to stop as well, and the ground began to tremble.

“Over here, quick!” Daniel commanded as he guided Carina toward an opened hatch that he spotted, leading them into the barge’s hold.

The girl tumbled in with a shriek, landing on the dirty floor on all fours. The sudden darkness and the acrid dust in the hold brought tears to her eyes. It was oppressively stuffy inside, the metal of the barge having absorbed the relentless sun’s heat, transforming the hold into an enormous oven.

“God, it reeks in here,” Carina’s hoarse voice quivered with hopelessness. She felt like her energy was running out with every passing day. She wasn’t as energetic as she was ten years ago. Sweat streamed down her forehead, clouding her eyes. Her shirt clung to her back from the sweat. Her heart raced as if it might burst from her chest. The chaos of adrenaline, fear of capture, and a sprinter’s pace had thrown her breathing into turmoil. She gasped for air through her parched mouth, and thirst tormented her. The nauseating stench of decaying seaweed and rancid fish worsened the ordeal.

“Every time you show up, everything I’m used to goes down the tubes! Oh God, I’m scared!” She admitted, tears streaming down her cheeks.

“Don’t be afraid. I’m going to take care of everything. Everything’s going to be okay now. Here, drink this,” Daniel said tenderly, cupping his palms together and offering them to her. Carina watched silently as his empty hands filled with water like he had made icicles before. He raised his clasped palms, allowing her to quench her thirst by drinking the water he offered.

Carina watched with relief as his hands filled with crystal-clear water. She bent toward his clasped hands and eagerly took a few gulps. Even after she had drunk the little water in his hand, it was still as full as before. She drank the water to her heart’s content, relieving her thirst completely. She wiped her face with the sleeves of her shirt and smiled back at Daniel. Her eyes had regained their fiery determination.

“How can you do that? How can you turn into water?” Carina asked, her curiosity immense.

“Your father deserves the credit for that, not me,” Daniel answered, a touch of sadness crossing his face. “Your father was a genius; I must complete his work.”

Carina couldn’t help but feel an odd mixture of emotions. “What a strange feeling.” Logically, their situation was far from encouraging. Instead, it felt like they were entangled in a trap. Outside, the sirens, the unmistakable hum of magnetic turbines announcing the approach of a heavy-duty drone, and the presence of two massive robots made it abundantly clear that they were cornered. Despite Daniel’s confident demeanor, his

words sounded unconvincing to her. She had lived and adapted to a very troubled and tasking life for the last ten years. "I waited a long time for you. I thought you would find me sooner!" Carina asked. Her voice was filled with a mixture of emotions: complaint and happiness.

"Don't worry. We are together in this now!" Daniel's voice was filled with comfort and warmth that touched Carina's heart, making her feel like she had found someone she cared for in the bleakest of times.

Yet, the uneasiness was so intense that she remained agitated, deeply bothered by what was going around her. But before she could protest and voice her discomfort, Daniel signaled her to quiet down by placing his index finger on his lips. She was infuriated but obeyed his instructions and stopped herself from saying anything.

Outside, the two canine robots had successfully tracked their trail to the old barge. Their digital brains displayed a luminous tunnel leading straight to the boat, complete with data on the metal's composition, thickness, and hinge specifications. With a powerful strike from one of the "dogs," the hatch flew off and landed a considerable distance away, its screeching metal echoing through the air. Fearing discovery, Daniel and Carina sought refuge behind some old crates. Approaching the opening, one of the robot's sensors projected a red holographic net into the hold, scanning for thermal traces left by the two human bodies, leading them directly to the hiding place of their target. "We're sitting in a trap," Carina whispered in worry. "We need to find a way out of this, or else they'll capture us without any trouble."

“You used to be more confident in your abilities,” Daniel whispered with a smile.

Carina watched Daniel materialize two sharp, icy darts in each of his hands. The darts matched the icicles he had created earlier, but they had sharper ends and were very concise in size. They looked exactly like darts, only made of ice. Daniel had even added his touch of artistry to the ice darts by replacing the feathers at the end with crystals.

Without aiming for perfection, Daniel just sensed his target and launched each dart in his hands toward the approaching robots. As Daniel threw the ice darts toward the robotic dogs, they spun against the warm air. Their revolution gained momentum, causing both the darts to fly from his hands to the target in the blink of an eye.

Each dart pierced through the metallic armor of the robots and plunged right into the processor behind their necks. Upon contact with the metal, the darts sliced the wires operating the robotic dogs, causing them to halt in their position. Immediately after that, the ice darts began to melt, and the water began to cause a malfunction in the robots’ processors directly and fry the microchips inside the convulsing robots. The drone’s hum and the sound of approaching soldiers grew louder, filling the air with dust and sand through the open hatch. Choking and coughing, Carina moved closer to Daniel, closing her eyes tightly. Beyond the metal walls of the barge, they could hear the crackle of radios and the clanking of machine gun bolts being pulled back. Thin red laser beams reached through the opening, scanning the walls, but the soldiers were distracted by the loud approaching roar of motors, distinctly different from the electro-drones.

“We’re surrounded. What are we going to do?” Carina whispered cautiously to Daniel.

Suddenly, a loud gunshot rang out, causing Carina to cover her ears. It was followed by a second, third, and then a burst of machine gun fire that drowned out the motor’s roar. Carina scanned the barge’s corridors, desperately searching for another way out. Squinting, she finally spotted another hatch, but before she could move, it creaked open slightly.

“Carina, are you in there?” A strong female voice asked.

“I can’t believe my ears!” Carina exclaimed joyfully. Her expression transformed into a faint smile of relief; perhaps the situation wasn’t as dire as it seemed. “What are you doing here?” She asked in surprise.

“This is no time to have a conversation,” the female voice replied. The hatch opened fully, and an athletic hand marked with long fingers reached Carina.

“Come on!” Carina called to Daniel with joy in her voice. “It’s my water gatherer friends. They’ve come to help us!” Carina and Daniel leaped out of the barge and were greeted by a stunning sight. On the side of the barge where they had emerged, jeeps and motorcycles from a bygone era circled around, creating a swirling dust cloud shielding Carina and Daniel from the soldiers’ view. The people riding these vehicles were clad in silvery foil, reflecting the intense sunlight. “Move it!” Commanded a stranger, who hopped onto an ancient motorcycle and revved the accelerator. Carina glanced back at Daniel, calling him to follow her, and led him toward the lady waiting for them. “Move it!” Carina urged, her tone imploring, but Daniel remained still,

looking toward the approaching soldiers. He slowly came and stood between them and the approaching soldiers.

“Listen, Carina, you make a run for it. I’ll cover you all. We’ll meet in the canyon by the drainage pipes,” Daniel said confidently.

Before Carina could protest, Daniel transformed into steam and vanished. Left with no other option, she hopped onto the back of the motorcycle and wrapped her arms around her friend’s waist. In an instant, the motorcycle engines roared like an angry swarm of bees as the water gatherers who had come to Carina’s aid disappeared into a cloud of dust.