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UNDER A CONCRETE SKY

Topic: Nutrition

The antiquated lift doors slid open, the soft squealing, an echo of a time before technology had eliminated such irritations. Stepping out of the cradling light, I paused to allow my eyes to adjust. Street lamps hung from above, cleaving wide rents through the surrounding dark, but they were few and far between. More than one had been broken, never to be repaired: an indication of how little the City cared, after all out of sight, out of mind.

But despite the inconvenience, the lack of light was an unlikely ally. The fewer people who saw me tonight the better. If word reached my peers that I was here it would raise awkward questions, questions that might well lead to my death, politically at least.

This street was so different from the one above that I momentarily entertained the notion that I was in a different world. In a sense I was, the world as it had been twenty years ago, though back then these streets had not been scarred with graffiti or been so devoid of humanity.

I moved uneasily, staying close to the middle of the street. Just because I couldn't see anyone did not mean no one was there. As a D.A. I knew what lived down here. Not for nothing had the lower streets been renamed Hell, by those who lived above.

Constructing the streets above had been intended to improve the city, a visionary solution to the overwhelming congestion, on which the city had been slowly choking. It had had some limited success, though not in the way that had been imagined. Certain areas of the lower streets had become expressways across the city. However, in general, the problem had just moved one level up. The bustle and life that had once thronged along these streets now flowed above me. Looking around me, I didn't think it was worth it.

At first the development had been welcomed but as the novelty wore off people began to tire of life under a concrete sky. The upper streets had been designed to filter natural light to the lower level, but people would rather have an open sky above them, at least as open as a city full of sky scrapers allowed. I guess we still have that primitive wild instinct in us. As the project was expanded, businesses and their customers inevitably abandoned the lower streets and this twilight world was created.

But what had been a death blow for the lower streets was a rebirth for the rest of the city. When the lower level was abandoned it was heralded as an opportunity to bury the city's old problems.

Gangs, drugs, violence had been ruthlessly targeted, though they were still the lifeblood of Hell. Other vices too had been targeted. With a fresh canvas to work on, the city had been repainted as an artistic and cultural haven. Obesity was another cancer dealt to in the city's rebirth. For too long it had been a blight on society. Over three quarters of the population had been overweight or obese. The internet, robotics and the Link Pods had all conspired to create a culture of indolence. It was all too easy to live and work without leaving the house or even your chair. As modern lifestyles had become increasingly frantic, people had come to depend on fast and pre cooked food. Things had improved a

little since the early years of the new millennium and some of that food had been made quite nutritious, but the vast majority had remained unhealthy.

Now fast food was totally was shunned by the general population. Sure the odd sweetcap would still be eaten at a special occasion but by and large fruit replaced chocolate, chips and cake had given way to a healthy serving of vegetables and organic fruit juices ruled where once Coca-Cola had been king. To be seen eating such junk food was a sign of weakness now, a silent admission that you did not respect the need for change: social suicide. Against all the odds the revolution had worked, today the city had one of the lowest obesity rates in the country.

But this transformation was not simply the result of changing attitudes; legislation had played its part as politicians jumped on the bandwagon of social rebirth. Work hours had been tightly regulated to ensure that people had time to spend with their families, and prepare a nutritious meal of course. I-Marts and other vendors were banned from advertising unhealthy food and anything they sold had to include prominent health warnings. In many ways it was similar to the campaign waged against cigarettes, before they had been totally banned in 2019. Not that prohibition seemed necessary this time round. Most stores did not bother with such stock anymore.

A clatter in the alley to my left snapped me out of my recollections. Foolish, I told myself to be daydreaming down here. My hand strayed to my jacket pocket. The weight there reassured me. My reflexes might not be as sharp as they once were, but my years on these streets had taught me how to use a gun and it was not something you forgot in a hurry. I quickened my pace to leave the alley behind. I heard nothing else. Whatever or whoever lurked within those shadows had obviously decided I was not worth the trouble.

Perhaps it was only a stray cat or maybe some old bag lady rummaging through the trash, a reminder that the city had not really solved its problems, just hidden them.

At the next intersection I turned left. Ahead of me one of the express routes cut across my path, the racing hovercars forming a river of light in the shadowy underworld. It was an ever present reminder of all the wonder these streets had held, and lost. I followed the access way down under the street. Another 'improvement', a way to increase the flow of traffic and people, now a haven for those society had left behind. The light down here was almost non existent. Where large spotlights once illuminated the tunnels, now only shattered bulbs remained. Three shapes huddled in the shadows. One rocking backwards and forwards, crooning, in the throws of a drug induced ecstasy. My hand rested well within my pocket as I wove between them.

I emerged into familiar territory. Once I had walked this street as a daily ritual. My goal was still some way off however. Anyone dealing in what I sought would be careful to stay well away from anything remotely related to the world above.

The closer I got, the stronger the cravings became. My body trembled in anticipation. It had been years, since my last fix, yet I could still recall the sheer pleasure after all this time. I had put aside my cravings, just like so much else, in favour of my wife and my career. You would think that after so long you would be free of an addiction, but not this one. For a while I thought I had broken free, but the cravings had returned. Over the years they had intensified, until at last the need for another fix, even just one more, had become irresistible. Had I been as strong as I made out publicly I would have sought help. Instead I was here, somewhere I had no business being, walking the lower streets.

I touched my wristband and the holographic display flickered into life: 11:52 p.m. I needed to hurry.

Finally I reached my destination, right where the inmate had said it would be. Light shone from the grimy windows cutting the street into rectangles. It seemed unnatural that such a place should be so well lit. I pushed open the door, something I had not had to do for many years. A man sat huddled in the corner, wrapped in a dirty grey coat, another stood, the counter a safety barrier between us. He looked up warily as I approached. Despite my shabby clothes he could tell I did not belong here. I gave his other patron another hurried glance, He had not moved.

My palms were sweating as I leaned forward and half whispered, "I need some coke."

I felt shame at those words. The shame of one who knows he is betraying everything he has stood for, the trust of everyone who is dear to him. I wanted to walk out then, but I couldn't, my hunger was so great.

"It will cost ya," he replied with a sneering smile.

I knew too well that he was right. I also knew I had to have more.

"...and a Big Mac."

Was that a look of triumph in his eyes as he asked, "Would you like fries with that?"

