

The Frames
by Nathan Brown

I wake up to the sound of the patrols pacing up and down the corridor. Five of them I can tell by the synchronized pattern of their footsteps. Sitting up I pull my hoverboard down from where it bobs above my head when I sleep and try to get out of bed ignoring how my legs scream in protest. I know it's from the last time me and Solstice snuck out. We spent hours hoverboarding on the rapids until we finally had to get back by dawn for morning lineup. I remember the ice-cold water splattering my face as I soared up the river, solstice by my side, laughing whenever my long stringy hair whipped in front of me, smacking my face.

Shaking my head to clear the memory, I clip my grippy combat boots on and open my window using voice command. The window opens, I slip through the small gap and hop onto my waiting hoverboard. the sound of chatter and laughter carries up to me from the ground seven story's below and I glance down to see the part of the city still functioning, teeming with life even in the middle of the night. There are Zor's everywhere their mix of fox, wolf, and human traits both unsettling and majestic as they call over helperbots or climb onto hoverbikes. Quite a few nestle into air pods, the polished capsules transparent in order to guarantee the best view of the city possible. Not that there's much to see. Most of the city is obscured from view, covered by the thick polluted air that turns the horizon a horrible brown.

Reminded of the pollution, I pull my flimsy mask farther over my mouth and nose and float up to Solstices room. When I reach it on the 21st floor I place my hand on the fingerprint scanner and hold it there until I hear a soft click and the window opens. Silently I climb inside and find Solstice sitting on her mattress fastening the clasps on her boots. Spotting me she smiles.

"Zy can you grab me a hair cord?" She asks in a whisper. I walk over to her desk and grab a hair cord, throwing it to her I sit down on her small, wobbly chair staring at the long silver locks that fall into my face as I do so; the outcome of a failed experiment they did on my mom after her parents gave her up for it. She died shortly after having me because of all the testing they did on her body, so the only memory of the experiment is the silver hair I got from it. They never let me see the lab the testing took place in, said it was confidential, so I never found out what they were doing with my mother. I never found out why I have silver hair or why everyone says my eyes remind them of a fox with their greenish yellow coloring, that appears to glow in the dark. Why-

"Zy are you okay?" Solstice asks interrupting my thoughts.

"Oh yeah, sorry I'm fine." I reply. Which is only a half lie.

"Ok; then we should get going. I want to head to the Frames tonight."

"The Frames?!" I ask surprised. "But that's across the city, we'd need to cross the functioning section."

"Exactly. That's why we need to leave now>"

I stare at the obsidian skin of her smooth face then glance around the room taking in the soft glow from the lamp bot, the well-worn mattress in the far corner of the room and the shabby desk with a wobbly chair before regaining my voice.

“Got it. You open the window and I'll grab our supplies.” I grab my pouch and clip it around my waist, so it settles on my hip as Solstice opens the window using voice command and we both jump out onto our hoverboards. The robotic voice of the window sounds behind me and I turn to face it.

“Shutting window in 5, 4- knocking.

Crap.

Behind me Solstice curses.

3- fiddling with the doorknob. 2, 1. the window slides shut right as the door bursts open and three Zors file into the room. Solstice opens her mouth and says only one word.

“Go.”

I whip around and speed away from the window heading out over the functioning part of the city. The Zors below, with their yellowish eyes, perked wolf ears, and soft pale skin a contrast against the hard metal of the bots, are too occupied by their drinks and endless platters of food to notice anything unusual. If they had glanced up, they would have seen the two human girls flying twenty- one story's up on their hoverboards as three angry patrols banged on the window trying to get out after them. They probably would have been shocked, considering that now in the year of 7436, all humans were confined strictly to the big block prisons across the river. But they kept their eyes on their crystal glasses filled with champagne, big silver platters holding gourmet food, sparkling smiles and jeweled clothing, completely ignorant of the pain caused in those tall square buildings with walls of solid stone and doors of thick, cold steel, just on the other side of the fence.

The wind whips at my hair and face and the polluted air burns my lungs but I keep going. Just flying for that darn brown horizon until I see them. The Frames.

“Solstice I'm heading for The Frames!” I shout over the roaring wind.

“Got it. You lead I'll follow.” I hear her faint reply.

I turn towards the direction of The Frames, the big metal skeletons of buildings rising in the distance. pinpointing my focus on the skeletons I pick up speed. The sound of sirens fill my ears and I know they're on our trail.

“Zy they're getting closer!” Solstice shouts.

Cursing I pick up speed again. The world is a blur as I fly past. The wind whips around me threatening to knock me off balance and plummet me to my death but my boots hold on keeping me steady. Finally, above The Frames I dip down into the metal skeleton of an old building and fly through before soaring up again and turning to a different frame. I repeat this, bending and weaving, dipping and dodging, dropping suddenly before soaring up again until I hear Solstices whisper in my ear.

“We lost them.”

Letting out a breath I didn't realize I had been holding, I slow down and guide my hoverboard onto a rooftop right next to a building that looked in better shape than the others. Deciding to avoid the trash and debris coating the ground below. Solstice taps my arm.

“Zy that building across from us is completely intact with not a scratch on it. After a moment she adds, and there are Zors patrolling it. “We've gotta get inside.” I stare at the long windowless white building as Solstice points things out and the longer I stare the more obvious it becomes. How did I miss that? How could I have been so stupid? Finally, after investigating it fully, I think of a way in.

Sweat drips down the back of my neck, and the polluted air stings my nose even with my mask on as I wait in position for Solstice to give me the signal. Nothing's happening and I'm starting to get convinced something went wrong when a red flash goes off near the back entrance.

Immediately in motion, I run out of my hiding spot by the main entrance and kick one guard positioned in the gut. The other guard is more prepared than the first one but a swift punch to the nose and she's out cold. I reach down to pull out my flasher to inform Solstice that I succeeded but I'm still fumbling with the pouch at my hip when a third guard lunges at me. Caught by surprise I stumble back and prepare for his next strike. The guard roars with his next attack but I spin out of the way of his long claws thrusting my elbow into his ribs with the motion. The guard hunches over and I take advantage of the moment of vulnerability knocking his feet out from under him I punch him hard in the cheek sending him backward onto the ground; out cold. I lay him down next to his two other unconscious companions, take out my flasher and hit the purple button to set it off.

The bright red light blinds me for a second and when my vision clears again Solstice is there bounding toward the door. Blinking hard to clear the white spots from my vision I put my flasher back into my pouch and hurry after her.

“Zy, we have a problem.” she calls back to me.

“What is it?”

“You need a fingerprint scan for access.”

“Crap.” I say out loud.

I walk over to the door. There are no handles on the big double doors. The only thing jutting out from the smooth metal is a small touch pad for your fingertips

“So, what are we going to do?” asks Solstice looking defeated.

“we scan our fingerprints I guess.” I pause than add.

“It looks like our only way in.”

“But it’s not going to work.”

“You’re totally right, it probably won’t.” I reply and press my palm onto the scanner.

Nothing happens for a heart stopping five seconds, eight seconds, eleven seconds, fourteen seconds, and then after a very stressful seventeen seconds a green light flashes and the doors slide open.

“That’s weird,” I say talking mostly to myself, “why would I have access to this place?”

Solstice’s reply was quiet, but I still caught what she said.

“I guess we’ll find out.”

I choose to ignore what she said and focus instead on memorizing the layout of the building. The hallway before us is white, unfurnished and lined with numbered doors, like a hospital might be. At the end of the hallway one door stands out with its bright yellow coloring and big black letters reading TESTING LAB. Though I resist Solstice tugs me along by the sleeve of my loose tank top, pulling on my waist length silver hair as she does so. Gritting my teeth and making a mental note never to go near Solstice without braids in I give in and follow her.

Solstice bounds in front of me and twists the polished silver knob. The door swings open and I step inside. The room we enter is filled with testing tables, tubes hooked up to machines, and screens showing data and results. In the center of the room there’s a hologram showing a body but manipulated and messed with to be a predator. At the top of the screen there’s a name... my mother’s name.

With a jolt I realize that I'm staring at a diagram of my mother’s body. All the pieces start to fit together; this was the confidential lab my mother was tested in. I glance down and my stomach turns sour as I read the message scrawled across the bottom of the screen.

Creating the Zors, test #1.