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## INTRODUCTION

### *The Slow March of Light*

CYCLE 7543 (APPROX. 1220 B.C.)

Light is slow. Like an old couple walking by the shore, photons amble without a care as I lie alone in this flying coffin, unable to outpace their leisurely stroll. The darkness stays still while I inch my way to a place I may never reach. Light is cruel. There's purpose behind its sloth, deliberateness. It *wants* me to suffer. I can hear it sometimes, snickering, while I beg death to come for me. I beg, and threaten, and scream, but I'm too far from anything for her to hear. I *need* to die. I need this to stop, but I'm not strong enough. WHY CAN'T I WILL MYSELF TO DIE? I can't move. I can't DO ANYTHING. This pain. Constant, relentless torment. It's everywhere, in the air I breathe, the water I drink. I try to sleep, but it keeps me awake until I can't tell if I am. I thank the stars when I lose consciousness, but it never lasts. I wake up to the SAME. SHEKRET. PAIN! It's been two cycles. I can't take another seven.

I want to die. I want it more than anything because there is nothing else. There is no mission. There's no duty. There's only pain. I'd kill myself without hesitation, but I can't move my arms anymore. I can't reach the controls and vent all the air into space. I can't overdose on pain meds. I can't alter course and drive myself into a star. I found thirty-seven different ways to end my life, but every single one of them is out of my reach.

"You are a hero to your people," he said. "Remember that

when you think it's too much to bear." I didn't know what he meant. I imagined. Apparently, I lack a proper imagination. I smiled at him. "Thank you, sir. It's an honor to serve." Lies. I didn't do this for *my people*. I did it for everyone who doesn't fit the definition. We have plenty of time to find a suitable home before ours turns into a fiery hell, but it'll take centuries to move everyone. And they won't really move *everyone*, of course. They'll start with the fertile. Then the citizens. Miners next, I guess—gotta have someone to dig—but they'll find every excuse to leave the rest of them behind. My son's half Xo. They'll move cattle before they get to people like him. The sooner we find a place, the better their odds. These scout ships are all we've got. It's a one-way ticket, but it's also the best I could do for my son's children, or their children. I volunteered. I . . . *chose* this.

Somewhere out there is a man who didn't choose. Another ship headed to the same world. Another being suffering endlessly. He attacked a superior officer, broke his neck from what I heard. Nothing they couldn't fix, but the boss wasn't pleased. This was punishment. I don't care if he slaughtered his entire unit and ate them. No one deserves this. There is no crime, no horror or savagery, that merits *this*. I never met the man, but I wish him dead. I wish him dead with all my heart.

I wonder if he knew, if he clenched his teeth the moment he climbed aboard his ship. He must not have. If I'd known. If I'd had even the slightest indication, I'd have grabbed my service weapon and blown my brains out on the spot while I could.

The ship's drive was still warming up. I felt the needle plunge into my neck. I started warming up myself when the flight plan popped up on my monitor. *Aneba 3*. I'd never heard of it. I figured it'd be a barely habitable shithole. Toxic air, giant bugs, that sort of thing. Nope. **Copyrighted Material**

INHABITED. POSSIBLE CONTACT WITH HOSTILE SPECIES.

There's no way we can ever relocate to that place if an enemy's there. This was pointless. I'd abandoned my son for absolutely nothing. I was . . . upset. So much so I didn't see the bio-warning blinking at the bottom of my screen.

SIGNIFICANT MORPHODIVERGENCE WITH NATIVE POPULATION. BIOMODIFICATION ADVISED.

Advised? The *shekret* needle was already in my neck. Whatever backwards oafs lived on that rock, I was going to look like one.

The virus spread like wildfire. I could feel it take over, tickling every corner of me. The little buggers are fast. They rewrote my DNA in less than a day. A letter here, a letter there, until the words weren't the same and my body told a discordant story. I had to be retold, reborn to fit the narrative.

Targeted apoptosis. Every cell in my second heart committed suicide in a matter of weeks. My entire secondary cardiovascular system dissolved itself. It was scary to watch on the monitor, but that part was painless. So painless I didn't notice when my one good heart stopped beating. I bit part of my tongue off when the ship zapped me with a thousand volts to restart it. That was the easy part. The real carnage was about to begin. Hundreds of genetic switches turned on to make me something else, like a *yershak* digesting itself inside its cocoon. My body merged white blood cells to make osteoclasts, legions of them, to eat at my bones. Like a growth spurt in reverse. Only worse, and endless, and everywhere. I live in agony while my body dissolves and rebuilds every bone, every joint. It will go on and on for nine cycles until my entire skeleton is replaced and I'm as tall as a *SHEKRET CHILD!* **Copyrighted Material**

My muscles atrophied all on their own. Lying immobile in a flying coffin will do that pretty quick. I'll lose a third of my body mass before this is over. A *third of me* will kill itself. Trillions of cells. That's a lot of corpses to deal with. My marrow's working overtime making white blood cells to mop up the dead. Unfortunately, it's not making any red ones while it's doing that. Every organ I have left is oxygen deprived. Kidney failure. Severe anemia. I watch the yellow liquid that was once my blood circulating in tubes above my head and I know the ship is the only thing keeping me alive. I despise it for it.

Even with dialysis and a machine oxygenating my blood, I might not make it. It's my bones. Too much calcium running through my veins. The medicine helps, but I pass kidney stones almost every day. I'm sure it hurts like hell, but I don't know which pain is which anymore.

The only bright spot is that these aliens have big heads. Can't shrink brain cells, so I would have had to lose some. I get to keep this part of who I am. Some of it, at least. My entire DNA thinks I'm something different. I know my brain is adjusting as well. New connections are made; old ones are erased. I don't know if I'm really me anymore, or how much will be left when this is over. I *can't* know. This is how I think. There's no way to tell if this is how I *thought*. When I'm not finding new ways to kill myself, I try to remember things. My son's face, childhood memories, the good and the bad. That trip we took to see the last ocean creatures. The day my mother dropped me at the academy. "I'm doing this for you, Sereh." I think that's what she said. I remember clear as day, but maybe that's not how it happened at all. I can't know what I forgot if I already forgot. I can't know what's real. Maybe I don't have a son and that face I see never even existed.

I don't know what I am now, what I'm turning into. Something else. Something small, and weak. Had I been born like

it, my parents would have killed me. I'll know, eventually. I get to watch all of it. I can't go into stasis until the carnage is over. Seven more cycles of this. Just pain, and silence because I'm too weak to scream. I get to sleep for the back half of the trip, but I'll go mad long before. I'm already broken. Whoever lands on that rock, I know it won't be me.

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# ACT I

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# 1

## *Just a Girl*

DECEMBER 17, 1999

Gawd, I'm starving. I been watching feet go by under the tablecloth for over an hour. Scuffed loafers with tassels. I seen his shoes before. Whoever he is, he better not eat all the chocolate mousse. Oh no! He dropped a shrimp on the floor. He's gonna step on it!

Oh, so close! He missed it by a frog's hair. All right, I need *new* feet if I'm gonna get dessert. I need tipsy feet. Folks don't eat much when they're drunk. What's that? Wobbly high heels. Two pairs of them! Jackpot. Time to stick my head out.

—AH! You startled me, Aster. Why are you hiding under the table?

—Oh, hi, Mrs. Sparks. Just playing. The floor over there's all sticky.

—There's not much to do here for a twelve-year-old, is there?

—It's okay. I brought my Game Boy.

Mrs. Sparks is nice, but she smells like an ashtray. Everyone here smells like booze and cigarettes. Even Pa. I seen him smoke on the gallery not five minutes ago.

—Can I get you something, Aster? There's four kinds of Coke.

—No, thank you. But . . .

—But what? Don't be shy!

—Are you going to eat your chocolate mousse, Mrs. Sparks?

—My—Oh, you can have it, Aster.

[*You can have mine too. Love the dress, by the way. You make a nice princess.*]

I think she's a sailor, Linda, not a princess.

—It's . . . It's from a TV show.

[*Aye aye, sailor! Eat your spinach!*]

It's not Pop— Never mind. Thank you for dessert!

Back under the table. Score me mousse number four! I shouldn't have worn that costume, though. Dad was all gussied up. I wanted to wear something special, not the same old dress I put on for church every week. He was sooo excited for this. "You'll love it, Aster. There'll be a buffet." He's extra proud right now. Smoking cigars with the engineers. Calls everyone by their first name and all. He said there'd be other kids. No kids. He also said there'd be cake. This buffet's all fishy, mushy stuff. It's like none of these folks have teeth. There's *tons* of mousse. There's shrimp mousse, salmon mousse. The white, smoky, something mousse no one's touched. There's chocolate mousse. I *love* chocolate mousse, but they're supertiny and there's a big paper sign on them. "ONE PER PERSON." I'm starving.

I—Why'd the music stop? Crud! Another speech. Come on! Y'all done like fifteen already.

[\*Tap\* \*tap\* *Can you hear me? Last speech of the night, I promise. It's been a big year for us at Stennis Space Center and I want to make sure we celebrate everyone's work 'cause we're not all working on the Space Shuttle main engine. There's lots of space plane stuff going on right now. Jim's team—Where's Jim? There you are—spent pretty much the whole year testing the Fastrac engine for the X-34. And we just started full testing of the engine for the X-33 on the A1 stand. What else? I don't want to forget anyone.*]

[*THE RELIC!*] **Copyrighted Material**

[*Shit! Sorry. I forgot the relic. For all of you wondering why*

*Bernie's hair is going gray all of a sudden, his team is doing propellant tests on the—How old is that thing? Thirty . . . some years old?—on the AR2-3 engine for, you guessed it, another space plane. X- . . . Thirty-seven! All right, I think that's it. Thank you all again for a great year. Enjoy yourselves. Have another drink. Bernie, you can have two. I wish us all . . . What's happening? Ma'am? Ma'am! This is a private party; you can't—]*

Who crashes an office party? Especially this one. I think I heard a dozen math jokes already. An infinite number of mathematicians walk into a bar. Two random variables walk into a bar. . . . Oh my god, they're screaming now. *Big ruckus*. I'm curious, but I'm not *that* curious. Headphones on. Me and Link are gonna explore that weird-ass island while the grown-ups throw a tantrum. A couple more instruments and I get to wake up the Wind Fish. Whoa! I think a chair just flew by. This ain't some squabble over free booze, more like an all-out brawl from the looks of it. I wonder what got them so riled up. Maybe someone's ex doesn't like the new boyfriend. I blame Christmas. The holidays make people do weird things. Still, folks here ain't exactly the fighting type. Math whizzes and science nerds getting physical, it's gotta be pretty bad. Whatever, I don't wanna know. Plus I might get more chocolate mousse if a ton of people leave.

Pa's gotta be trying to talk them down by now. He does that. He doesn't like conflict. It doesn't have to be serious, even. Star Trek versus Star Wars. Boxers or briefs. He can't stand people arguing about anything, so he plays arbiter all the time. He can't help it. No way he'll sit still when folks are throwing chairs around. You think that lady would take a hint and leave—

Gunshots! I think those were gunshots! Okay, crud. What do I do? Nothing. I'll stay right here under my table. Crud. Crud. Crud. I'm burning up again. This really isn't the time for one of my episodes. Stay calm. Stay. Calm. How do I stay calm? I'll do

the stupid flower thing Mrs. Abney taught me. Breathe . . . in. Breathe out. Breathe . . . in. . . .

AAAAAHHH! Someone fell face-first right in front of me. It's . . . It's Mrs. Sparks. Her glasses are all bent up. She's staring, but I don't think she's really looking at anything. Is she dead? I think she's dead. Oh yeah, she's dead! There's blood pooling around her now. Lots of blood slowly creeping under the table. I need to move. I'll lean back against the wall and roll into a ball. Breathe . . . in. Breathe out.

I'm sweating up a storm. I'm going to black out again. What do I do? What do I do? I got nothing to defend myself, ain't nothing but plastic knives on that buffet table. I don't even know who to defend *from*. Maybe I can short the power outlet next to me. If the lights are on the same circuit, I can make it out in the dark. What the hell is wrong with me? I'm not going out there. Close your eyes, Aster. Close 'em tight. Crud, the blood's at my feet now. Breathe in. I could . . . Break a bottle of wine and use it as a—No no no! Mrs. Sparks's shoes. Those high heels are basically hammer knives. SHUT UP, ASTER! You're staying right here. Breathe in. Breathe out. Too many things going through my head, I can't turn it off. TURN IT OFF! TURN IT OFF!

The room's spinning now. That's it. I'm gonna pass out.

## 2

### *Why Does My Heart Feel So Bad?*

I don't feel sad. I don't feel much of anything, really. I ain't crying. I ain't cried since they told me. I *should* be, I know—but I ain't.

I woke up to the smell of bleach. Bleach and something lemony. Clean, in a scratches-at-your-throat sort of way. I opened my eyes and there was more clean. White walls. White bedsheets. White cabinets. I figured out where I was when I saw the heart monitor next to the bed. The white door opened to let a nurse in. She stared at my clothes for a second. "I'm so sorry," she said. Sorry? Sorry for what? I asked where my dad was and that's when she told me. Well, not at first. She said she'd call someone, but I asked again where my dad was. *Then* she told me. Pa had a heart attack. They did all they could, but he was already gone when he got to the hospital. This hospital, I guess. Then, more sorry. *Terribly* sorry. Then she left.

And I just . . . lay there in my stupid costume. No more Pa. No more anyone. I lay there until the white door opened again and another woman came in. Gray suit. Supershort hair and Drew Carey glasses. "I have something to tell you, Aster." It sounded more real that time. Pa had a heart attack. They did all they could, but he was already gone when he got to the hospital. This hospital, for sure. More sorry. *Terribly* sorry. I could tell she'd done this before. I figured she was Child Services. People

say bad things about Child Services, but they said they'd find me a good family when my mom got rid of me, and they did. They found Pa. He was a good family. I thought maybe she could find me another. I asked her when we'd be leaving. I got a "soon" and a big fake smile. I ain't leaving soon. I seen people hide things and she was *definitely* hiding things.

I feel bad for not crying, like I didn't love Pa, or not enough or something, but I ain't crying here. Not in a bleach-and-lemon-smelling white room. I want to cry in my room, or in *his* room. I want to cry where it smells like him. Gray lady asked if I wanted to see him. I liketa said yes, but Pa was always so happy. I don't want to remember him all sad and all dead.

The door. She's ba— Oh no. It's a man this time, a soldier. No, a general or something. Lots of bling on the uniform. Tiny flags. Shaved head. He looks like Bruce Willis. Like, for real.

—Hello, Aster. How are you feeling this morning?

— . . .

—Aster?

—I'm sorry, sir. It's just . . . You look exactly like—

—I know. I know. My name is Benjamin Veilleux. I came to see you.

Me? What does he want with me? I don't think Pa was ever in the Army.

—Are you a doctor?

—I am, actually. I'm a colonel in the U.S. Army, *and* a doctor. I work at the Walter Reed Army Medical Center.

— . . .

—It's in Washington.

—I—Wait, we're in D.C.?

—No, Aster. You're still in Mississippi, in Picayune. But the doctors here did a blood test last night—you were unconscious when you came in—and they didn't know what to make of it.

The results, I mean. They didn't know what to make of the results, and they made some calls, and, well, here I am. I came a long way just to see you.

—No one said anything about a test. Is there something wrong with me?

—No, Aster. There's nothing wrong with you. At least, that's what they tell me, but that makes your test results all the more peculiar. That's why I came. I work for an agency called the Armed Forces Medical Intelligence Center and we have very smart people who are trained just for this sort of thing.

—I'm sorry, sir. What sort of thing?

—They're . . . detectives, like the ones on *Law & Order*, but for medical things. I'd like you to meet them. Will you do that for me, Aster?

—They're here?

—No, they're in Washington. There's a helicopter waiting for us on the roof. It will take us to Biloxi; then we'll get on a plane. Have you ever been on a helicopter, Aster?

—No, sir, but I—I don't want to go to Washington. I just want to go home.

— . . . Did someone explain what happened to your father?

— . . .

—Then, you see, Aster, there *is* no home for you to go back to. I'm terribly sorry. When we get to the hospital, we'll—

—How'd he die?

—He had a heart attack. I thought you knew.

—No, I mean why? What happened last night?

—What do you remember?

—There were people screaming. I heard gunshots. Mrs. Sparks, she worked with my father, she . . . she was shot, I think. I don't remember anything after that.

—You're right. Someone walked into the reception at Stennis



Space Center uninjured. The . . . individual opened fire with a high-caliber rifle when security stepped in.

—Who?

—We don't know. But several people were killed. A dozen or so were injured; one is in critical care. Your father, well . . . I know this is a lot to take in. There must be a million things running through your mind. It's perfectly normal for you to be scared.

Scared. I wasn't until he said it just now. I was all kinds of things—worried, sad, confused—but not scared. Now I'm scared. He wants me to get on a helicopter with him and go to Washington so I can talk to some people. That doesn't make sense. He came here. Why didn't they? He said they're like detectives on *Law & Order*. They put people in *jail* on *Law & Order*.

—There was a woman from Child Services. She said we'd be leaving soon.

—Is that what she said?

—Yes, she—

She said soon. She did. I asked when we'd be leaving and . . . Crud. "When do I leave?" That's what I said. I asked when *I'd* be leaving and she said soon. I guess she meant with him, not her.

—I already spoke to Child Services and informed them we'd be taking over your case. We'll take good care of you, Aster. I promise.

My case? I don't believe a word coming out of his mouth. Take care of me. How is the Army going to take care of me? I want to go home. I *need* to go home. I just need a reason.

—We . . . I have a cat.

—Don't worry. I'll send someone for your cat and your personal effects. We'll make sure you're comfortable. You'll feel at home with us in no time; you'll see. . . . May I ask a personal question?

—What?

—What are you wearing?

—It's—

—Excuse me for one moment.

What's going on? He looks worried. Oh, I hear it now. There's screaming down the hall, lots of screaming. And running, I see heads flying by through the door window. AH! Loud bang. It's— This can't be happening again.

—Was that a gunshot?

—Don't worry, Aster. I'm sure it's nothing. I'll be right back. Stay right here, okay?

—Yes, sir.

...

Stay right here. Yeah, right. Like hell I am.

# 3

## *Run*

My bed's covered with broken glass. It's pretty, like the sun reflecting off a lake, or when they find the diamonds in those heist movies. It's making my head spin a little. I never been drunk, but I bet this is what it feels like. My heart's racing, even if I'm supersleepy. Everything's . . . not real, like I'm in a dreamworld or some magical realm. Like *Labyrinth*. "It's only forever, not long at all. . . ." Crud, I stepped on my Cabbage Patch Kid crawling in through the window. I must have had a shard on my shoe, 'cause there's a cut above the eye now. I think I like it. She looks badass. Desirae Chandelle, the destroyer.

I don't know what happened at the hospital. There were people running in the parking lot. This woman said: "You can't stay here, kid!" I got into her car and we drove off. She drove me all the way to Gulfport. I told her my dad couldn't pick me up till later. It didn't take them long to start looking for me. There were two cop cars parked out front when I got here. The regular kind. I guess they think I'll see a cop and think: Yes! Take me back to Bruce Willis so I can live in D.C. with the Army *Law & Order*. Fat chance. I let Mrs. Bloom's dog loose to distract them—sorry, Mrs. Bloom. Damn dog likes to scratch at our lawn and Mrs. Bloom sounds like a fire alarm when she's upset. The cops were still chasing the dog when I jumped the fence and climbed to my window. Anything to turn Mrs. Bloom off.

—Oh, there you are. Come here, Londo. The house is empty, I know. Don't worry. I'm taking you with me. We'll pack you some kibble for the road.

I told myself I came back for the cat, but I had to see the house again. I wonder what they'll do with it. Pa had no family that I know of and I doubt houses go to adopted children, at least not to the fugitive kind. That's what I am now. This is so messed up. Like, what do they want with me? I'm not the one shooting at people everywhere. They should just— Where are you going, you crazy cat? Food's down in the kitchen.

Oh, Pa's room . . . It's so tidy. It's always just me and him—I don't remember the last time someone came over—but he keeps his room spick-and-span like the Queen's spending the night. He used to travel before . . . before me. He said he liked sleeping in hotels. I thought he just missed traveling, but what he really liked was climbing into a well-made bed. Three pillows, not two, and bedsheets so tight you have to put your feet sideways. It seemed like a lot of work for ten seconds getting into bed, but he always liked the little things. Fancy bowls for breakfast, silverware for grits. I think those were a wedding gift. I wish I'd known his wife. I wish he were here. . . .

—What'd you find there, Londo? Oh, the box. We're not allowed to look in the box.

I suppose he won't mind if we take a peek. Still feels wrong, though. That box was for private, precious things. He scolded me just for being *near* that thing. What's this? Perfume. A woman's, must have been his wife's. What does it sm— Ew, gawd. I think it's gone bad. A bunch of Greyhound tickets. He really *did* miss traveling. There's nothing but paper in here. Crud. That's my last school report. Really, Pa? That's *all* my school reports. I knew he was proud, but . . . See what you did, Pa? I'm crying now, on your supertidy bed. I can't stop. I want to; it hurts, like

someone tickling me for too long. It hurts everywhere inside, but I can't . . . I'm shaking like a shitting dog now, making a big wet mess of things.

I miss you, Pa. And I *hate* you! You're not allowed to leave me like this. . . . "Me and you, Aster. Me and you." That's what you said. You said it all the time. It didn't matter if I had a bad day at school, or if it rained for three days, or . . . whatever. None of it mattered because we had each other. That's what you said. You lied! Now say it's not real! Say it! I'm gonna close my eyes and sleep till you shake me awake and tell me it's not real, all right? . . . Just come back, Pa . . . please.

Just for one day. We'll go to Blockbuster like before. Three movies for the price of two. We'll do the crossword puzzle over breakfast. God, I miss that. Remember how you used to cut my toast in the shape of things? Always something different. Toast in the shape of a turtle, a sailboat. Cat toast. Car toast. None of them really looked like anything—oh, Yoda! Yoda looked like a Siamese cat. I loved guessing what it was, though. First thing I did when I got out of bed was think about the day's toast. Why'd you stop, Pa? I grew up, I know, but why that day? One morning you looked at me and thought: Aster's grown-up. No more fancy toast. I wish I could be in your head for a minute. Was it something I did? Something I said? Maybe it's just . . . I ain't never said thank you, have I? I meant to. Thank you. Thank you for the toast, Pa. Thank you for everything.

I should get up and go, but I can't move a muscle. I can't keep my eyes—



Where— Oh. I'm still here, lying on his bed. He's still gone and I'm . . . nowhere close to knowing what to do. The cops didn't go anywhere either. I can't stay here. One of them will need to

use the bathroom sooner or later. It feels wrong to leave everything. Those were his things; now they'll throw them away, or give them to someone. I should take a picture with me at least. This one, maybe. No, I want one of the both of us. There's a good one in the living room.

—Here, Londo. Let's go downstairs and pack you some kibble.

There it is. I always liked that picture. I have no idea where we took it, though. This ain't our yard; it's— I don't have time for this. Cat food, cat food. There it is. I should eat something too. I haven't since . . . then, but I don't think I can. My stomach's all *gwaaargh*. Cheez-It. That'll have to do. I can eat on the way there, wherever "there" is. I don't have any money. I don't *know* anyone. Where am I supposed to sleep? I'm pretty sure shelters will call the cops if a minor shows up at the door. Kids run away from home all the time. Where do they go? I don't know any movie that can help either. Well, there's *Wizard of Oz*; *she* runs away. Oh, and *E.T.*, but they get caught. I need—

*\*Knock\* \*Knock\**

Someone's at the door. Cat, backpack, and out the back. I know, Londo. I don't want to go either. Crud, I didn't even change. . . .

# 4

## *Bitter Sweet Symphony*

They look happy. They're kind of funny looking, but they look happy. Father and son, sharing a meal in a crummy truck stop. They don't care about the hundred-year-old wood paneling, or all the holes in the red leatherette—my seat looks like it's been chewed on by a horse. Maybe they're on a road trip. Driving coast to coast and stopping everywhere. The Brain Museum. The world's largest pistachio! Or maybe the son's going to a new school and Dad is driving him there. A good school. Like, his parents were superproud when he got the letter, but he's worried 'cause he won't know anyone there. Pa said I could probably go to a school like that if I really wanted to. Maybe they're going to buy a dog! A Dalmatian. No, one of those really big ones that save people after an avalanche, and they have to go where there's snow to get one. Colorado . . . Maybe they live right next door and Dad didn't feel like cooking. Well, whatever they're doing, they're having a good time doing it. They're a family, with food. I should really stop staring, but that sweaty glass of iced tea looks darn yummy right now. So's the—I'm not sure if it's chicken or what, but I'd kill for those mashed potatoes, and gravy. God, gravy. I'm starving. Londo peed on the Cheez-Its. *Bad* cat.

I feel like I ain't slept in a *month*. I did sleep, though. I slept at the park, at the bus stop, in that woman's car when I was hitchhiking. I slept the whole time. It was supernice of her not to talk.

I'm still plumb sleepy all the time. Everything's slow, and hard, like walking through snow or molasses or something. I think I just need food.

No food. No father. No home. No money, no clothes. Clothes would be nice. I ain't got friends I can call, an aunt I could stay with. I don't know where I'm going. I don't know where I'm gonna sleep tonight. I don't know how I'm gonna eat. I ain't got a plan. I really need a plan.

What do I got? I got cops chasing me, and Bruce Willis. He's out there, somewhere. And I got . . . I got folks shooting other folks like it's turkey season, at a Christmas party no less, *and* a hospital. What kind of person shoots up a hospital? That's horrible! Even for a mass murderer. Oh, I got a cat in a stinky backpack and nowhere to let him loose. At least he stopped crying. He's either too tired or he's come to terms with life's suckiness. Poor thing. He just wants to sit on Pa's lap and watch TV. He can't anymore, but there has to be something between that and living in a bag.

Crud, I got something else now. I got a waitress coming my way again and still no clue how I'm supposed to get myself a free meal. Has "I found a hair" even worked in a place like this? I mean, it's got lots of things going for it, but cleanliness ain't one of them. I been in the bathroom. Also, the waitress looks nice, even with a black eye. I wish I knew what happened to her. Maybe not. Anyway, I'll feel bad if she ends up footing the bill. What do they do in movies? I seen *Down and Out in Beverly Hills*, but I ain't digging through this place's trash. Ewww. No way. I need to eat, though.

Maybe I should just tell her everything. "Hi! I'm a wanted fugitive running from the police, *and* the Army." Plenty of folks hiding from the cops, but I got the *Army* on my tail. I'm a special kind of fugitive. Anyway, I'd really like to eat something before I walk back to the highway and hope to God I don't get picked up