

CHARON

I don't think I'll make it off of the Mother. I feel achier and more tired than ever. But I put on my suit anyway. I'll never get used to walking around in those boots, but I'll never forget what someone looks like when they don't wear their suit outside either. I lock my apartment door.

To the elevator, like always. It takes me to the tunnel that leads towards the workers. Dawson meets me halfway. He's smoking a cigarette. That's a throwback.

"What do ya know?" Dawson lets out a half laugh, half cough. "Terry worked out a deal with those government guys and got us 30 packs of cigarettes. I love that lazy bastard." I give him a smirk. He seems happy he got that, like a dog nipping at my heels. "How'd he do that?" I ask. Dawson looks down. "I wish you wouldn't've asked that." His fat hand raises to the back of his neck and sits there. "He said he'd give 'em that one Springsteen record."

That idiot. I walk forward, but Dawson moves in front of me. "Now before you get all pissy, you're the only one who listened to it."

"So? You can't let me have that one record?" Dawson's a little annoyed, and I'm fuming. "That stuff was like a hundred years old, and grainier than a field of buckwheat." I turn away from him and his stench. "It was *mine*. You had no right to pawn it off for a couple cigarettes." Dawson scoffs. "A couple cigarettes? We have 600." I stop him. "You'll smoke those in a week. Judas gave up Jesus for 30 silver pieces." Dawson eye-rolls. "Oh, so Bruce Springsteen was Jesus?" I face him. "He was America." Dawson laughs like your classic covered hillbilly. "Man, *this* is America. I sold a relic for something useful. What's more American than that?" I walk past him.

An hour later. work starts.

The sun burns the dirt on the ground. When you walk, your feet make sizzle noises on the terrain, so I sit up high to survey the work. Today, we have to herd cattle onto a rocket headed for the Father. We never needed to launch space shuttles in Montana. But the Father needs steak. I miss steak. Dawson's crew emerges in their black suits, they look like ants up here. Above-ground buildings over two floors high weren't practical anymore. Skyscrapers, now obstacles, or perches for men like me. The team maneuvers through city streets, and at some point the cattle, crying from the heat, becomes white noise. What is it like up there? The Father was red like Mother is now. Even a couple years ago it was better. They were only shooting out the mega-rich. I still had my buddies, and we had our traditions of smoking, drinking, and thinking that we would never face a come-down. I guess the horse never thought it would run out of style either. I always wanted to live back in the days of the frontier. Now I think I know what it was like, and I wish I could get out of here. I laugh under my breath, and I fog up my glass. In it, I see myself. "Damn, man, you're getting old."

BOOM.

The rocket shakes for a second. Then, liftoff. A subtle petrichor from the fuel. You can still see it for a while, until it becomes another one of the stars.

...

"I don't know where Terry went." Dawson and I sit in his office, this just didn't make any sense. Terry Thomas, the cigarette trader, vanished during the cattle herding job. "Alright," I say. "We need to ask your men about this. I'm sure that one of 'em has to know." Charlie King's first.

"I don't know where he went, boss." Charlie's always been a smug prick. I get straight to the point. "I know you like those cigarettes Terry hooked you up with." Charlie nods matter-of-factly. "Well I don't. And I'll take them away if you don't tell me where Terry went." Charlie's smile fades. Now it's my turn. "Now we're getting somewhere," I say proudly. But then Charlie laughs. And his smile widens bigger than mine. He turns to Dawson. "You didn't tell him?" Dawson walks out. Charlie stands up. "We smoked 'em all."

They smoked 600 cigarettes in a day. Fine. Then no one can have music.

I walk into the lounge where we keep our vinyls. I smash as many 2010's hip-hop records I get my hands on. *TA1300*, *1999*, *Astroworld*, broken into black shards. "What the Hell are you doing?" a worker asks. "Where is Terry Thomas?" I yell across the room.

"I don't know," the worker says. I hold *Daytona* above my head. "Yes. You do." He just walks out.

I kneel on the floor of the lounge, the carpet obscured by layered bits of vinyl. Dawson walks in. "Apparently, Terry snuck onto the rocket. He's headed to the Father right now. I told you he was lazy." I turn towards him. "How'd he do that?" We both know that this isn't about Terry.

"He snuck on with the cattle. Guess he made it off." Dawson laughs a little. "Does anybody wanna work anymore?" I ask. Dawson sits on the edge of a table. The table teeters like it might fall over, but it prevails. I guess Dawson is a sort of comfort every now and then. I think it's 'cause he knows how to say things I'd be pissed at in a way I can handle. "Why should they?"

I can't answer that.

America lied to me. I'll never make it off of the Mother. We don't have toothbrushes, half our teeth are rotting. We eat our rations. We lay down and take it. There's one thing I took away, though. So all I know is that when those government guys come back, the first thing I'm going to say is:

"We need more vinyls."