

Meat Machines.

By Sean, F. Stevens.

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The pale light of the full moon filtered through the tiny barred dormitory window and roused Z from her all too restless slumber, but it was neither the glare of the moonlight nor the quiet buzzing of the psi-suppression field constantly reverberating in the back of her mind that made her restive this night.

She lifted the thin bed linen from her near-decrepit bunk and emerged fully clothed and ready, brushing an errant lock of her milk-white hair from her large cherubic eyes of deepest blue and making her way in the faint moonlight across the otherwise gloomy room to where a thin (though relatively warm) jacket was slung over the back of a much used aluminium chair, the only other furniture in her extremely spartan room.

Z quickly pulled on the jacket and turned the chair upside down, she then pulled a small wad of rags from one of the chairs hollow legs and then carefully tipped the chair upright once more, with a satisfying metallic tinkle, two tiny tubes fell onto the floor from their hiding place. Z quickly gathered them up and shoved them in the deepest pocket of her jacket, quietly hoping that she wouldn't need to use them.

She turned to gaze out the window; through it the moon was still visible, high in the sky and still rising. She guessed with an accuracy that was uncanny to all but those others of her enhanced abilities that it must be five minutes to midnight.

It was almost time...

Alpha gradually worked his way along a hallway within the Guard Block, nopping the floor slowly and precisely, not a corner, not a patch of the faded linoleum was missed in his careful progress.

Like all the other experimental males he wore a one-piece blue denim overall (the females wore a one-piece dress) his garb was now much faded and patched from many years of use except for a somewhat newer patch which was emblazoned on each shoulder and on his back, the reflective white "T" symbol that identified him as a Trustee-Inmate, and thus allowed him a limited freedom within the cluster of interconnected buildings known simply as "The Complex" so as to perform a series of allotted menial tasks, which in the case of Alpha was to mop the floors and clean the toilets for the entire six levels of the Guard block.

Alpha, at twenty-two years of age was the oldest of the Esper's (a term referring to ESP or extra sensory perception, a description that was at best an inaccurate label for the experimental subjects of the Complex, whose powers went far beyond the limits of simple mind reading and such like) but to be more accurate he was the oldest to still be alive. There had been many children born before him in the project but as Alpha's name implied he was the first to actually live for any significant time, a thought that unnerved him more than he cared to think about. For he had lived with the grey-faced intellectuals - who called themselves Bio-Alchemists - that worked non-stop in the laboratory block and had on every day of his life been a first hand witness to their nonchalant attitude towards the pain and suffering they

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His diligent progress brought Alpha to a turning in the corridor, he could see a

faint light diffusely permeating from the as yet unseen hallway and could hear the faint sounds that his heightened senses identified as the quiet movements of just one singular guard.

As was common at this time of night there was only a skeleton staff on duty throughout the entire complex; there was no need to be on high alert, for all of the experimental children were in their suppression field blanketed dormitory rooms and were no threat, only the few weakly powered trustees were still at large, and the guards had other methods of controlling them. Indeed, at this time of night there was perhaps only one or two guards patrolling the entire dormitory block and perhaps as few or

none at all patrolling the Administration, Guard and Laboratory Blocks, they were mostly either asleep in their rooms or in the Cafeteria on the top floor of the Guard Block.

Alpha tensed at the thought of what he now had to do, absently fidgeting with the band of steel that encircled his neck tightly, officially it was just a mobile suppression field generator which ensued that none of the trustees tried to use their powers on their masters (though most of the trustees, Alpha included, did not have excessively powerful faculties, for if they had they would have been sold off as weapons as the other Esper Children had been when they matured, that's why the trustees

official designation was "Failed Test".) but the other unspoken functions of the collars were to act as a tracer, should any of the trustees try to escape, and to act as a self-destruct device, if the other methods of subjugation or capture failed or were in some way not viable.

Alpha's finger ran over a rough patch in the steel band, a near invisible imperfection in it's otherwise perfectly smooth exterior that hid where the device had been carefully opened and hopefully, deactivated. Alpha grinned grimly, for though the suppression field of the collar had definitely ceased to function, there was no way to test if the destruct system had similarly failed until now, for it was an almost certainty that

one of the guards would try and use it tonight.

He sped up his mopping and turned the corner swiftly, yet carefully; it was almost time. He fingered one of the pencil-sized metal tubes in his overall pocket with nervous deliberation.

The secondary guardroom door was just ahead, pale light filtering through its tiny frosted glass window and casting surreal patterns on the opposite wall in the otherwise semi gloom of the corridor. Alpha breathed slowly, composing himself. He carefully concealed one of the tiny tubes under his hand and behind the shaft of the mop, hopefully placing it out of the line of sight of the single guard that he could

sense in the far corner of the room. With his free hand Alpha then typed a short code into the doors electronic lock and as it clicked open made his way inside.

Alpha's senses had not failed him, there was indeed only a single guard in the room, seated at the well-worn aluminium bodied and formica surfaced control desk in the corner. His legs were crossed and up on the table but though bored looking he was otherwise seemingly alert, his eyes strayed from the wide bank of security monitors before him and he glanced at Alpha curiously as he entered.

Alpha, in keeping with the servile attitude expected of the trustee's didn't greet the guard and kept his head bowed

over his work as he continued with his pretence of mopping the floor, but he was quietly unnerved as he could feel the guards eyes on him, never once wandering or even blinking in his quiet inspection of Alpha's progress.

Finally the guard shifted his position, bringing his feet down from the table and leaning forward on the desk, and Alpha couldn't help but notice that the guard's feigned nonchalant pose brought him within striking distance of the control that could with a single quick movement activate his collars destruct mechanism.

"You're Alpha, aren't you?" The guard said, more as a statement of fact than as a question.

Alpha kept his head down. "Yes sir."

He replied.

"Look at me when you're talking, Boy." the guard snapped.

Alpha raised his head and the guard nodded to himself in satisfaction. He was a forty something old fascist that Alpha had seen before but whose name he did not know. He was like all the guards dressed in a black uniform with white highlights, but in the case of this guard the uniform was so ill fitting it totally failed to conceal the Psychon armour that he and all the Complex's staff secretly wore as their last line of defence against their powerful - and often unwilling - charges. Psychon armour was another of the Complex's products and had been developed in

tandem with the Esper Children. It had a dual purpose, on a regular human it could reflect any psychic attack back at the aggressor, but on an Esper it could also absorb the attack, using this stored psi-energy to amplify the wearers own powers for a limited period of time.

The style of armour the guard was wearing was the only variation the Esper's were familiar with, a standardised skin-tight kevlar bodysuit with embedded circuitry and power supply, simple to use and maintain. Though the head and hands were exposed, they too were encased and protected by the invisible force field the suit generated. There were also rumours of a military version of the armour, one

that in addition to its psi-shielding properties was also armoured against conventional kinetic, focussed light and plasmatic weaponry, making the bearer virtually impregnable. Alpha didn't know how true the rumours of this variation of the armour were, and quite frankly didn't want to find out.

"Y'know Alpha, you've been a trustee with us for a long time now," The guard declared, watching Alpha's reactions carefully. "I can't think of a moment when your fellow Esper's haven't hated and abused you because of your collaboration, not for even a minute."

Alpha bowed his head in assent. "They look upon us as spies for the Guards, sir, or at very least traitors." he

shrugged fatalistically, careful to keep the tube in his hand hidden behind the mop handle.

The guard frowned. "I hadn't finished, boy," he murmured dangerously. "For what I meant to say was that they hadn't ceased in their abuse of you until this very week," and the guard grinned, shark-like and threatening. "Now why do you think that is, boy?" enquired the guard with vicious glee.

For a desperate moment Alpha thought that their plan had been exposed and that he had walked into a trap. He forced himself to remain calm and expand his senses to the limit of his abilities. Reassuringly he could detect nothing in the surrounding area. Alpha could only

presume that it must just have been this one single guard being all too bloody clever for his own good, and he carefully primed the mechanism of the hidden tube.

"Well sir," Alpha began and without finishing his sentence lowered his broom, aimed the tiny, disposable Tranq-Gun and fired it's single dart at the Guard all in a one fluid movement. But even as the dart penetrated the guard's clothing and delivered it's disabling dose of narcotics into his bloodstream his finger had already stabbed out, activating the destruct device.

Alpha winced as the steel collar sparked and fizzed momentarily and

breathed a sigh of extreme relief as it just as quickly fell inert. He looked with satisfaction at the guard who, after his one last reflex action with the destruct button had now slumped across the control table, well and truly out like a light.

Not wishing to push his luck Alpha reached over the desk and removed a small specialised tool from the guards belt clip and quickly used it to remove the now hopefully fused collar from his neck, it came off effortlessly and Alpha breathed easily for the first time in years.

Carefully, he bent over the control table and eased the slumbering guard off the console and backwards into his

chair, not wanting to gamble too much on the potency of the tranquilliser by shaking the guard too heavily and yet not wanting to be forced to give the guard another shot either just in case a double dose turned out to fatal.

Rolling the guard-carrying chair into a quiet corner, Alpha paused a moment to check the guard with his senses, for though a human may be able to fake unconsciousness to another human, there was no fooling an Esper like Alpha. After a moment of examining the guards definitely quiescent brain, Alpha straightened, satisfied by what his minds eye had seen, he then turned back to the control console and reaching into another pocket produced a much beaten

and worn old-style wind up pocket watch (for unlike the children of the second series of genetic experiments who were identified by their roman letter code names, the Greek letter code-named first generation Esper's had no extremely fine tuned temporal senses and had to rely on more old fashioned means to tell the time)it was a minute to midnight, he had made it with a little time to spare.

He quietly waited, counting off the remaining sixty seconds with nervous impatience. The second hand crawled around the dial, seeming to travel in slow motion, the final five seconds ticking away with a painfully molasses-slow movement.

Tick, Alpha tried to stabilise his breathing, and failed miserably. Tick, his fear-enhanced senses started picking up the movement of every mote of dust in the room making him feel disorientated and queasy. Tick, he extended his finger to merely a millimetre above the control for the security system, trying to control it's shaking and this time succeeding. Tick, he looked quickly over his shoulder at the guard, who was still reassuringly quiet and unmoving.

Tick, midnight.

Alpha's finger stabbed out at the emergency security activation control on the console, there was a distant whoosh of heavy duty hydraulic actuators as the Guard Block security shields almost

instantaneously shunted into place over all its doors and windows. A second later with a movement as quick as the last, Alpha simultaneously pressed the two buttons adjacent to the first and the Administration and Lab blocks received the same treatment. The three blocks were now both completely cut off from the rest of the world, until those manning the primary security room realised what was happening and tried to override the system, but that should take a few minutes and if all went well someone else would be on their way to deal with that. One last button was pressed, and he sensed the many individual high-security dormitory room doors of the Esper block disengage and the main complex

suppression field shut down.

With satisfaction Alpha calmly yanked a high voltage power line from a nearby wall and fused the control panels circuitry in such a way as to render it useless for hours and then exited the room at a quick trot. He ran down the corridor to the guard blocks main bulkhead door, it too should have closed but there was another trustee waiting just outside the door, calmly holding the massive portal in it's open and unlocked position with an almost casual display of mid-level telekinesis.

"Theta!" Alpha called waving.

"Keep running." Theta called back,
"They're coming."

And indeed Alpha could sense them,

the guards were pouring out of every nook and cranny in the building and they were all heading this way, very quickly. He rushed out of the building and Theta calmly removed his influence from the door, the heavy shielded door slamming almost instantaneously into place with a thud that rattled Alpha's teeth.

Alpha tossed the collar-removing tool to Theta, who received it thankfully.

"I noticed that they tried to detonate the collars," Theta observed, gingerly removing his steel band and throwing it into a nearby bush with relief. "I guess we cut the right circuits after all, Eh?"

Alpha nodded "I just hope it worked for all the others, also." He quickly checked his pockets, he had three of the

tranq-guns left, and though unlikely that he would need them at this point, he decided that it couldn't hurt to hang on to them just in case.

"By the way," Alpha began, waving a tranq-gun idly in Theta's direction "your little "acquisitions" came in quite useful. For a moment I was worried that they'd finally noticed they were missing, but everything turned out fine in the end."

Theta grinned, "I just did what I could do." he replied modestly. As the trustee-janitor for the Lab Block, it had been Theta who had been quietly skimming the tranquilliser-gun stocks and distributing them amongst the other kids for the past several months, it hadn't been an easy task and he had run the risk

of discovery on many an occasion. But without the guns their chances of escape would have been significantly lower, or indeed as Alpha had discovered tonight, practically impossible.

An audible thudding began on the other side of the door; the first of the guards had arrived.

"You realise that they'll be able to get those doors open inside of five minutes," Theta pointed out helpfully. "They can override the lock as soon as one of the middle level officials primes it with the secured pass from the Guard-Commandant's safe. Even if the primary junction's toasted they can still open the doors at their local security panels, one by one."

Alpha grinned nervously "If all goes well, inside of five minutes there won't be any power in the whole complex to open the doors with. They'll have to bleed off the fluid in the hydraulic rams and push the doors open manually, which will take the better part of a couple of hours." Looking over his shoulder at the sealed portal behind them, he added: "at least, that's the theory."

Z jumped involuntarily as the security door of her prison opened with a whoosh of displaced air. She moved quickly out the door and into the corridor, grinning with satisfaction as a moment later she felt the buzz of the suppression field fading from her mind,

Z knew now without a doubt that the first stage of the plan had been a success.

She could now sense that the corridor was for the moment clear and rushed along it without the slightest hesitation. She had perhaps five minutes or less to reach the Power Block, a semi detached sub block of the Admin Block that was automated and usually unmanned, she hoped absently that the block was guard free as her supply of tranq darts was limited and her power would be needed for other things.

She ran down the three flights of stairs that would take her to ground level at near-breakneck speed, practically climbing over the other Esper's who all had the same idea, except for the few

who were cheerfully tying up the stunned guards with whatever they could find or locking them inside rooms, not willing to trust the tranquilliser darts potency so much as to just leave the guards where they lay.

Despite all of the twists, turns and bottlenecks Z was out the main dormitory door and rushing across the quadrangle towards the power block within less than a minute.

Though she had been aware of the escape plan for less than a month, Z knew that the older series of children - now mostly young adults - had been planning this breakout for many years, carefully rising up through the ranks of trustees until they were in positions that

would place them near to the resources or departments they would need access to before they could make any genuine attempt at escape. She also knew that it was an Esper like her that they had been waiting for, an Esper with enough power to shut down the entire power grid of the Complex with a single thought.

The Power Block was directly ahead, there was already a trustee at the door holding it open and waiting for her, she had barely two minutes to spare.

The Power Block was unlike the other parts of the Complex, it had it's own separate suppression field and even if the other Esper's could get it deactivated, it would take long minutes to get to the main power relays through

the many layers of shielding that lay within, all rigged with anti-Esper booby traps just to make it worse. In other words it was far too secure for conventional Esper's to shut it down in the five minutes they had available.

This was where Z came in, she didn't need to enter the building to deactivate the power grid, all she needed was to be relatively close to it, and just outside of the range of the suppression field would do just fine, because for what she was capable of even the suppression field would be of no use, not even regular Psychon Armour could defend against what she was going to do here, which was perhaps why the bio-alchemists had always been careful to keep Z as far

away from the power block as possible...

For her most famous (and most dangerous) faculty was a compressed spatial reflex that had been dubbed: The Pressure Wave. Z was able to gather and focus the very air itself into an extremely large, semi-solid mass with her hyper-powerful telekinesis and to launch the mass at high speed, she could even customise the shape of the force in such a way as to maximise its damage-dealing potential in all manner of frightening ways.

Z concentrated, her eyes closed but her mind focussed to pinpoint accuracy on the centre of the power block, where she knew the generators to be even if her

senses could not penetrate the suppression field. Her lithe young frame tensed, and with all the power at her disposal she gathered in a huge mass of the surrounding air, causing the wind within the quadrangle to whip and slash around her. If the other Esper's had not taken shelter or found handholds they would surely have been dragged into the gathering singularity that was taking on a monstrous, amorphous form before them.

Z's eyes opened, her face twisted in a grimace of strain at holding the focussed air-hammer in place. With a gasp of effort she made a pushing movement with her hands and the surrounding Esper's could see (or sense) the projectile unleashed at close to the

speed of sound. With a screaming whoosh of tortured air, the pressure wave hurtled forward, shattering the doorway and surrounding wall in its passage and passing through the suppression field without pause. Even without Z's power to keep it focussed on the other side of the field, the wave's own momentum held it together for several seconds, plenty of time for it to smash its way through every barrier and shatter the mighty reinforced alloy shielded generators at the centre of the building into so much sparking fragments.

The Complex went dark. After the chaos of the previous minutes, silence reigned.

Z tottered unsteadily and fell to her knees, her efforts leaving her drained momentarily. Around her all the Esper's cheered, the first of their major hurdle's having been spectacularly overcome.

Alpha turned from the sight of the others merrymaking back to the job in hand, he had been gathering all the stronger telekines of both series and had set them to work on the main gate, a huge structure of adamantine steel mounted in a perimeter wall of both excessive height and thickness and locked with massive bolts that King Kong would have had a hard time getting past. Usually the bolts were opened and shut using huge electromagnets controlled by one of the security networks' subsystems,

but as they had had to destroy both the security net and the power supply they would have to open the heavy door by other means.

Having set them to their task and leaving Theta in charge, Alpha then made his way to the Admin Block side of the quadrangle to where the Complex's small contingent of land vehicles were parked. There were just over a dozen of them, mostly minivans and busses and one solitary Levitation-Limousine that belonged to the Director of the institute. Further along, hidden in it's own mini-hanger was a Helijet, a six-man flying machine of military colouring but with half its weapon pods replaced with search & tracking

equipment. Alpha grinned slightly, for though the helijet had been designed with the intention of chasing and capturing (or destroying) escaped Esper's it had never yet been used before for that purpose and on this one time when it could justify it's existence, it would almost certainly fail to achieve anything, especially as there was now one of the female Esper's - one of the older trustees - standing next to it and frying the delicate electronics of its engines with the judicious use of her power which was to manipulate electromagnetic waves.

"How goes the fight, Gamma?" Alpha asked her, threading his way through the stationary vehicles to stand at her side.

"All proceeding smoothly?"

Gamma nodded, her auburn curled hair shifting and settling on her shoulders in ways pleasing to Alpha's eye. "I've succeeded in bypassing the security interlocks and starting all the vehicles engines." Gamma reported with a grin.

"They're powered by quantum batteries and are fully charged so it should be OK

to keep them running for the duration of the trip without flattening them out. It's just as well too, as the security system will rearm itself if the motor is shut off."

Alpha nodded in understanding. "Once we're out of here and split up they won't be able to restart the engine

without you." He looked up at the helijet "Looks like you toasted it well and truly." he observed with a grin.

Gamma shrugged "I figured we'd be having enough trouble working out how to drive the land vehicles," she explained "I didn't want to risk sending any of us up in this potential death-trap, but on the other hand I didn't want to leave it behind in one piece either."

"They could always have spare parts hidden somewhere to repair it with." Alpha theorised.

"Even if they do, it will take them some significant time to repair it," she replied with a grin. "I'm being very thorough."

Alpha grinned back at her "I bet you

are."

But before he could say any more he was interrupted by the arrival of a breathless and grim faced Theta.

"We have a problem." He explained, panting.

Alpha, Gamma and Theta stood facing the huge gates, surrounding them in a rough semicircle were the telekinetic children who had been at work on the bolts, they were red eyed, grey faced and sweating profusely from their exertions. And as Alpha could plainly see the products of their efforts were worse than negligible, the heavy almost train-carriage thick bolts had hardly moved at all...

Theta shook his head grimly "We've

underestimated the paranoia of those bastards." he remarked, gesturing in the general direction of the admin block.

"They've deliberately weighted the cores of the bolts with depleted uranium, they're far heavier than they look and beyond our combined strengths."

"My powers not strong enough to polarise the coils," Gamma remarked with a sigh. "Could we rig some kind of backup generator or connect the power packs of the ground vehicle's into a series, and re-power the electromagnetic latches that way?"

Alpha shook his head "not in the time available, our "lords and masters" must already be bleeding the hydraulic locks in the three blocks. They could be out in

less than an hour."

"Could we climb the wall perhaps?" Theta suggested "or levitate the kids over the wall in small groups?"

"Even if we got them over the wall in time we'd be on foot on the other side," Gamma replied. "How far could we get on foot when we don't even know how far away the nearest settlement might be."

Alpha lowered himself to the ground and sat cross-legged on the concrete pavers of the quadrangle. Staring bitterly up at the grey mountain of barred steel that stood between them and freedom, his mind a grey blur of uncertainties.

A tiny hand touched his shoulder, startling him out of his reverie; he turned

and was surprised to see a grim-faced Z standing behind him, leaning on one of the other younger Esper's for support. Her countenance was almost as pale as her hair from the exhaustion of her previous effort but her mouth set firm in determination.

"Let me try." she said.

Alpha opened his mouth to argue, and just as quickly closed it. Z was clearly beyond arguing with and Alpha couldn't deny the fact that she, despite being only fifteen years of age, was almost certainly the most powerful Esper of any of them. He watched as everyone stood back and she slowly made her way over to the gates. He thought of the massive powers that resided in her tiny metre and a half

frame, he knew little about her, but what he did know was telling: he knew for instance that she was the last of the second series children as denoted by her code name, Z. He also knew all of the children younger than her were replications or enhancements of earlier developed genome patterns rather than improvements upon Z's enhanced and purified genetic structure, for the bio-chemists had been (so far) unable to reproduce Z's genetic pattern, failing miserably in the attempt. Lastly, he knew that out of all the children in the Complex none terrified the alchemists more than this one small teenage girl.

Standing within the semicircle of Telekines Z's body tensed as she looked

up at the huge portal before her, in one flowing movement she spread her arms wide and with a violent, screeching transition the massive bolts slid back with a resounding clang, almost shaking loose from their huge bindings with the suddenness of their relocation.

Her milk-white hair floating halo-like around her head with the force of the power she was generating, Z moved forward a step, her hand outstretched. Her extended fingers touched the gates lightly, barely contacting with the cold adamantinum steel for a millisecond in the faintest feather light brush of fingers against the seemingly immovable mass. Less than an instant later the doors swung rapidly outward, swinging round

on their huge hinges and smashing loudly into the outer wall with a deafening reverberation akin to nothing the children had ever heard before in their lives.

Just as quickly, the echoes of the massive impact faded. And the still shuddering group of Esper's found themselves staring awed at the stark moonlit landscape beyond the wall.

It was Alpha who gathered his wits again first, noticing the tiny Z slumped on the ground, he ran over to her, fearing the worst. Picking up her tiny limp form the frown of concern quickly left his face as his senses told him that she was merely unconscious, and with good reason, for he was sure she had never

used her power to such an incredible extent before.

He looked up from her quiescent form to the landscape beyond; it was quiet and deserted, bare of habitation and without a tree to be seen, only low scrub was visible as far as his eyes could see into the faint moonlit gloom. But this didn't concern him, for no matter how bleak their future may be out in the wilderness, he was sure they had more of a fighting chance there, than here in this experimental cage.

Turning his back to the sight of the outside world and still carrying Z, he ran back into the compound. "What are you waiting for?" He yelled at the milling group of Esper's "To the vehicles,

quickly!"

The spell of the outside momentarily broken by Alpha's words, the Esper's dragged themselves away from the sight of freedom and ran to the waiting vehicles. Alpha noticed Gamma behind the wheel of the Levi-Limo and ran towards it; on arrival he placed the limp Z in the back seat and strapped her in firmly.

As Alpha got into the passenger seat of the Limo, behind and around him the other vehicles - packed to the brim with Esper's - gunned their engines, and with a few uncertain wobbles of inexperienced driving, made their way rapidly out of the wide open gates. Following their prearranged plans by each taking a

different route away from the compound, in the hope that if they split up that at least some would succeed in their escape.

With one last look of concern at the slumbering Z, Alpha nodded to Gamma and she floored the accelerator. The engine whined in straining anti-gravity units for a moment and then with a sudden release of built up antigravity potentials the Limo shot away like a cork from an over pressurised bottle. In a few short seconds it was through the gates and just another fading dot in the moonlight.

The last of the engine sounds quickly faded into the distance and the quadrangle was quiet again, only the

muffled banging of men at work on the security portals, gave any indication that anyone still resided in the compound.

Suddenly a shadow separated itself from the deeper inky blackness between the admin and dormitory blocks, resolving itself into a human shape it quietly walked to the gate to watch the last of the vehicles disappear over the horizon. Satisfied that the vehicles were out of sight the figure strode quickly over to the admin block. Pausing to inspect the shorted out helijet in its hanger, the figure cast a pale obviously male shadow on the dark vehicles fuselage as he carried out his careful examination, his blonde buzz-cut hair almost luminous in the pale light.

Seemingly satisfied with what he saw the figure strode chuckling to the nearest security door and set to work.

The next day dawned as bright as only a binary sunrise can be, the tiny red orb of the secondary sun being the first to rise into the brightening sky and almost instantly followed by it's much larger & significantly brighter cousin, ten times it's size and painful to look at directly. Together they were quite a sight, though since the sky was it's usual cloudless, hazy orange-grey expanse of nothing much in particular it could be that the two suns appeared more impressive than they should have been simply because there was nothing else to compare them to.

None of this stellar showboating was of much particular interest to Alpha and Gamma on this day though, partially because they had seen it all before but mostly because they were driving the Limo at breakneck speed and were terrified of crashing, since they had only rudimentary knowledge of how to drive. But they dared not slow down, either, as they were equally unnerved at the thought of what the guards might do to them if they were caught.

With a whining of strained anti-gravity units the limo crested another cacti-encrusted dune and screeched down the other side under maximum air brakes in an attempt to avoid hitting bottom too hard, which almost

succeeded. There was an unnerving crunch as the Limo's rear fender scraped against the hard, scrubby vegetation in the valley between the dunes and was nearly ripped loose for the 'nth time.

In the drivers seat, Gamma barely flinched at the sounds of tearing vegetation beneath them or the over stressed machine-pain coming from under the hood of the limo, her jaw was set perhaps just a trifle too firmly to be classed as the fixed expression of determination and the sweat on her brow was perhaps just a little too early in the day to be blamed on the heat of the rising sun. In the passenger seat, Alpha gritted his teeth but decided against commenting on the quality of Gamma's driving. For

in the intervening time between their escape last night and now, they had both taken turns at the cars' controls and had discovered (much to their chagrin) that they were both exceedingly pathetic drivers. Meanwhile, strapped carefully and firmly into the back seat, Z was surprisingly still fast asleep. Alpha was more than a little amazed at this as despite Z's unsurprisingly debilitating over-use of her power last night, he would have presumed that the better part of seven bumpy hours in the back seat would have even woke up Rip Van Winkle, if only to be car-sick.

He looked around at the bleak dry landscape, nothing but sand and dry desert foliage was to be seen in any

direction, the Complex had long ago faded into the distance behind them and the busses and vans that held the other Esper's had also long vanished into the dusty haze to either side of their Limo. He quietly hoped that they were having more luck than he and Gamma and Z were seeming to do, and idly wondered if the rest of the planet was nothing more than sand dunes and that eventually they'd find themselves back at the Complex, having come full circle without finding a single other sign of habitation on the entire dusty planet.

They crested another dune and the sight beyond it made Alpha forget his previous introspections and caused Gamma's foot to slip from the

accelerator in surprise, the engines whine faded and the Limo drifted down the opposite side of the dune at an almost leisurely pace. Gaping in amazement, neither of them could believe their eyes but there was no denying the fact that at the foot of the dune and directly in their path was a broad (though somewhat dusty and cracked) highway of a kind they would never have expected to see in the middle of the desert. It led off to either side of them, to their right being lost to sight amongst the rolling dunes and to their left off into the far distance...

Leading to a city.

With some short moments of inexpert jiggling of the controls, Gamma aligned

the Limo on the highway and gunned the engines once more, heading at top speed for the hazy image of tightly packed together skyscrapers on the horizon. It did not take them long to arrive on the outskirts of the city's urban sprawl, they passed first only the occasional lonely single story building dotted on either side of the highway but soon the solitary concrete pillbox-like constructions made way for whole groups of buildings, taller and more complex in design, the gaps between the increasingly intricate "neighbourhoods" becoming smaller and less frequent.

Soon the gaps between the constructions disappeared entirely and the occupants of the limo found

themselves passing between two parallel streams of buildings, formed into shapes both utilitarian and fantastic, their functions uncertain to either Gamma or Alpha, and their height gradually increasing, rising up into the distance to meet with the tall artificial mastiffs of concrete, glass and steel that rose up before them and dominated their entire field of view.

And like the buildings on either side of them, all too obviously in a state of semi ruination...

All the buildings were noticeably deserted, their colours faded, their concrete and masonry shells cracked and crumbling, their windows dusty and broken. In the far distance, one of the

massive skyscrapers was tilted at an unusual angle, drunkenly leaning against a neighbouring building, further on another tower's shell had partially collapsed, exposing the remnants of the floors within.

Gamma looked bleakly around her and shook her head at Alpha; he nodded in confirmation and sighed. There was no respite in their situation to be found here, no pause for rest, no crowd to hide amongst. No future, not yet.

"This city's been deserted for a long time." Alpha murmured. "I can't sense any movement anywhere, even the vermin have left for greener pastures."

"No electromagnetic residues either." Gamma added. "I can't sense any

remains of a power grid anywhere, this city's dead."

Alpha shook his head, as if to shake off the last of the false hopes that had begun to roost there. He looked ahead grimly. "Full speed ahead, then." He told Gamma. "We'll continue to follow the road through the city and out the other side, with any luck the road will continue on and perhaps eventually lead somewhere."

Gamma grinned, her eyes narrowing suspiciously "You really think so?" she enquired cynically.

Alpha grinned back, but didn't reply, there was no need for telepathy or speech for Gamma and he to understand each other, they had always known the

risks involved in their breakout, but that didn't make the reality of their situation any less bleak.

"Let's Go." Alpha said.

Gamma nodded, and gunned the engines. Within a moment the limo was again rocketing along the highway, its wake stirring into long trailing clouds the heavy dust that had for many years lain upon it.

The highway split into several broad avenues, Gamma picked one at random and continued forward, finding all too quickly that her choice led into a convoluted web of narrow roads that wound deeper and deeper into the warren of ruined mid-sized buildings and dark, dusty side streets. They

seriously considered turning back and trying another path out of the city, but found that they had made their decision far too late. They were completely lost, even the suns could not be used to navigate by, as they were no longer visible from the narrow artificial valleys through which they now travelled.

The path twisted and turned before them, for the tenth time in as many minutes the road bent sharply ahead of them, causing Gamma to bank the limo at an acute angle. There was a combined screeching of overstressed antigravity motors and metal on masonry as the outflung airbrake panels scraped against the brittle alley wall.

Alpha made a face as the limo

skidded roughly around the corner, his shoulders were beginning to bruise from his being constantly thrown between the wall panels on his left and Gamma on his right.

Noticing his expression Gamma frowned. "Any time you want me to slow down just let me know!" She remarked, "And if you think you can do a better job in this bloody maze, feel free to try!"

"It's too fast for these side streets, but probably not fast enough to lose any pursuit." Alpha replied "I'm willing to bear with it if you're willing." and with a slight grin he added: "And I know I'd be no better at driving through all this than you are!"

Gamma's expression cleared for a

moment and then clouded over again. "I wonder how the others are doing?" she murmured quietly, as if speaking to herself

"Better than us, do you think?"

Alpha shook his head "Who can say." He replied truthfully "But I hope so."

He gritted his teeth as the limo swerved around a large chunk of fallen reinforced concrete, protruding, rusted steel shafts from it's jagged mass gouging long streaks of paintwork from the outer panels with a painful screech reminiscent of a dentists drill.

They all cringed at the sound and Alpha looked behind him, at the slumbering Z

in the back seat. Though shifted about

somewhat by the cars movement, she was still completely unconscious.

"I hope Z's OK." Alpha wondered aloud. "She must have used every last drop of her powers last night, I just hope that all she's suffering from is exhaustion."

Gamma risked a quick look back at the tiny Esper, her eyes wide in wonderment

"Did you have any idea of the extent of her power?" she asked, turning back to face the road so as to take another corner at speed "More to the point, do you think Z had any idea?"

Alpha shook his head. "I didn't, and I don't think Z did either." and he turned away from Z to look Gamma in the eye,

his face thoughtful "I think she had begun to suspect, but I don't think she had any real inkling of her true potential until last night when she asked me to let her try the doors, I think it was at that very moment that she finally realised what she could do." Alpha shrugged, his face a mask of amazement as he remembered last night's events.

"Why would they create someone like Z and then not let her test her powers to the fullest?" he mused.

Gamma smirked; the answer to Alpha's question was all too obvious. "Because they were afraid of her." she replied.

Suddenly Gamma's smile faded she quickly glanced in the rear-view mirror

and craning her neck looked directly up through the Limo's skylight at the narrow slit of sky, far above. Unnerved, Alpha followed her glance but could see nothing, above or behind. "What can you sense?" He asked her "Have they caught up to us?"

Gamma shook her head; a generalised shapeless disquiet had begun to echo in her mind but had as of yet not formed into anything specific. She slowed the car and let her senses expand.

"We're being tracked, I'm almost certain of it." Gamma finally replied, her voice faint and distant, finally her eyes opened and she looked at him in concern. "Can you sense anything?"

Alpha let his body relax and closed

his eyes; he stretched his consciousness to its limits and with a great effort tried to push his senses further. At their furthest extent his powers could just sense ... something, the barest most tenuous of sensations but nothing specific. Coming back to himself he turned to Gamma and shook his head. "If there's something out there, it's at the limit of my range." he said, "I might be feeling something on the fringes of my sensory sphere and then again it might just be ghost images or my imagination."

Gamma mused quietly, speeding up the limo until it was once again careening around corners at its previous speed.

"It could of course just be my

paranoia." she began slowly "But if it is indeed members of the Complex following us, it could be that they know that it's us down here and are keeping deliberately out of our range until they have a clear opportunity to act."

Alpha rolled this idea around in his mind "If that is the case then they would have a knowledge of this city and where the best locations for an ambush would be."

"I guess it's too late to try and second guess them anyway." Gamma murmured.

"Any suggestions as to what to do next will be greatly appreciated."

Alpha shrugged "Were flying blind here, Gamma." he replied. "All I can suggest is that we run for as long as we

can and then stand and fight when we have to, it's not as if we have much in the way of alternatives."

Gamma sighed. "Run it is then." and taking yet another corner at breakneck speed she accelerated the Limo beyond all possible safe limits and with a whoosh of solid objects passing within close proximity of one another at deadly speed the car popped from the narrow alley in a cloud of fine sand and almost fossilised trash, flying out into the broadest of broad avenues.

Gamma instinctively turned the Limo to the right to avoid slewing into the opposite side and then slowed momentarily to check the cars electro-compass to make sure that they weren't

heading back the way they came. After all the twists and turns it was no big surprise that both she and Alpha had completely lost their sense of direction, and with no direct sunlight to cast shadows in the grey half-light of the broad, man-made valley there was no option but to trust to their instrumentation.

They hurtled forward, a nervous sheen forming on their brows despite the over-cool air conditioning within the Limo, the echo of disquiet in their minds building with every passing moment but never getting strong enough to form into a definite uncertainty.

The light along the avenue began to grow rapidly; the dark uncertain end of

the broad street had become a faint point of light, rapidly brightening. Above them the dark tops of the ruined buildings had begun to slowly shrink back into less vertiginous heights and the sky was once again visible (if just barely), they were coming to the end of the city at last.

And their hidden pursuers had finally decided to act.

Alpha and Gamma sensed it at once, Alpha felt danger approach as multiple objects, hard and rapidly drawing closer, for gamma it was a sensation of strong artificial magnetic fields getting stronger, growing closer. But for both the conclusion was the same: the attack had begun.

Gamma swerved by instinct and not

before time, instants later the avenue directly ahead of them was a rapidly expanding, incandescent ball of flame. Far too broad and far too hot for the car to traverse with any chance of survival.

Gamma spun the Limo in a wide 180-degree turn but before she could begin to accelerate once more the avenue along which they had passed only seconds earlier was now also engulfed in flames, just as broad and virulent as the first blast. They were now trapped in a short stretch of the dusty cracked avenue with no streets or alleys on either side and thus with no alternatives other than to either risk a suicidal run through the flames or to wait for their attackers next move.

Practicality won out over stupidity and Gamma parked the Limo over by a dusty kerb just as the helijet from the Complex landed in a cloud of grimy dust in the centre of the street.

Gamma grimaced as she exited the Limo "So they did have spare parts hidden somewhere for the bloody thing!" she turned to Alpha with a tired look on her nonetheless beautiful face "Well at least now we know what they were waiting for, there's no way they could have ever landed that flying tin-cow in one of those narrow side-streets."

Alpha shrugged as he got out and joined her "Well at least we got a half-days head start on them." he remarked with a fatalistic grin.

Gamma smiled back, but it faded as she turned with him to face the helijet. It's engines high pitched roar diminished to a faint whine and then finally faded out altogether, the clouds of dust about it had just about begun to settle when they were stirred up once again by the opening of it's passenger doors, it's stairs unfolding themselves in a smooth ballet of articulations and touching down upon the rock hard macadam with an audible clanking.

The second the stairway was down, two security guards from the Complex double-timed it down the stairs, they were both wearing Psychon Armour and armed with the latest of plasmatic-beam pulse-pistols, their faces were a mask of

grim determination. They split up as they touched ground and halted, flanking the stairway with their pulse-pistols cocked, ready to fire and pointed in Alpha and Gamma's direction.

A tall figure appeared at the head of the stairs, he was a well-groomed man in his middle years and slightly foppish in bearing. Casually brushing an invisible speck of dust from his Psychon Armour as if it were an expensive three-piece Italian suit, he slowly moved down the stairs with careful deliberate steps. All with the intention of causing the most uncertainty and nervousness in his prey, his smiling face a mask of minutely judged confidence and disdain, his eyes calculating and cruel.

This was Peate, the Director of the Complex and a barely restrained sadist into the bargain.

"Good afternoon, Director Peate." Alpha remarked casually, but his eyes were dark with hatred. "What brings you to the wasteland?"

Peate smiled a cold, thin smile. His eyes glinted with amusement. "Alpha and Gamma." he remarked coolly "Two failed experiments not even worth the cost of reacquisition, what a world of problems you and your brethren have given me today."

And with feigned surprise he glanced towards the Limo. "And joyriding in my private car also, how naughty of you." the feigned humour drained from his face

in an instant, his face becoming hard and cold "You will all be punished extremely for this, indeed some of you may not survive the retribution I have planned for you."

"They're not going back, none of us are!"

Alpha and Gamma turned in surprise; Z was standing behind them. She turned to them and gave them a tiny smile of encouragement, any vestige of the fatigue from the previous night had faded from her features and her dark blue eyes were bright with a razor sharp alertness that alleviated any of the concerns the two older Esper's had been harbouring for the young Teen.

Moments earlier, Z had awoken from

her grey limbo to find herself strapped into the back seat of a car. She had quickly swept the area with her powers and within instants had deduced the desperate nature of their situation. Deciding that quick action was almost certainly going to be necessary she had silently and rapidly slipped from the Limousine and moved to stand at their side in a youthful display of Esper solidarity.

Alpha looked back at Peate and had the satisfaction of seeing his face suffused with surprise and fear for one long instant before his mask of oily confidence snapped back into place. Alpha nodded to himself in satisfaction, Peate and the others were just as afraid

of Z as he had suspected.

"We're free now, Peate." Alpha declared, more confident now with both Gamma and Z at his side "And we intend to stay free."

"Oh really?" Peate replied with a sneer "Well I have a newsflash for you kiddies, freedom is a human right and you three are anything but human." Peate paused, his sneer widening and his hands on his hips. "If you don't believe me have a look at your DNA under an electron microscope and you'll see our brand name stamped on it."

Alpha nodded "I'm not going to argue with you on that because it's beside the point. You did create us, I know. You also made us stronger than you, smarter

than you, indeed you made us better than you in every way." and Alpha paused, he glanced at Peate and shrugged "And yet after creating a race of such superior humanoids you expect them to be subject to your whims, did you really think you could control us for ever?"

Peate grinned arrogantly "We never doubted your superiority for a moment boy, that was after all the goal of our experiments. But that doesn't change the fact that you are all products of ours and as such we can do what we like with you and no one else will care!"

"If that's so why put us out here in the middle of nowhere, far from any prying eyes?" Gamma demanded, "I once believed that the Complex was just in

the middle of your common or garden desert; but I'm beginning to wonder if this world we're on is totally uninhabited. Outside of the Complex I haven't sensed a single solitary electromagnetic field in any direction."

Peate didn't reply but from the shadows within the helijet a familiar voice rang out, confirming Gamma's suspicions.

"You're half right, dear sister. This isn't your average planet, but neither is it completely uninhabited." and with that a young boy of about Z's age or slightly older emerged from the belly of the helijet. Unlike the other occupants of the craft, he was not wearing Psychon armour but was instead dressed not

unlike the Esper's who faced him, for an Esper was indeed what he was.

He waved to the others like he was some sort of VIP and strolled casually down the stairs to stand at Peate's side, who frowned at the unplanned intrusion.

"XE." Z gasped in recognition.

The newcomer named XE nodded in confirmation, a wide grin on his face and his almost luminous pale-blond buzz-cut hair reflecting the dying embers of the burning craters with a coppery glow, he faced them smugly and continued:

"We're on a planet known only by it's galactic central code: DBL 968, and though once a major pit stop on the main galactic trading routes it's resources are mostly exhausted now and it's

considered a bit of a backwater. It's about the size of a planet called Venus in the Sol system and has a similar gravity but needless to say has a much more hospitable atmosphere." and he jerked a thumb at the fuming Peate "I read his mind while he was stepping into his suit." and he grinned at all and sundry with a rebellious smirk.

"XE!" Peate all but snarled, his face reddening. "You were not to come out unless I called for you!"

XE shrugged "I was getting a cramp in there." he replied, jerking his thumb in the general direction of the helijet "I decided to step out for a stretch."

"You traitor!" Alpha hissed "Can't you see that you're helping our enemy to

persecute your own kind!"

"Gee I can't seem to please anyone today!" XE remarked with a shrug "What can I say Alpha, good may well be cute but evil is definitely sexy." and he struck a pose, as if standing on some imaginary catwalk.

"And by the way, dear Sister Gamma." XE continued, brushing past Peate with finely calculated disregard "You're perfectly right about our lords and masters, we're not on this planet for the nice continental breezes. We're here because they're breaking every galactic bio-experimentation law in the book, we're here to stay out of the public gaze." and he shrugged and sighed with heavy irony "Governments are quite

happy to buy the Complex's bio-weapons as long as they don't officially know how their little Esper warriors, assassins and spies are being made, isn't that right Mr Peate?" he turned to face the now brick red Peate, who was all but bursting with apoplexy. XE grinned with pleasure at the sight and there was a red glint in his pale grey eyes that may have been more than just the reflection from the fire.

"That's all I'll take from you, you arrogant little snot!" Peate spat in fury, he turned to his bodyguards "Take him back on board!" he ordered in an almost-shriek.

The guards made to move towards XE but had made no more than a single step

when he turned on his heel like some stereotypical gunslinger and pulled two imaginary guns from two imaginary holsters and yelled "POW" at the top of his lungs. It was such a ridiculous sight that it was far too late for them to react when they realised that he was holding a (now empty) Tranq-gun in either hand...

The two guards fell as one onto the hard dusty macadam of the avenue and just as instantly Peate had a Plasma-Pistol in his hand and was firing volley after volley of shots in XE's direction, all of which reflected off of a shield of pure psychokinetic energy he generated, to explode harmlessly in the upper heights amongst the ruined cities crumbling towers.

"Really now, Mr Peate," XE purred with mocking admonishment "Small arms fire verses my powers? How overconfident of you."

This was Peate's final straw; his nerves cracking, he dropped the pistol and ran for the Helijet, screaming for the pilot to get the motor running and lift off, all pretence of arrogant over confidence fading into a grimace of pale sweaty fear.

But Peate did not make it even half the way to the helijet stairs, nor did the helijet's engine hum into life. Peate froze in position as if he had collided with an invisible wall of flypaper. He was stuck in his half running, impossibly unbalanced position and yet unable to

fall over, sweat flowed freely from his brow and he whimpered softly, glancing desperately in the direction of the helijet, from which no hint of movement came.

XE levitated easily from where he had been standing and casually glided over to the vertically sprawled Peate. He followed Peate's desperate gaze towards the helijet and laughed derisively, his hatred of the Director now all too obvious.

With no more than an impulse from his mind XE dragged the quivering Peate around in a semicircle so that he was once again facing the other Esper's and then forced the once self-assured Director to his knees.

XE bent over the prone form of Peate, his face suffused with mock apologetic supplication "I suppose I should have mentioned beforehand that I'd already tranquillised the pilot before I came to join you." he remarked in an conspiratorial stage whisper that all could hear "And just in case you're still wondering how I can control you like a cheap doll, It's because I sabotaged your Psychon armour before you put it on, sorry about that." and with a charming acid smile XE straightened up and walked towards the others.

"Did you really think I'd send you down the river?" XE enquired with an all too charming and completely false smile.

"Yes I bloody did." Z replied with flushed cheeks and a dangerous frown "And I still think you would, if it suited you!"

"I merely wanted to exit the Complex in style, how could you possibly doubt me." XE replied in mock hurt.

"Easily." Z replied. She had been in many of the same classes as XE, being of much the same age and having similar (though far stronger) powers and had quickly developed a healthy dislike for the cocky boy with the near-albino complexion.

"Are you still angry at me for beating you in that little friendly bout we had last month dear little sister Z?" XE enquired with a cheeky grin.

"That wasn't a "friendly bout" and the only reason you won is because you cheated!" Z all but hissed. "And I'm not your sister!"

"Oh come on now, little sis, were all children of the same machine here." XE replied in a tone of admonishment, as if Z was some much loved but often errant toddler "And in the real world people don't always play fair, you might as well get used to it kiddo!"

"Oh I have, I have got used to it, XE brother dear." Z replied with heavy sarcasm and much to his surprise XE found himself levitating fifty metres up in the air.

"You caught me off guard." XE observed coolly. "I guess that makes us

even little sis."

"Don't push your luck bucko!" Z warned "I could just drop you from this height and see how quick your reflexes are, or then again I could test my powers to their limit and see if I could send you into orbit."

"And then never get to hear what news I have to say?" XE remarked with a winning smile.

"Let him down Z." Alpha suggested diplomatically.

XE let out the proverbial sigh of relief.

"You can always put him into orbit later." Gamma added.

"You're cruel, sister Gamma." XE remarked in hurt tones as he floated back

down to earth and brushed himself down "Have I only got my dear brother Alpha to protect me from two such dangerous women?"

"Spare us your BS and start talking." Alpha advised.

"Don't listen to him!" Peate screamed from his kneeling position near the helijet "He's a liar, a compulsive liar!"

"But you fell for it just the same, didn't you?" XE observed with a grin "You genuinely believed I was going to help you track down my own kind."

Peate shook his head "Not completely, not enough to trust you with armour."

XE shrugged "Not enough to give me armour perhaps, but still too much freedom than was good for you, old

man."

"You can't do this to me, damn you!" Peate screamed, "I made you, all of you; your mine!"

"Yes, we're your fleshy little automatons." XE replied bitterly "Your clever little machines made of meat. Well listen good old man, your skin-toys have got minds of their own and short tempers to boot!"

Peate began to struggle, as if against invisible bonds. But against the power of XE he had no chance and gave up all too soon in complete physical exhaustion.

XE turned to the other Esper's with a faint grin.

"Ultimately, whether you believe in

me or not is immaterial." He began

"Because all the information you need to know is in the head of the chief bozo over there; how about you have a look in his head sister Z, to confirm all that I'm about to say?"

"Keep out of my head!" screamed Peate, his fear rising again "You have no right!"

"Shut up." XE hissed and Peate's mouth shut itself against his will with an audible clacking of teeth.

"We have every right, old man." XE reminded him vehemently "consider yourself lucky that I don't do any permanent damage to you!"

And he turned back to the others as Z meanwhile moved to face Peate, her face

draining of expression as she dived ever-deeper into the Director's memories.

"Ready sis?" XE called over his shoulder.

"Ready." Z replied faintly, as if calling from a great distance away "And don't call me sis." she added.

XE chuckled, and he looked Alpha and Gamma with a twinkle in his eye.

"Can you believe that little sprog?" he enquired jovially "even from the depths of someone else's brain there no pulling any fast ones on her!"

"Why do you provoke her all the time anyway?" Gamma asked.

"Because she's so damn cute when she's angry." XE replied with a wink.

"So what did you have to tell us?" Alpha prompted.

XE turned and gestured back the direction from where they had come, back towards the Complex.

"Well firstly." He began "There's a squad of twenty hard boiled mercenaries in military grade, fully ray and kinetic shielded Psychon Armour heading this way, but the good news is they're in relatively slow moving armoured cars with heavy, portable suppression shields so they shouldn't be here any sooner than two or three hours from now."

Alpha turned to Z "Is that true?"

Z nodded "Yes."

He turned back to XE "Keep talking."

XE looked slightly surprised "You're

taking this rather well." he remarked

"I'd have expected at least a little bit of surprise, maybe even a bit of stunned shock."

"It's as much as I would have expected." Alpha replied "If not exactly in form than at least in intent."

"Just get on with it XE!" Gamma hissed.

"Alright, alright." XE replied and continued. "In a nutshell, you and most of the others are heading in generally the right direction. And have enough of a head start to perhaps get away cleanly, there's a major spaceport not more than six hundred kilometres from here and several minor settlements on the way."

"What about the merc's?" Gamma

enquired.

XE gestured towards the immobile Peate "According to smiley over there, once any of us get close to a colony the mercenaries are likely to drop the chase." he shrugged "It seems that it's easier for their Public Relations spooks to deny everything if their highly armoured soldiers for hire keep their distance. And then later on they'll secretly assassinate anyone making any strange accusations."

"So keeping our head down and our mouth shut is a good idea?" Alpha enquired with unrestrained irony.

"You bet." XE confirmed.

"Once we make it to the spaceport we should be OK." XE continued "Though

getting the money for a trip off the planet may be a bit of a fiddle, once we're off the planet we can just "fade into the crowd" as it were."

"Are you sure there's nothing closer?" Alpha enquired.

"Sure there is." XE nodded "There's a small company spaceport ten kilometres north of the Complex, but since it's guarded by six permanent squads of mercenaries in military grade Psychon armour I didn't want to put that forward as an option."

"Fair enough." Alpha replied.

"How many squads of merc's are out searching for us?" Gamma asked.

"There are six roving squads in addition to the six fixed squads." XE

replied.

"What will they do to any Esper's they come across?" Gamma asked.

"They'll kill them." said a voice.

XE and the others turned in surprise, for the voice was Z's.

Her small frame was quivering with suppressed rage "They've been ordered to kill us!" she gasped.

"Not all of us." XE replied grimly "They have specific orders to capture one particular Esper and return her to the Complex, don't they Z?"

Z nodded slowly "Yes, they have orders to take me in alive."

"Z?" Alpha murmured in amazement "Why kill us and keep Z?"

"Because they don't need us anymore."

Gamma replied "and we've given them the excuse they needed to kill us all."

"Well, you're almost right." XE commented "In fact they were planning to sell off those that they could and put down the rest fairly soon now, in less than a month or two probably. But in truth Z was the only one they really needed alive." and XE turned to the pale shaking Z and smiled almost sympathetically.

"And now you know why, don't you Z?" he said.

"How about you tell us XE." Alpha demanded. "And while you're at it, lay off the word play and give it to us straight."

By answer XE lifted his right sleeve,

on his upper arm was a series of tattoos. The first was a bar code; the second was a number code (in XE's case it was "XE-04") and a designation (TELEKINE/TELEPATH). XE

murmured quietly "As you can see we all have three specific tattoo's that the Complex's bio-chemists use to codify us, right?"

Alpha and Gamma nodded.

XE shook his head. "Wrong, Z has six."

And they turned to see Z with tears in her eyes and her sleeve rolled up to expose:

(BARCODE)

Z-001

TELEKINE/TELEPATH

And then below these in different coloured ink that appeared newer and less faded than the first three:

(BARCODE)

ALPHA-A001

ANGEL

"What the hell?" Alpha wondered aloud "Angel?"

XE grinned faintly "Little sister is a whole new kind of life form." and he patted the depressed looking Z on the back in an out of character display of concern. "Every single one of us apart from Z was created by manipulation of existing genetic material, normal human genes."

"But not Z?" Gamma asked.

Z shook her head. "My genes were engineered from the subatomic particles up, they're totally synthetic and so am I." she gestured towards Peate "It's in his mind, his memories, I've seen my genome's blueprints in his mind!" and she burst into tears at the recollection.

Gamma held Z to her chest, hugging her tight. Trying to sooth the shaking teen. She could sympathise with the young girl's misery, for it is one thing to believe that your (predominantly human) genetic structure has been muddled with by a group of high tech Dr Frankenstein's and something completely different to find that you were never really human to begin with.

"It seems that all of us were just prototypes." XE remarked softly.

"Prototypes?" Alpha repeated, and then nodded grimly. On reflection it all made a bitter and horrible kind of sense. "Hundreds of experimental children, each more powerful than the last. And then finally, Z the most powerful of us all."

XE shook his head "Not finally; Z's just the beginning of her series, a third series of Esper, a type they've labelled "Angel"." and he shrugged grimly.

"Who can say what the final product will be, perhaps it will be indiscernible from a god?"

Alpha smirked "And how will they control this "god" when they can't even

control us?" he enquired wryly.

XE shrugged "Who can say, perhaps they haven't thought that far ahead?" And he glanced at the sobbing Z with a (not unsympathetic) smile. "What I do know is that before they can create god, they'll have to first succeed in reproducing her series and I know that they've had over thirty failed attempts so far."

"Over thirty?" Gamma gasped in shock, still holding onto Z protectively "But they should have all of Z's original gene maps and tissue samples, they've never had any problem cloning us from that data before."

"I'd heard they'd tried and failed," Alpha remarked. "Though I didn't know how many times they'd tried or why they

had failed."

"Every single copy they made was precise to the sub atom and yet has been nonetheless unsuccessful." XE replied "The theory is that there is some quantum variance beyond the capability of their measuring devices, but in truth they just have no idea."

"So until they can successfully duplicate her, they need Z to be a living supply of genetic material for their research." Alpha commented.

XE nodded silently.

The moment passed slowly. Finally it was XE who moved first; gathering them all together, he cleared his throat in a business-like manner.

"Now to get back to our primary

concern, I suggest we get a move on."

XE

advised, his flash of empathy was already a memory and brusquely tried to navigate the group towards the helijet. "I suggest we all use the heli as that should give us a larger lead." he pointed out helpfully.

"What about the others?" Z said through her tears. "What about the other Esper's out there, the rest of us from the Complex?"

"They've got as much chance as anyone, more or less." XE replied.

"Not as much as us." Z retorted, drying her eyes.

"What do you have in mind Z?" Alpha enquired, sensing a new determination

forming in the young girl.

"We have to do something to help them." Z replied "We're all in this together or it's all for nothing."

Gamma mused silently for a moment "Perhaps we should act as a decoy, draw all of the squads towards us and then give them the slip?" She murmured, thinking out loud. "That should give the others time to make it to the outer settlements."

"And just how, precisely do we give them the slip?" XE demanded querulously

"They can shoot us out of the sky long before we can get out range, and the heli's weapons won't even scratch them."

"Don't over exert yourself on our

account XE." Alpha remarked sarcastically.

Z shook her head "I've got a better idea." She began. "You three escape in the helijet and leave me here with the car and one of the spare suits of Psychon Armour (I know there's some in the heli). As soon as you're all clear of the city, radio the other squads and tell them I'm here. XE should know the frequencies to use, like me he's seen inside Peate's mind."

XE nodded in confirmation. "I know who to phone."

"Are you crazy Z?" Alpha hissed "There's no way we're going to leave you here alone!"

"You can't fight them!" Z replied with

certainty "But I can!"

"As much as I'd love to just scarper." XE remarked "I'd have to point out that those armoured cars have portable suppression fields, your powers would never get through them and the Psychon armour will only be useful if they have any Esper's with them."

"Their suppression field won't be any use. I won't have to touch them directly with my power, not even once." Z replied "And even if I may not need the armour, it can't hurt to keep it around right?"

"But how can you be so sure that they'll all come for you?" Gamma asked incredulously.

Z looked meaningfully at XE and his

face cleared in realisation. "Because Peate has put an awfully large bounty on her head!" he replied, "Those meat-headed apes will be falling all over themselves to get her, they won't even give the other Esper's a passing look!"

"Then we'll stay and help you." Alpha said.

Z shook her head "I need you guys to send the message." and she half-smiled ruefully "And I wouldn't want you around if I'm wrong about myself."

Alpha looked at the tiny girl with the tear streaked but determined face and sighed. "Alright Z I won't argue any further, we'll play it your way."

Once everything was agreed upon, it took only a few moments for XE to

levitate the still drugged pilot from the helijet cockpit to join his stupefied comrades on the ground and get the engines running, Alpha came to join him and sat in the co-pilots chair, gazing at the multitude of controls and readouts with bewilderment.

"Are you really sure you know how to fly this?" he asked XE.

XE shrugged "More or less." He replied with one of his trademark irritating grins "I was watching the pilot pretty closely on the way over, but I may have missed a thing or two."

"Lets hope you didn't miss anything essential." Alpha replied apprehensively.

Gamma in the meantime was giving Z

a few quick pointers on how to use the Limousine.

"Now as you can see, the basic controls are pretty simple." Gamma remarked,

"But I'd try to avoid any fancy moves just in case you stall the engine."

"What do I do if that happens?" Z enquired.

"Get out and walk." Gamma replied "I didn't have the key so I used my power to trip the ignition in the first place, if the engine conks out, you're up the creek."

Z nodded "I'll be careful, Gamma. I don't have any particular desire to walk the whole way!"

Gamma smiled and gave Z one last

tearful hug before turning and making her way to the helijet, she passed XE going in the opposite way a dark bundle in his hands.

"Yo, Z." he waved with his free hand and tossed the dark bundle to her.

"Psychon armour," he explained "This is the smallest one I could find, but with your stringy figure it may still be a bit on the baggy side." he added with a grin.

Z reddened. "My figure is none of your business!" she retorted hotly.

"Maybe so, maybe no." XE replied, his grin widening "When you're all done, will you be able to get the Limo past the flames OK?"

"Of course I will!" Z snapped, still seething at XE's previous remark "The

flames should be low enough to fly over by the time I'm ready to go, and if not I'll be able to levitate the Limo over the flames without too much trouble."

XE nodded in reply "Then I guess I'll be seeing you later then, Sis." he said with one last burst of impudence and he walked jauntily back to the heli.

"Wait!" Peate gasped, at last finding his voice again as XE passed him by "You can't leave me here, if they find me like this they'll kill me for sure!"

"Boo Hoo." XE replied with a complete and utter lack of sympathy for the man, and he grinned faintly "You look a tiny bit fatigued, Peate. Why don't you have a little nap?" he suggested.

Peate jerked momentarily, his eyes

bulging. An instant later he collapsed like a limp rag to the ground, snoring faintly.

"Z!" Alpha called out of the cockpit window "we'll wait for you at the spaceport for as long as it takes. Don't forget, we're all in this together!"

Z nodded and waved to them as the helijet took off with XE at the controls, waveringly at first and then slowly and more confidently it rocketed away. Quickening it's pace as it receded into the distance until at last fading away into the diffuse light at the cities periphery.

Z turned away from the receding shape of the helijet, and clutching the Psychon armour tight to her chest levitated herself up into the upper

reaches of the cities dark canopy of dusty masonry and glass. Confident in the powers that she could feel building within her all the time she accelerated until the passing skyscrapers were a grey blur.

Within a few short minutes she crested the last of the artificial peaks and found herself hovering over the massive ruined mass of the city, she whistled softly at the impressive view but not having time to sightsee she floated over to the far edge of the city. It didn't take too long to find a spot on a relatively stable looking tower close to the highway where they had entered the city that gave her a panoramic view of the desert beyond.

Changing into her Psychon armour Z ruefully noted that XE had been correct in his previous observation, the armour was indeed a bit on the baggy side. But she allowed herself a quiet moment of anger at the thought that he had taken the liberty of making such an observation in the first place, she made a mental note to herself to find some way of embarrassing him by way of revenge should she ever see him again.

Z shook herself out of her reverie; far out on the horizon there was a growing cloud of dust and smoke. She had no doubt that this was the first of the mercenary squads, almost certainly the one XE had said was directly on their trail. She calmly sat on the crumbling

balustrade of the towers roof and waited, they would be in range all too soon.

Cresting one final dune the squad of armoured cars reached the dusty highway and caught sight of the ruined city in the distance, on a prearranged signal they halted as one and waited. From the lead car the mercenary Commander exited; climbing up to its armoured roof, he stepped over the small mounted laser turret and brought out his electronic field glasses. He carefully scanned the jagged silhouette of the cities skyline and the horizon to either side. There was nothing visible anywhere, not in conventional line of sight visual scanning or in any of the

computer assisted scanning modes that his field glasses were capable of. But it could be that his targets had spread out or left; after all, a single individual at this distance might not even show on the 'scope.

The Commander frowned, uncertain as to whether there was any of the Esper's still in the area, let alone the small girl with the big bounty. But he had heard the message on the radio and was just as certain that all the other squads had also; and he knew that the first of the other roving groups could arrive at this location any time soon. He didn't want to hesitate too long and lose his advantage. Neither he nor his men had any intention to share with anyone

else, nor did they take the warnings of their masters too seriously, such massive powers in such a small child were ridiculous beyond belief!

The Commander stepped down and slipped back into the passenger seat of the armoured car, he gave the driver the order to move forward at half speed with full suppression fields in place. Behind him the other squads fell in behind him, forming a slow moving phalanx of motorised armour.

Z watched the slow moving convoy and grinned to herself, in the end greed won out over caution as she had suspected it would.

She stood up from her hiding place and was almost immediately sighted and

placed under fire, the mercenaries may well have been avaricious and ignorant but that didn't mean they were stupid enough to drop their guard for a second.

Stun shells flashed and sparked all around Z; some actually missing her position and falling down into the shadows of the streets below, but most hitting the shield of pure force that she had drawn up around her, bouncing off with loud pops and crackling sounds to lay fizzing quietly at her feet. Z grinned quietly to herself, enjoying for a moment the feel of the power flowing through her body, but not so ecstatic as to lose sight of her position; for she was sure that the mercenaries wouldn't settle for the "kid glove" approach forever.

Sure enough, several minutes later. The mercenaries tired of their stalemate with Z and they switched to more heavy-handed tactics. They began hurling Kinetic shells and laser beams at her, blasting the masonry to dust all around her position. But despite their increased offensive, the outcome was still much the same; any shells or laser beams that got too close to Z simply reflected or ricocheted off of her shield. The building though, already fragile to begin with, was not so lucky and began to crumble and collapse under the heavy barrage.

Z calmly levitated into the air as the brittle tower beneath her finally collapsed into the street; she then headed

for a nearby building that was still relatively in one piece and gave a good view of the battlefield.

Floating daintily down to the cracked parapet on the buildings roof, Z turned to face her distant attackers and closed her eyes in concentration, she'd given them time enough to give up and leave and they'd (predictably) continued firing on regardless; now it was her turn.

The air in the space between her and the mercenaries began to shimmer and coalesce into an almost solid mass of compacting air molecules, any blast that hit the growing pressure-wave either exploded on contact or was diverted safely away from her high perch.

The mass of air began to take on a

discernable shape, forming a long broad wedge of almost solid matter. Slowly it sank down to ground level and began to move towards the still firing soldiers for hire, some had begun to fire at it rather than her but none had yet tried to run from it's path.

"I don't want to kill anyone if I can help it, I don't want to become the weapon you were trying to make me." Z whispered quietly to herself "But you'll not be taking me today or any other day, either!"

The incredibly dense pressure wave was now travelling at almost supersonic speed; it covered the distance between the city and the soldiers in a few short instants. The mercenaries were all now

firing at the wave in stark terror, others had jumped in their armoured cars and were desperately trying to escape but it was far too late for that. The wave hit the ground beneath their feet at high speed, carving up tonnes of earth and flipping it over like some huge sandy pancake.

When the dust settled not a car was upright or in one piece but the mercenaries were to the man largely unhurt, though almost certainly shaken from the top their kevlar assault helmets to the soles of their desert boots.

Every single vehicles suppression field had failed as a result of the impact and Z's power swept the area like a spirit of mechanical death, some cars

fell entirely to pieces while others had their entire electrical systems fused, yet others simply evaporated completely.

The mercenary Commander dragged himself from the shredded metallic foil that had moments earlier been his command car. He spat out a mouthful of sand and surveyed the carnage that had only moments before been a squad of crack armoured mercenary troops, the sight of the shattered and sparking vehicles of his squad brought his masters warnings back to mind and he shook his head bitterly at the memory.

His men gathered around him, their uniforms dishevelled and dirty, their grimy faces masks of shocked surprise. He had no doubt as to what to do next,

against the power of his opponent he had no choice.

He raised his hand and pointed towards the desert.

"Fall back!" he ordered at the top of his voice. And he walked away from the city, not looking back even once.

Z stood on the edge of her concrete roost and surveyed the damage with an air of calm satisfaction.

"Cars are just like turtles, turn them over and they're not going anywhere fast." she observed with a grin "But a little bit of overkill never hurt when you're trying to discourage any further pursuit!"

And she noted with approval as the entire mercenary squad picked

themselves up from the sandy chaos of the battlefield and turned their backs on the city; slowly marching away, their heads bowed in defeat.

She looked up from the battlefield to glance at the distant horizon. Far out on the very range of her vision, but rapidly coming closer were five distinct columns of dust, the other roving squads were on their way.

Z exhaled calmly and sat down to wait; she had no doubts in her ability to defeat the coming squads, not any more.

Her certainty was fed by the other piece of information she had lifted from Peate's mind, a singular detail that perhaps even XE may not have known. For she now knew the reason why she

seemed so much stronger today than ever before was that there had been a drug in her bloodstream, designed by the Bio-Alchemists of the Complex to limit her powers.

And now almost completely purged from her system.

Peate had been having her food spiked with the new drug for some significant time, it was designed to one day replace the need for suppression fields, even on Espers with powers of a magnitude comparable with Z's own. Alpha had asked the question earlier in the day as to how the Bio-Alchemists had hoped to control the ultimate form of the Angel series and Z knew that it would be the final form of this drug with which they

intended to achieve this aim, it was intended to be so effective that it would numb their extremely powerful faculties when even the strongest suppression field no longer had any effect.

Even though the drug was not fully out of her bloodstream yet, she could already feel the difference. In it's current form the (not yet perfected) medication was seemingly not strong enough to fully suppress her powers on it's own, but its effect was nonetheless not one to be ignored; moving the heavy gate last night while being freshly dosed with the drug had drained her powers to the point of exhaustive collapse, yet today by comparison with the effectiveness of the drug almost completely faded, flipping a

square half-kilometre of soil hadn't even brought her out in a sweat!

She stood again and looked once more at the coming squads, they were still so far away that they were even now only visible as little more than black specks on the horizon.

"Can't you people hurry up?" she called out with a grin on her face "I've got an appointment to keep at a spaceport, and I haven't got all day you know!"

And laughing softly, she turned away from the buildings edge and sat down to wait.

THE END.

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