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Until the very last second
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Ocean City
Until the Last Second

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R.T. Acron

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Sample translation by Rachel Hildebrandt

1.

Something felt off even though Jackson couldn't put his finger on what was making him uneasy. Was it the portfolio with the drawings under his arm? But Jackson knew that the controllers heading down the street toward him and Crockie couldn't care less about a portfolio belonging to a boy at Clark Kellington High School.

The only things they'd care about were the decoders strapped to his and Crockie's wrists. Checks like this weren't all that unusual, especially whenever Jackson was out in the city with Crockie.

Crockie was shuffling down Maui Avenue next to him, as if this were just a totally normal school morning with them running late as usual. Their time accounts would be reduced slightly as a result, and they'd get a hard look from Heather Blue, who sat enthroned at the main entrance in her uniform and could take care of problems with the students' wrist decoders with just a few button clicks.

However, a quick glance at his friend immediately told Jackson that Crockie had also noticed something. Crockie's usual relaxed smile was nowhere in sight. His friend was trying to grin away his panic, which had hit him hard the moment the controllers appeared.

Nobody had their time account checked more often than Crockie, who just seemed to draw attention. In the eyes of most people, Crockie was a slacker, a freak. For them, his shaggy mane alone, which he often bound into a little topknot with a rubber band, was provocation enough. His black, almond-shaped eyes made him look like a samurai warrior, and when he left his hair loose, it fell around his shoulders, looking exactly like he had pulled an old dust rag over his head. Both of these hairstyles suited Crockie, though not your typical student at the elite Clark Kellington High School. Crockie's entire appearance was a pure declaration of war as far as the parents, teachers and time controllers were concerned. On the other hand, since his accident, Crockie had simply come to care more about other things than regulation haircuts.

Crockie not only had the body tension of a shoelace and a perennially relaxed smile, but he was always cool. He never walked, he shuffled. He never spoke, he mumbled. And his clothes were always too something: too large, too baggy, too faded.

Whenever Jackson and Henk went shopping with Crockie, they could bank on being stopped at one of the traffic points at the exit, where the value of their items were deducted straight from their time accounts.

"Decoders, please," the guards would demand, before checking their accounts.

Understandably, nobody believed that Crockie had accumulated enough time in his account to wander around as lazily and aimlessly as he did. It wasn't forbidden, but it was frowned upon. People just didn't like it if you strolled around a neighborhood, hung around one of the pristine parks, or lured people into time-consuming small talk. Most people couldn't afford such wastes of time. And Crockie didn't look wealthy, which was why it wasn't surprising that he was checked out so often.



But this looked like more than a routine control check.

Jackson brushed a strand of black hair off his forehead and glanced around nonchalantly. Maui Avenue was completely cordoned off, and the subway entrance was barred shut. Even Timeline Park at the foot of the Time Agency's main headquarters was fenced off. Security personnel were posted at all of the access points. Jackson picked up his speed. If this check ended up being as serious as these guys looked, they would definitely be tardy for school. These controllers' uniforms fit tightly, their muscles filling them out. With cold, expressionless faces, they were following an exact plan that only they seemed to know.

"Let's get out of here," Jackson murmured.

"For once, you're right." Crockie shoved Jackson down the narrow street that led to the canal.

The security guards hadn't blocked this way yet. They ran along the empty alleyway toward the canal. Totally inappropriate behavior, in light of the fact that nobody ran in the city. Sprinting down a street revealed to the entire world that someone's account was running low. Nobody rushed around or ran unless they were out of options.

But at this particular moment, Jackson couldn't have cared less about propriety or impropriety. He glanced back without dropping his speed and crashed into a man who must have just stepped out of one of the back courtyards.

"Watch out!"

The old man was carrying a mug of coffee, and the hot brew splattered across his stomach and chest.

"Sorry!" Jackson gulped air and wanted to keep running, but he was momentarily startled when his eyes met those of the street sweeper. The man's eyes were two different colors. The left one was sky blue, while the right one was brown, almost golden. The old man had a fairly prominent scar on his left cheek. He studied Jackson and growled something before turning around.

"Come on!" Crockie hollered.

Jackson ran down the alley behind Crockie. Four wide steps led down to the canal.

A couple of large, thick blocks were sitting right beneath the water's surface, where they were intended to help break up the surge in bad weather. They could reach Clark Kellington Street by walking across them, easily accessing the schoolyard from there. This was an amazing shortcut, though the other students could always see who was running late again by their wet shoes.

"Hold on, boys!"

The controllers.

Jackson came to a screeching halt and caught sight of Crockie's subtle movement out of the corner of his eye.

Please don't, Jackson begged silently, but it was already too late. With a quick twist, Crockie slipped the decoder from his wrist, shoving it deep down into his pants. He had to be careful not radiate a couple of fairly important things down there, otherwise his future children would be born with timecodes on their foreheads.

"What the hell are you doing?" Jackson whispered.

"Trust me!" Crockie smiled, relaxed once more, though Jackson wasn't completely convinced.

Jackson could have strangled him. Crockie, the freak. Did he really have to pull one more mega-gag over on the security guys, particularly now of all times? They'd barely make it through the traffic point at the school gate before the bell as it was.

"What's all this crap?" Jackson watched the time controllers stride down the alley. There were way too many of them. Six men against two boys? Jackson realized now why he had felt uneasy all along: These security guys were carrying guns. All six of them had one hanging from their belts. These weren't the typical time controllers that Crockie enjoyed teasing and pulling a fast one on. These were different, a heavier caliber.



Crockie just mumbled: “Don’t lose it, Jackson. Nothing’s going to happen to you. After all, your mom kneads Lydia Tremont’s neck.”

Jackson didn’t answer. Crockie often acted as if Jackson’s parents were total kiss-ups. They weren’t. Okay, they were conformist, and his dad hated it when Jackson and Henk went out with Crockie.

“Precious minutes, Jackson Crowler! Precious minutes! You need to develop a reasonable sense of time!” Herb Crowler lectured over the over again.

It might have been a mistake to tell Crockie and Henk that his mother was the masseuse for Mrs. Tremont, the most powerful woman in Ocean City. This had provided Crockie with ammunition for his malicious potshots. Like when he claimed that she had actually given Jackson’s parents their two-week vacation on Cheruba Island. It wasn’t true. They’d won the trip in the big end-of-year raffle, and Crockie knew that. The Crowlers’ move to the much posher Parkfield neighborhood was also unrelated to Mrs. Tremont and her tension. Jackson’s father had earned the move by spending long years working in waste management and then in water treatment.

“We work hard for every free second, and it’s good that way,” Herb Crowler was in the habit of lecturing. But it wasn’t Jackson’s fault that not all work carried an equal value in the city’s system. Those who met critical social needs the fastest could calculate on having more free minutes in their accounts. That was logical. And right.

It was obvious that there was going to be trouble now. All Jackson had to do was look at Crockie’s face and those of the six grim controllers to see that. The one in the front seemed to be in charge. He planted himself solidly in front of Jackson and Crockie, while two of his colleagues barricade off the alley.

“Decoders!” the leader demanded curtly.

Jackson clamped his portfolio with the drawings between his knees. He was good at sketching, but he enjoyed drawing more than just what Mr. Gobbins assigned in class. He liked to scribble his, Henk’s and Crockie’s craziest ideas down on paper. Underneath his self-portrait sketches, there was a paper in his portfolio that could make some major trouble for him. It wasn’t something from class or a smeared caricature of his teacher, but instead, a very precise, clean and carefully measured composition of lines, angles and circles.

Jackson pushed up his sleeve and presented his decoder, which was strapped firmly to his wrist, according to the regulations. The decoder had to sit right on top of the small chip that each resident had to have embedded under their skin on the day of their big ceremony. The controllers weren’t interested in him though. Their eyes were on Crockie, who was shifting his weight from one leg to the other, like a first grader needing a bathroom.

“I’m really sorry. I forgot to put it back on after my shower, and we’re running really late,” he mumbled. He showed them his bare wrist. No decoder. Of course not. It was stuck down his underwear.

The leader pulled out his reader. “Name?”

As he did this, his jacket pulled a little to the side, and Jackson caught sight of his black, bulletproof vest with a small burgundy Z emblazoned on it. The logo for Department Z.

Jackson’s stomach lurched. Rumors about this department were floating around the city. When they were deployed, anything was pretty much possible. People said that nobody had ever been able to give Department Z the slip.

Why didn’t Crockie just pull his decoder out? He’d get a warning, probably lose a few minutes, since decoders had to be either on your arm or on the docking station for nightly charging. Definitely not where Crockie had hidden it!

However, his friend wasn’t giving even a moment’s thought to pulling out his device. It dawned on Jackson



that perhaps this was a smart move after all. There was no way the guys could be allowed to take a reading from his decoder - not if Crockie had taken it upon himself to activate their plan without telling Jackson and Henk about it.

“Shit, Crockie!” Jackson couldn’t help hissing quietly.

“Your account’s going to feel this, boy. Got it?” the controller said. “Name?”

“Run!” Crockie grabbed Jackson’s arm and yanked him behind him. Jackson’s portfolio flew down onto the pavement.

“The plans!” Jackson panted, but Crockie kept running, dragging him along in sheer panic. Down the alley to the canal.

“Faster! Faster!” Crockie yelled.

Then something cracked. Pebbles erupted in a spray close to Jackson. Then another crack.

“Damn it, they’re shooting” Jackson wheezed.

Refusing to hand over your decoder would get you punished, of course. But shooting? Who would shoot at two harmless students?

One thing was clear to Jackson: Department Z didn’t play games.

His stomach dropped, and all he wanted to do was turn himself in. Hands up, and we’re done. But Crockie clearly didn’t agree, as he ran straight for the blocks in the canal.

“Jackie, they’re serious about this...”

Jackson stared at him blankly. Crockie was the only one who’d need security guys shooting everywhere to get that. And there was only one reason why they were so serious. “You didn’t launch the damn thing, did you?” Jackson groaned as they reached the bank of the canal.

“Sorry about that, Jackson. It’s brilliant. They can’t catch us.”

“They just did!”

But Crockie kept right on talking: “I just have to get to the box one more time, because of Henk. I forgot to...”

Crockie never got any further than that. Another shot cracked through the air. Jackson jerked back, as a piece of Crockie’s pants was blasted away. Underneath it, a seriously bleeding wound gaped in his leg.

Jackson thought he could see the flash of bone inside it.

Crockie gulped for air. “Jack...”

That was the last thing Jackson heard from his best friend. Crockie stumbled and plunged into the canal, sinking like a stone before Jackson’s very eyes.

“Crockie!” Jackson tried to grab Crockie’s mane, but he wasn’t fast enough.

The water turned red.

Crockie was athletic. He was a freak, and he came up with the best ideas in the world. There was just one thing Crockie couldn’t do: swim.

*

The old man in the overalls leaned down to pick up the portfolio. He smiled. They were still using these big gray cardboard things in schools these days. They were tied shut with strings in black, dark red or blue. Taking his cap off, he wiped his face with it and ran his lefthand fingers through his hair, which was still thick for his age, before putting his cap back on. He clamped the portfolio down behind the trash bag on his wheeled trash cart. He swept together several more scoops of dirt before moving on.

By the time the shots were fired, he had already disappeared around the next corner. He sat down on a small



wall in the shadow of the Oneworld Building, and whipped out a handkerchief, which he used to dab at the rest of the splattered coffee. He then untied the portfolio. He liked what he saw there.

The portfolio's owner was a talented draftsman and painter. Charcoal drawings, caricatures of people he obviously didn't like much, all kinds of designs and studies of various body parts, a very successful self-portrait in acrylics. The jet black hair, the crystal clear gaze out of sea blue eyes, a quizzical though friendly gaze. He had registered something of this friendly attitude with which the artist went through life in his collision with the boy.

Down at the very bottom sat a technical drawing.

He'd keep the pages. He reattached the portfolio to his cart, a gentle smile on his lips. "Clever ones," he murmured. "Clever ones, these boys."

Nobody paid attention to the old man, who straightened his cap and vanished shortly afterward. The street cleaners came and went like this. Nobody asked where they'd just been or where they were going. It has its advantages, the old man thought with a quiet smile.

2.

Crockie is dead. Jackson's head only had room for this one thought. Crockie.

Dead.

Jackson had watched everything from his hiding place in the gorse bush up on the school's roof, which had had been greened like many roofs around the city. He had simply run, across the blocks in the canal and up to the school. But instead of going through the check point and sprinting past Heather Blue's glass pulpit, he had headed for one of the fire escapes that reached up to the school's roof.

Down at the canal, Jackson had been prepared to jump in after Crockie. He could survive the leg wound, as long as the bullet hadn't hit an artery. But Jackson couldn't see where Crockie was. The water in the canal was too murky.

The Department Z guys had shown up then, and one of them dove right into the canal. A second guard joined him just a few moments later. But it was even too late for these athletic muscle men. The current had already carried Crockie too far away.

All Jackson could do was watch as the security guys fished Crockie out of the water. The paramedics were there, and they lifted Crockie's completely limp body onto a stretcher, before pushing it into an ambulance. A doctor spoke with the Department Z leader. She shook her head and climbed into the cab of the ambulance, as the leader sent one of his guards into the back. The jerk still wanted to keep an eye on Crockie even though he was dead? That was insane!

Jackson heard his own breathing. He was wheezing. He wasn't a good sprinter. Although his endurance was decent, he lacked a speedy take-off.

He couldn't hear the security guys, since he was too far away. They were discussing something. Probably wondering if they should search for Jackson. But they had taken a reading from his decoder. Everything had been just fine with him. None of them know that I had anything to do with it, Jackson tried to reassure himself.

As long as nobody found the portfolio with the drawings.

That's where the plans were. His plans for a transponder that people would kill for. Jackson hadn't really thought about the conditions for this would, and now the next realization pushed this aside.

Not would.

Some guys actually had killed for it. They had killed his friend Crockie.



And Jackson's name was written on the portfolio. Jackson had to get it back before it fell into the security team's hands.

He stayed hidden until the others had all disappeared. He then climbed down the fire escape and ran back to the canal. His knees grew weak when he reached the spot where they had shot Crockie. The images scrolled before his eyes in slow motion: Crockie as he dragged Jackson behind him, the crack, the tattered pants, the blood, and Crockie's fall into the canal.

Jackson pressed his clenched fists into his eyes, pressing until he saw bright spots and his eyeballs hurt so badly that he had to stop. No tears, he couldn't cry right now. He stumbled on numbly. He tried to remember the last few minutes before Crockie... before it happened. The old man with the differently colored eyes, the coffee, the green overalls of a street cleaner. Then the controllers, Department Z. Their attempt to escape, when he had lost the portfolio.

Jackson looked under a bench and rummaged through the trash can sitting next to it. Nothing. No portfolio. He ran on, peering into doorways and down side streets, his eyes glued to the ground. The pedestrians who hurried past him had to think he was totally crazy. Who could afford to wander around the city before lunch without having been given the time? Jackson didn't care what people thought about him. He only had eyes for the portfolio that could not be allowed to fall into the wrong hands.