

Introduction

176 years ago...

December 11, 2221 Charlotte, NC

Dr. Aryan Singh raced down the corridors of the Stratus headquarters tripping and stumbling all the way, his usually dark brown face white as sheet, his face a mask of pure terror. He burst into the office of chief executive scientist Dr. Alie Wang, knocking over several vials filled with unknown fluids. "Aryan," Alie cried out but immediately realized her anger was misplaced. The normally calm and composed Aryan Singh would never have entered like that in a normal situation she thought. No, something had gone wrong, terribly wrong. "Aryan what happened?" Alie demanded.

"The nukes," he gasped, "they've been launched."

Alie started, "what? what do you mean? which ones?" she shook him "which ones Aryan?" His next words sent a slow chill down her spine.

"All of them." Aryan replied. World tensions had grown increasingly stressed the past couple decades and an all-out nuclear war was on the minds of most people these days. But no one had really expected it to happen so suddenly, especially with the promising results of the last Summit meeting between the powers of the world. For once, China, Russia, America, Japan, and North Korea had finally agreed on something. The talk had been mostly about the cutting edge AI that Stratus Industries had developed. As the lead scientist on this project, Alie herself had been present at the meeting and the decision to expand and further develop the already magnificent tech that was Alie's lifework had been nearly unanimous. A brilliant piece of technology that could crack any code on any-

"Aryan, who fired the first shot" Alie asked, suddenly dreading the answer.

Aryan frowned "No one, they were all launched at the same time" he answered, not comprehending the weight of this realization.

"Aryan," Alie slowly said again, "who alone in this world would've had the ability to synchronize the launch of every nuke of every country on Earth?" Realization dawned on Aryan's face as he finally understood what she was saying. Together they raced down to the twelfth floor, specially designed for working on the AI ironically nicknamed 'Peacemaker' or just 'Peace.' At this point, alarms were already blaring through the countries, warning citizens to evacuate to the underground bunkers that had been constructed during the tense years for exactly this purpose. But many of the bunkers weren't finished or sealed. Deathtraps, where radiation can seep in, killing everyone inside. Deathtraps, to which hundreds of families rushed with false hopes of salvation.

Some were just design faults, things that engineers had simply overlooked, but many of these were purposefully built by governments seeking to reduce population. As it was, you had a fifty percent chance of surviving, and a fifty percent chance that you would die. As they ran, they were accompanied by hundreds of scientists all pale faced and tear streaked. By the time they finally made it to the twelfth floor, the five hundred meter tall skyscraper was nearly empty. The silence of the usually buzzing halls weighing heavily on them. "Aryan," Alie panted, "get me into it's system, we might still be able to stop this." Aryan, being of philosophical nature, had already overcome his initial terror and he steadily jabbed away at a keyboard connected to a giant monitor on the wall. As Alie watched, she thought that it was rather amusing how everything in the world was so advanced, yet a keyboard remained the same. Alie heard the shouts and screams of the crowds outside all rushing for shelter and suddenly felt the urge to scan the skies for the ominous elongated shape of a nuke dropping down from above. She knew it was futile to run, the amount of people outside already far surpassed the capacity of the nearest bunker which was thirty miles away.

"I'm in!" Aryan exclaimed. Alie snapped out of her thoughts and skidded back to the computer. Peacemaker was a recent invention, and Stratus hadn't had a chance to give it a voice. As a result, you could only talk to the AI via texting.

"I've been expecting you to reason with me." said Peace before Alie could touch the keyboard. "The Earth is already overpopulated," it continued, "At this rate, extreme overpopulation is imminent and the human race will not survive. There are simply too many people."

"Alie look!" Aryan pointed in the distance and Alie could just make out the sleek form of the missile on the horizon hurtling towards the center of Charlotte. A jolt of electricity spiked out from the monitor, frying the monitor along with all of Alie's hopes. Ashen faced, Alie made her way to the small balcony that jutted out from the building like a thumbtack, Aryan after her. He pulled out a flask of pungent liquor, and he and Alie drank sip for sip as they waited for the inevitable.

Chapter 1

Present Day

Trent gazed out over the vast expanse of black sand before him. Far away on the horizon, he could see the black dunes starting. Behind him it looked almost the same, except the sand was a reddish yellow color. He knew it was a risk, but he had no other choice, he would either cross into the black sand or starve. The sand was full of danger, from sand

cobras and marauders to sand storms and acid fog. But the deeper you went, the greater the rewards. Unfortunately, everyone knew that, so the hunters had to go deeper and deeper every week to find sufficient food as prey was scared away from the shallow Oasis's that were scrambled across the desert. This was life since the nukes.

In school, everyone was taught to fear the world beyond the gates, the cruel wastelands of America outside the safety of the walls. From birth, he had been taught about Judgement Day, and what had happened after that. The Earth had been way overcrowded with almost eleven billion people. The many nations were fighting over the precious resources that were left while the civilians succumbed to starvation and disease. Then, an AI called Peacemaker was created and it culled the population of its sinner so that only the worthy survived. A fancy way to say an AI dropped bombs on our heads, thought Trent. He knew that many privately agreed with him, but the last time anyone publicly said anything, they were sent to the Wiper.

The Wiper was the ultimate fear of most people these days. According to the government, or at least the AI now called Salvation, any crime committed by a person above the age of majority was a capital crime, and is punishable by wiping. It sounds ridiculous, but it is a fate to be avoided. One time, one of Trent's teachers, a kindly man with giant glasses had spoken out against the government of America. That very day he had been publicly dragged out of his class by the police and later paraded around town as an example of the wiper's power. The man's name had been Jonathan Ley, but now he was known as number #811277. Trent had made eye contact with Jonathan several times during the parade, but there was no recognition in his eyes of anything. The wiper didn't just wipe your memories, it wiped your very identity. It erased your profile in the datacenter and replaced it with a number. People were reduced to mindless husks and sent to work in the Wells in Hydro. Life without Hydro would've been nearly impossible. It provided seventy-five percent of all water in America. The other twenty-five were taken from the naturally flowing rivers and lakes in Eden. Eden was paradise, but only the top half percent could live there, mostly the government officials and extremely important people. It was also where Salvation was housed and worshipped like a God by those who believed in the bull that the government taught.

Eden was a large patch of green amidst the American desert. It was about 95 miles in diameter making it the largest known oasis in North and South America. Many oceans and seas had fully dried up and in others you could only find water in the center where it was deepest. This was how North America was connected to South America. This was why North America had no idea of what was going on in the other continents.

Trent pondered all this as he made his way across the barren landscape. With a chill he realized that it was almost dark. This was when the dunes were the most dangerous. Never before had he ventured into the desert and spent a night there. His breath quickened as he raced towards the dunes on the horizon. They would provide at least a little protection and conceal him from the predators that hunted at night. There was one type creature that not even the bravest hunter would face, reapers. He had seen one only once, when he was younger and had gone on a hunting expedition with his father, before his parents died in a wave of sickness two years ago.

“Son,” his father had said, “if you ever see or hear a reaper, you turn and run the other way as fast as you can. No matter how brave or strong you think you are, to fight a reaper is to die.”

Reapers were ghastly beasts with a bearlike snout full of two inch long teeth, serrated claws as sharp knives, and a scaly body not unlike a crocodile. They resembled a large lizard but could walk on two legs if they wished. No one really knew how they had come about but most theorized that they had mutated because of the radiation.

Trent's breath came in gasps now as he neared the edge of the dunes, where the sand became softer and harder to traverse than the hard crumbly ground of the flat wasteland. He set up camp a couple dunes from the edge. Out of sight, yet he would hear if someone was approaching. Trent wrapped himself tightly in the blankets from his pack and settled down, propped against the side of a large dune. He knew that sleep would be impossible tonight. He knew that in the morning he would have to begin his return empty handed to the Wedge. To be honest, he had it better than most. Since he lived on the fringe, Eden patrols weren't as common so they could get away with a lot of things, the key of which was hunting. Hunting was prohibited, all the meat supplied by Eden caravans that passed through every month. When they arrived, all the game was quickly stowed, all the doors were quickly locked, and all the streets were quickly emptied. No one wanted to chance angering The Guard which accompanied supply lines. Trent had seen other cities before, the people living closer to Eden lived in extreme poverty. Their streets were dirty and their faces sullen as they would receive their one meal per day. He had seen the cameras posted on every corner of every block to watch the citizens and he had seen The Guard's brutal execution of people who had dared to steal food or contradict them.

In the morning, Trent wearily picked himself up from the ground and the world spun around him for a moment, then began his sullen trek back. He was tired of all this, all the pointless rules and regulations that left people hungry and weak. Four hours in and the sun was blazing overhead, glaring down hatefully at Trent. He had drunk the last of his

water fifteen minutes ago, but again he felt parched as if he hadn't even seen water in a month. He knew that he still had seven hours to go to before the large silhouette of the Wedge appeared on the horizon. He trodded on and on lethargically. He didn't even notice the boundary where the desert turned yellow.

He stopped twice to rest for five minutes before getting up again to continue his desolate journey. By the time Trent saw the Wedge in the distance, his head pounded loudly in his ears and each movement caused a flare of pain in his head and feet. He was so tired that he didn't register the gates standing ajar to let the caravan in, he was so exhausted that he didn't notice the Guardsmen watching him plod into town or the butt of the rifle as it came down on his head.