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PAPERBACK.

The monster had brought him here. Vinn had been to the city before, but never alone. His parents wouldn't find out, how could they know? They didn't track him like all the other kids' parents, but they wouldn't let him use wearables either. They were Ludlites the people at school said, that was why.

He was allowed time on the workstation at home, but his parents said that always being online was bad for him, he should go out and play with his friends. How was he supposed to find his friends without being online? Let alone join in the games they were running. Instead he sat inside at the computer, working on his models. One day his freak robot monsters would run outside in the games. They would destroy, he was sure of it.

The city was much busier than he remembered, but the route from the station to the Book Center was unchanged. Tourists waved tablets in the air, navigating the ways to their respective destinations, flipping through the art channels in the streets and sky along the way. Vinn tried to catch glimpses of their screens as he ducked between them, but they always turned away. Why wouldn't they let him see?

Vinn sniffed at the air, a chill came in on the wind. People around him checked their devices, opened umbrellas and hurried along. Time to make a run for the Golden Arches.

He entered just as the first drops of rain fell, took place in the long line that had formed, and waited. The Arches were a dirty, busy food spot. People laughed and argued there in many languages.

The first time he was here his father had taken him. Back then a smelly bearded man stood on a chair, waved his arms at the counter staff and screamed:

"I am the owner of the restaurant, and you're all fired! All meals are free for the day!" Then the MacSec officers threw him out. Two of them had to hold him down until the police came. It was all rather exciting, and Vinn thought the man had been very funny.

Today two fat old ladies stood in a corner screaming about their God and his prophet. They weren't any fun at all, why didn't they get thrown out?

He found a seat by the window, sat down to eat, and worked in his book. The book was the key to escape. Someone had paid 15 cred to run one of his models in the games, enough to have the book printed and get out to the city. he had filled its pages with everything he needed for the trip; maps, transit timetables, contact details, screenshots of the models he was working on and the best selections from his picture library.

He worked quietly, watched the people come and go, drew improvements on the robot monsters and jotted down notes in preparation for the next iteration of his book. Then a MacSec guard waved a tablet in his face.

"Why aren't you showing ID kid? Are you shielded or broken? You aren't in here alone are you?" Vinn smiled and shook his head, feigning ignorance. Questions were bad. Questions meant they would keep him and call the police. Or his parents.

Vinn closed his book and pointed to the stairs in the back. The guard turned to look, Vinn slipped off the stool and ran.

The MacSec lunged and grabbed, tearing a fistful of cheap disposable jacket from Vinn's shoulder. His bulk shifted as if

to start a pursuit, but the effort broke off as Vinn flew through the doors out into the street.

"Goddamn Paperbacks!" The MacSec shouted at no-one in particular, "Should lock the bastards up if they can't be tracked properly!"

Vinn legged it around the corner into an alley, looked back and slowed into a walk. The chase was over, so he stopped at a bench to catch his breath. The smell from the shops here reminded him of his fathers' attic.

He looked over the jacket, it was ruined. He tore it off, crumpled it up, and dumped it in the nearest recycler. He had the money to fab a new one, Mother would never know the difference. If he sold more models he could buy one with wearables anyway. Then his monsters could run in the games, his own running days would be over.

Finally he reached his destination, the place his Father had taken him on their first trip to the city, the place where the books all came from. He browsed through the store, admiring the thousands and thousands of books that were stacked along the walls. How did they know what to put in them before anybody asked?

He made his way to the third floor, which he remembered as

his favorite. Here they kept the machines. There were three of them now, producing a book every minute. He loved the warmth, the smell, and the sound of the carbide blades as they sheared the books down to size. A new smell singed his nostrils. An unknown machine stood in the far corner. It didn't look like it made books.

The machine clunked, a panel slid open to reveal a pristine, freshly formed figurine.

It was nothing like the lumpy monochrome toys the kiosks made, it was much larger, and so much more detailed.

Bright colors and deep blacks shone, fine lines formed intricate patterns of rich, detailed texture. Smooth matte surfaces contrasted the fierce gloss finishes of others. It was a real live monster, truly an amazing creation.

A clerk walked over to remove the figure from its fixtures, Vinn had to ask;

"How much does it cost?"

"Well that's a custom job" the clerk said, "a nice one too by the look of it. About 500 cred I guess."

Vinn stared in silence, overcome with awe and sheer disbelief.

He had sold the model for 15.