

Chapter Three – Fallen

Sunday, April 27, 2087

Sammy stood inside a large executive office on the top floor of the tower of the First Continental American Bank, a pair of binoculars pressed up to his eyes. The view of the city was gorgeous, so were the plush decorations of sleek, modern design. The skyscraper neighbored the Joswang Tower in downtown Detroit. He let the binoculars hang around his neck and checked the time in the upper corner of his com's holo-screen.

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His eyes grew blurrier the longer he stared, and it took several seconds of rubbing to make the blurriness go away. Then he yawned and rubbed his head. His hair had grown long in the last few months, now reaching past his ears. Jeffie seemed to like it that way, so he didn't cut it. Sammy brought his binoculars up to his eyes. *So far so good.*

Rain poured down from the skies, splattering the large windows which he, Kawai, Li, Jeffie, and Nikotai stared through as they watched the street below through night-vision binoculars. Part of Sammy wished he could be in the building with the teams planting the bombs. It felt odd being away from the danger. He didn't like leaving his friends to do the dirty work, but they wanted him in control of the mission, ready to move in only if needed.

They were too protective over him, even insisting that he wear their best armor despite being out of the action. It was the same flexible, woven bulletproof mesh Psion Alphas wore in combat. Only two other suits had been salvaged from Capitol Island. Anna wore one, and Al the other.

Brickert was doing an excellent job of coordinating between Sammy and the teams. *I told him he'd make a good team leader*, Sammy thought, remembering their conversation a few weeks ago as they'd planned the Detroit mission after the success in San Francisco. All their time since returning from the Hive in the Amazon jungle had been spent planning strikes on Hybrid cloning facilities. San Francisco first, then Detroit, and a third mission in Austin if today went well.

Using his binoculars, Sammy checked the street around the lobby entrances to make sure his team had no unwanted visitors. When the explosives detonated in the upper floors, they wanted to keep casualties to zero. Though they had made every effort to limit damage to only the floors where the Hybrids were grown, nothing was certain when dealing with bombs and buildings.

After the all-clear came for the three teams to plant the explosives, Sammy waited for the next update. Some strange sounds came from the coms of Brickert's team followed by hissing like static.

"Albatross, check your com. Everything okay? I'm getting some white noise."

There was no answer except the strange crackling noises.

"Albatross," Sammy said to Brickert again, "I'm picking up some interference from your coms. Please answer."

No answer. Jeffie cast a nervous glance at Sammy.

"What do you want to do, Sammy?" Li asked. "Send someone to check on them?"

Sammy's mind flew through his options. It would be almost impossible for someone to catch Brickert's team unaware. No reason Brickert couldn't warn Sammy if a problem occurred. *Then what's causing the static? And why isn't Brickert responding?*

"CHARGE THEM!" Brickert's voice yelled over the com.

"Albatross?" Sammy asked. "Report to me now!"

The only answer Sammy heard was a muffled booming sound like a cough or a distant drum. He heard other sounds, too, but couldn't tell what they were.

"Sammy?" Li asked. "What are your orders?"

"Go," Sammy finally said. "You and Kawai, go check on them."

Without another word the two Psions ran for the elevator. Nikotai and Jeffie went back to watching the street. Sammy eyed the zipline guns stowed in the pack in the corner of the office. Back in February, when they had started training for these urban missions, Sammy and his team practiced using the guns for speedy escapes from the office towers.

"Albatross," Sammy said, "if you can hear me, Li and Kawai are coming over to check on you. If your com starts working, report in as soon as—"

"Help us!" Brickert said in a wheezing voice. "Attack ... on the ... security center!"

"Each leader send half your team downstairs now!" Sammy ordered. "I'm coming in, too. You four hold tight and keep your shields up."

"Gas," Brickert's voice cut through his own coughs and gags. "They've got gas."

Sammy looked at Jeffie and Nikotai. "You two stay put. I need you to be my eyes in the sky. Nikotai, snipe any enemy who tries to enter from the street. Keep me informed. You're in charge."

"Be careful," Nikotai told him.

Jeffie gave Sammy a nod. With his hands spread apart, Sammy blasted the large glass window multiple times in rapid succession until it wobbled and then shattered into thousands of pieces. The difference in the air pressure sucked the glass out into the night where the pieces fell like tiny twinkling stars. He wasted no time in setting up the zipline gun, anchoring it into the wall and floor at three points. Then he aimed the zipline and fired it into the roof of the neighboring building. He tugged firmly on the line, testing its strength and elasticity. Satisfied he wouldn't plunge to his death between the towers, Sammy grabbed the handles and triggered the release. Pressurized air shot him forward until he dangled across downtown Detroit at speeds nearing sixty kilometers per hour.

Once he knew his momentum would carry him to the rooftop of the Joswang building, Sammy released his hold of the zipline and flew onto the roof. Loose gravel awaited him below. He used his Anomaly Fourteen to fire several blasts from his feet, powerful pushes of energy that slowed his fall and allowed him to set foot on the rocky floor at a run. Across the way was a door to the rooftop. He sprinted to it, fired three shots at the lock, and kicked it open. A deafening *BANG* assaulted his ears as the door crashed into the wall.

"Sammy, they've taken Brickert down in the elevator," Al reported. "I just saw it with my own eyes. We barely missed him."

"Was he alive?" Sammy asked. There was a catch in his voice as he spoke the words. The thought of Brickert dying....

"Yes, but wounded."

“If they took him to the elevator, it must mean they’re going down.”

“How do you know?” Al asked.

“Because that’s where they took me.” Flashes of his own elevator ride with Stripe and other Aegis flashed before Sammy’s eyes. “Are there any Thirteens left on the main floor? Are the others okay?”

“I don’t know.”

“Find out! If you see a Thirteen, kill it and cut off its finger. I’m going to need it.”

“We have to be out of the building, Sammy. The explosives are in place. Nine minutes to detonation. We agreed on this.”

“Get everyone out. You’re honcho in the building. Nikotai is taking my place. As far as everyone else is concerned, I’m on a solo rescue mission. Contact Rosmir and have him bring the ambulance around to the lobby doors. Got it?”

“Be careful.”

Sammy reached the top floor of the Joswang building. It wasn’t a penthouse suite like the fox’s N Tower in Orlando. It was a fitness center for the executives with a large pool, racquetball and basketball courts, and a dozen other amenities. Sammy sprinted across it and came to the stairs next to the elevators. The stair door wasn’t locked. He pushed it open and hurled himself over the railing.

Down he fell. Every few floors he used foot blasts against the walls of the stairs to slow himself to a manageable speed. With his Anomaly Eleven, Sammy’s brain calculated everything, from his speed and acceleration to the amount of blast energy he needed to control his fall.

“Sammy,” Nikotai reported, “the Thirteens are broadcasting a feed using Brickert’s com. They’ve got him. He looks really—”

“Patch it through to mine,” Sammy ordered.

The holo-screen on Sammy’s com came alive, displaying the live feed from Brickert’s com. When Sammy saw his best friend slumped over on a chair with a sign stuck to his chest—copious amounts of blood dripping from his nose and mouth, a dull, lifeless expression on his face—he wondered if his friend was already dead.

Not Brickert. I can’t lose Brickert.

He read the sign. Saw Brickert stir, the faint rise and fall of his chest.

You chose the wrong hostage.

Sammy ground his teeth together so hard they squeaked. His jaw began to ache as his pulse quickened, his blood roaring through his veins. *I will kill you all.* The rage inside threatened to transform him into something darker, baser, and deadlier.

When he reached the ground floor of the Joswang building, he left the stairwell and ran for the security center. “Al!” he shouted. “I need that finger now!”

Al came out of the security center. His clothes were covered in blood and he cradled something in his hands. “It’s not good, Sammy,” he said. “Hefani is ... Natalia’s unresponsive. Strawberry’s in shock.”

“Just give me the finger!” Sammy screamed in a primal, rage-filled tone.

“Here! Here! Go.”

Sammy took it and ran to the elevator. He jammed the button repeatedly until the door dinged. Once he was inside, he pressed the digit against the scanner and watched as the panel opened. Two choices: black and red. In the elevator in Rio, there had been a third choice: white.

I've seen black. Black is where they keep the anomalies for questioning.

He watched the feed coming in live from their location. The Thirteen couldn't seem to hold the camera very steady. Sammy noted the furniture, torn and shredded.

He's in their living quarters. Like the one at the Hive. He saw them again as clearly as he saw his own reflection in the elevator doors. *Their eyes, their clothes, their lust for blood.*

Sammy mashed the red button with the severed finger, and the elevator began its descent. Images filled his mind as he sank deeper into the earth. He saw himself destroying them. It would be a massacre. He wanted to smell their blood. Every blow they had landed on his friend would be paid for with a life.

No, no. That's not me.

On the com screen, Brickert muttered something. His words came out thick and wet. Slick red liquid trickled from his mouth. Then he coughed. It sounded like he was choking. Sammy watched closely as his friend spat out something long and white.

His front tooth.

Rage so strong and violent passed through Sammy that he shook—crackling with a lively, dark energy that needed to be expended. A brief vision passed before his eyes of himself tearing apart thylacines in the jungles of the Amazon. He remembered the guilt he'd felt after seeing what he'd done, after losing control over his mind and body. He had let the anomaly take over. The Thirteen.

Sammy closed his eyes. Letting it out would make him nearly invincible. Keeping it reined in could mean his death. But each dance he had with the darkness inside—the Anomaly Thirteen—the darkness grew stronger, louder, harder to ignore. He thought of Trapper, how he had changed from being Commander Byron's best friend to something twisted and unrecognizable.

A whimper came through his com's earpiece. He opened his eyes and saw a Thirteen holding a knife to Brickert's face.

"Please ..." Brickert moaned.

They're going to carve his face.

"DON'T TOUCH HIM!" Sammy roared into his com.

The elevator came to a stop. The Thirteen on screen paused at the sound of Sammy's voice coming through Brickert's com. The doors opened with a soft ping. Sammy walked out of the elevator with his arms held high above his head. The stench of the floor assaulted his nose. Two Thirteens appeared down the length of the corridor, in the doorway of the large common room where Brickert was held, weapons aimed at Sammy's chest.

Fully automatic assault rifles. One hundred twenty rounds per magazine. Nine hundred RPM.

The red-melt-to-black uniforms met him halfway down the hall, their guns still trained on his heart. "You better be here to give us the detonators," one said. "Or you are never gonna see the sun again. And your fellow Fourteen ... he hasn't even begun to know pain yet."

"Burn in hell." As they reached out to pat him down, Sammy attacked first, blasting them in the chest with his most powerful hand blasts. As the Thirteens flew backward, they opened fire.

Sammy used his right hand to shield while performing a small blast jump. With his left hand, he used a strong push blast to support his body while running along the right wall, his body now parallel to the floor. The Thirteens adjusted their shots, but Sammy anticipated this and jumped again, turning his body another 90 degrees until he was running on the ceiling. The Thirteens followed him with their bullets. Sammy turned again, switched hands, and continued running along the left wall. All the while his computer-like brain kept count of the number of bullets each gun had fired.

One hundred five ... one hundred twelve, one hundred twenty.

Sammy dropped down to the floor and used his left hand to shield the bullets coming from the Thirteen who'd been more conservative with his ammo. With his right, he pulled his syshée from its holster and fired five bullets into the other Thirteen. The Thirteen had just finished reloading when the barbs hit him in the chest and gut. He hit his knees and sprayed his clip wildly around the hall. Sammy fired again, this time making a headshot.

The other Thirteen didn't have time to watch his comrade die. He backed away, still firing at Sammy, who used his shields as he pursued.

It's like taking candy from a baby, the dark voice told Sammy.

Sammy hummed as he fired a shot into the Thirteen's kneecap. The Thirteen staggered, but stayed standing. Sammy aimed again and shot, this time hitting the other knee. The Thirteen's weight nearly brought him down to his knees, but the remarkable ability of the anomaly allowed him to stand, his face in a twisted grimace of effort and fury. Sammy crossed the distance between them, easily blasting away the last of the Thirteens bullets.

"You're out," he told the Thirteen.

The Thirteen shrieked and hissed at him. His face was so screwed up with hate that his scars looked like wrinkles. He lunged as soon as Sammy drew near enough, but Sammy caught his head and twisted hard until he felt a snap. As the Thirteen slumped to the floor with a twitch, the door ahead to the common room closed and locked.

Sammy checked the time. *Six minutes until the bombs go off.*

Urgently, Sammy tried the door handle and found it would not give. His holo-screen showed him the feed from the camera on the other side of the door, and he watched as the Thirteens lined up around the room, their guns aimed and waiting for him to enter. Using super-heated blasts from his left thumb, Sammy melted the three hinges on the door. The stench of liquid steel and burnt flesh smelled like melted sugar and vanilla. He looked at his thumb and noted the raw, peeling flesh, but the pain was not as severe as he'd expected.

Third degree burns. May need a skin graft. The thought hardly bothered him.

He knocked on the door with his syshée. One of the Thirteens on the other side stepped close. "Who is it?" she asked in a sweet, girlish voice.

"I'm here to negotiate the release of the prisoner in exchange for the bomb codes. I have the detonator. I will give it to you with the code to deactivate the weapons."

Through the door and over the screen, he heard and watched them communicate in their bizarre language of body jerks and shrieks. After about thirty seconds, she returned. "Slide the detonator under the door."

"Release the prisoner first."

"Slide it under the door or he gets a bullet in the skull."

Via the holo-screen on his com, Sammy saw a Thirteen put a gun to Brickert's head. Brickert made no sign that he felt the nuzzle press against his temple. Sammy set the detonator on the floor and eased it slowly under the door with his foot. The girlish Thirteen bent down by the door to pick it up.

Sammy watched her over the camera. Just before she stood, he blasted the door with both hands using maximum power. The door, no longer held in place by its hinges, flew inward, crushed the Thirteen, and slammed into three more behind her. As he walked in the room, Sammy glanced at his com.

Five minutes.

Bullets greeted him like flies to a cut of meat. For the moment, Brickert was forgotten by the animals. They all wanted the new guy. One of the Thirteens screeched to the others, and in all the noise, Sammy heard his own name. It made him smile to think that they were aware of who he was, that word had spread about him. He felt powerful and larger than himself.

At a glance, he counted ten Thirteens in the room with him. Four had been knocked down by the door, but besides the girl nearest to it, no permanent damage had been done. He chose the angle that would give him maximum shielding ability from as many enemies as possible. In his left hand, he held the syshée with twenty-two rounds left in the magazine. Even with his weapons, his Anomaly Fourteen and Eleven, he could not beat so many enemies. Not without help.

Release me. Use me. Then you can put me away again and forget about me.

Sammy had no choice. He exhaled and embraced the darkness, the rage, the cold. Energy surged into his limbs. The pain in his thumbs vanished. His fear melted.

His first shot found its mark in the forehead of one of the Thirteens who'd been hit by the door. The second missed. The Thirteens fanned out at once, quickly attempting to surround him. Sammy didn't care this time. He only wanted their attention on him and away from Brickert. He let them move around the room, his body tensed, coiled, ready to spring when the time was right. Though the camera had been set down, it was still on, broadcasting the events in the room. Sammy positioned his body so that he could see behind himself by watching the camera feed on his com screen. Without moving, he could see around himself in almost 360 degrees.

For a brief moment, everything stopped. Sammy stayed completely still, and the Thirteens froze, waiting to see if he would make a move. Sammy, however, was content to be patient. He saw a Thirteen's fingers twitch and knew this would be the first one to fire. Sammy shifted his weight ever so slightly, turning his body as he did to put himself in between two Thirteens.

The moment the trigger finger twitched again, Sammy blast jumped up to the ceiling. The bullets flew under him harmlessly, striking the Thirteen behind Sammy twice in the chest. Now using hand blasts, Sammy pushed hard off the ceiling at an angle and landed directly in between two more Thirteens. He paused only long enough to allow them to fire at each other before blasting again. As he shot forward toward the wall to his left at an upward angle, the bullets passed through the space where he'd stood. One Thirteen took a bullet to the shoulder, the other dodged, receiving only a graze across his cheek.

Sammy hit the wall and bounced off. He jetted around so quickly the Thirteens couldn't keep up. To protect himself, he kept his shields placed at angles providing the

most coverage. He sent his body toward a Thirteen, who thought she had a good shot at hitting him. Sammy dropped his shields at the last instant and slammed his fist into her neck, crushing it. The sensation of breaking bones and cartilage under his blow was glorious. As she crumpled, he blasted away again.

Midair, Sammy saw in the holo-screen that a Thirteen had a gun trained on his back. Two upward blasts pushed Sammy back down to the floor, where he slid, shielding himself and shooting the syshée's deadly barbs into another Thirteen. The sounds of firing guns and shrieking enemies assaulted his ears like an orchestra turned up too loud.

Less than three minutes left.

Die. All of you.

It was a game. The whole battle was a game, and Sammy held the best cards: speed, energy, superiority, strength, and intelligence. With all three of his anomalies, plus his precise training and formidable physique, how could he not? The Thirteens were always a step too late. The bullets always just missed him. The combination of his three anomalies made him better, uncatchable. It let him do things he normally couldn't have done, bend himself, twist himself, throw himself, and break his own bones on their bodies without consequence.

A small voice inside his mind whispered, *Stop this. There are consequences ...*

Sammy ignored the voice like he would a bee buzzing in his ear. The Thirteens did not go down without a struggle. Despite taking numerous shots to the chest or abdomen, they fought on. In some perverse way, Sammy found this admirable. But it didn't stop him from killing them.

One minute left.

Sammy knew he wasn't going to make it in time. He had to just keep fighting and hope for the best. If his calculations were correct, the Joswang Tower would be fine.

Keep fighting to save Brickert. To win the war.

Wrong. You're doing it because you enjoy it.

His heart rejoiced each time he saw the lights go out in their eyes, and he reveled in the way their fluids splashed across wall, ceiling, and floor as the syshée did its deadly work. At some point during the middle of the battle, his five minutes ran out and the bombs detonated. Sammy was so far below the earth that he heard no detonation. But he knew something had gone wrong when he felt the tremors in the building. If the bombs had been placed correctly, no tremors should have been felt this low in the structure. All the damage was supposed to be contained to the upper floors.

Sammy cursed. *This building can't come down. I didn't plan it this way.*

Six Thirteens still remained of the original ten. Two of them were badly injured, one of which had absolutely no chance at surviving the next twenty minutes without immediate medical attention. Sammy had eight rounds left in his last magazine.

One of the Thirteens paused to reload. As fast as he was, Sammy was faster and put a bullet in his throat. The Thirteen died as he finished reloading and fired one last bullet into the ceiling as he stumbled backward into the table where the camera sat. His body crashed and sent the camera to the floor and his gun clattered at Brickert's blood speckled shoes. By then Sammy was already five meters away attacking two more Thirteens. Another tremor ran through the walls and floor. Sammy cursed again.

Can't you wait until I'm finished?

He focused his energies on the two weakest Thirteens. The game was becoming easier now with so few players remaining. Boring almost. They gave up trying to surround Sammy, instead trying to shoot him with sporadic and chaotic movements and angles, using helter-skelter tactics in attempt to confuse him. But it didn't work. They bounced off the walls, dove, jumped, and threw things at him. Sammy countered by keeping them off balance, never staying in place for more than a second or two.

One by one the remaining five fell. The first of them threw half of a broken dining table at Sammy. Sammy blasted it back, impaling the Thirteen on the metal leg, and finishing him off with a bullet to the head. Two other Thirteens became so enraged that they emptied their clips at Sammy from opposite sides while a third took careful aim at Sammy's head, and the fourth tried to get back to his feet despite massive blood loss.

Sammy shielded the two on his left and right flank and waited until the last moment to jerk aside and avoid the bullets from the third Thirteen—something he could never have done without using the Anomaly Thirteen. The forward Thirteen adjusted and fired again while the other two reloaded. Sammy shot multiple blasts at the Thirteen, hitting him and shoving him backward into the wall. As Sammy got closer, the strength of his blasts increased. The blasts crushed the Thirteen's body while behind Sammy, the two Thirteens finished reloading and fired at his unprotected back. Again he surprised the Thirteens by jumping out of the way and leaving a crushed, defenseless enemy to receive the full fury of his brothers.

Three left, a gloating voice reminded him. Finish them.

Stop using the anomaly!

Sammy shielded with only his left hand now, the other held his syshée. *Seven bullets.* He fired at one Thirteen while blasting at the other. Both missed. He jumped with a medium blast and turned midair, firing the syshée twice at the one behind him, while shielding in the direction of the one he'd missed. One bullet struck the Thirteen's shoulder while the other hit his lower abdomen.

"And then there was one," Sammy said.

The Thirteen snarled at him. He was one of the more normal-looking Thirteens Sammy had seen. For some reason, this made Sammy hate him even more. Sammy flicked the safety of his syshée to the "on" position and dropped the gun. The Thirteen must have found this insulting because he roared with rage and shot at Sammy. Sammy taunted him with his blasts, mixing up shields and strikes to push around the Thirteen like a toy.

"Sammy, hurry," Al urged. "The building is comprom—"

"Don't tell me what to do," Sammy growled through gritted teeth. He continued to screw around with the Thirteen, keeping him off balance with blasts to his legs and chest.

"It's coming down. Get Brickert and get out of there!"

The Thirteen looked apoplectic. Two veins bulged in his forehead, another in his neck. His deep red eyes fixed murderously on Sammy's throat, but he was powerless. Finally he charged, a stupid and reckless decision. Sammy stepped forward and clotheslined the Thirteen at the neck. Before the Thirteen could recover, Sammy sat on his chest, pinning him to the ground. The Thirteen bucked and tried to kick Sammy off, but Sammy punched him in the mouth.

Listen to Al. Get a grip on yourself.

Hitting the Thirteen sent a wave of bliss through Sammy. Nothing else mattered. He had no sense of self. No responsibility. No worries. Nothing. Just the euphoria of violence. He hit the Thirteen a second time.

And a third.

And a fourth.

Someone moaned Sammy's name, but he ignored the sound. His fists flew into the Thirteen's jaw and skull, feeling bones break and shatter. Some of them might have been his. It didn't matter. Blood flew and splattered with each blow Sammy delivered. The Thirteen had stopped struggling at some point, but this didn't matter either.

Someone groaned Sammy's name again, but he didn't let it stop him. All the hatred and rage locked inside of him—in the darker side—poured out through his arms. It turned him into a machine, cold and powerful, capable of perpetual motion. He would go on forever, so long as he had something to strike, a target for his darkness.

A gun fired. It struck the Thirteen, but startled Sammy enough that he jerked back and looked around to find the source of the disturbance. Whoever did it would die. All he saw was Brickert slumped over on his knees in front of the chair. His face unrecognizable from the swelling and bleeding. His chest rising and falling in rapid, shallow gasps. A gun dangled from his hand. Sammy charged his friend, ready to kill. He grabbed Brickert by the shirt, cocked his fist back, and let it fly. A bone broke beneath the blow. Then he punched again. He pulled back to do it a final time, to mash the face into a pulp.

DO IT! a voice told him. *KILL!*

Brickert's eyes fluttered, but only one could open. The eye was unfocused, roving around the room until he finally fixed itself on Sammy.

"H—h—h—" Brickert struggled to speak. Each breath brought with it a wheezing sound, hollow and light. "Who ... are ... you?"

Sammy nearly dropped his best friend. The fog of darkness lifted from his mind. As the haze diminished, the pain grew. His hands, legs, ribs, and arms ached. His thumbs throbbed and seared with pain.

He tried to pick up Brickert, but his arm didn't work properly. Blood soaked his shirt. He touched the center of it carefully. Pain radiated outward. Horrible pain. His mesh armor was in tatters. *I was shot and didn't even notice.* Regardless of how Sammy felt, it was nothing compared to how Brickert looked. Large purple and black bruises colored whatever wasn't covered in blood. His left arm hung at a weird angle. Sammy had never seen anyone so beaten.

"Come on, Brick," he said as he knelt down to lift his friend. "We can do this."

The shooting agony brought tears to Sammy's eyes as he pulled his friend up and over his shoulder. He breathed through his nose in sharp, forceful draws. His first three steps were staggers as he stumbled toward the doorway. When he reached the hall, the building shook again. Needles stabbed his legs with each step he took toward the elevator. Sammy's eyes stayed locked on his target, allowing himself to see nothing else.

Another quake under his feet nearly sent him to his knees.

"Leave me," Brickert whispered behind him. "You can't ... save ... us both."

"Yes, I can," Sammy grunted back. "Now shut up and don't die."

Bracing himself on the filthy walls, Sammy lurched step after step until he slammed against the elevator doors. Holding Brickert with one hand, he reached out and pressed the call button to go up.

“Hold on,” he whispered. “Just ... hold on ... buddy.”

He counted the seconds silently until the elevator arrived. When he reached nine, he heard a soft *ping*.

Thank you.

The doors closed behind Sammy, and the elevator began its ascent to the lobby. Sammy eased Brickert off his shoulder and lowered him to the floor. “You still with me?” he asked Brickert.

Brickert gave no response.

“Brickert?” Sammy gave him a gentle shake, but still Brickert didn’t answer. Sammy checked Brickert’s wrist and found no pulse. His trembling hands moved to Brickert’s neck. *Please, please, please.*

The elevator stopped. They hadn’t reached the ground floor. Sammy jammed the button again, but the elevator didn’t budge. He slammed his fist against the panel. A robotic operator’s voice came over the intercom: “Due to building instability, elevator use is suspended until further notice. Please use the stairs. Please do not attack or damage the elevator as it will not improve your situation.”

Sammy spoke into his com. “Al, can you hear me?”

“Barely. Where are you?”

“I’m stuck in the elevator! I need help.”

“You’re cutting in and out. What do you need?”

“HELP! I need your help!”

“Okay. What can I do?”

“Are you still in the building?”

“No one’s in the building, Sammy. It’s coming down soon. You have to get out!”

“*I’m trying to get out!*” Sammy screamed. “I need you to open the elevator doors on the ground floor. Can you do that?”

“Open the ground door?”

Sammy repeated his request, barely keeping his cool.

“Yes—yes, I can do that, but you have to hurry.”

Sammy blasted open the top escape hatch of the elevator car. It was too dark to see how far up the doors were. *Doesn’t matter. I have to make this right.* Sammy grabbed Brickert and lifted him up high.

He yelled at the top of his lungs as stabs of pain ripped through his arm and burned thumb. He shot blasts from his feet until he was high enough off the ground that he could push Brickert up through the hatch. Fresh tears blinded him, but he continued to heft his friend’s weight until Brickert rested on top of the elevator. Then Sammy climbed out, sat next to Brickert, and wiped his eyes with his better arm.

“Hold on, buddy.” He placed his hand on Brickert’s head. “I’m going to take care of you. Just hold on.”

“Sammy, I’m in the building,” Al reported. “It’s bad. We gotta be fast. Be ready to move as soon as I pop open these doors.”

“Copy that.”

Sammy used the elevator cables to pull himself back to a standing position, ignoring his body’s protests. Then he picked Brickert up again and trained his eyes on the darkness above him. In those few seconds, he noticed how it never ended, the blackness. It was limitless and consuming.

“Don’t die, Brickert.” His words tasted hot and bitter, filled with guilt.

A shaft of light appeared almost twenty meters above them. After turning on his own com light, Sammy wasted no time jump blasting toward it. Carrying Brickert severely reduced the height of his blast jumps, forcing Sammy to adjust in midair. He bounced from wall to wall, gradually scaling the distance to the elevator doors on the ground floor. The space between the doors widened, and more light filled the shaft. The better Sammy could see, the more confident he felt in his blasts.

“Hurry!” Al shouted from above.

Sammy could not go any faster. The tremors in the building grew worse. The pain in Sammy’s limbs grew worse. The quaking in his arms grew worse. At one point, Sammy’s body nearly gave and he barely hung onto Brickert. It was too much. He could hardly summon the strength to blast. He thought of everyone who had helped him, sacrificed for him, enabled him to be where he was. He called on their strength and reached the elevator doors.

Al was there to help him through. The moment Al reached Brickert to take him from Sammy, a ghastly haunted noise rang through the walls, reverberating so powerfully that it deafened Sammy. The sound surrounded and filled Sammy with its high-pitched groans as steel folded on steel and the structure collapsed on itself.

Debris fell from above as Sammy, still carrying his best friend, ran behind Al toward the doors. Before they could reach them, a massive chunk of the ceiling crashed onto the floor, blocking their path.

“This way!” Al yelled.

Sammy huffed and stumbled after his friend. He tried to ask Al to take Brickert for him, but couldn’t find the breath to speak. A tremendous roar came from the building followed by a monstrous tremor that did not stop. Al sprinted toward the nearest bay window and shot at it several times until the glass shattered. With his blasts, he blew away any remaining shards. “Go, Sammy! GO!”

Sammy hurried forward and jumped through the window. Al followed behind. They didn’t stop once they hit the street, but kept running until they reached the stealth cruisers parked in the road. Behind them, the Joswang Tower began to crumble.

Ice filled Sammy’s gut. *How many people did we estimate could be in the building during these hours?* “God help us,” he said. “What have I done?”