

SCENE 1

SFX: Caine's car rumbles.

MUSIC: Purple Light is Fading by MokuseinoMaguro from Pixabay.

CAINE:

The strangest thing about the way the Metropolis disappeared in the rearview mirror was how fast it was. For a while, it lingered there, an ever-present shape on the dark horizon, electric stars blinking in and out. And as the truck in front of us lumbered along the Torpedo highway, I barely noticed it slip beyond the horizon until... it did.

Indra was right—they didn't expect us to survive out here. Hell, I barely thought we would when the sun first rose. It was *hot*. Hot enough to peel the paint off the car, off of the road, until it was just a dark strip half covered in sand, with miles of dead and scorched brush stretching out to either side. I counted myself lucky that I still kept my hands wrapped—the wheel got so hot it nearly blistered my fingers anyway. But we pressed onward.

The grim silence that pressed over us at first seemed to lift, little by little. Sure, between inhaling smoke that seemed to crowd out light from the sky and the radiation from the sun still pressing through the layer of haze—none of that could be good for us. And the long hours on the road were mostly everyone dozing off, leaving Jet to play the same seven songs. But the drive so far going pretty much without a hitch was enough for us to feel like this plan was really going to work. Even if we started getting a little... restless.

SFX: Jet plays a song.

SONG:

Do what you wanna do...

INDRA:

Ugh. Shut up.

SFX: Vic drums his fingers.

VIC:

(HUMS THE SAME SONG)

INDRA:

(GROANS) Dude, come on.

VIC:

What? It's stuck in my head! It's not my fault that Jet played that song like forty times in a row.

JET:

I only played it 22 times in a row!

CAINE:

Jet, I love you, but that doesn't make it any better.

SU-JIN:

Yeah, to be honest, I think I hit my threshold the fifth time you played it.

VIC:

(HE SNICKERS) I literally watched you force yourself to sleep to escape it.

INDRA:

God, I wish I could do that.

JET:

Well, *I* like the song.

INDRA:

Do what you wanna do... go on and... (INDRA MUMBLES THEN STOPS XIRSELF) Oh dammit, look what you got me doing! This is why we shouldn't be sitting next to each other. You're contagious.

VIC:

There's no shame in singing a song 'cause you like it. Or if you think it's catchy.

SFX: Indra pulls xir knife slightly out.

VIC:

Man, *this* is why we shouldn't be sitting next to each other! We'd be the greatest one-hit wonder band that never existed.

INDRA:

Oh please. Any band I'm in would be a massive hit!

VIC:

Lola, listen to this.

INDRA:

Do you ever shut up?

VIC:

No, I've forgotten how, because I just... gotta do what you gotta do!

INDRA:

Oh my god.

LOLA:

(YAWNS) Just deal with it, Indra.

VIC:

Lola, how are you still sleeping? It's nighttime already, I swear you slept for like half the day.

LOLA:

I'm trying not to mess up my sleep schedule.

SU-JIN:

You *have* a sleep schedule?

LOLA:

Do you not?

CAINE:

Hey, we're in our twenties, we're entitled to have screwed up sleep patterns.

INDRA:

Reyes, can I just drive again? Aren't you tired?

CAINE:

We're making faster progress at nighttime because there's less strain on the engine, so ...no.

SU-JIN:

I seriously thought I was gonna die when the sun was up.

LOLA:

I know. I'm surprised there was a farming community out here at all... if that was even true. I can't imagine the land out here being able to grow anything. And all those power lines just stretching out. I guess the idea that the

Numitron provides enough power for the Metropolis wasn't true either.

SU-JIN:

(JOKINGLY)

Makes me feel kind of bad for leaving the fridge open that one time.

VIC:

Pfft.

It seems kind of weird to have a bunch of servers all the way out here though, right? I mean, what's the point?

LOLA:

I'm not sure. I keep seeing lines of machinery out in the distance, but I can't tell if those are just... relics and junk or if they're actually being used for something.

Is it morning already? I feel like my sense of time is gone.

JET:

The time is 11:41 p.m.!

VIC:

Way off. I think you did mess up your sleeping schedule.

LOLA:

No thanks to your singing. (SHE LAUGHS)

SU-JIN:

Okay hang on, but what is that light on the horizon if it's not... whoa.

SFX: Caine slows the car.

MUSIC: Robots Talk After All by astrofreq from Pixabay.

CAINE:

Fire. From some of those machines in the distance. Some stray spark must have lit the brush and the flames tore through the night, swathes of light that forced their blazing hands into the darkness and ripped it apart at the seams.

INDRA:

So *that's* what they were talking about.

SFX: The truck begins to turn.

VIC:

What the hell? Why's the truck turning around?

INDRA:

I mean they have that plating on them, they should be able to drive straight through the fire.

TRUCK OPERATOR:

Get out of the car and we won't do anything.

SU-JIN:

Are they talking to us?

INDRA:

Do you see any other cars on the road?

TRUCK OPERATOR:

We have protocol for this.

CAINE:

Jet, how far are we?

JET:

19 miles from our destination.

CAINE:

How's the route looking?

JET:

Well, there's a 52% chance of successful escape. Chances increase 15% if your top speed is higher than 80 miles an hour.

CAINE:

Higher than half. Alright. Works for me.

MUSIC: Accelerator by Yoshinori Tanaka.

SFX: Caine hits the gas.

TRUCK OPERATOR:

Truck 46 to base, we got bandits! Should we pursue?

VIC:

Did they call us bandits? What is this, a western?

SFX: Truck revs.

SU-JIN:

Caine, Caine, you know we're friends and I care about you, but do we have to keep driving *towards* danger?

SFX: Caine swerves.

INDRA:

Okay, you wanna tell me why you drove off the road?!

CAINE:

Our chances are higher if I'm off the road.

LOLA:

I hate to say this, but we are still driving *towards* a fire!

SFX: Caine shifts gears. We hear the car powering up.

CAINE:

Come on, come on...

TRUCK OPERATOR:

We're in pursuit!

CAINE:

Alright, everybody! Brace yourselves!

SFX: Caine hits the gas even harder, speeding through fire and flames.

VIC:

God, how are we not dead? You just drove through a fire!

CAINE:

Yes, thank you for pointing out the obvious, Vic!

VIC:

Caine, that was amazing. But next time, be wary of what's behind the fire, too?

CAINE:

Well, we're through it, aren't we? Now I have to decide if we should shake them off before we get to our destination.

LOLA:

I think there might be more pressing things to pay attention to.

SFX: Another car revs.

CAINE:

Another car seemed to materialize out of the flames—armored in the same plating that the truck had and pulling up flush to the truck. I half-thought that they were techs from the Metropolis too, until they popped the top of their car.

GANYMEDE:

Hi there, operators! Hate to tell you, I think you're chasing the wrong car.

SFX: The car hatch opens.

TARI:

You might wanna be more worried about us!

CAINE:

Three figures sat in the car, each with a different mask on. The one with a rabbit themed mask, LED lights morphing into a pleased expression, hopped up in their seat as the woman in the passenger seat extended a device towards the truck door.

NELL:

Get in position, Tari.

SFX: Tari jumps on top of the car.

TARI:

Ready!

SFX: A machine extends. A metal crunch.

GANYMEDE:

No sweeter sound than a car door getting ripped off.

NELL:

Take care of them.

TARI:

Right-o!

TRUCK OPERATOR:

Hey, whoa! Get off me!

TARI:

I got fists and I know how to use 'em!

SFX: The truck careens.

GANYMEDE:

Uh oh. Watch out, kids!

JET:

I think he means us!

CAINE:

Dammit—everyone, hold on tight!

SFX: Caine narrowly swerves away.

SU-JIN:

Did we get hit?

SFX: A loud pop.

CAINE:

Nope. That would be the engine.

SFX: Caine stops and opens the door.

MUSIC: Pixabay 1 min Piano Arp by DeepMusicEveryDay from Pixabay.

CAINE:

The truck had vanished around the next bend of the road, but the other car—with its two occupants, had spun back around and coasted to a stop next to ours. Both of them were illuminated by the headlights and the red embers burning in the distance. The man was tall, with dark curly hair tied into a low ponytail and large hands dangling casually out of his pockets. On the other side, the woman he was with stood straight, taking even and measured steps even as the hot wind blew her hair around her. Both still had masks on—which, as they got closer, I realized were gas masks, probably to protect them from the acrid smoke that was just clearing.

GANYMEDE:

Sorry about that. But that was some pretty slick driving back there, kiddo.

NELL:

Tari's still pretty new at that maneuver. We weren't expecting to see anyone on the road—especially not any new faces.

SFX: Vic rolls down the window.

VIC:

So, uh... who are you people?

GANYMEDE:

Aw, shoot. Here we go talking about faces and we're not even showing ours. Think the smoke's cleared enough for me to take this old thing off. (HE TAKES OFF HIS MASK) Hey there. I'm Ganymede Moreno.

NELL:

(SHE TAKES OFF HER MASK) And I'm Nell Palomo. Escapees from Metropolis West, I'm guessing?

CAINE:

Uh, yeah. Sort of. It's a little more complicated than that.

NELL:

I understand.

GANYMEDE:

Well, tell you what—complicated or not, I think you might've just busted your engine, so you're not heading anywhere anytime soon. Take a ride back with us and we'll fix it up.

JET:

Where are we going?

NELL:

Home. For us, at least.

SCENE 2

NIUSHA:

Come on.

AVA:

Kaleo, tell her!

KALEO:

Uh, hi, Niusha.

NIUSHA:

Hi, Kaleo. Ava, did you drag him into this?

KALEO:

In her defense, I actually chose to come along this time.

NIUSHA:

Look, I'm glad the two of you aren't like, soaking wet and toting a pile of books, but I just feel like... a secret underground base? Are you sure didn't just stumble into an abandoned station of the Numitron? It's a big place.

AVA:

No, no. I know Numitron pretty well. And it didn't look abandoned either!

NIUSHA:

O-Okay, come sit down, both of you.

SFX: Ava and Kaleo sit. Ava pulls up her comms and scrolls through pictures.

AVA:

Look, I even have pictures! This is wild, right?

NIUSHA:

Hm... they're not very high quality, but you're right. It doesn't look *abandoned*, but this could still be a station.

AVA:

I mean, it raises so many questions! Who goes here? What are they doing? How did these Correctors not find this place?

NIUSHA:

As if a competent Corrector exists in the first place.

AVA:

Okay, fair point. Still, a Glasshouse special ops team and they don't find this base we just randomly stumble into? Maybe Lola Sunn struck a deal with the Correctors? Or Vic Vass killed them! Or maybe—

KALEO:

Ava, I feel like I should remind you that you've neglected one little detail which is that WE ALMOST GOT KILLED.

NIUSHA:

WHAT?!

AVA:

Oh, yeah, that's right!

KALEO:

I cannot believe how calm you're being about the fact that we were nearly mauled.

NIUSHA:

By what?

KALEO:

This... thing. I don't know. It was like... a massive machine. It didn't move like any bot I've ever seen myself. It moved more like an animal. Running around on all fours. I swore I could hear someone yelling orders at it. But it was gone by the time we got out.

NIUSHA:

Well, that's horrifying. Geez. But it does make me think... Ava, maybe the place isn't a secret base. Maybe it's a *Corrector* base. Y'know, they run experiments and stuff there? That could have been a new bot, right?

KALEO:

I can't imagine what else it would be.

AVA:

Whatever that place was, I have to dig deeper.

NIUSHA:

You're still interested in going back there?

AVA:

We've never broken such a big story! We're always just doing conjecture and reporting on whatever trickles down. This could be it! Not just a big break, a humongous break! A colossal one!

NIUSHA:

And you're okay with that?

KALEO:

I mean, she's right. It's bigger than anything we've ever stumbled onto. And while I'm pretty happy with where I'm at in Moondog right now, this is a huge step up in our careers.

Also, I think Ava needs someone to keep her from getting killed.

AVA:

Brave words from the guy who ran away screaming.

KALEO:

Equally brave words from the girl who was the reason we got noticed in the first place.

NIUSHA:

Okay, okay. Where exactly are you going to start with all this?

AVA:

First, we're all going to get some sleep. And then we're gonna see if we can get some of the Correctors from that Glasshouse team on the air.

NIUSHA:

Are you staying the night?

KALEO:

Uh... don't worry about it. I can go.

AVA:

No, no, you should stay.

KALEO:

I don't wanna bother you guys. I can just head back to my own apartment. I'll... see you on Tuesday, Ava.

AVA:

(SIGH) See you then.

SCENE 3

SFX: Car rumbling.

NELL:

Sorry to be so quiet.

SU-JIN:

It's no trouble.

NELL:

I would have let you ride in that truck with Ganymede and Tari, but since they're dealing with the technicians, I figured it'd be easier if we just met them there.

INDRA:

Are you going to tell us exactly where we're headed? Or are we just going to get carted around to... wherever?

NELL:

Ah, I should have gotten Ganymede to do this, he's better with wording than I am...

Uh... apologies. We're only a couple more minutes away from Cair Mallplex. It's one of the last outposts before the land is pretty much unlivable. There are a few other communities, of course, but Cair Mallplex is the biggest.

LOLA:

Earlier, you asked if we were escapees. Is that common around here?

NELL:

As you might imagine, the roads are usually pretty empty. In fact, I don't think I've seen someone out here that wasn't familiar since... well, since Tari. But we leave signs for people. Encrypted pathways pointing towards us, symbols and maps we hide and send back. I'm not saying it's easy to

get here, but if you're desperate enough to leave, we wouldn't want people just running with no direction.

CAINE:

As she spoke those last words, Cair Mallplex began to rise in front of us.

I hadn't been to a mall since I was younger—pretty much every single one was in Glasshouse. Val hovered over me while Sebastian dug through shelves of goods that were way beyond our budget. I'm pretty sure we got kicked out by security guards who decided we looked like we were planning on stealing a video game we couldn't play even if we wanted to. I drove past malls when I delivered to the Dome, watching smiling people walk in and out, watching them judge people who looked like me. Those malls were... delicate. Open air plazas or whatever. (SCOFFS) But this? This wasn't anything like that.

MUSIC: Way Between the Shadows by MokuseinoMaguro from Pixabay.

CAINE:

Seb used to read to me a lot. He was really into these fantasy stories with knights, princesses, magicians, all that. He told me once that "cair" apparently was an old name for castles. And this place? It was a fortress—standing armored in the midst of a dark land. Yet as we drew closer, we passed through tall stalks of grass, growing in spite of the blackened earth. A small scroll was affixed to the side of the doorway, while above it was a sign that read out Cair Mallplex, a symbol carved underneath it.

TARI:

Nell! Welcome back! And, uh, what's with all these new people?

NELL:

I'll explain in a moment. But let's get inside first.

SFX: Jet beeps.

JET:

You've arrived at your destination!

TARI:

Ooh, and who's this precious little bot? Hi there! You look familiar.

CAINE:

His name is Jet.

SFX: Jet beeps affirmatively.

JET:

Nice to meet you!

TARI:

Jet, how'd you know how to get here? I don't suppose you entered in any coordinates, Nell.

NELL:

I didn't.

VIC:

I was wondering why that symbol up there looked so familiar. It's Alnair, right? The southern fishtail?

Oh! You sent these coordinates out, didn't you? The ones that Jet decoded. I've never seen someone use so many encryptions.

NELL:

Better to be safe than sorry. It was hard to decide whether we could send out coordinates without them getting compromised. Those were old. Our newer ones have significantly improved.

But if you went to all the trouble of decoding where we are, but you're not leaving Metropolis West, then... what's your game here? What are you planning?

LOLA:

Caine was right to say it was complicated earlier. I don't suppose we could ask who exactly runs this place?

TARI:

You're talking to her. Nell's our fearless leader.

NELL:

I wouldn't call myself fearless, but I would consider myself the caretaker here.

LOLA:

Well, it's an honor to meet you. I'd better introduce myself then. Lola Sunn. I'm the leader of Zero Zero.

TARI:

Whoa, whoa, whoa. Wait. You're Lola Sunn?! Nell!

NELL:

That name doesn't mean anything to me.

TARI:

She's the woman who defected from Glasshouse!

Hi! The name's Tari de Whitte! Uh, you—you can call me Bunnie too, if it suits ya. Maybe you know me! Maybe you don't. I'd... kind of prefer it if you didn't, actually. But I used to live in Glasshouse. I was still there when you left, actually. Um... you're the whole reason I'm here.

LOLA:

I'm flattered. Then you'll know the reason we're here.

We want to take on Glasshouse. The inequality there has been far too great for far too long and we want to change that. But we can't do it alone. We need help—especially from other communities outside of the Metropolis. So, we wanted to enlist you.

NELL:

I... I don't...

TARI:

Nell, are you okay?

NELL:

I'm fine. I just need to... go. Tari, would you show them a place to stay?

TARI:

Yeah, I can do that.

SFX: Nell walks off.

LOLA:

I—I didn't mean to offend her.

TARI:

I don't think you did. She just gets like that sometimes. I'll take you to the north wing. It's still pretty empty.

CAINE:

More people live in here?

TARI:

Tons of people! Nell takes in pretty much anyone who needs a place. And it's not like we were selling that much stuff all the way out here. Better for most of those stores to get turned into housing and gardens and all that.

SU-JIN:

I, uh... I don't think we're trying to stay here long-term necessarily.

TARI:

Not everyone does. Either way, I'm not trying to have you guys sleeping outside. Plus, your-your car still needs to be fixed. We can probably catch him sometime in the morning. Unless that's too much trouble. I'm sure you guys are exhausted.

CAINE:

Nah, I'm good. I'll come with you. I mean, it's my car after all.

TARI:

Alrighty then!

Well, let's get a move on, shall we?

SCENE 4

MUSIC: Great Guitar Piece by Palle1958 from Pixabay.

CAINE:

I was starting to get used to just waking up in different places. Staring at the ceiling of a car, of the Zero Zero base, of this new room in Cair Mallplex. But even so, when I opened my eyes, I still felt like for a moment, superimposed over what I could see, was the memory of the apartment I knew so well.

SFX: Knocking.

TARI:

Hey, Caine, right? I'm gonna go see our mechanic—I think Ganymede's already there asking about the truck. You wanted to tag along? But—but no pressure, obviously.

CAINE:

(GROANS) Yeah, yeah, yeah, got it. I'm coming.

SFX: Caine opens the door.

CAINE:

Ey looked pretty chipper for the morning. Tari was practically bouncing on eir heels, eir short white hair moving up and down as ey swayed. Two white tufts stuck straight up, gelled up like that, looking an awful lot like bunny ears. Ey somehow had the time to put on a full face of makeup, with a lot of blush on the nose, making em look more like a rabbit.

TARI:

Not a morning person?

CAINE:

Not after last night, no. I haven't really slept properly since we left the Metropolis.

TARI:

Oh, yeah, tough ride for sure! I'm lucky enough that I hitched a ride on a truck. You probably couldn't do that with the number of people you had riding with you.

CAINE:

Yeah. Probably not,

TARI:

Is Lola the only one from Glasshouse?

CAINE:

Um, the rest of us are Epsilons. Or-or Deltas.

TARI:

You must be a Delta, right? You've got a car and a bot.

CAINE:

(THEY LAUGH) Uh, used to be. I've been an Epsilon for a few years since... uh, w-well, since my parents and siblings died. Or-or left. Left actually.

TARI:

Left?

CAINE:

Well, not my parents. I definitely think they're gone. But... I just recently found out my siblings are probably still alive. Or at least, I'm hoping they are.

TARI:

Geez, no wonder you didn't sleep well. That's a lot to have on your mind! Uh, where are your siblings?

CAINE:

Actually how we pinpointed this location. The map we got pointed to a bunch of different places, but we narrowed it down to Cair Mallplex by using the signal from my brother's tracker.

TARI:

Oh, he's a criminal, huh? I mean, I guess I am too, technically.

CAINE:

It's... complicated.

TARI:

Isn't it always?

SFX: Tari opens the door.

TARI:

Here's the garage!

Baz! Hey, Baz, where are you?

SEBASTIAN:

I'm in the back. Hey, Gan's outside with the truck so you'd probably better meet up with him.

TARI:

Okay! Well, I brought someone here! Did you get around to looking at the car we brought in yet?

SEBASTIAN:

Yeah, yeah, it's on my to-do list.

TARI:

This person's the driver for it, so you'd better talk to them! Will you get out here?

SEBASTIAN:

One second.

SFX: Sebastian walks out.

CAINE:

(GASPS)

SEBASTIAN:

Geez, Bunny, you're so impatient.

TARI:

And yet you put up with it. Anyways! Caine, this is our mechanic, Baz! Baz, this is-

SEBASTIAN:

Caine?

CAINE:

Kuya.

MUSIC: Riverline by Tri-Tachyon.

END EPISODE.

Hi, Eli Ramos here, creator and editor of Under the Electric Stars, an Aster Podcasting Network production. If you liked this episode, please share it with your friends and rate and review it wherever you're listening to us. You can find us on our website at undertheelectricstars.com, or on social media: we're @utes_podcast on Twitter and undertheelectricstarspodcast on Tumblr. You can also find us on Patreon at [mxeliramos](https://www.patreon.com/mxeliramos), that's M-

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And speaking of our cast, our voice talents are as follows: Rhea Anne as Caine Reyes, Rey Ángel Olachea Yoáli Martinez as Indra, Kevin Paculan as Vic Vass, Christine Kim as Su-jin Yi, Robin Guzman as Jet, Chaitrika Budamagunta as Lola Sunn, Rue Dickey as Ganymede Moreno, Philomena Sherwood as Tari de Whitte, Katriel Rose as Nell Palomo, Setaareh Nikbin as Niusha, Serena El-Hajali as Ava Jafari, Matheus Nogueira as Kaleo Hale, and John Patneau as Sebastian Reyes. Additional voices were provided by yours truly.

Attributions for sounds and music used can be found in the show notes. Thanks to Fran Carr and Ezra Lee Buck, \$20 Patrons on our Patreon, as well as all of our new patrons that have joined during the Patreon Drive. And to everyone, thanks for listening, and see you in Metropolis West soon.