



LIFECAST

MARC OPSAL

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Publisher's Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Opsal, Marc, author.

Title: Lifecast / Marc Opsal.

Description: Pasadena, CA : Marc Opsal, 2020. | Series: The Neurogem saga, bk. 1. |

Summary: Noble Valet Bear must save his best friend from becoming The City's most famous person.

Identifiers: LCCN 2020915581 (print) | ISBN 978-1-7355495-1-4 (hardcover) | ISBN 978-1-7355495-0-7 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Oligarchy—Fiction. | Dystopian fiction. | CYAC: Teenagers—Fiction. | Revolutions—Fiction. | Imaginary wars and battles. | Young adult fiction. | BISAC: YOUNG ADULT FICTION / Dystopian. | YOUNG ADULT FICTION / Science Fiction / General.

Classification: LCC PZ7.1.O67 Li 2020ber (print) | LCC PZ7.1.O67 (ebook) | DDC [Fic]—dc23.

ISBN 978-1-7355495-1-4

Printed in the United States of America

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

First Edition

LIFECAST website address: welcometolifecast.com

*For Meryl—
my somewhere that's green.*

LIFECAST



PROLOGUE

*Welcome to LifeCast, by Neurogem.
You are: The Idol, Voxonica Aslanian.*

You see the Idol, Vox, through her own eyes. She stands before a full-length mirror in a brilliant gold wedding dress. You can't influence Vox's actions or feel what she feels, but in this moment, you inhabit the Idol's life.

Stylists pull your lavender hair into place, add finishing touches to your makeup, and spout platitudes about what a perfect canvas you are. Whenever your champagne glass gets low, a composed blonde man in black formal attire refills it without a word.

Your dressing room door crashes open. A tall woman with broad shoulders enters. Her bright orange dress robes float as she speedwalks into the room. The woman shouts to herself in a furious, one-sided conversation.

"15 minutes until showtime!" the woman calls out. "Idol Aslanian, this came for you."

"Don't you know it's bad luck to open gifts before the ceremony?" you ask. "What kind of handler are you? Put it with the others!"

“Idol Aslanian, it is customary for the bride and groom to exchange small, meaningful trinkets before they meet down the aisle. Judging by the slate box and turquoise ribbon I assume this is from your fiancé.”

“In that case, give it here! Stylists, scatter!”

The stylists scurry out of sight, while the handler breaks into another hurried conversation with someone unseen. You’re left alone with the box.

“Valet!” you beckon, and the blonde man in black formal attire appears at your side. “Hold my glass.”

“Yes, Idol Aslanian.”

You pull the turquoise ribbon and let it float to the ground. With both thumbs you slide back the box’s smooth stone top. A flash of bright white light envelops you.

“... and you, get a cool washcloth! She can’t breathe, this dress is coming off!”

“We don’t have time to redress her, Valet! Try another dose!”

“She isn’t responding to the drugs!”

“You don’t know what you’re doing. Where’s the medic?”

You hear a loud rip. Your eyes flutter open.

You’re on the ground. Your gaze darts between all the faces staring down at you. You hear quick, panicked breaths. They’re *your* quick, panicked breaths.

You examine the details of your dress as though you’ve never seen the garment before and look straight ahead. The mirror that previously reflected a confident girl at the center of everyone’s attention is gone. She’s been replaced by someone broken, crumpled to the ground, with a terrified expression.

“Idol Aslanian, are you all right?” the handler asks. “Can you go on?”

“Why am I wearing this?” you ask. “Where am I?”

“Idol Aslanian, this is no time for jokes!” the handler snaps.

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You look around with more urgency than before, pop to your feet, and race out of the dressing room. Your long legs take you to the end of a hallway where you burst through a pair of huge double doors.

You find yourself in an open-air garden that overlooks several smaller stratoscrapers. A long white aisle extends before you. Rows of guests in chairs flank the aisle. All at once, the guests rise to look back at you. Their faces blur as tears well in your eyes.

You wipe away the tears and scan the guests' faces. They're all so beautiful, the most beautiful people you've ever seen.

No one moves to help you. A din of murmurs rises into the air. You fall to your knees.

"Why is this happening?" you shout. "Help me, please! Where are you?"

Sweat-drenched locks of lavender hair hang slack over your face. You brace yourself with open hands on the ground. Every blink drops more tears onto the aisle.

The shadow of someone approaches from behind. A large hand wraps around your shoulder. You brush it away and spring back up.

The guests' murmurs turn to screams as you climb onto the garden ledge. You stare down into the swirling layer of indigo mist far below. Dozens of camera drones hover in place around you.

Frantic pleas come from the guests. Once again, you scan their faces but don't linger on any one. You inhale a long, deep breath and release a shaky exhale.

"I'm sorry," you say. "There's nothing left of me to give."

The guests drop out of sight as you fall backward. A vast sky of bright stars opens before you until your body turns. You plummet straight down toward the mist.

Hysterical laughter overtakes you. Your arms flail. The only sound you hear is the air as it rushes past.

Light tendrils of mist kiss your still, outstretched hand. Frosted borders form at the edges of your vision.

LifeCast Terminated.

PART I



A single glass of Ol' Sassafra's 205-year-old Appalachian bourbon balances on my sterling silver serving tray. I weave through throngs of distracted mourners and spin around self-absorbed socialites.

Reminders of the Fallen Idol hit me from all sides. Every wall displays a different highlight from her Idol reign. My eyes settle on one that triggers the audio.

“Bear, you’re looking fit as usual!” Vox purrs. *“But no one can see those cute black curls against your dark complexion. Un-shade that fade with NuRoota’s Chrome Slick Silver! Try it now for just 15 points! And if you love it, like I know you will, schedule a permanent coloration consultation at your nearest NuRoota Highland Spa! Come on, Bear; treat yourself!”*

Vox winks. She’s been telling me to dye my hair silver since that ad launched.

I reach the East Study and locate Master Telladyne.

Bertram Telladyne, a stratoscraper of a man, is easy to spot. He’s tall, even by Noble standards. His long black hair, peppered with champagne gold strands, bobs as he gestures.

I move to Master Telladyne’s side and stare at the ground.

“What was in the box?” someone asks.

“At the bottom of the box,” Master Telladyne replies. “Was a copy of the deed to my rival’s last remaining diamond mine. At the top of the deed, my name was listed in bold as its new owner. The document was embedded with a retinal scanner. By simply looking at it, the poor fool was forced to acknowledge his witness of the transaction. And that, as they say, was that.”

The small crowd breaks into applause. I’ve heard that anecdote hundreds of times. Master Telladyne loves to recount the tale of how he took complete control over The City’s diamond trade. Diamonds aren’t even his primary business—they’re more of a hobby.

“What they say is true,” someone says. “Never trust a gift from a Telladyne!”

I don’t want to publicly interrupt Master Telladyne’s adoration, so I send him a NeuroText.

“Master Telladyne, your drink has arrived.”

He takes the glass and toasts the crowd.

“Will there be anything else, sir?”

“No, Valet. That will be all.”

“Very well, sir.”

I hear 3 beeps. It’s a NeuroChat from Young Lady Kallista, Master Telladyne’s daughter.

“Valet! Bring me and my friends... No, shut up! Stop that! Three bottles of champagne, Piper Leipzig Brut. You have five minutes.”

“Yes, Young Lady Telladyne, right away.”

That’s odd, Kallista always drinks Svenson Ice Vodka on the rocks.

Of course, Kallista hasn’t activated her NeuroTracker, so I have to tap into the Reinhold Palace security cameras to find her. She’s with her twin brother, Kassian, and their horrible friend, Davis Vexhall.

I dart into the hallway. Everyone I pass holds a champagne flute. There’s no way to know for sure, but I have a feeling it’s the same champagne Kallista ordered.

As I approach the bar, the bartender sets out an ice bucket for me with a single bottle of Piper Leipzig Brut.

“I need three bottles.”

“Sorry, that’s the last one we have at this bar.”

“How is that possible? This isn’t even a rare vintage.”

“There’s a rumor going around that Piper Leipzig was secretly Vox’s favorite drink. We got cleaned out.”

I check the master inventory and locate more bottles at other bars. They’d take too long to get. I consider which is worse: being late or being wrong and decide to feign misunderstanding.

With 42 seconds left on my countdown clock, I gather the items and head for the West Garden. Once outside, I slow my pace to appear as though my task was effortless.

I see Kassian Telladyne first. He stands near, but almost apart from, his sister and Vexhall. He’s tall with the same thin, but muscular frame and fair skin as his father. Waves of black hair fall over his large ears. His arms are folded, as usual.

Kallista and Davis Vexhall play-wrestle on the lawn. Kallista howls with delight as Vexhall tosses her through the air like a stuffed animal. With each throw, Vexhall’s muscles bulge through his crisp, white, vintage naval jacket.

Vexhall freezes with Kallista suspended a few inches off the ground and drops her. The short, but hard impact looks painful. Vexhall grins as he extends his hand to her.

Kallista sees me once she’s back on her feet. She’s short, just over five feet tall, but her intense look lures people down to her level. A severe, angled black bob frames her bone white face of electric blue eyes and bright red lips.

“Young Lady Telladyne,” I say. “Your order.”

Kassian, Kallista, and Vexhall each take a glass. I move to pop the bottle’s cork, but Vexhall stops me.

He takes the bottle and unsheathes a decorative sword from his side. With a single motion, Vexhall lops off the bottle top and fills each glass.

“It’s delicious!” Kallista says. “No wonder people believed it was Vox’s favorite!”

All three of them laugh. Kallista must have started that rumor before placing her order.

“Not bad,” Kassian adds.

“It’s fine, I suppose,” Vexhall says. “I’d christen a ship with it, but I wouldn’t drink it again.”

“Well, I would love another glass, but it appears our Valet failed to fully deliver my order. Did I not request three bottles, Noble Valet Bear?”

“You did, Young Lady Telladyne. I apologize for my mistake. Please allow me to retrieve the remaining bottles.”

Kallista throws back what’s left of her champagne and steps closer.

“That’s all right, Valet,” Kallista says as she runs her hand down the lapel of my jacket. “There’s no need to get more. We have other means by which to improve our mood.”

Kallista flashes me a cold, emotionless smile. Her hand continues until her fingers rest around the top button of my jacket.

“Tell me, what’s this gold chain here?”

“It is a pocket watch that Noble Valet Holt, under whom I apprenticed, gave me upon the completion of my training with the Yukita family.”

“Beautiful, may I see it closer?”

“Of course, Young Lady Telladyne.”

I detach the pocket watch chain and hand it to Kallista. She eyes the bobble with admiration, turns it over, and reads the inscription.

“Viventes serviamus, mori honeste,” Kallista reads aloud. “Live in service, die with honor.’ Fascinating.”

Kallista must have used a NApp to pronounce and translate the engraving, she doesn’t speak Latin. No one does.

“It’s the Noble Valet motto,” I say.

“I see. This is such a lovely trinket. It would look fabulous with my outfit, don’t you think?”

Kallista wears a black cape dress with a red, hand-painted silk lining. The watch would look fine with it, but that's beside the point.

"Young Lady Telladyne, it pleases me to know that you appreciate my watch's beauty, but it is simply too dear to me; I cannot part with it."

Kallista grips the watch tight.

"You know, Valet," Kallista says. "I really did want another glass of champagne. If you followed my original instructions, I would have it."

Kallista walks away with my watch and continues to examine it with obsessive focus. I follow.

"But you didn't follow my instructions, did you Valet?"

"Young Lady Telladyne, I apologize for my misunderstanding. Please, allow me make it up to you."

"Historically you've been so reliable. Why choose this of all nights, when we mourn the death of the Idol Vox, to flagrantly disobey me?"

Kallista keeps walking. She's headed to the garden's edge, which drops straight into the mist.

"Perhaps I was distracted by grief. Regardless, that is no excuse for my mistake."

"You're absolutely right, Valet," Kallista says and stops at the garden's stone border. "It is no excuse."

She climbs onto the low stone wall and sits down. Her legs dangle over the mist as she continues to look at the watch.

"I've wanted to be the Idol my whole life, but if I can't even get my own Valet to follow my orders, how can I expect the entire city to follow me?" Kallista asks. "Maybe I should just end it all, right here, like Vox did! She was supposed to show us how to live! Perhaps we should follow her example in death as well!"

Theatrics aside, Kallista's perched dangerously above the mist. If she slipped and fell, I'd be blamed for her death. It's too risky to forcibly pull her off the wall.

Kallista wants penance for my mistake with the champagne. The only way to get her down safely is to grovel.

“Young Lady Telladyne, I apologize for my incompetence. I will get you two, three, 100 bottles of champagne to make up for my negligence. Drop the watch, it means nothing compared to your life. Please, come down from there; I beg of you!”

“Is that so, Valet?” Kallista says and releases my watch.

I lunge forward. Before the watch falls out of sight, it stops. Kallista had the chain wrapped around her finger.

“You have a NeuroClock like everyone else, yet you check this thing constantly. Don’t lie to me. Tell me what this watch means to you or I *will* drop it.”

Vexhall snickers behind me. Kassian stands beside him but doesn’t find the situation amusing. He shares the same worried expression that must be on my face.

“Very well, Young Lady Telladyne. That watch is probably my most cherished possession. It is a symbol of all of my hard work and how far I’ve come from my lowland birth. I am a peasant, a simple Valet, but that watch makes me feel significant—like my life actually matters for something in your family’s gracious service.”

Kallista looks out into the Highland while she swings my watch back and forth.

“Young Lady Telladyne, I implore you, please come down! You could fall straight to your death!”

“I’m fine, Valet, see,” Kallista says and launches into casual upper body choreography. “I could stay up here all night!”

“I have a suggestion,” Vexhall says.

He removes a narrow tube from his breast pocket. Several small, round, bright red capsules fill the tube. The capsules have no discernible markings, but given its recent popularity, there’s only one thing they could be.

“Kallista, darling. Come down from there; it’s time to be reborn!” Vexhall calls out.

Kallista looks straight to the vial in Vexhall's hand. She connects the chain of my watch to itself, drapes it over her head like a necklace, and climbs down.

Kallista approaches Vexhall with her palms out, ready to receive a capsule. Vexhall doles out three capsules and puts the vial back in his jacket.

"Young Master and Lady Telladyne," I say. "If that is ReBorn, I highly recommend that you do not dock it. ReBorn has been linked to numerous cases of blindness, hearing loss, temporary paralysis, nausea, loss of consciousness, and even death."

"We know the risks, Valet!" Kallista snaps.

"What of your father? What if he sees you dock a common street drug? At least dock something that Telladyne Pharmaceuticals produces!"

"It's competitive research, Valet," Kassian says. "Nothing more."

Vexhall produces three empty RXPens from his jacket. Kassian, Kallista, and Vexhall load their capsules into the pens. I have to think fast. The only thing worse than Kallista's untimely death is the untimely death of both Telladyne children from ReBorn overdoses.

Kallista stabs the pen toward her wrist.

"It could be counterfeit!" I shout.

Kallista stops with her pen hovered just centimeters above her dock.

"Counterfeit," Vexhall says. "Do you really think I would sling counterfeit ReBorn?"

"Not intentionally, sir, but reports have emerged from all over The City of fraudulent and impure ReBorn."

"Those reports are from the lowland. Of course they have dirty drugs. Besides, I've already docked seven of these capsules today and I'm fine!"

"Did you test them?" I ask.

"How dare you question me, servant! Your services are no longer needed. Leave us!"

“I apologize, Young Master Vexhall, but I do not take orders from you.”

“You didn’t test their purity, did you, Davis?” Kassian asks.

“Why would I? No one would dare sell me fake drugs!”

“Please, Young Master Vexhall, allow me to test your capsules with my RXSleeve. It will only take a moment.”

Kassian unloads the capsule from his pen and gives it to me. Kallista lets out a huff, but follows Kassian’s lead. I look to Vexhall. He doesn’t move.

“Can’t you just test theirs?”

“For the sake of due diligence, I should test them all. You will be able to see the results on my RXSleeve readout.”

Vexhall rolls his eyes and hands me his capsule.

I drop the capsules into the medication testing compartment at the cuff of my RXSleeve. The results relay to my Neurogem before they appear in the sleeve’s readout. The drugs are clean, so I prompt the readout to lie on my behalf.

“Paritan Phosphate!” Kassian shouts.

“I’m glad I tested these,” I say. “If you continued to dock these capsules all three of you would be fully paralyzed by dawn and dead shortly after. Here, allow me to give each of you a pen of Veracort. It will break down the Paritan Phosphate in your system and let you pass it naturally.”

“Impossible!” Vexhall shouts. “I’ve never purchased counterfeit drugs in my life! You’re lying!”

“My RXSleeve does not lie, Young Master Vexhall. Please do not take this personally. Counterfeit ReBorn-related deaths have risen 347% in the last 12 hours. You are not the only one to be swindled by a lowland drug dealer, but you are one of the lucky few to survive.”

“Swindled?” Vexhall replies. “By a LEF?”

There it is, Vexhall’s favorite slur for people born below the mist. LEF, Lowland Educated Four, seems to work its way into every interaction I have with him.

Vexhall grabs my lapels and pulls me close. His light brown skin, with its subtle golden undertone, flushes red with rage. I'm so close I can hear Vexhall's teeth clench and grind.

"How dare you make such an absurd accusation!"

"Young Master Vexhall, even if I could alter the sleeve's readout what would I have to gain by doing so? My purpose is to serve the Telladyne family, which includes protecting their lives from the... mistakes of those around them."

"Mistakes?" Vexhall shouts. "I don't make mistakes!"

He pulls back to punch me, but Kassian grabs Vexhall's arm.

"Davis, that's enough! You're making a scene. My sister and I are headed inside for another drink. Do *not* follow us."

Vexhall snatches his arm from Kassian's grasp and stares me down.

"Before you go," I say. "Allow me to give you those Veracort pens."

I remove three empty RXPens from my jacket and stab them into the orange-black-yellow color-coded Veracort pin on my RXSleeve. Among the 128 drugs available in my sleeve, Veracort is one of the lesser used, which is why its pin is awkwardly located near my elbow.

Kassian and Kallista dock their pens. I extend the last pen to Vexhall. As expected, he knocks it to the ground.

"Get that away from me. It's probably full of poison! I can't believe you two trust him! This one's devious. They all are, but him more than the others. I'll have my eye on you, Valet," Vexhall says and stomps off.

Kassian and Kallista start to walk away, and I remember that Kallista still has my pocket watch around her neck.

"Young Lady Telladyne!" I call after. "My watch."

"What? Oh, right."

She pulls the watch chain over her head and tosses it away without a second thought. The watch flies in a high arc over the garden wall. Kallista flashes me a sarcastic smile.

Once the twins and Vexhall are gone, I run to the wall for one last glimpse of my mentor's thoughtful gift. I'm too late—it's long gone.

Perhaps if I reciprocated Kallista's romantic advances years ago, I'd still have my watch now. But that's absurd. She's practically my little sister, and in some ways, my daughter. Of course, she took my rebuff as a personal insult, and here we are.

Neurogem Tower stands in the distance, a striking glass spire wrapped in large silver neurons. The neurons illuminate to mimic the movement of information through the brain. Branch-like tendrils surround the landing where Vox was to be married and culminate to a sharp point above.

I suppose my watch, like Vox, froze solid when it hit the mist and shattered on the lowland street.

I take a deep breath and turn my back on the Highland view.

3 beeps. Aleks!

"Come find me when you have a chance. I have amazing news!"

I go inside to meet Aleks. She looks beautiful this evening in a long ice blue gown. Her platinum blonde hair lays in soft waves against her fair shoulders. Pale freckles travel across her cheeks and over the bridge of her nose. Most Noble girls would cover the freckles with makeup or have them removed, but Aleks likes them. So do I.

Davis Vexhall has her cornered beside a horrendous flower sculpture of Vox. He delivers every word through a toothy, forced smile.

"My father recently bought me a new boat for passing my corporate exams," Vexhall says. "It's the largest ship at the Lion's Chest Yacht Club, probably the largest in the entire bay. I'll have to take you out on the water some time."

"Oh, do you know how to sail?"

"Of course I know how to sail! Haven't you heard of the Vexhall Sailing Dynasty? We've won every major sailing competition since my grandfather took the cup at the very first-ever Windjam Regatta!"

Vexhall takes a beat to calm himself and resumes his advances with the same smarmy tone.

“Come out with me tomorrow. I’ll show you the ropes, as it were. And maybe if you’re good, I’ll walk you through the ship’s cabin. It’s quite... comfortable.”

“The only sailing event I’ve ever attended was the Neurogem Sea Dash last summer. It was a beautiful day, perfect for sailing I was told.”

Vexhall’s chest deflates.

“I didn’t really follow the race, but I do remember one thing. There was a boat far ahead of the others that was tilted way over to one side. All they had to do was go around one more buoy and head back in to win. But right as it turned the whole boat flipped over! It was hilarious! I felt bad for laughing, but it serves them right for showing off. Did you see that race?”

“It’s called ‘tacking,’ when a boat leans over like that,” Davis replies. “And yes I saw that race. I was actually on that boat.”

“Oh no! I’m so sorry, I didn’t mean to laugh! It’s just—”

“Tacking is a perfectly acceptable and often used tactic in yacht racing... it was lovely to see you again, Young Lady Yukita.”

Vexhall departs with his eyes fixed on Aleks. His focus shifts to me for a brief moment before he turns away. Aleks and I try to stifle our laughter but fail.

“How may I help you, Young Lady Yukita?”

Aleks spins to face me and grips my arms in excitement.

“Ow!” she whispers, and shakes her hand. “I always forget about those sharp little pins on your sleeve.”

She pulls my arms down so our faces line up.

“I heard the Monarchs are in the Northern Slopes for the rest of the week! Can you believe it? They actually left!”

“Really? Did their Valet go with them?”

“She did! It’s hunting season. Are you free tonight?”

“Yeah. Meet me at the maintenance room when you’re done here.”

I try to suppress a broad smile and wind up with an awkward smirk. Aleks jumps up and down and shakes my arms, but I pull back. I can’t risk word of my frivolity making its way back to Master

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Telladyne. My face and body return to the same sturdy, neutral posture that all Noble Valets have mastered.

“Good evening, Young Lady Yukita. I look forward to serving you again soon,” I say with a respectful nod.

Aleks is used to my sudden mood changes when we’re around other Nobles. She dips into a low, formal curtsey.

3 Beeps. Master Telladyne.

“Valet, I am ready to leave. Bring the car around.”



Inside the Reinhold Palace garage, I pass vehicles covered with explosion residue, bullet holes, and deep gashes. The faint smell of gunpowder wafts into my nostrils. This damage is fresh.

Every Noble has his or her own strategy for staying safe while traveling lowland highways. Some sacrifice speed for weaponry, while others forgo agility for heavy armor. Master Telladyne prefers to avoid conflict altogether, which is why his ride, the BT-27, is the only vehicle here without a scratch.

I step into the cockpit. Gauges and windshield displays spring to life with neon blue and champagne gold. I've logged so many drive hours in the BT-27 that it feels like an extension of my body.

I wait for Master Telladyne at the main palace entrance. As is tradition, I stand beside the BT-27's open rear door. The doors are automatic, and I already know his destination, so there's no practical reason for me to stand here. Noble Valet life is full of needless ceremony.

Master Telladyne says a few quick goodbyes at the palace entrance and locks into a split stare. He shouts at people in his virtual meeting and steps into the BT-27.

I'm 19 years old now and started working for the Telladynes at the age of 10. Even though I've spent almost half my life in his service, Master Telladyne rarely speaks anything aloud to me beyond, "That will be all, Valet."

We drive out of the Reinhold Palace grounds past Highland boutiques filled with rare treasures and hand-made items. The road ends at a lowland port.

The enormous, blast-proof port doors close behind us. Our slow descent begins. Bright white light illuminates the port car to make visual vehicle inspection easier.

I exit the BT-27 to manually test the tire pressure, confirm the external cameras' angles, and check the strut calibration.

An alarm sounds within the port car. 30 seconds until we reach the lowland.

I reenter the cockpit and affix my six-point harness. Master Telladyne is still immersed in his meeting.

The port car settles to a stop. Another alarm sounds, which is joined by flashing red lights and an audible countdown.

10.

I pull down on my black gloves and wrap my fingers tight around the steering wheel.

9.

I glance at the gauges. All of the BT-27's internal systems are fully operational.

8.

Black tire marks cover the port car floor. Some Valets let their nerves get the best of them.

7.

I understand their anxiety. Lowland port exits are the only places in The City where Noble vehicles dependably appear.

6.

If I were a radical and hated the Highland as much as they do, I'd gather a small arsenal and hold up outside the nearest port exit.

5.

Then again, Noble Guards in prismatic stealth armor guard every port exit. They'd apprehend me before my finger touched the trigger.

4.

But the Noble Guards, for all their strength and speed, can't stop everything.

3.

I release a slow, steady breath. There's no sense trying to understand the tactics of radicals.

2.

They're called radicals because they don't subscribe to traditional logic. They'd probably welcome Noble Guard capture if it meant one more dead Noble.

1.

I've seen some of the weakest Noble vehicles survive endless barrages of firepower and some of the strongest taken down by a single bullet. One lucky shot could end it all in an instant.

0.

Two sets of thick steel doors open before me. I stomp down on the pedal. The BT-27's tires spin before it launches into lowland traffic.

I lay a fresh pair of black skid marks in the port car. This happens every time. I try to stay calm and analytical but lose my cool at the last second.

I weave through countless LaborLiners. The blue and silver, retro-styled buses stop every few blocks and congest traffic like mad. Their enormous tires make it hard for them to accelerate quickly, which slows everyone down.

Those enormous tires have a purpose though—one I keenly appreciate right now. Harsh rumbles rise from the neglected lowland road, through the BT-27's hard racing tires and sporty suspension and vibrate into my arms. We're also assaulted from above, as rain from the lowland's constant storm pummels the windshield and glass roof.

Then there are the ads. Thousands of bright, gigantic ads play on the exterior of every building in view. Like the clips of Vox at the wake, if my eyes linger on any particular ad for a fraction of a second, its audio blasts in my ears.

Master Telladyne doesn't experience any of these distractions. For performance purposes, I need to feel every bump in the road, but Master Telladyne's compartment is equipped with advanced shock dampeners to ensure a smooth ride. Acoustic paneling blocks all exterior noise from Master Telladyne as well. For all he knows, we're still in the lowland port.

We reach the highway. Unlike the lowland surface streets, the highways are in pristine condition. Packed LaborLiners crowd all seven lanes, but I weave through them. Water flies off the windshield faster than it can collect.

Pa-kehur!

I lose control of the BT-27 and veer toward a LaborLiner in the next lane. With a hard yank of the steering wheel, I avoid a full-on collision. Shrill damage alerts sound through the cockpit.

The rearview camera shows black smoke rise from the highway. A road mine. They're easy to hide but have unpredictable ignitions. Someone got lucky.

Two powercycles speed through the smoke. The riders raise their guns and open fire.

Ping-ping-ping!

They're far away, so only a few shots graze the BT-27. But that distance won't last long.

I engage the BT-27's prismatic stealth panels. The riders close in and fire more rounds.

Ping-ping! Ping-ping-ping-ping-ping-ping-ping!

A trail of direct hits runs down the BT-27. How can they see me so clearly? Some panels must have been damaged in the explosion.

I drop the stealth. No sense diverting power to a useless defense.

One rider holds back and fires at the rear wheel wells, while the other speeds ahead. The rider in front fires into the windshield. It's nearly impossible to see through all the tiny explosions.

My heart pounds against my rib cage. Beads of sweat form and tickle my brow, but I don't dare wipe them away.

The steering goes loose. A shredded black trail of rubber sprays behind us.

I grip the steering wheel hard and overcorrect at a rider. He drops back. My fierce momentum launches the BT-27 into a shipping truck.

The harsh screech of metal against metal pierces my ears. I turn the wheel but remain stuck to the truck. Somehow, we hooked together.

3 beeps.

"Valet! What's going on up there?"

"Just some road debris, Master Telladyne! Nothing to worry about."

The truck drags the BT-27 like a dead weight as we hurtle down the highway. Sparks fly while spider-web cracks spread over the roof and windows. With another hard tug, I break away and veer back into my lane.

Ping-ping-ping! Ping! Ping-ping-ping-ping-ping! Ping-ping!

I fight against the unpredictable steering to evade more direct hits. That truck collision made most of the bulletproof windows useless. If either rider gets a clear shot, Master Telladyne and I are dead.

I hear the BT-27's spoiler tumble onto the road. The rain stops, and my periphery turns white. We're inside an ad tunnel. Wherever I look, Vox appears.

"Bear, you haven't eaten anything since before the wakes, you must be starving! You should treat yourself to my favorite, a BurgerNite ChomperDeluxe..."

Ping-ping-ping-ping! Ping-ping-ping! Ping-ping-ping-ping-ping!

More shots connect. Where are the Noble Guard? There's no time to wait; I have to save myself.

I lock the front left wheel and spin the BT-27 180 degrees.

“... Premium wagyu beef,” Vox continues. *“On a honey-infused black sesame bun with crisp iceberg lettuce, juicy heirloom tomatoes, artisan pickles, and bold garam masala aioli...”*

The smell of burnt rubber rises in my nostrils. I pop the BT-27 into reverse and drive backward down the highway while thin, pink slices of meat cascade down the tunnel walls.

I veer into another lane and lose one of the riders behind a LaborLiner. He'll be back any second.

Now!

I shift the BT-27 into drive, stomp down on the pedal, and rocket against oncoming traffic. The rider reappears right where I expected.

I engage the BT-27's emergency brake system, and stop dead in place. To my surprise, the rider accelerates. He lifts the front wheel of his powercycle and launches over the BT-27 like a ramp.

As if in slow motion, the rider aims his gun straight down at me. With the bulletproof glass roof compromised it won't deflect a single round. This is it.

Vox's face appears above the rider. She implores me one last time to try a ChomperDeluxe and gives her trademark wink.

Vox's wink.

People have fought over that wink—lived and died for that wink. Some would consider themselves lucky to see Vox one last time before they died. But I don't care about Vox. The last face I want to see before I die belongs to Aleks.

She's made me feel more whole and loved than any Idol who's ever lived—all the Idols combined for that matter. By some incredible stroke of luck, I stumbled into her life. Why haven't I told her that? I've wasted so much time!

I can't die like this. Not today!

As I open the door to dive out, a series of concussive blasts distracts the rider. He looks back, and lands behind us without firing a shot.

Chunks of cement and metal rain down from the tunnel ceiling. A single, bright red Noble Guard flies down through the new

opening. He pursues the now-fleeing radical rider with a chain of bright white bullets that sends plumes of pulverized pavement into the air.

I turn the BT-27 around and follow the Noble Guard. Far ahead, I see the Guard's rounds clip the back of the rider's powercycle.

The cycle stalls, and the rider flees on foot. He barely gets three steps before the Noble Guard plucks him from the highway, stabs a sedative into his neck, and soars out of sight with the radical's now-limp body.

A second Noble Guard streaks across the sky. Vehicles up ahead crash into each other as the rider tries to divert attention away from himself. He has no idea how focused the Noble Guard can be.

A subtle smirk crawls across my face. The radicals came to kill a Noble, and by virtue of that mission, me as well. But their plan failed, and now they're the ones being hunted. I drive on the shoulder to get a better view.

The second Noble Guard's approach is different. As he closes in on his target, the guard raises his mechanical arm and fires once. The single, perfectly-aimed shot, connects with the front tire of a LaborLiner.

The tire bursts, which drops the LaborLiner hard onto the pavement right in front of the powercycle. The rider swerves and hits the highway barrier at full speed. His body catapults into the air. The Noble Guard catches the radical mid-flight and vanishes.

With my eyes back on the road, I take in the chase's wreckage-filled aftermath. Everywhere I look, vehicles lie crumpled into each other, some rendered motionless and smoking.

I approach the Noble Guard-hobbled LaborLiner, which sits amid a lake of shimmering broken glass. Some of the glass is tinged pink from the blood of people inside.

A muscular woman with a deep, bloody gash on her forehead stands atop the LaborLiner and pulls passengers up through the door. Everyone who emerges has a different injury; bleeding wounds, broken limbs, dislocated joints.

Dozens more bloodied and broken lowlanders huddle against the highway barrier. They weep to themselves, scream in agony, or sit frozen from shock. Camera drones fly over the scene with spotlights to capture every gory detail.

I pull over and slide back my door with a thought. Tears well in my eyes while my hands strangle the steering wheel. With the door open, lowland screams flood my ears. For some reason, I can't will my body out of the seat.

My skills and training could save lives out there, but I'm frozen. I clench my teeth, let out a primal scream, and beat the steering wheel until my palms ache.

3 beeps. Master Telladyne.

"Valet, why have we stopped?"

I take a deep breath to collect myself before I answer.

"A minor technical issue, Master Telladyne. We shall resume our travels straight away."

My door seals shut, the painful reality around me silences, and we resume our trip. Even though I fulfilled my primary objective, to keep Master Telladyne safe, something feels sunken inside me.

As we near our highway exit, Neurogem Tower comes into view. Down here it practically fades unnoticed into a landscape of similarly dilapidated buildings.

Most of the neuron details are broken off or rusted. A milky film coats the glass. Like all building sections in the lowland, scaffolding surrounds the tower to ensure that it's strong enough to support the Highland landscape above.

What am I doing? This isn't the time for contemplative observation. Even though we escaped with our lives, Master Telladyne's safety is still my top priority.

I dock a pen to stabilize my mood and increase my focus. We should be home soon.