



Sarah Raich

Equilon

What if your fate is decided by the system?

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400 pages

Does your life matter?

Jenna has done it: she has cracked the score for the 'One Billion' and is now one of the privileged few allowed to go to New Valley, the place where EQUILON was developed. EQUILON: the algorithm designed to make the planet – a world shaken by poverty and climate change – habitable again. But when an event at New Valley is bombed by rebels, she gets a first glimpse of the dark side of this glamorous world.

Dorian from Old LA is bitter: His survival depends on the 'One Billion' score – but he fails at every evaluation. Then he meets little Maggie. Her mother is dying and entrusts him not only with Maggie's fate, but also with something incomparably more valuable: the key to crack the 'One Billion' score.

- Fascinating near-future fiction addressing some red-hot topics: climate crisis, A.I., the ever-widening gap between rich and poor
- A tense and profound tale of disenchantment with social media and virtual reality
- Based on the author's own experience of living and working in Silicon Valley and her research on the influence of algorithms on our reality



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Sarah Raich studied General and Comparative Literature at the FU Berlin, worked at creative agencies and as a journalist, and lived in California before she began publishing narrative texts. Her debut novel, *'All That's Left'* (Piper), was nominated for a Seraph (the German Fantasy Literature Prize) by the Phantastische Akademie in 2022. Sarah Raich lives in Munich with her husband and children.

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Jenna

The ocean lies below me like an expanse of sequined cloth. Sunlight sparkles off waves that from this distance, can't even be made out; only the shimmer makes its way up to me. I fantasize about how glorious it would be to plunge into the rolling depths of glittering sea spray. To dive down among colorful fish, to feel the air bubbles tickling my skin as they float up to the surface.

The truth is, I've never been to the seaside. I've never been anywhere. Well, anywhere that counts, that is. Everything I know about the sea I learned from the light screens on Breitscheid Square in my hometown, Old B., where I used to go with my friends sometimes. Although "friends" is stretching it. We took breaks together, got our minds off that daily struggle to reach the score. And afterwards we were competitors again. Sure, we liked one another. But there just aren't that many openings, and everyone wanted one. When they find out I'm gone, I'm sure they'll bad-mouth me. Rip me to shreds. I don't blame them. I'd probably do the same if I were in their shoes. A person's gotta have some way of keeping their puny little ego alive in Old B.

But now, Jenna! Now you're here, high above the clouds! flashes into my mind, and my heart leaps. I have to shut my eyes tight so I don't start screaming. It's really happening. I reached the score. I don't know how it happened, but it did. And now here I am, sitting in the hyper-glider to New Valley in Alascanada. Of all possible (actually unreachable) places, the coolest one of all. I'd have been happy with anyplace in Ice-Skandia, North China or Nova Sirbia. Of course I would have. But New Valley. Talk about unreachable! In the region of all

regions, it's the place of all places. And yet it really happened. Here I sit, on my way.

I run my hand over the shiny white lining of my cabin. There are no edges, no seams, I'm enveloped in a smooth capsule. Even the compartment holding my notebook, certificates, and Root Crawler sketches is single-cast, a protruding wave in the flow of the mold. The material is smooth and hard yet feels so soft and comfy that it sends shivers down my spine. It's warm, practically alive.

In History of Power I learned that the design of the hyper-glider and all other New Valley transport means are an homage to Steve Jobs, one of the visionary pioneers of MegaGoods. The materials are energetically charged and oscillate in a way that enhances well-being, according to the travel information on my new BraceConnect, which was waiting for me in the cabin.

Comprehensive emotion management is a central pillar of the good life in New Valley; therefore, the wearing of all devices specifically designed to achieve this, but in particular BrainDots, is strongly recommended to all new arrivals. Long-time residents will never be seen without them, it says. For new residents, the older-model, less-invasive BraceConnect is a possibility to accustom oneself to the new technologies. The black-and-gold-scaled cuff bracelet hugs my wrist and covers half my lower arm. In the middle is a touch-screen; to get it to project a picture in front of me, all I need to do is tap it.

Of course I had known they have these things in New Valley. I'd also seen photos of them in the classroom; sometimes there were also videos of the life that awaited us borderland people if and when we ever broke into the one billion. But to see a BraceConnect and a hyper-glider in real life is something totally different. In Old B. we worked with older, donated tablets from the 20's. In New Valley they probably don't even know what those are anymore. A screen that doesn't project, breaks easily, and isn't bendable ... I'm sure nobody there would put up

with anything like that.

I can't help thinking of the code I didn't get finished; I was typing it on an old laptop. Will they be able to finish the app without me? I know I have other things to think about now. Old B. is behind me. But that's exactly what bothers me: until just a couple of hours ago, Old B. was my whole world. Sure, it's a dusty old remnant of a city. But it's all I know. Everything in my life that means something to me is there.

I run my hand over the shining white of the wall next to me. This joy, this tingling, it suddenly occurs to me ... is it really all mine, and mine alone? Or do the vibrations of the BraceConnect have something to do with it? Shouldn't I actually be a little more concerned? Or sadder? I think of my grandparents, the way they sit at the table. Before we ate, we always held hands for a few moments. In silence. And then my grandma would say, "May a little love season this slop." She never got over her old life being gone. She was also the one who insisted that the picture of my parents be left hanging in the living room. I have no memories of the two of them; they both died when I was little. Grandpa didn't want the picture there. He said it would only hold me back, and I had to think of the future, of how I'd get out of Old. B. "That's ancient history, just a millstone around your neck." And Grandma would always retort, "A person needs roots to grow – just like your quinoa and your cabbage." And the picture stayed hanging there. But me, I'm gone now.

Then the tears come, of course. No surprise there. I force myself to swallow, and I pinch the bridge of my nose. That almost always helps to stem the tide. Honestly? I always hated Old B. This old, gray city that's got nothing more than its history. And now I'm suddenly feeling a wave of homesickness for it. I feel so small and stupid. I don't know the first thing about the world.

“Hey, Jenna! How ya doin’?” The glass door has silently slid open, and in front of me stands a smiling woman with perfect makeup and an updo. Her skin reminds me of moonlight; her hair is highlighted with rainbow colors so glittery, I wonder if she hasn’t actually got tiny lights stuck in there.

“I’m Thea,” she says, raising her hand and spreading the ring and middle fingers to form a “v.” The Vulcan greeting. I give her what must be sort of a goofy grin and leave my hands in my lap. I’m just afraid I won’t be able to get my fingers spread in the right place. In Old Europe we still mostly shake hands. Thea is still smiling. Embroidered on her blouse is a grayish-blue kingfisher, the emblem of the transition helpers.

She lays a hand on my shoulder and smiles a little wider. I can hardly look away from her teeth. They’re so white and straight. Almost gem-like.

“It is so, so great that EQUILON has chosen you! Congratulations! You broke the score hurdle! That’s an accomplishment anyone can really be proud of!” She says this in such a friendly way that I don’t even know how to react. People in Old B. are never that nice to each other. But then again, it’s hard to be nice when you’re always hungry and tired, and just plain worn out.

I nod while red blotches are probably spreading over my cheeks. “Yeah,” I stammer like a twelve-year-old. “I’m really happy.” And then I feel a brief surge of anger. After all, I’m 19 years old, a graduate of the New Future Academy; I developed the Root Crawler, a device with the potential to optimize crop irrigation, and I taught myself ten programming languages. I mean, why the hell am I feeling like some idiotic kid right now? *Jenna, cut it out!* I think to myself. *You know that emotion management is super important in New Valley. No aggression, friendly-behavior rules?* I swallow and count to ten. I smile in a way I’m pretty sure looks

confident and say, “I’m really looking forward to making a productive contribution to New Valley.”

“Where’re you headed, then?” Thea asks pleasantly, cocking her head slightly. Now she really does look a little bit like that emblematic bird, eyeing me.

“Um, to New Valley?” I say hesitantly, because after all, here we are, in the hyper-glider headed there.

Thea chuckles, which actually does sound very nice, but I also know that I’ve no doubt said something pretty stupid. Again I feel my face turning red. Damn.

“I mean what company, Jenna. Which of the MegaGoods has chosen you?” Of course. That’s what she wants to know. It’s not about flying to New Valley anymore; now it’s all about where I’m landing in the new hierarchy. I really am going to have to practice a lot so I don’t wind up making a fool of myself over there. If things keep up like this, she’s going to think I somehow cheated my way in.

“Um, I’ll be in the VERO training program,” I answer softly.

“VERO?!” Thea raises her eyebrows, and for just a moment her face drops its professional look. “Wow.” Then she reassumes her warm smile. “With the developers of EQUILON themselves – *THE* algorithm, the foundation of our world order.” She gives me an encouraging nod. “That really *is* impressive. I hope you get along all right.”

And now I don’t know what I should be feeling – joy or dread? But then joy wins the day because: How cool is that?! VERO, the most important company in New Valley, has chosen *me*, Jenna Mills. I beam at Thea and say, “Thanks. I’m sure I’ll manage.”

Thea nods graciously. “No doubt you will,” she says, and her fingers dab at her hair as if there were something that needed fixing. But not a single strand is out of place.

“Can I help you with anything else, Jenna?” I shake my head and find myself looking at those white teeth again. I can’t help wondering if they feel as smooth as they look.

“You know, it’s important for you to use these few hours of flight time well by relaxing as best you can.” The smile on Thea’s face disappears, and her big eyes look at me very seriously. “The clocks in New Valley just tick differently, you know? There’s a lot to learn, also about what to do in your free time.”

The smile hurries back to her lips, and I feel better. I don’t want Thea to get a bad impression of me. She’ll surely be writing a report about the flight. “It’ll be best if you start now,” she says, looking at the BraceConnect that surrounds my arm. “How about a little music?” Scrutinizing my head, she says, “But you’ll have to attach the BrainDots first.”

“Oh, yeah. That’s right. I hadn’t even seen those yet,” I tell her, and give an embarrassed little laugh.

The truth is, I find the concept behind BrainDots somewhat disturbing. You attach one to each temple, right and left, and then they connect with your brain waves.

I know everyone wears them in New Valley ... but still. I like working with computers, thinking about how to improve software or how the interaction with the hardware functions best. How to get the most out of the system. I would have liked to finish the prototype of the Root Crawler – would have liked to see if it really functions, check if the micro-irrigation directly to the roots works. I love technology with all my heart. But to connect my brain directly to a computer? The idea freaks me out.

“You really should attach the Dots, you know. Without them, fitting in at New Valley will be, well, more difficult. During the last couple of years, the Dots have almost completely replaced BraceConnects.” she pauses for a beat. “Did you know that the BrainDots can pick out

music just right for you and the mood you're in? Wouldn't you like to try it, Jenna?" Thea gives me that serious, wide-eyed look again and I nod. It probably *is* silly to make such a big deal about it; after all, I'm in the process of moving to New Valley. And as I'm considering that, my stomach jumps in amazement and excitement. NEW VALLEY, JENNA! Your wildest dreams have come true!

Hastily, I dig the BrainDots out of the package and stick them on. There's a friendly little tingling sound and a bright CONNECTED appears before my eyes. For a moment I feel dizzy and grip my armrests.

At first I think the darned things are broken; I hear children shouting. But then the music really does kick in. A high, classic electro melody, and then a deeper buzz, while a drum holds the beat. *You were a child, crawling on your knees toward it, making mama so proud ...*, sings a young man. A grin spreads over my face, and I feel like dancing. What a song! The BrainDots really do seem to know exactly what I want.

"There – you see?" Thea says, smiling, and looks at my BraceConnect. "*Kids* by MGMT." She nods approvingly. "A little old-fashioned, but really good vibes. I think in choosing you, EQUILON has proven once again how well it functions." She gives me a wink. "By the way, you don't actually need that BraceConnect if you've got BrainDots. It all works over brain waves." She gives me such a friendly, happy smile that I can't even imagine her having a single negative thought.

"Thanks," I answer. "I'll see how it goes."

Thea nods encouragingly. "You know what I think would really go well with your music playlist? A vanilla milkshake. How 'bout it?" Ice cream ... okay, I knew they had dairy products here. But I'm still blown away by the idea that I can actually have them. A milkshake!

“Should I have one brought to you?”

I clear my throat. “Yes, thank you. That’d be nice,” I say, trying my level best to sound casual. I can’t help wondering why we heard so little about how to conduct ourselves in New Valley. In case we made it there. After all, we learned so much! Pushed ahead with so many projects, developed devices, studied climate. But how the heck I’m going to hold my head up here without feeling like a total doofus, I’m not at all sure. I smile.

“You have a great trip now, Jenna,” Thea says, giving me another wink. The glass door closes silently behind her. I’m alone again.

I lean back in my seat, which responds immediately by easing me slowly into a half-reclining position. The hyper-glider has changed direction, and now when I look out the window, I look directly at the sun, standing just above the horizon. It’s spreading its warm morning light out over everything before it. The aircraft is flying so high that I can see the curve of the Earth. All at once I can sense the fragility of the globe below us. In Old B., the world seemed to me to be a mammoth machine I had to fight against, one that was slowly wearing us down, destroying us with its storms and droughts and polluted air. From up here, it gives off a completely different impression. What a complex network it all is, the world!

I’ve known for a long time how it basically all works, of course. Climate modeling was one of my main subjects in the Future Academy, and for the Root Crawler project, I also had to learn a lot about chemical-biological interrelationships. But looking out the window, I get the feeling that only now am I able to grasp my theoretical knowledge. The complexity of all these components that were, above all, numbers in tables, is now surrounding me, and I can really see it for the first time: the clouds, the wind currents, the ocean waves, the light that strikes them, the warmth that turns the water to vapor that turns into clouds again. The Earth that absorbs the

water and releases it again; plants, animals, people, interwoven in every drop of water, every glimmer of light.

I shut my eyes against the dazzling brightness out there, and a warm dark red that penetrates my eyelids remains.

“Jenna, the world is far more beautiful than you can imagine. Believe me.” I hear my grandpa’s voice. “Even now. All you have to do is look,” he told me again and again. And I’d just roll my eyes and say, “Yeah, right. Back in the day.” But now, from up here, it occurs to me that he was right.

A memory pops into my mind, crystal clear. My grandpa and I, standing there in the dust-covered vegetable garden. He’s smiling even though another sandstorm has just annihilated our work. The sun is blinding me, the heat is everywhere. My grandpa, me, and the yellow light. Together we carefully dust off our plants so that maybe, just maybe they’ll be able to grow a little more. In spite of the storm. The sand. The drought.

Before the collapse, before EQUILON reorganized the world and MegaGoods took over governing mankind, my grandpa was a scientist. A biologist. Together, we did research in that small garden plot on how to plant crops and feed animals on the steppes. “Life, Jenna,” he’d always say, “life always finds a way. You have to remember that in everything you do.” And we really did develop good techniques, and our crops survived. Cruciferous plants, quinoa, peanuts – things like that. I taught myself programming. Him with his knowledge about plants, me with my codes – together, we were just the best team around. He wouldn’t want me to be sad remembering the past. “You are tomorrow, Jenna. And if you get out of here, don’t waste your time thinking about Old B. or me or Grandma, you hear? Promise me that. No looking back. No tears.”

Then suddenly a wave of sorrow hits me and I sob, loudly. I'll probably never see my grandpa again. He's much too old to break into the 1 billion. EQUILON will never, ever pick him, no matter how good he is. That much is clear. And whoever's been to New Valley or any of the other Safe Places never goes back. Visits are not part of the plan. Regular people don't have access to e-mails, telephone lines, the postal service or anything like that. All communication channels have been cut. Because they just lead to confusion. In New Valley, the future is all that counts. And I'm going to be a part of it. I'm going to make my grandpa proud. I am. He did all he could to put me here in this seat.

A friendly ringtone sounds. "The music stream will be adjusted to your mood," says a voice, and a new song begins.

A deep bass plays a peaceful melody; one by one, other instruments softly join in, a woman with a husky, gentle voice ...*Nothing's gonna hurt you, baby*, she sings, and I cry softly. My fingers smooth over the seamless, glossy white finish of my cabin, and then I have to laugh, because it's just so unbelievably idiotic and so typically Jenna to cry, of all things, on the way to New Valley.

"New Valley, Jenna," I whisper. "You've done it."

It really has been a lot to get my head around, I think to myself. Everything was so sudden and went so fast. There I was, on the way to Breitscheid Square to watch a film on the light screens with my friends. Then a truck pulls ahead of me, and two friendly gentlemen get out and invite me to come with them. As soon as you reach the necessary score and EQUILON uploads your profile to the 1 billion, things are set in motion. Somewhere in the depths of the quantum computer something goes "click" and triggers the process. Then there's no turning back. No provision is made for good-byes. And really, it doesn't matter. You're not coming back

anyway. What do tears help? And, okay, that unpleasant sad feeling – it gets less and less.

“You did it,” I whisper once more. And then the door glides open; the service wagon parked there slides a tray over to me. On it is a big, fancy-looking glass containing a frosty-white confection. Topped with whipped cream and a red cherry. The vanilla shake looks like it came straight out of one of those old films.

“Thanks,” I murmur, because it seems weird not to say anything, even if it is just a machine, and using both hands, I pick up the heavy glass. I suck on the red-and-white striped straw and the taste of the creamy sweetness explodes in my head like a fireworks display. “Wow! How great is this?” I exclaim to no one, extremely glad to be alone now so that nobody sees me greedily slurping this down.

There’s another friendly “ping.” “You wish to inform yourself about the culinary culture in New Valley,” says the voice. Then, right before my eyes, a program starts. A young man in a chef’s apron is standing in front of a high counter, talking animatedly about the fantastically fresh pumpkin gazpacho he’s about to prepare. He starts listing the ingredients. Even though I haven’t a clue what he’s talking about, I watch him with fascination while drinking the rest of my vanilla shake. Pumpkin gazpacho. The name alone sounds delightful.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see land appearing beyond the sea, a vibrant green swath on the horizon. So it’s really true. There are forests here. Down below stand trees, thick forests, and their radiant green stretches all the way up to me. My heart gives a little leap, and finally it’s there again, this joy, this unbridled joy. “You really did it, Jenna,” I tell myself one last time.

2

Dorian

Here’s the main thing I feel: cold as fuck. And kind of disappointed, too. Somehow I thought it would all be more beautiful. Okay, maybe beautiful is the wrong word when you’re trying to kill yourself. I mean like, more meaningful or enlightening. That’s why I’m standing here. Because none of this makes sense anymore. And I’d hoped that now, in these last few meters, I’d get some sort of inspiration. Something that would make a fitting closing remark. I mean, that’s the least that life could offer at the end. A good exit. To make up for all the shit that came before.

But no. Of course. It’s just cold and dark. Thanks for nothing, fucked-up world. So, the end is just the last bite of the shit sandwich called life. “Well then, Dorian,” I murmur to myself, “that’s all she wrote.”

A guardian whirs up over my head. I can see its beady camera eyes swiveling back and forth, recording everything that happens below it. I’m being recorded too, naturally. And probably the eyes can also see that I’m standing on the wrong side of the bridge railing. Nothing will happen. That’s of no interest to a guardian. It’s just looking to check if we’re still alive – as many of us do – and if we’re doing something illegal. Burning plastic to keep warm at night, for instance. Suicide is not illegal. There are too many of us anyway. How I’d love to sling a big old rock right between its nasty little robotic oculars right now! But that would be pointless, because of course it’s got a protective shield. And I’d get tased, or it would alert an OrderUnit and they’d come and round me up, and the end of the story would be that shortly before I check out anyway, I’d wind up in some wasteland having to mine rare earths for a couple of months until I finally

croak. The guardian zooms off, whirring away into the darkness without taking any further notice of me. Lousy piece of junk.

I hold onto the railing behind me with both hands and lean forward. It's dark, and I can't see the chasm below me. That's the San Andreas Fault; it goes down a few hundred meters, easy, maybe a couple thousand. And that's molten rock waiting down there, magma from the Earth's interior. Whoever plunges in has truly left this life behind.

I wouldn't be the first – not by a long shot. That's why this spot is called *Jumpin' Jack Flash Point*. At least among those of us scrambling around in the New Future Plan here in ExCal, Old LA. Otherwise, nobody knows this place, and nobody cares. Because this place is lost, and we have only the choice of working our butts off and waiting to see if we make it out of here in time, or taking the Jumpin' Jack Flash Point exit.

In any case, I'll never make it out of here. That's a given, even if nobody says it to my face. I'm just too far down. No good grades. No connections in New Valley. No ideas. No nothing. I'm a big fat zero.

A warm breeze suddenly rises out of the chasm. The breath of the Earth, it suddenly occurs to me, and I feel the tears rising.

I don't want to jump in. I don't want to be dead – not at all. But *this*. This life in a shitty borderland on a completely worn-out planet that has no use for me – I don't want that, either. And that pretty much sums it up. I just don't know what to do.

“That's really dangerous, what you're doing there! It's a long, loooong way down!” shouts a high-pitched voice behind me.

I'm so startled that my hand slips. For a moment I'm hanging on with only one arm over the dark abyss, but I've got enough strength; I manage to pull myself back to the balustrade and

carefully turn around.

“Are you crazy? I nearly fell off!” I bellow and drape my upper body over the railing. I’m dizzy, everything’s spinning before my eyes. I shut them tight and see flashes of light through the black. My heart is beating so wildly that I’m scared it will push me toward the abyss a second time.

I breathe deeply and look up.

In front of me stands a chubby girl with glasses. She’s maybe nine or ten, twelve years old at the most. And she’s staring at me, her mouth opened slightly. And her leg has some sort of odd-looking metal brace on it.

“See? Told you so – that’s dangerous!”

She nudges her glasses up and bites into the nutrient block she’s holding with both hands, as if somebody was just looking for a chance to snatch the nasty thing away from her.

“Should I help you?” she asks with her mouth full. I can smell that bar – cabbage and peanuts – and it makes me gag. That stuff is truly nauseating. Whoever thought it up should be caned daily for the rest of their life. Honestly, the nutrient blocks alone would be reason enough to jump into the fucking San Andreas Fault.

“No!” I yell. “Stay the hell away! I’d only wind up dead!” Stupid brat, I think. God, everything just sucks.

I try to heave myself over to the other side. But I can’t get my leg up high enough, and then I suddenly have to cry. Seriously bawl. Great sobs come bubbling up out of me, and my body trembles. What fucking shit this all is. A humungous pile of stinking, steaming manure. With me stuck right in the middle. I feel like screaming, but instead all I manage to do is blubber a little louder.

Out of the corner of my eye I see the girl stuff the rest of the bar in her mouth and start walking toward me. Her black corkscrew curls hop with every step, her expression is determined, her brace softly squeaks and clacks. She looks like a fat little superhero, only without a costume. She grabs my jacket with a strength that takes me totally by surprise and pulls me up over the railing until I land on the crumbling asphalt of the road like a gunny sack full of dead rats.

“Thanks,” I gasp, and snivel a little more. But suddenly I feel better.

“Want some?” she asks as if nothing at all had just happened, holding a fresh nutrient block under my nose.

“No, no. Thanks,” I say, sitting up. I breathe in deeply and smell the dirt of the road and even the ocean, which is just a few hundred meters from here, even if we’ll never be able to go there. Restricted area. I really don’t feel like eating. But I don’t feel like dying anymore, either.

“So where do you live, then?” The girl has put a hand on my shoulder, and she’s looking at me like she’s examining me. As if I were a sick animal. I turn my body so I can escape her concerned hand and stand up.

My clothes are completely covered in dust, and I feel like I’ve run a marathon. Strange to think they really had those. People who spent the whole day running around. Just because. And for over 40 km. Nobody does *that* anymore, of course. It’s probably not even allowed. Waste of energy.

“Well, I live over there,” says the girl, pointing across the desolate field, where a few scattered quinoa plants defy the heat and the sand. Behind the field is a shanty town. That’s where Old L.A.’s Unsorted live. The ones that no one has any use for anymore. The ones who stand outside of absolutely everything.

But first you have to somehow wind up there. Because actually, we live in the collectives. Apartment blocks out of containers, or houses from the old days – ones that were able to be converted. Everyone is allowed three square meters. And admittance to a feeding room, where the nutrient blocks are dispensed and occasionally even real food. Rice meal, dried cassava, sometimes even dried fish. Those who live in collectives get enough to survive. So that we can take care of our projects, of developments that are supposed to rescue this world. The Unsorted, they don't get anything.

“Come on. You can come to our place and rest for a little bit if you want.” The girl fumbles around on my hand and pulls and tugs until I finally clasp hers and let her guide me. “My name is Margaret, by the way, but everyone calls me Maggie,” she says. “My mom named me after some woman back then, a politician. My mom says she was every bit as stubborn as me.” She gives me a wry smile. “But I'm nicer, my mom says.”

Maggie aims straight for the field. We make our way through the quinoa plants. The latest sandstorm really did a number on them. They're standing far apart; we have no trouble walking between them. Now and then my jacket brushes one and their leaves crackle like paper in a fire.

“What's your name, then?” Maggie asks in a joyful sing-song.

“Dorian,” I half-whisper. Actually, I'd just like to be left in peace right now. The image of that yawning abyss keeps flashing in front of my eyes, and I have to ask myself if maybe I really did jump and what's happening now is the afterlife. Ha-ha. Knowing my lousy luck, that's probably not so far-fetched. Welcome to eternity. The moment of your death, only it lasts forever. What a nightmarish thought. I shudder. Little Maggie is jabbering away like this is any ordinary day and we're strolling through the park.

“Dorian ...” She draws out “n” as if she’s going to start making up some idiotic song out of my name. “Sounds nice. I don’t think I’ve ever heard it, though. Why are you named that?”

“WHY ARE YOU NAMED THAT?! What a loony question!” I snort. “Because that’s what my parents named me, Little Miss Genius!”

I let go of her hand. We’re standing in the middle of the field, staring at each other. She puts her hands on her hips and grins at me as if she hadn’t heard me yelling at her.

“Yes, but WHY did your parents name you that?” she asks, holding her index finger up in the air as if she’d just recalculated the theory of relativity.

I roll my eyes and keep walking toward the shanty town. “No idea,” I mumble more to myself than her. “My parents are dead.” And if Miss Maggie here keeps babbling on, I’ll take and pitch her into the San Andreas Fault myself.

“My parents are dead, too,” she says, not so happily anymore but still rather matter-of-factly.

“Huh? But you told me you were taking me to your mom!”

“Yes. Well – I mean Hannah. Hannah *is* my mom. But she didn’t have me. I just call her Mom. That’s simpler.” She shrugs and I shake my head. What an odd child. I make up my mind to concentrate on going my own way, on my own two legs. And anyway, it’s best to be alone. Then nobody can get in your way.

“Okay, here we are!” Maggie calls after me, and now I notice I’ve walked right by the shacks, making my way through the quinoa on autopilot.

Maggie is leaning on one of the shack doors. You can sort of sense dim light behind it.

“Hmm,” I grunt and walk back the few paces. As casually as possible. Although I already feel pretty idiotic. What a lousy day.

3

Jenna

I feel as if I'm drifting up over my body, my thoughts are like cotton. That must be the fatigue.

Everything seems so unreal. As if I'd stepped into a picture where everything is faultless, all the colors coordinated, every light perfectly placed, even the furthest corners white and clean. I keep blinking my eyes because somehow I don't trust them.

“Welcome to NEW VALLEY Airport, the future of the world,” the pleasant voice of a woman announces over invisible loudspeakers.

The air terminal is a building of glass and steel pipes and is so airy and light that the roof above me seems about to lift up and fly away. The metal struts supporting everything seem so thin it's almost impossible to believe that everything holds together. A stable, light material like this would help quite a lot in Old B. Back there, I used to think about how to build an ultralight yet sturdy arone to transport the sick to our one and only medical station. With metal like this, it could be done. I start thinking about how to build the rotor blades – if the metal were rolled out thin, it could work, but the rotor blades would have to be several meters long ..., but then Thea walks by me and says, “Hurry, now! We can't be dawdling. Your transport will no doubt be punctual. Everybody's always on time here in New Valley! Not like back in the borderlands where nobody's too concerned about that kind of thing. The sooner you get used to it, the better!” She laughs and I follow her down the hall.

Even though we're inside, the light is golden and warm. I look around for the lights. It takes me a while to realize that there's not just one single light source; above us floats a cloud of

tiny gold-gleaming points. I almost think I’m dreaming and shut my eyes tightly again, but there they are still, these golden mini lights. Like tiny fairies, I think. Like magical beings from a different, better world. I point up but manage only a “What ...?”

Thea steps over to me and gently pulls my arm down. She grins and winks. “If you don’t want to out yourself as a New Entry everywhere you go, you’ll have to practice reining in your amazement a little.” She strokes my cheek lightly. “But I like that innocence you all have when you first arrive,” she murmurs almost to herself. What do you mean by that, I want to ask at first, but it seems impolite.

“But what *is* that?” I ask instead.

“That?” Thea looks up along with me, and it still looks so exquisite, this hovering film of light. “Those are the Lights in the Sky,” she says, pulling me gently along in the direction of the exit. “For the last five years they’ve been replacing most of the light sources in New Valley. Basically, they’re extremely lightweight micro-LEDs that are kept hovering there with the help of magnetism and currents from the ventilation system.” Thea glances up one last time. “Yes, they really are very pretty, but you just get used to everything after a while.” I stare at them a little longer. I mean, what an absolutely fantastic idea! I’d love to meet the people who developed Lights in the Sky.

We step out of the air terminal. After all those hours in air-conditioned rooms and the hyper-glider, the warm air feels as if I’ve hit a wall. I feel a fine dampness on my skin, like rain, but much, much lighter. And it occurs to me that I’m now at the sea and not on the steppes that surround Old B., and I get butterflies in my stomach.

The sea ... I’ve been dreaming of the sea my entire life. Nobody in the borderlands travels. Because as long as we still have even the slightest chance to reach the 1 billion, none of

us would sacrifice points.

But now I'm going to live here, directly by the sea. I can already sense it in the air. The humidity, the salt. I hear a screech and turn around. Behind me is a big white bird landing on the canopy of the exit. Its wings look as though they're woven out of costly material. Its beak is bright yellow with one red dot.

“A seagull,” says Thea, laughing. “Be careful of those beasts. They're grabby little thieves. And spoiled. Like all wild animals, they're considered endangered, so they're fully protected.” I nod, already looking forward to the time when, in an unobserved moment, I can lure one of these birds over to me with some food. Maybe I'll even manage to touch its feathers.

As if the seagull had read my mind, it lifts a wing in order to clean itself underneath, poking its beak around, and one delicate feather flutters down to me. I stretch out my hand and catch it. It has, in fact, no weight at all and is completely white. I quickly close a fist around it and put it in my dress pocket, where I've also stowed the BrainDots. I don't feel all that comfortable with them yet. I look around for Thea. She's walked on a few steps ahead and seems to be looking out for something.

I try to get my thoughts straight, but they're buzzing around in my head, fluttering ghosts that dissipate as soon as I try to grab them.

Although the flight itself lasted only 10 hours, I've been awake for over 24. In Old B. it would be night now. Or already early morning? As hard as I try to think, I just can't figure out how the time zones work. The missing sleep lies like a sheet of sandpaper over everything. Panic rises in me and insinuates itself in front of the joy and excitement in me. I'm at the other end of the world, and I'm all alone.

“There it is!” shouts Thea, eyes wide with amazement. “You really were telling the

truth!” I look where she’s pointing and see a flat vehicle floating through the air toward us.

“That’s the pick-up taxi from VERO!”

And now I see the writing projected in the air over the taxi: WELCOME JENNA MILLS.

And then it’s there. The sea. Not spectacular. Less sparkly and exotic than it seemed before. And yet infinite and beautiful. How do you describe that – the feeling that there’s nothing in the way? That you can see forever, and below your gaze the water ripples and rushes up to the beach, where the waves, exhausted, stagger onto the sand and disappear.

The cabin of the taxi is made of curved glass; only the floor and the heated seat remind me that I’m not floating in the air. Above me whirl dozens of silent rotors, holding the machine in the air. As I press myself against the window for a moment, I can imagine how the seagull must feel. Free, surrounded only by the sheer boundless world. And then it becomes clear to me; I really am like the seagull. I’m here, at the sea, and the world now has no limits for me. Finally. I can feel a smile pressing my lips together and drawing my mouth wide. I can’t help it.

4

Dorian

“Mom, I’m home!” I flinch. For a little kid, she sure has a big voice. Cautiously I pad behind Maggie up to the poorly lit shack.

The air almost takes my breath away. Not that it smells terribly good in Old LA otherwise. But *this* is beyond gross. It smells like decay and unwashed people. Like old food, like mold and something that I can hardly name but that’s worse than all the other smells put together. It smells like death.

“Come on, then!” Maggie pulls me by the sleeve into the shack. I choke back a gag and follow her into the gloom.

“I want to introduce you to my mom!” she says, and she sounds so proud I’m afraid I’ll start blubbing again. In a few steps we’ve crossed the shack.

Everywhere are stacks of old boxes, mountains of clothes, warped furniture. Maggie must notice the look on my face. “Mom never says no. She takes every present, even if it’s only junk.” She shrugs. “And then all the stuff just sits around.”

“Oh,” I say, although I have no idea what she’s talking about. But maybe it doesn’t matter.

What in the world am I doing here? I should turn on my heels and make tracks right back out the door. I’m just such a dope – no wonder I can’t get my shit together. Instead of either leaping into the San Andreas Fault or working on my damned score, here I am shuffling around the stinking shacks of the Unsorted. There’s a rumor that it goes on your record if you have

anything to do with the Unsorted. They take points off your score – a bunch. Okay, I don’t know that for sure, but nobody knows for sure what they take off points for. With my luck, though, your score drops to zip and stays there forever if they catch you with an Unsorted.

Maggie pulls aside a kind of curtain. It’s made of scraps of material that have been tacked together to make a cloth big enough to section off part of the room.

Behind the curtain there’s a small but very bright light burning. Otherwise it’s dark. I can make out a cot. The light illuminates a pale sunken face that’s resting on a few stuffed sacks. My insides contract.

“Hi, Mommy!” Maggie says sweetly, approaching the bed. “Did you sleep well?”

The pallid face stirs on the pillow and the eyes open.

“Can you help me, child?”

Maggie apparently knows what to do. She pulls on the arms of the figure until it’s sitting up.

“Look here, I’ve brought somebody. His name is Dorian. I think he could use a little help.” Maggie points to me. “He was so dumb that he almost fell off the bridge into the San Andreas Fault. Can you believe it?” She vigorously shakes her head back and forth as if she really can’t believe how stupid I am.

Help? I think. Who’s going to help me here? They can’t even help themselves!

“I didn’t mean to bother you,” I say, trying to sound very, very cheerful and carefree. “I feel great. Nothing happened.”

“Well, how about that,” says the figure and smiles. “You almost fell into the San Andreas Fault.” I can see her eyes now; they’re gentle and dark, nearly black. “It’s been known to happen.” She winks at me. “How about telling me something about yourself – who you are and

what brought you there? Maybe I really can do something for you.”

Her. Help me? So not only is she as good as chained to her bed, she’s crazy, too. Which is of course understandable.

On the other hand, I don’t even remember the last time somebody actually asked me who I am. And why I am where I am. And suddenly I have such a strong urge to just start talking that I sit down in the middle of all that stinking junk and say, “Hello. I’m Dorian.”

“Pleased to meet you, Dorian,” she says, and a warm smile brightens her wearied face. “My name is Hannah.”

She raises herself up a little higher and looks into my eyes. Searching, but friendly. It’s strange: from a distance she looked like a living corpse. But now, close up, her missing hair, the ashen color of her skin – those don’t matter. She’s got the most incredibly alive, loving eyes. Despite that, I have to look away. It’s been a long time since anybody looked at me so intensely.

“So, Maggie met you on the bridge,” she says finally.

I say “Yes” and hear how hoarse my voice sounds, tired and drained. And then I look at Hannah again, and she looks at me, and I see she knows exactly what it means that I was standing on the bridge. Of course she does. Except for Maggie, probably everyone in ExCal knows what it means when somebody’s hanging around on Jumpin’ Jack Flash Point.

“Do you live in one of the collective houses?”

“Yes,” I say again and clear my throat. “Down on Hollywood Boulevard.” I say that so she won’t think I’m a snob. The houses on Hollywood Boulevard are collectives, but they’re a little shabbier than the ones downtown, or by the Guggenheim up in the hills. Because not far behind Hollywood Boulevard begins the no-go area, that strip of land between Old LA and the sea. Whoever lives there is most definitely not one of the promising.

Maggie is rummaging around somewhere among all the boxes and piles.

“Mommy, do we have any more nutrient blocks with peanuts? I’m so hungry.”

“I think you ate the last ones, sweetie. We still have some with teff flour and turnips.”

“Ugh, no! I want one with peanuts!”

Hannah shrugs and looks at me with a smile.

“It is what it is, child.” It’s odd how her voice sounds weak and happy at the same time.

“How about you go out and rustle up some quinoa and we’ll do some cooking?”

Maggie grumbles unintelligibly, stomps through the shack and slams the door behind her.

Hannah laughs weakly.

“Maggie has the enviable gift of acting like the spoiled only child she is, even in this hellhole where we live.”

I try to imagine the sound of Hannah’s laughter before she got so frail and emaciated. Loud, I’ll bet. And infectious. No doubt she really stood out in a crowd. The life of every party. I can picture it.

We look into each other’s eyes for the longest time, it seems to me, and then she says: “Why don’t you want to live anymore, Dorian?” And instead of answering, I start crying again.

“Because it’s no use,” I say finally. “Because I can’t stand this place anymore. The constant evaluations. Seeing every month how my score keeps dropping and I keep sinking down, down, down. And in a couple of years, I’ll be too old for the New Future Plan, and when that time comes, I’d be better off dead anyway.” I laugh bitterly. “Or I could join the New Horizon Program, on that absurd expedition toward the Gamma Earth. Squeezed in with millions of others on mega-spaceships, for 20 years.” Another bitter laugh escapes me. “Or I can have myself frozen in the New Dawn Plan! As if anything would ever get better! Or ...”

I can't finish that sentence because I was almost about to say something about her life. I'm so ashamed I could crawl off into the mountains of garbage and hide. But all I see in Hannah's eyes is humor. "Yes, or you could live like us. Which I can't really recommend, to be honest. Although it does have its advantages." She reaches for the cup next to her and takes a swallow. "I don't get my nose rubbed in my monthly score total, anyway." She sits up further still and lets her legs slide off the bed. Now it's obvious how painfully thin she really is.

"I'll turn the stove on. Maggie will be bringing the quinoa in soon, no doubt." She wraps a coat around herself and ties a scarf over her hair, sparse stubbles. How old is she? Probably somewhere between 40 and 60, but it's hard to say.

"And why does your score keep going down?" She asks me this as nonchalantly as if she wanted to know what the nutrient ration is today.

"I ...," I start stuttering. "I'm not good at tests," I say finally. "And I haven't got a ..."

This is so damn hard. But finally I say, "A useful project. Nothing that the 1 billion would be interested in." And I sink down in a ratty old easy chair in the corner, next to the stove. "Once I was part of a team for an ocean cleaner. But they kicked me off because I didn't deliver any useful results. And no doubt they were right." Strange, how liberating it is just to talk about all the ways you've failed.

"No matter what I decide to do, no matter how hard I try, I can't make any progress." I keep talking and talking, can't seem to stop, because it doesn't matter anymore anyway. I'm screwed, and the lady knows it, so why keep anything to myself anymore?

"Sometimes I get an idea in my head, and then sometimes I think, YES! Now things are gonna happen! But then everything gets messed up somehow, and I start thinking how ridiculous and pointless it all is. Because how many of us ever do really make it out? And we don't even

know how high a score we need or how many places there really are. Are there actually places? And who thought up this fucking shit anyway? I mean, I know it's a huge catastrophe; after all, I'm living right in the middle of it. But who was it who decided that this is the right way? That it's fair and just?"

I'm a little surprised at myself, how the words keep pouring out of me. Like a pipe has burst or something.

"The MegaGoods just took over the helm, or the governments just threw in the towel. What do I know? And now we're supposed to pay the price?" I pause. Any one of those sentences would be enough to get me kicked out of the program. But like I said, that doesn't matter anymore. And Hannah doesn't look like anybody who'd rat on someone.

"And so," I finally say, speaking into her silence. "That's what keeps spinning round and round in my head and then once more, nothing happens. I just can't get ahead. And my score keeps falling and falling and falling ..." With my right hand I make the motion of a sinking flight and then crash it into my left hand. "Boom!"

"Hmm," is Hannah's comment. Not quite as impressed as I'd hoped. But whatever. I'm just a little prick on a crummy day in a crummy life in a crummy world. Who cares? Just one more loser.

"But surely there's something you can do, isn't there?" she asks as she digs out a dented saucepan. She says that like she's really expecting an answer. And like she's absolutely convinced there is one.

Should I tell her? There's actually only one thing about me that I don't automatically hate 100%.

"I ...," I stammer while Hannah rummages around in her ad hoc kitchen corner, acting

like we're having a perfectly normal conversation.

“I ...,” I start again, but nothing more comes out. I just can't say anything more. And then she stops looking for things and sits on her bed.

“Go ahead,” she says, looking at me again with those eyes that are much too friendly and joyful for this place.

“I ...” For a third time I start and clear my throat. “Sometimes I do these things with words.” I could kick myself. Couldn't have phrased it much stupider than that.

“Sometimes texts form in my head. Poems,” I start yet again. “And sometimes I write them down.” I look at Hannah and she looks at me. But she says nothing. “And sometimes I like them, too. Even though I know they won't do me any good.” I shrug my shoulders.

“Have you got one in your head now?” she asks.

“Yeah,” I say. “On the way here. Well, going to Jumpin' Jack Flash Point. I thought of one.”

“Would you recite it to me?” And the way she says that, casual and serious at the same time, gives me goose bumps.

“Okay,” I answer. For a moment I say nothing, maybe to test if she means it or not. But there she sits, hands in her lap, with her attention fixed on me. Yes, she really does want to hear it. So I start:

*“Blackness. Like the night
that's far above me
and also deep within me,
it has unfurled
like a dark velvet cloth
throughout my veins.
The San Andreas Fault, deep,
much deeper
than I can ever imagine.”*

*If I had wings,
I'd have a life.
But I have only night."*

Afterwards, there's a stillness in the room. Only my words seem to still hang in the air, and it's as if they weren't even mine anymore; it's as if they've become Hannah's words.

"That is so very beautiful," she says finally. "Thank you for sharing that with me."

I only nod.

And then the door flies open and Maggie tramps in.

"I have returned from the far reaches of space with a message for you: I have quinoa!" she announces in a deep, dramatic voice, lifting an old plastic bag up high. Hannah and I both have to smile.

"Do you think you could take off again, my little astronaut? We haven't got any more sweetener. And without it, the quinoa tastes kind of boring, don't you think? Take a can of the soy concentrate and go over to the neighbors'. They've probably still got some sweetener and will be willing to trade with us."

Maggie grumbles, but she takes a can from the kitchen corner and leaves.

"I wanted to discuss something with you," says Hannah as soon as she's out the door. "Without Maggie. You can see that I'm not doing so well. I probably haven't got more than a couple of weeks." She says it very casually.

"No!" I burst out. NO! She's probably the nicest person I've ever met in my whole life. "Can't they do anything?" I feel tears coming on.

"Oh, Dorian," she says, smiling indulgently. "I'm an Unsorted. Of course there's nothing they can do." She draws a long, deep breath and exhales.

“I wish it were different. But I’m almost certain. I’m a doctor myself. It’s probably liver cancer. From the toxins that are in the soil, the water, and the air here. The symptoms fit, anyway.”

I don’t know what to say.

“When I’m gone, then Maggie will need someone. She has a father. In New Valley.” And by the way she audibly draws in her breath, I already know there’s a bombshell coming.

“I’d like to ask you to take her there and find him.” She doesn’t drop her eyes from me. “Or at least try. I’ve been thinking for months about what’s going to happen to her. Who I can ask. And now you come walking in here.” She smiles and stands up. Then she gets something from under her mattress, a small black box made of cardboard. She hands it to me. And for the first time I see that her right index finger is missing. She must have gone through so much already. Her hands are cracked, they’re so dry. Her lips, too, are dry and scaly.

“I’ve prepared everything. I just didn’t know who I could give it to,” she says, smiling. “To explain everything to you would take too much time. Maggie will be coming back now, and I’d like to talk with her in peace.”

Hesitantly, I take the box. The lacquer coating is worn. In fancy gold lettering are the words *Rhythm is gonna get you – the ultimate 80s collection*.

“I don’t think I’m the right one,” I say, looking down. I can feel my face getting warm. I hate turning her down, but the thought of smuggling a hyper, overconfident, slightly overweight girl with glasses and a leg brace into New Valley seems completely nuts to me. And then there’s also the fact that I have absolutely no idea how I’d ever go about transporting us a couple of thousand miles north. On a good day, I might be able to find the right direction, but as for the rest?

“Don’t worry,” she says. “You don’t have to decide right now. Just take the package with you, look at it, and either you bring it back tomorrow, or ... I’ll send Maggie to you when the time comes.” She smiles at me, and I take the package. “And if you have questions, you can of course come here anytime.” For a moment, neither of us says anything.

“It’s up to you. There’s one more thing you should probably know. In the package you’ll find something that will give you the key, if you use it right.”

“The key to what?” I ask.

“The key to the 1 billion.”