



by
**JONNY
ZUCKER**

ILLUSTRATION
**DAVE
SHEPHARD**

**THE LAST DAYS OF
ENERGY
WAR**

ENERGY WAR

Chapter 1

A Vid Message at 3 a.m. doesn't usually bring good news.

Cato was roused in his sleep by a beeping sound and looked at the Vid Implant in the palm of his hand.

"Cato Barnes. Report to Government Energy Ministry at 9 a.m." read the message. His hand screen went blank.

The Energy Ministry at 9 a.m.? Had they found out he'd hacked into the central computer games mainframe to mine more data for himself on his favourite game, War of the Vactors, and had thus used more energy? If so, he was in serious trouble.

"Cato, why on earth are you up so early on a Saturday morning?" asked his Aunt June, ambling into the kitchen, her eyes still crumbly with sleep.

"I'm meeting Greta to talk about the new robot her flatmates are thinking of getting."

"Well be careful out there. The Security Providers have just stepped up patrols around the North Side. Rumour has it that some bandits from the South Side have got over the wall and are looking to steal from us."

Cato frowned. Anyone foolish enough to even try and get over the wall would be shot. It was an impossible task.

"What have we got to steal?" asked Cato.

It was true. Since the Sixth Government Decrees, most household gadgets had been 'reclaimed' by the government and the High-Ups for the Cold War 'effort'.

"Those South Siders will do anything to destroy us. I saw some of them on my Vid Screen last week. Terrifying bunch, they seemed," said Aunt June.

"Fine," sighed Cato, "I'll stay out of trouble."

June kissed him on the top of his head and he headed out of the apartment. He walked down the corridor and stepped onto one of the waiting Chute Boards. He stamped his foot and the board plunged from Floor 77 to Floor 1 in eight seconds. Lifts were so last century.

It was warm outdoors; the sun burned unusually powerfully for December. It seemed to be getting hotter every year despite what the government scientists said.

On every street corner was a government Security Provider, dressed all in black and carrying a balaclava and a sub-machine gun. Cato pulled his hood on and hurried towards the bus stop.

THE LAST DAYS OF THE ENERGY WAR

Ten minutes later, he was on a hover bus, where grey-faced passengers were speaking into invisible mobile phones implanted in their cheeks, listening to responses through minuscule ear implants.

A woman in a beige skirt-suit made her way down the bus carriage, offering colourless tubes and nuggets. Cato bought a Breakfast Pill. It tasted of burnt paper.

Getting off at City Central Plaza, he crossed a square surrounded by information boards. The biggest one read:

THE SOUTH SIDE WANTS TO DESTROY OUR FREE WAY OF LIFE AND IMPOSE ITS
VIOLENT, LAWLESS LIVES ON US.
ALWAYS BE ON THE LOOKOUT FOR SPIES + INVADERS.

Free way of life, thought Cato, looking at a couple of tatty cafés serving cups of foaming grey broth and a selection of discoloured cakes.

Still, anything was better than the violence and abject poverty on the South Side. The Vid Screens were forever showing reports about rioting and violence over there. Cato shivered and moved on.

The Energy Ministry was on the far side of the square, a gigantic structure made from steel, one hundred floors high and housing five thousand planners, designers and engineers. Cato wondered whom he was here to see; probably some junior pen-pusher who wanted him to fill out a boring questionnaire about home energy use or to yell at him about his computer game usage stats.

The huge, glass front doors swished open and a moving platform delivered him to the reception desk.

Before he could speak, a square-jawed man carried out a full body scan with a security bar, then did an iris scan and attached an ID hologram to Cato's jacket.

"Floor 87, Room T1," said the man, pointing to a line of Chute Boards. Cato stepped onto one and up he hurtled.

He found himself in an orange-carpeted corridor. It was completely empty. He walked until he spied Room T1. Before he could knock, the door swished open.

He entered a large, rectangular room with slim, white blinds, an elegant, white sofa and a large glass table. At the table sat a tanned woman in a white suit. She had long, auburn hair and azure eyes. She was studying a document.

"Take a seat, please, Cato," she said, looking up. "I'm Arietta Stone, Under Minister for Energy Production and Storage."

With a title like that, Arietta Stone was no pen-pusher. She was one of the High-Ups. Cato sat down facing her across the table.

"Put bluntly, you're here because we need your hacking skills," said Stone.

Cato blushed. Does she know about my mainframe hack?

"It's recently come to our notice that although the North Side has far more developed and advanced energy gathering and processing machines, the South Side has started to produce energy at a faster rate than us."

Cato frowned. From the chaos shown on the Vid News it was amazing that the South Side could produce anything at all.

THE LAST DAYS OF THE ENERGY WAR

"We want you to get inside the South Side's Energy Centre, hack into its heavily encrypted system and find out what programmes it is using to achieve this. Once you've located these, you will download them onto this."

She handed him a bright, gold USB4 Stick.

"What about all the rioting and violence over there?" asked Cato, pocketing the stick. "How will I avoid that?"

"We have a route specifically planned that will circumvent any trouble."

"But why can't an adult do this? You must have hundreds of tech people in this building."

"We've been watching you and you are faster than any of our people."

So she does know about my mainframe hack!

"What if I don't want to do it?"

"Let's just say you and your aunt might find yourselves living in 'less inviting' quarters."

I get it. A threat.

"The Archer Gate is the only entry/exit point between the North and South Side," went on Stone, "and we operate it."

Cato had heard about the existence of such a place but had thought it was only a rumour.

"It opens for two minutes one night every three months, at 12 a.m. and 3 a.m. That's how it's been programmed and the code that works it is so complex that not even a million tech wizards like you could hack into it. So those times can't be altered. We very rarely send anyone in, but this can't wait. Tonight is one of the nights it opens. You will meet me by the gate at 11.45 p.m., where I will give you further instructions."

"Fine," said Cato.

"Excellent," nodded Stone, pulling on a medical glove to shake his hand. "I'll see you then. And Cato... do not underestimate the importance of this mission. It is absolutely crucial that I get this information tonight. We simply can't wait. And one other thing: do not tell ANYONE about this."

Cato got up and left Room T1 with the feeling that his life could quite possibly have just changed forever.