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With a prehistoric growl, Russo raised a question that was burning on his lips. "What the hell am I doing here?!" She did not answer. The shock of Abel Russo standing there, a man whose face had been plastered over every inch of FBI arrest-paraphernalia and one Jessica knew well, had rendered her mute. "What the hell am I doing here?"

She answered his question with one of her own. "Where's Leon?"

Russo looked at her soft dimples and teased her with a vicious smile. "Leon's fine."

She paused and shouted for him. "Leon?! What have you done with him?"

"Never mind Leon. What am I doing here?" he barked, his eyes swollen with rage. She switched back to silent mode.

There seemed to be no breakthrough from either person. It remained unstoppable force versus unmovable object. The hush however had left an impatient Russo enraged. What he did next, through his eyes, discriminated little whether the recipient was a man or a woman. He lunged forward and grabbed Jessica's throat. Initially, his surprise raid had given him the upper hand, but her hands immediately latched onto his wrists and began to pull them off her neck. He tried to press on her throat by shifting his body weight forward to make her submit, but he soon realised that that was futile too. He could feel the raw power surging through his arms – but it wasn't coming from him. As his own pain level mounted, it was soon clear to Russo that he was confronting no ordinary woman. Despite using all his immense strength, he watched helplessly as his arms were forced back. She pushed him away effortlessly and with a slice of caution, he retreated a few paces. His face was one of surprise and that was before she removed her jacket. He had never experienced such resistance, particularly from a woman, but with one glance at her formidable arms, he could see why this case was different. But Abel Russo was not going to be beaten by a woman, no matter how strong she was. He reeled away, drew back a battering ram of a fist and delivered a powerful punch to Jessica's face. He had reserved one of his strongest for her. She staggered back, her head colliding against one of the kitchen cabinets. He took a step back under his own steam and got his fists ready again. "What the hell am I doing here?!"

The attack had knocked her senses. Those beautiful, innocent features of hers now looked pained but determined to strike back. She recovered her stride and lithely got to her feet. Without an answer from her, Russo again prepared to rely on his knuckled arsenal to settle the score and make her complicit. He pulled back another clenched hand and propelled it towards Jessica, but the second fist never had the chance to dent that pretty face of hers. With a loud clap, her clawed grip intercepted its momentum and stopped Russo's javelin in mid-air. In one flowing movement, she kicked him first in the hip, then swivelled around to deliver a powerful strike towards his jaw. That would certainly test how robust it was. Russo clattered against the refrigerator and slumped to the floor like a doll. He looked up at this towering Amazonian warrior and then fled the house as quick as the decision to flee entered his mind. The answers as to why he was here did not merit him hanging around. Breathing hard, Jessica rubbed her aching head, before darting into the living room for Leon's gun that he traditionally left in the small cupboard on the far wall. She prayed it was there. It was.

Russo fled down the street and sprinted in between two houses on the left, leaving a thin trail of blood behind him. Breathing rapidly, he stopped and leaned against the side wall of one of them, before subtly sliding part of his head around the corner to see Jessica appear. She was now scanning the area and coming his way. With little more than a dead end to his right, he was forced to spring out of his hiding place and run as fast as he could down the street. "Hold it right there!" Jessica ordered. The instruction was ignored and she watched Russo continuing to flee, heading north. Her long stare at him along the barrel of the gun was her first real opportunity to realise that he was wearing Leon's green polo-shirt and jeans from last night. Her strained thinking manipulated the deepest frown. *He's got Leon's clothes on. Why?*

But as if her enhanced muscles had a life of their own and had authority over her brain, she instantly powered on, without any other thought than catching the intruder.

Thi31y one

Russo turned left and ran for another half mile, leaving the confines of the housing area behind. His heavy, brawny body was fighting hard to keep going, but ultimately, the pumping adrenalin ensured that he never felt the pain. As the residential area receded, a colossal arc emerged in the distance that resembled a gigantic upper lip. It was the newly constructed Century Logistics Zone; a giant docking bay and cargo port characterised by its gargantuan, white dome that encompassed the entire five-square-mile complex. It was so big, it looked more like a natural geographic feature than anything man-made, much like a low-lying, snow-capped peak. The development was intertwined with a series of Hyperloop tunnels that sprawled across the nearby area, before burying themselves deep underground. Russo's eyes lit up and he wasted no more time in exploiting the potential that this new world could offer to camouflage him. Some ninety seconds later, Jessica's sprint brought her to the point where she could make out the entrance to this transit port and was just in time to catch Russo submerge under the thick lip of the dome.

As she came within touching distance of the arced colossus, Jessica stopped with her back towards the building and moved her head one way, then the other. The surface was cool and she used it to chill the furnace inside her body. The scan allowed Jessica to see that the building had a handful of large panels along the side, some open, some closed – entrances designed to facilitate mainly robotic traffic. Exploiting one of the open access routes, Jessica found herself standing in a vast, open spaced complex where the air was clear, yet noticeably warmer compared to outside; whilst a constant droning, background noise was present that implied distant, moving machinery.

Under its giant roof, the space was made up of a series of tunnels, linked to the next one thanks to an adjoining, transverse corridor. Parked on her left was a series of cargo lifters – inflated fork-lift trucks – whilst to her right, an outbreak of wheeled droids was heading in their direction ready to pilot them. The surrounding environment was predominantly overcast and charcoal in shade, with only a splash of colour here and there. One of those injections of colour came from a huge electronic route map overhead. Near that was a digital sign inserted over one of the access tunnels.

MAIN TRANSIT DOCK:

DESTINATIONS: WASHINGTON, NEW YORK, BOSTON

Jessica took a few steps forward and moved into the tunnel directly in front of her, where she found herself standing next to a lengthy Hyperloop shuttle, over one-hundred carriages long, stretching as far as her eyes could take her.

A concerto of silence reigned again – but not for long. The wind then howled its way inside and chilled Jessica's face as if she was being kissed by a ghost. Suddenly, her sensitive ears heard a rattling noise coming from behind her. She spun around, where, through the connecting corridor, she saw a smaller shuttle docked on platform two. It was tugging three small pods, which shone brightly and reflected back a gentle, converse image of its surroundings. *Was that noise coming from inside?* Unrushed, she walked through the connecting tunnel, muffling the noise of her boot heels with the careful precision of every step. With two hands firmly on her gun, she slid her back down the slippery skin of the pod and activated the cargo-door button housed at the base. As she did, the door retracted into the roof with supersonic speed to reveal the interior. She sprang up, swivelled her body and pointed the gun inside. An internal light gradually illuminated and she tilted her head to take in every inch of the confined space, but it revealed nothing other than its emptiness. She then paced sideways along the platform and moved to the second one, but the same outcome followed. Her mouth was dry, and for once, she could not feel any muscle in that powerhouse body of hers. She paused in front of the last pod and pointed her gun at the closed door. This time, she stretched her leg out ready to kick the button, but before she did, a tense punch hit her in the stomach. Yet, nothing physical had hit her. But something just inside the periphery of her vision was seen looming fast, fuelling that fearful sensation. She spun her head right to see one of the large cargo loaders come out of nowhere and shoot straight towards her. In that moment of despair, it felt as if her whole insides had been ripped out. She tried to get out of the way, but she did not have the time or the space to do so. It was tearing towards her with murderous intent.

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The speeding cargo loader hurtled towards her like some crazed animal, its two broad, titanium-made pincers, which gave this mechanical beast its lifting capacity, snapping wildly at her. Its claws effortlessly grabbed hold of her two arms by her wrists, forcing her to drop her gun, before dragging her along, with her feet trailing the ground. "Uuggghh!" she screamed, as a sharp, pain ripped through those powerful biceps of hers. In the chaos of being hauled along the platform, she just had time to notice that the face of the driver was not a synthetic one typically wired into one of these vehicles. Instead, the twisted features of Abel K. Russo were all too evident.

"Die you freak!" he growled, as he floored the accelerator on approaching the end of platform two. With his fury bubbling, Russo hurtled away towards a nearby cargo tunnel, both sides of which were funnelling shipments towards an open chute at the end wall (with a flurry of automated cargo-bots milling around it that were facilitating the first leg of each consignment's journey).

Jessica could see Russo's eyes flicker with deathly pleasure before she spun her head around to see the gauntlet for herself. If she was caught in between the end wall and the speeding load lifter, muscle or no muscle, she would be cut in two. A split second later, Russo leapt out. She then turned around with wide eyes to see the cargo tunnel a second away. As the machine pin-balled its way through its slender gap, scraping one border of the tunnel then the other, the robots at the far end powered up their remaining fuel supply to rocket skywards. The last thing she saw before feeling an almighty shunt was a flurry of friction sparks all around her. The heavy crunching sound then died, before Jessica screamed out loud. It was followed by an echoing silence, but even though she could feel herself untouched by further danger, her wrists and neck were crying out with pain. With her eyes still tightly shut, she breathed in deeply and the smell of industrial metal wafted up her nostrils. The loader had shunted to a stop thanks to the vehicle's titanium made pincers – which still imprisoned her hands – gnawing away into the wall over the cargo chute. As the life of her mechanical rival died, Jessica found herself in a claustrophobic world. In the tunnel, she was imprisoned in the small space between the chute's (now closed) entry and the stranded lifter. She slowly opened her eyes to see the dark pattern of the lifter's mechanics and wires not far in front of her.

She flicked away her hair from her eyes with a sharp movement of her head, and then began to use what immense strength was in her arms and channelled it to her wrists. With an atomic-like energy, she started to pull apart the manacle that had handcuffed her. The pincers no longer looked that unassailable. Distorted now as if chewed by some beast, they were sufficiently apart for her hands to now slide through, but she was now presented with another prison to escape from. She flexed her biceps and began to push hard against the main body of the cargo loader, whilst her legs, like giant pistons, using the wall behind as leverage. She let out an almighty scream that seemed to be the pained combination of every muscle in those industrial limbs of hers. The vehicle slowly began to move. The lifter was shunted from its temporary home, taking with it some chunks of the wall that it had severed as it did.

As she pushed it slowly up the cargo tunnel, that factory of a body began to tire. But somewhere deep inside her, that lack of energy began to go in reverse. Fuelled by losing Russo and possibly losing Leon, a frustration – rare to her – began to take control. Before she even had the chance to think, she sank to her knees and placed both her hands below the loader's undercarriage. Her face then twisted, which was then followed by a deep groan of metal. As she pushed her legs up and the muscles reprogrammed in her straightening back, the wheels were the first to leave the ground. With a muted scream, the entire front end of the vehicle began to defy gravity and moved up into the air. With the power of her body seemingly on the increase and beyond what even she imagined, the entire lifter momentarily left the ground, before it was flung out of the tunnel area. An almighty crash announced her freedom as it rolled over across the platform. She appeared with arms that looked bigger than ever and a chest that was pumping hard through the lycra, like a heavily beaten drum.

She then looked at her arms with a new sense of expectation. What she had just done was new territory. As Jessica's inner voice inside reminded her of the increased responsibility that rested with this newly discovered level of strength, she closed her eyes and gently breathed out. No-one alive could do what she had done, and she could be forgiven for thinking that she was now at the summit of the evolutionary table. However, for Jessica Hudson, a Buddhist like moment of serenity and humbleness was what was needed in what had been nothing less than a superhuman effort.

She walked back over towards the small pod-like carriages on platform two where the cargo lifter first took her hostage. She bowed her head and was lucky to find her gun at an opportune moment. Now, Russo could be anywhere she pessimistically admitted to herself – and her new powers did not stretch to a third eye. But as if she *had* been handed the power of sight in the back of her head, another advantage emerged. A green flash ripped through the shiny

exterior of the shuttle pods in front of her. Her head spun around and through the connecting section behind her, she witnessed a nanosecond of Russo running down an area marked:

← CARGO STORAGE DEPOT

She breathed in a flood of oxygen and immediately sped after him down a large, arched entranceway – void of vehicles and robotics – which was the opening to a long service-tunnel, dominated by a large conveyor belt in the centre, which was unusually stationary. As she ran, the pressure in her leg muscles began to change as she adjusted to the downward trajectory of the sloping corridor. Her eyes then fixed on the exit on the far wall of the tunnel – particularly the illuminated red lights next to what was clearly a warning sign. As her legs began to notice the descent in the floor's character even more, she could now read the digital sign in more detail:

TIME TO CARGO DROP: 2 MINUTES, 23, 22 SECONDS

Ignoring it, Russo continued to run on into the next section, courtesy of a large electrically elevating door that sensed his arrival. By the time Jessica had got there, she found herself in another windowless tunnel of industrial colours with a grated metal floor that saw its sloping gradient become much more acute with every single step.

Seconds later, sirens blared out. Jessica stopped and covered her ears before a voice-over began to compete against it.

“SIXTY SECONDS TO CARGO DROP. ALL PERSONNEL MUST LEAVE THE TUNNEL NOW. REPEAT, ALL PERSONNEL MUST LEAVE NOW.”

Frozen, neither she nor Russo knew what to do for the best. She then watched as he broke free from the inertia and fled on towards the far end. She contemplated running back towards the electric door behind her, only to see that door now close to shutting, so had no other option but to follow him. However, it was only when those cautionary sixty seconds had become a thing of the past, did both of the tunnel's occupants realise the significance of the warning.

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As the sirens became deafening, with a sudden bolt, the tunnel began to slowly split into two from the middle, an action that saw both chutes lower further than their present angle. On either side of the divide, both pursuer and pursued fought against the growing tide of gravity, but no matter how strong they were, this was a battle neither would win. Along with the remaining cargo, both humans were unceremoniously dumped out of the tunnel. Jessica fought the hardest to hold on, but seconds after Russo slipped away, she was resigned to her fate. The next thing Jessica sensed was being funnelled fast down a spiralling chute, before crash-landing onto a moving conveyor belt, where she was met with more brute force.

Punched and stabbed by two metal barriers at either side, that slowed her down and stabilised her movement, only by getting to her feet and looking around, did she realise why. In a dark cavern-like chamber, she found herself in an underground lair, suspended for what could have been miles in the air. She was now inside the belly of a vast labyrinth, knitted together by a spiders-web of freeway-long conveyer belts leading to further tunnels; a system complete with giant cranes, like inquisitive arms, that shipped cargo to-and-fro, including up to the platform surface. It was a sprawling, intertwining logistical network; with machinery stretching tentacle-like in what was a large underground skyscraper, leaving no corner untouched by its genius-like connectivity. The entire complex was mostly dark, with a rusty glow to it, courtesy of red warning lights positioned next to each tunnel's entrance (each one covered with a pale-blue electrical-like mesh, which detected and unarmed explosives). The only other light came from above, as shafts of white artificial light found its way underground through the access chutes on each platform's surface. The mosaic of angelic, white shine from above and hellish red light below, looked as if this place was where the two afterlives had merged.

As Jessica looked over the side, the bold, unforgiving darkness told her that a drop of some distance was hiding down there. She already felt numb. Her balance would have to be a very close companion. Not far away, Russo also got up cautiously and scanned the unholy darkness below. He gawped at the tower's boundaries delimited by lights tapering inwards before the blackness swallowed everything up. It seemed as if the sheer sight of the drop was enough to push him uncontrollably over the edge. He continued to stare at it and in that matter of seconds, all his arrogant fearless he had shown in the past now seemed to be a distant memory. He took a painful bite from his right hand with his teeth and crouched down tightly to concentrate his centre of gravity. His face looked impaled with terror. The heights were affecting him more than her.

By the time he next heard his pursuer's voice, he looked up to see a pyramid-shaped cargo with a broad base (which left only a foot's width of conveyor belt between it and the dark abyss below) separating him from her. Some twenty feet behind him, Jessica stopped and stood cautiously on the other side of it, arching her body, with her gun doing most of the bargaining. "Russo! Hold it right there!"

He looked up and the two stared at each other on either side of the steel, triangular partition in a silent face off. She was always expecting to hear from him again, but she had not reckoned on the level of fear detected in his words. "Leave me alone." His body language told of his surrender, yet those suspicious eyes of his still had the ability to betray any silent offer of capitulation.

"Come this way!" she ordered, never really looking at him, instead nervously eye-balling the edge.

"No, I can't. The power of this runway is too strong. You will have to come here!" he declared, shouting around what had clearly become his bargaining chip. He then shuffled his entire body, two very cautious feet back, before she realised that she would be forced to comply. She contemplated picking the pyramid up and throwing it from the conveyor, but fearing the damage that action might cause, opted against it.

She wiped her brow and began to make her way around the side of the triangular cargo with surgical precision, watching her every step. She put one cautious foot in front of the other hoping the next one would not be her last. As she shuffled along, the right-hand side of her boots could feel the perimeter of the steel shell, whilst the left edges would feel nothing but emptiness below. It was a meniscus-like stretch to the fatal unknown. Her tightrope walk towards Russo of less than fifteen feet was going to feel more like a mile. She felt dizzy, and her legs, usually a reliable source of power, now felt weak, resulting in her movement becoming nothing more than a painfully slow shuffle to the other side. Jessica swallowed hard and tried not to look down again.

Suddenly, a swift movement caught her eye. Nervous to the point of breaking already, she stopped and spied a large mechanical arm hovering overhead, with its giant, pincer-like fingers bracing the sides of a large freighter-case close by, before shuttling it up to the access chute high above on the platform surface. She began to lose her balance. Jessica tried to anchor herself by holding onto the pyramid-shaped cargo, but her moist fingers first slithered, then scampered across the frame's glossy shell. In a split second, she panicked and screamed, disabling every sensation in

her body other than the primal will to stay alive. She dug both her hands into what edges the pyramid cargo offered, forcing her boiling-hot fingertips in so hard, it seemed as if they were going to melt the cold metal. Once it had anchored her, she held on and made it to the other side. But it had come at a price. In a moment where death had introduced itself to her with the briefest of handshakes, in the blind frenzy, her gun had unconsciously escaped her grip. She would neither see it fall or hit the ground. A mouth of darkness had swallowed it up long before that. This time she had lost it for good.

Buoyed by her panic, aggression naturally took hold of Russo. Keeping low, he picked up the cargo box behind him and threw it at her with all the force he could muster. He scored a hit as the box thumped her hard in the chest. She staggered back but kept her footing. Nervous about the edges of the conveyor belt, she moved cautiously towards him, yet he remained static and firmly locked in his tight, grounded posture. That made him an easy target and with a bolt of her right leg, delivered a powerful kick to his head that not even its anvil-like dimensions could contain. That force, along with the momentum from the conveyor belt played with him and he was soon heading towards the edge. "Ah! Save me!" he shouted pitifully. Instinctively, she grabbed his flailing right leg and utilising those strong arms and that stronger humanitarian spirit, she pulled him to safety. She then let go of his ankle, but he had not escaped his fate.

"You're under arrest Russo!"

He lay there, gripping anything he could to make sure he was not heading over the edge. A pathetic mess, he was under Jessica's control, but more significantly, he was ultimately at the mercy of the drop below.

However, his prostrate body then involuntary flickered with shock as if doctors were trying to resuscitate him. And his defibrillator was not far away. The mechanical crane-arm reappeared, this time directly overhead of him, homing in on his head like some giant dentist's tool ready for extraction. Russo did not think twice about what he wanted to do and in reality, did not have the time to. He got to his feet and as soon as the giant transit crane grabbed hold of what cargo it had come for, he jumped on and wrapped himself around its stout hull. With a consignment of more than just its usual shipment, the crane's immediate movement took it in Jessica's direction, allowing Russo to deliver the hardest kick he had reserved for her. Now, *her* wayward movement was caught under the power of the conveyor belt's pace before she fell and hurtled towards the edge.

Feeling her body move chaotically under the wicked velocity, her fingernails scraped desperately along the conveyor belt to leave a permanent trench in its rubber. As she began to feel the ground empty beneath her, she grabbed onto the edge of the platform while her screaming echoed throughout the tower. She was hanging on for dear life and could only feel her sweat laden fingers slip further across the thin metallic border running alongside the belt. Her muscles grew to immense proportions, but her fingers were all that was keeping her from falling and in their moist state they had nowhere near the necessary traction. "No! Help!" she screamed, the weight of her powerful body now conspiring against her.

"Die you freak!" Russo yelled for the second time from the safety of one of the cargo chutes high above her - his desire to make a clean getaway temporarily adjourned in favour of watching her demise. After performing his own superhuman act in escaping from her, he used his remaining energy to swiftly slip away towards the main exit.

By now, Jessica could taste death in her mouth. The pain and pressure were ripping through both sets of fingers. Before she knew it, an empty, helpless feeling had gripped her stomach. She was now plummeting to earth.

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As she fell, Jessica's sensations were reduced to nothing else but a marginal role. She perceived, saw and heard nothing on her potentially fatal trip towards the floor. There was not even enough time for her life to flash in front of her eyes, before she sensed something against her back. However, she did not feel a sudden agonising pain or see a celestial-like bright light. Instead, she continued to see the tower's rusty-red glow as her body moved in the air with a buoyant (and yet, pleasurable) movement, as if she was a buoy bobbing on the sea's waves. Was she dreaming? Was she in heaven? Seconds later, the level of that buoyancy began to slow before stopping completely. From her horizontal position, she scoped around, where she could see herself lying in the middle of a large inflated cushion that covered the floor space. She stood up on the spongy, uneven surface and took in the graveyard-like quiet, with even the hum of conveyor belts now absent.

Walking over the inflatable surface, she soon eyed an exit sign illuminated over a door to her left. Through it, there was a steep, moving escalator housed in a cylindrical tunnel, which seemed to stretch up forever. Beyond the dark infinity, a speck of daylight existed. Over a mile later, the escalator terminated and Jessica alighted before being met by fresh air that immediately slapped her exposed flesh. Despite the sub-zero temperature, it was warmly welcomed. Ignoring a Med-Bot that was soon on the scene to nurse her bloodied lip better, it wasn't long until she began the slow, laboured journey back to Leon's home.