

# Low-city life

It's no game.

"What can I get you?"

The chaos of the low city at noon is too much for Terra's first time out of the house since late spring. She rests against a parking meter and takes a pull from her breather. The canned air helps, although the mouthpiece leaves the stale taste of dust on her lips.

"You okay, ma'am?" The street vendor puts down a large set of tongs and snaps off his synthetic gloves. She's terrified he'll touch her, but he stops well short. "Do you need help?"

There's an exchange of smiles and assurances, enough for him to reset.

"What can I get you?"

Terra's sick of doing quests, just disgusted with the whole game really, but she's so hungry it *burns*. "A hot dog, please," she says, forcing herself to speak the trigger.

The man asks her what she wants on it and she answers while he fights with a fresh pair of gloves. She doesn't have to repeat anything, and he makes it perfect. It smells like heaven.

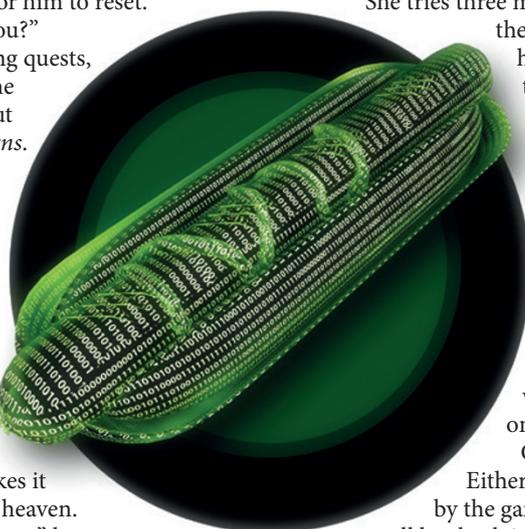
"Comes to three even," he says.

"What?"

He raises the hot dog a little higher and shakes it. "Three dollars for the dog."

How could the most essential step in the quest slip her mind? "No cash." It is all she can manage, and it comes out muddled. The sights and sounds and *smells* close in again, threatening to overwhelm her. Her vision blurs, and she fumbles for her breather.

"No reason to get upset." The man has his hand out. She steps back against the hot hood of a car parked behind her near the meter. "I have a scanner," he says. "It'll be fine. Here. Give it a go."



day she decided not to play the game, so she knows it's pointless. But she has to try: she's desperate.

The scanner chirps and whirrs, and its display light reflects off the stainless steel of the hot-dog cart, red to yellow to green and back to red. Denied. Heat blooms beneath the skin of her wrist. She shakes the warmth away.

"Run it again," the man says. "These older models often take a few scans to get them to work." He gestures skyward at the high-city traffic. "Refraction or something like that."

She tries three more times before the vendor stops her and stows the scanner out of sight.

"Just take it," he says. A fly circles the hot dog and Terra spots rows of zeroes and ones scrolling inside the thin membrane of its wings. "Here. Go on. Enjoy." Compassion? Pity?

Either is a new trick by the game, anything to pull her back into the fold. She considers refusing, but it's impossible to survive on principles alone. "Thank you." It takes all the willpower she has left not to cram the whole hot dog in her mouth right there on the street corner.

"My pleasure, ma'am. Hang in there."

She eats too fast on the walk home and gets sick in her breather. Nothing could make her stay outside even a second longer at this point, so she leaves the mess near the stairs and staggers inside to the couch. The darkness of home is the only comfort the game still allows her.

Four rapid knocks drag her from the brink of sleep. "I know you can hear me, Abby."

Another new trick, using her real-life name. Terra crawls to the window and picks with a broken fingernail at the black tape covering the glass, enough to peek out. Scott seems normal in his high-city patrol

uniform, like old times. *Almost*. The sight of him frightens her now.

"Come on." He removes his visor and wipes sweat from his eyes. "I'm worried about you. I tried your Cortical, but it's disconnected. Just let me know you're okay."

Using her knowledge that Scott never could adjust to the low-city heat is a good shot by the game, but Terra reminds herself of their accident, the night he respawned as something less than her brother. It gives her the strength to ignore his pleas.

Scott steps down and disappears around the corner. Terra listens to him circle her house until he reaches the front where she can see him again. The fingers on his left hand dance in the air at his side as if he's mimicking an old-time piano player. A transparent grid of the high city appears beside him. He closes his hand into a fist, and the grid flickers through several levels to the low city and centres on Terra's house. Her location near the window glows a bright orange.

"We need to talk, sis."

She breaks her silence. "Don't call me that!"

"I can't keep protecting you." He slaps his palm flat against the window. "Do you hear me? This isn't a game."

"You're not Scott. You're not Scott. You're n—"

"Stop it! Please. Stop it. I'm going to have to go and get help. I should've weeks ago when you destroyed all that money. It can't wait any longer. You're just getting worse."

The truth hits her as Scott climbs back into his car and heads skyward towards the high city. What the game's trying to say. Hunger. Compassion. Comfort. Having its tool tell her this isn't a game. Using her real-life name. All of it makes sense and Terra knows she has no choice now; it's too late. Every game needs a player, and she's the only *real* one left. □

DAVID G. BLAKE lives in Pennsylvania with his girlfriend and their chocolate Labrador. In addition to *Nature*, his work has appeared/is forthcoming in *Futures 2*, *Galaxy's Edge*, *Beneath Ceaseless Skies* and several other publications. For more info, visit his Facebook page.

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Terra relents and sticks her hand under the scanner. She cleared her account and burned all her money the