

1. Unclean

You don't know what's happening when you're rolling around on the floor frothing at the mouth; you only go by what other people tell you. It's like you're asleep. There's just blackness, void. You lose time: not hours, just minutes, or even seconds. Sometimes you bite your tongue so hard it bleeds, or you pee yourself. When you wake up you're staring around, wondering where the hell you are, and who you are. Your arms and legs feel like lead, your whole body is a dead weight. You can hardly sit up, and when you manage to stand up, all you want to do is to fall back down again.

This is how I remember my first seizure.

It's early one morning, or the middle of the night, whatever way you want to look at it. As usual I've broken curfew, out on the streets with my gang, the Rockets, fighting the Prey on our patch in an alleyway down by the docks. None of the gangs keep curfew, which begins at sundown, even if the penalty for getting caught is death. We keep an eye out for the robot police guards, massive metallic machines over thirty feet high which maintain law and order in twenty ninety-nine. They shoot deadly laser beams from their eyes, and have missiles in their hands and feet. They're especially tough on street gangs who defy curfew. Everyone, even the hardest gang member, fears the guards, but it doesn't stop us meeting up at night, roaming the deserted streets, robbing for food and money. We're like a family, looking out for one another. We don't have money, or enough to eat, so we have to steal to survive.

We escape the guards mainly because we don't have probes injected in our necks. Probing has been around for about three years to keep tabs on the behaviour of the population. A probe feeds off nerve impulses from the spinal column and the brain, monitoring our emotions and actions. Probing babies is law now. The crime rate has plummeted – except in the gangs. They haven't been able to catch the majority of us yet to probe us. The authorities know who's probed and who isn't. We're constantly hiding from anyone official who comes with the guards to search out the docks, inspecting people with their probe detectors.

Guards are soulless, sadistic, and cruel; they treat people like toys. They like to chase you before they shoot you. Well, I suppose you can't really call them sadistic, as they have no feelings, but that's the point: they're robots, so they don't care.

Say, for instance, they catch a kid drinking alcohol. Drinking is outlawed. The ground trembles and the road cracks as a guard pounds through the streets, its electronic voice droning, 'Stop! Police! Stay where you are! You have thirty seconds to obey!'

The air is filled with the screams of people too scared to move in case a laser beam hits them in the head. I dodge through the door of a derelict shop, stooping under a block of concrete which is hanging down, watching the scene through the crack in the broken board nailed to the window. The lad sways on the spot, wasted with the drink, as the others around him are ordered to lie face down on the ground. He's panting hard; thin, pale, weak, and too knackered to run any more, but he's still shouting at the guard, defiant to the end.

'Come on, yer loser! Come and get me!'

Seconds later he's a burnt corpse.

The guard, having done its duty, scoops up the remains, then thunders away. The people lying on the ground stand up nervously before going about their business.

I wait until dark before I make my escape. I can barely see a thing in the shop, and I forget about the concrete block. I walk straight into it, banging my head so hard I'm stunned. I nearly pass out, but I manage to recover enough to stumble back to the relative safety of what I call home.

I'm street trash, with no family of my own. I've no idea who my family are, or where I come from. I don't remember having anyone close in my life, except the Rockets. I've been with them for years. I have a tattoo mark on my arm, the letter 'R'. We all have one, we belong. I've always been known as Travis, but I don't know where that name comes from. I have no education. I can read, but that's about all. Education is for the fat richers living in their cosy houses. They've got lots of things street trash don't have, like renewable nucleic light, reserved for them, the big businesses, and the hospitals.

I don't even live in a house. I live in a shack made out of corrugated iron, down by the Mersey, with other lonely souls in what we call Corrugated City. Our heat and light come from bonfires. It's always cold at night, warm and damp by day. The old ones talk about cold winters, warm summers, and snow which I've never seen. It rains a lot these days. When the sun is out it can be too hot to move by day sometimes. The old ones blame something called 'global warming'. They tell terrifying stories about great storms ravaging the planet before my birth, caused, they say, by the sky becoming too hot, resulting in electricity sending sharp, blinding lights throughout the atmosphere, and people drowning in floods caused by heavy rain.

I live on my wits like everyone else. I've no idea how old I am, something like fifteen or sixteen. I don't have face hair yet like the older men, but I'm tall, and not that bad-looking. I have a girl I love. She loves me. Her name is Jenna. She's a Rocket, too.

The Prey's territory is at other end of town. We get word that they've wandered into our patch, so we get together, all thirty of us, armed with our weapons, and go looking for them. We know Zed Lewis, their leader, fancies his chances with Jenna. He's probably come to fight us with her as the prize; he's been bothering her when she's alone. I want to kill him! And we have another score to settle: one of our gang has been beaten up near the derelict containers. He's nearly dead when we find him. We have to take him to the hospital, because we can't take care of him ourselves.

'They're bound to tell the authorities he's not probed,' I say as we leave his body outside the hospital doors, before running back into the shadows.

Injury is the only reason you go into hospital in twenty ninety-nine, because genetic cleansing has supposedly wiped out all of the diseases. The old ones tell us about illness in the past: it's been ten years since anyone has been allowed to get sick and be looked after in hospital. You can't even get something called a 'cold' or 'flu', or even a 'headache' now, because they've found cures. Sickness is a crime these days. No one wants to come face-to-face with a health inspector – or the 'clean police' as we call them – any more than they like to face a guard.

We corner the Prey by the warehouse, and start attacking. I duck as Lewis takes a swipe at me. I run into him, charging him to the ground. As we're grappling the glow from the fires all around Corrugated City start to swim, and faces become blurred. Lewis vanishes from my grasp. I'm falling away from him, descending into darkness.

I wake up in an old shopping trolley, being pushed at high speed through the streets. Shopping trolleys have littered the city for years, and we use them for all sorts of things. People have tried to trade them for their metal, but the metal is too thin and worthless. I open my mouth to speak. I taste salt, and my tongue hurts.

'What's going on?' I lisp.

No one answers. Voices shout. Something dribbles down my face. I put a hand up to my head; it's sticky. Blood!

'There's a wheel loose! I hope it stays on before we get there!' That's Saul speaking. He's my mate.

'Not far to go; just around this next corner,' replies Jenna.

It's too dark to tell where they're taking me, and I can't seem to focus properly. Everything is a blur. At last a large, brightly lit building comes into view, too big to be a richer's house. I see big white vans parked outside, and a sign with the words 'Accident and Emergency' printed in big red letters. The hospital! I groan. I must be badly hurt.

They don't drop my body outside in the dust; they push me through the big double doors.

'Help, please!' shouts Jenna. Two men (or they may be androids) come from nowhere.

'Leave him here!' says Saul urgently. 'We can't go any further. They'll call the guards...'

'Travis, I'm sorry...' begins Jenna. Her voice dies away.

I'm moved from the shopping trolley to a hospital trolley, pushed again, this time down a long corridor to a room occupied by people in green and blue uniforms. They're all talking at once.

'What have we got?' asks a tired voice. My clothes are stripped off.

'Young white male, about fifteen years of age, left by a gang of kids in the foyer. The girl called him 'Travis.' Something cold is pushed in my neck. 'Not probed, either, and he's out of curfew.'

'Rockets,' says another man. 'Look at the tattoo on his arm. We should notify the guards. There'll be trouble if we don't.'

'The guards will have to wait for now,' says the tired doctor. 'He's too ill to be interrogated.' A light shines in my eyes. 'Pupils equal and responsive; GCS twelve; lacerations and bruising to the face; the nose is broken,' I cry out as pain shoots through my arm, 'and the arm. Let's get him down to the scanner as soon as we've finished here, see if there's any more damage.'

Needles are stuck into my body. I pass out, because the next thing I know I'm looking up at a machine making noises. Then I'm wheeled into a room with pale blue walls, and put into a bed.

I don't know how long I'm there, because I have no sense of time. I just keep slipping in and out of consciousness. My arm hurts; it's bandaged, elevated in a sling. There's a needle and a drip attached to my other arm. Every so often someone coaxes me with a spoon or a straw, and a different, usually pretty young girl in a white uniform sponges me down, but I'm too ill to get excited about that. Sometimes a group of people stand at the foot of my bed, and talk in low voices.

'How many has he had up to now?' asks a grey-haired man, presumably a doctor, to a big woman in a dark blue dress, presumably a nurse.

'Seven.'

'Well, his scans show he definitely has epilepsy. The health inspectors will need to be informed. How long is he usually under?'

The woman looks at a clipboard. 'This morning's seizure lasted about ten minutes.'

'And the Diazepam brings him out of it?'

'Yes.'

'Continue with the present dose. I'll speak to the health inspectors. It will most likely mean the institution.'

I drift away, thinking about what health inspectors do. One whiff of anyone falling ill the inspectors class them as diseased, locking them away in institutions. Every town and city has an institution, dark, depressing buildings, with big steel doors, and bars on the windows. We all know what they get up to in there: experiments, treatments, attempts at cleansing that usually end in death. Saul's brother, Emmett, is in one. Saul doesn't like to talk about Emmett much.

There's no danger of me going to an institution. I know for a fact I'm clean. The doctor must be talking about some other poor sod.

I press my tongue against my teeth. It still hurts.

As time goes on I become more aware of my surroundings. For most of the time I'm alone with nothing to look at but the four walls. Men in dark suits with badges labelled 'Health Inspector' come and go, but I get no other visitors. I don't expect the Rockets to come. They can't risk being caught by the guards, who don't come, either, but I hear them mentioned more than once. It seems in my present state I'm not that a big risk to security.

'It's definitely the institution for him. He won't be a danger to anyone there.'

I let out a low groan.

‘Oh, so you’re with us this morning, are you?’ asks the grey-haired doctor, peering down at me over his glasses. ‘How are you feeling?’ Travis, is it?’

‘Like crap,’ I mutter. ‘What’s all this about an institution? You only put the unclean in one of those. I’m clean.’

The doctor pulls up a chair. ‘Have you ever heard of a condition called epilepsy?’ I shake my head. ‘Well, you’ve been fitting constantly since you came in here, and we’ve done all the tests. You have it.’

I frown. My brain is fuzzy and confused. ‘But I haven’t got a disease.’

‘It isn’t a disease as such,’ says the doctor, ‘not like cancer or diabetes used to be. It’s caused by electrical disturbances in the brain. One of those things, unfortunately, and there are many sufferers.’

My heart thuds. ‘What’s – epilepsy? – and what’s it got to do with the institution?’

‘Years ago epilepsy was considered to be a type of madness. Sufferers were hidden away in places called asylums. Over the years excellent medication and surgery meant they were able to lead relatively normal lives, until they discovered that cleansing couldn’t eradicate it, and surgery became more risky with an increasingly high death rate. It will always need to be treated. It’s a condition that can’t be wiped out.’

‘Can you catch it?’ I ask quietly. ‘I mean how did I get it?’

‘It may have just developed, or you had a bang on the head at some point in your life; and no, you can’t catch it.’

‘So why...?’

‘You know illness – any type of illness – is considered to be a threat to humankind, and the institutions are there to protect the clean. Epilepsy medication is no longer available to the public without hospital intervention. I’m sorry,’ he gets up from his chair, ‘the inspectors have made their decision.’ He nods to the nurse, and they leave the room.

I stare at the door, my brain reeling. So there’s no cure for this epilepsy thing! I can’t pass it on, but the inspectors say I have to be locked away! It’s a life sentence, or worse!

I have to get out of here!

I drag the needle from my good arm. Blood gushes everywhere, on the sheets, on the floor. I get up quickly from the bed, and immediately flop down again. I’m so weak; everything hurts! My broken arm throbs like mad. I sit up more slowly, trying to regain my balance, but the room won’t stop spinning. I stand up, and make my way carefully to the locker to see if my clothes are there. It’s empty. The sods have taken my clothes! I’m not going to get very far in this gown with my arse sticking out!

The door is probably locked, too; doors usually are here. I’m not sure I have the strength to climb out of the window, with only one good arm. I try the door, anyway. It opens! I peep into the corridor, empty except for a large trolley full of sheets. Nervously I creep out of my prison, without any idea of where I’m going, not caring about the trail of blood I leave behind.

I need to find something else to wear. I stagger along the corridor, before I come across a door labelled ‘Locker Room’. I have to hide behind the linen trolley when the door opens, and someone comes out. The footsteps stop for a moment, and then they carry on. I wait for them to fade away before I dare to venture out, and make for the locker room. I open the door slowly, listening for voices. When I’m sure the room is empty I go inside.

There are clothes hanging up on pegs, white lab coats, blue boiler suits, black trousers, and the white smocks the orderlies wear. I choose a blue boiler suit, the nearest I find to my size. If I’m able to pass for a hospital employee maybe I could sneak out of the building. It fits all right, except the sleeves are a bit long.

The door bangs open, and I’m surrounded by orderlies. I’m too weak to fend them off. My sleeve is forced up; something sharp pierces my arm. Then the room swirls into a mass of colours, and I know no more.

When I wake up the first thing I see is a window high above my head, from where a beam of light shines on the opposite wall; moonlight or daylight, I'm not sure which. It takes a while for my eyes to become accustomed to my surroundings. I'm able to make out various shapes, but what they are I can't tell.

I sit up carefully in the creaking bed, shoving away rough blankets. Although every bone and every joint in my body hurts I try to manoeuvre my legs over the side, but a cold metal bar, some sort of rail, stops me. I manage to climb over it, and I gasp as my feet touch cold stone. Shivering, I run my good hand through my hair; I'm beginning to realise where I am.

'Hey,' whispers a voice urgently, 'get back into bed!'

'Who's there?'

'Shh! Just get back into bed! There'll be trouble if the droids catch you up before the bell goes!'

'Droids?'

'Yeah. They'll be in to wake us soon, but before then no one is allowed up.'

'So if you want to pee,' says another voice, 'you'll have to boil it, or wet the bed.'

I do want to pee now he's said that!

'Stop winding him up, Hudson!' snaps the first voice. Hudson? Saul's surname is 'Hudson'. 'Use the bottle on the locker if you need to pee, lad.'

I make a face at the dark, annoyed at being told what to do by someone I can't see. 'Who are you? Head bleedin' boy or something?'

There's a snort. 'Nice one!'

'Shut it, Hudson!'

'There are lots of rules here, and Kappelhoff makes sure we stick to all of them,' says Hudson. 'He's the ward creep, and sucks up to Them Upstairs!'

'I said shut it, Hudson!' says Kappelhoff. 'I'm no creep; I just make sure none of us risk the penalties for rule breaking, that's all.'

'I'll get up if I want to,' I snap, and jump when I hear the loud clanging of a bell.

A woman's voice announces, 'Six o'clock, young gentlemen!'

A bright light comes on. I blink at two figures in black dresses and white caps.

'Nuns?'

'Droids, programmed as nuns,' whispers the boy in the next bed. 'No bedside manner here, mate!'

'Time to wake up!' The nun speaking has a severe, unsmiling face. 'Come along! Sit up, please!'

'You!' shouts the other nun. She's tall and strong, and grabs me roughly by my night shirt, forcing me back onto the foot of the bed. She lowers the metal bed rail, and bundles me back beneath the sheets. 'You know the rules, boy! You stay in bed until we get you out!'

'Gently, Sister Augusta; his arm is injured,' says the other droid sternly. 'He is a new inmate, and only came to Number Forty last night. He has not had time to learn the rules yet.'

I stare at the other 'inmates', nine other lads around my age. Eight of them are pale and colourless, dressed in the same starched grey pyjamas, sitting up, or lying in metal beds with grey blankets. Only two other beds besides mine have rails. Our white sheets and pillowcases are crisp and clean.

I'm sure the ninth face belongs to Saul's brother, Emmett Hudson. His appearance and surname give him away. The Hudsons' origin is a country called Nigeria, although they're British-born – immigration to Britain has been illegal since twenty thirty-two. Emmett has a look of Saul. He grins at me with large white teeth, the way Saul grins. I feel a pang, homesick for my old mates.

I take in my surroundings. Each bed has a small locker next to it with three plastic bottles on the top. We all have our own small table at the foot of our beds, and there are washbasins at the end of the room. The floor is lined with stone tiles, the walls made of solid concrete. I look

up at the window. It's too small to climb through, even if I could reach it. Everything in the room is neat and clean, with no dust anywhere. It's almost sterile.

'I told him to get back into bed, Mother Superior.' I recognise the voice: that's Kappelhoff. He's a very thin lad, with large, bulging eyes. 'He wouldn't listen to me.'

Mother Superior ignores him, and turns to me. 'Inmates are not allowed out of bed until the nuns and the orderlies assist them, my dear. It is for safety reasons. You have bed rails in case you convulse in your sleep, and fall out of bed. Please make sure you obey this rule. Do you understand?'

'What if we need the bog?'

'He means the toilet,' Kappelhoff jumps in.

'There are bottles within easy reach for overnight use,' says Mother Superior, pointing to the bottles on top of my locker, 'and for the bowels you ring the bell there to call an orderly to take you to the toilet.'

'Hudson lied, Mother,' begins Kappelhoff. 'He said...'

'Never mind, Mr Kappelhoff, I can quite well believe what Mr Hudson said.' Mother Superior frowns at Hudson, who sneers back. 'By the way, young gentlemen, this is Mr Travis. At least that was what the hospital said he was called. Correct, Mr Travis?'

I shrug. *Mr Travis!* Mother Superior claps her hands, and three men appear, dressed like the orderlies at the hospital. They'll be droids, too.

'Toilet round,' says Mother Superior, 'then medication, then showers, and into the hall for breakfast.'

I'm desperate now, so I reach for a bottle. The orderlies collect the used bottles, and wheel those of us who need it to the toilet for 'the bowels'. I don't need to go, but I want to get away from the other inmates to sort out my whirling head. The unsmiling, silent orderly sits me down on the toilet, then leaves. I'm amazed I'm allowed to have any privacy.

My head feels like it wants to burst. The walls and the lights blur in an alarmingly familiar way, and I'm unable to stop myself from sinking into the void. I soon find myself back in my bed, with Mother Superior bending over me.

'Doctor is on his way,' she says in an unexpectedly kind voice. 'You sleep for a while. You can eat later.'

There's nothing else to do, since my body feels like lead. I close my eyes, thinking about the Rockets. Do Jenna, Saul and the others have any idea what's become of me? I doubt it. I dream of an escape, of the Rockets breaking in, finding me, busting me out, but how can they if they don't even know where I am?

When I wake up Emmett Hudson is sitting on the edge of my bed, a tray resting on his lap.

'Soup,' he says. 'Mother told me to feed you, because the Sisters and the orderlies are busy. Someone went loopy, so they're busy calming him down.' He dips the spoon into the soup. 'It's chicken. It won't poison you; the food's good here. Come on, try some.'

Slowly I sit up, and reach for the tray, but Hudson pulls it away. 'Leave it. Leptos are spoon-fed after their seizures, in case they have another fit and choke, or spill the food. Anyway, your arm's bust, so you can't balance the tray. They'll do me if you burn yourself! You heard Mother this morning. They're safety mad in here. We don't do much for ourselves, except the work they give the fitter ones, and even that isn't much.'

I fall back against my pillows. Being spoon-fed by an inmate! This place isn't scary, it's weird!

'So how come you're here without an escort, and allowed to feed me soup?' I ask. 'What if you have a seizure?'

'I'm not a lepto, mate,' says Hudson. 'I'm here for, er, another reason. I could get violent if I want to, but don't worry, they'd zap my probe if I did. Besides, we're being watched.'

'Probe?' My hand flies to my neck. There's a small lump there. Hudson laughs.

'Yeah, they injected you. They use the probes to stop us from doing things we're not supposed to do, like try to escape. They can tell every movement from that probe. They won't zap you when you fit, though; they know you can't help that, but you'll sure as hell feel the pain when they do!'

I study Hudson's face closely as he calmly mixes the soup.

'Why didn't they zap me this morning when I got out of bed? If they knew I was breaking the rules...'

'The nuns came in. Are you going to have this soup before it gets cold?'

I eat the soup hungrily; it tastes delicious. Hudson offers the spoon again, and I take another mouthful.

'I know your brother,' I tell him. 'You're Emmett, aren't you?'

He shrugs. 'Hudson will do.'

'Saul's my mate. He talks about you all the time.' That's a lie. I like Hudson, and I want him to think someone on the outside cares about him. 'He told me where you were. He worries about you. Why are you in here?'

He takes a deep breath. 'I killed my stepfather. He beat my mum to death, so I hit him with a hammer, and buried him. The guards knew what I'd done because of the probe. They found him, and then they came after me. I just let them take me so they wouldn't shoot me. I managed to escape the death penalty by pleading insanity, and by agreeing to let the shrinks examine me.'

I know about Saul's mum, but not the rest. So that's why Saul never talks about his brother.

'They had a field day. They decided I couldn't function in normal society, said I was mentally deranged; and I liked to drink, too, see. You know what they think of under age drinkers, so they put me in here for that, too. I've been here for three years.' He feeds me another spoonful. 'Anyway, we know your name is Travis, and you're a lepto. We heard them bringing you in last night. What we don't know is how they caught you.'

I tell him about the fight, the seizures, and the hospital reporting me to the inspectors. I tighten my fists. 'They won't keep me here! You can bet on that! *Ouch!*'

That's the first time my probe is 'zapped'.

'Forget it, mate,' says Hudson, 'you're here for the duration. The only way you'll get out is when you're dead. Even then you'll be buried in the grounds.'

A voice booms from somewhere, 'That's enough, Mr Hudson. Let Mr Travis sleep now.'

I stare wildly around the room. 'Where did that come from?'

'I told you, they're watching us,' says Hudson, standing up. 'Well, sweet dreams!'

He picks up the tray and leaves.