

# Worlds Between Worlds

*J. Max Levin*

The wet sound of rubber soles slapping against concrete echoed through the old, rancid tunnel. Abigail's clothes were soaked right through to the bone from thrashing about the shallow waterway. Dark sneakers, plain jeans made of Future Forward PseuDenim™, a torn white T-shirt, and a thin jacket made of worn polyester armored her against the dank, stale air. Cold sweat and fear poured down her face, framing her brown eyes and welding her short brown hair to her face and nape. The acrid scent of raw sewage mixed together with the stench of the black mold and rot that dotted the tunnel's walls, forming a colorful cocktail of nauseating filth. Ancient, leaky pipes and wires stripped bare of insulation ran down the hole in either direction along the cracked concrete coated by the dim, dolorous, incandescent lighting. She'd been running so hard for so long, she felt as though her legs were about to give out underneath her. Her lungs were on fire and her head pounded with tension, but some primitive need to survive drove her forward. Abigail shut her eyes tight and tried to swallow her panic, but the tears leaked through her eyelids like a sieve. The sound of her pursuers followed close behind. *Splash, splash.* The jackboots plowed through the aged water duct, at least three separate pairs. *Splash, splash. Splash, splash.* Abigail's eyes flew open, bloodshot and wet from sobbing. She wanted to pause to catch her breath. She was so tired. Instinct whispered in her mind.

Don't stop. Run.

Her inner animal was right. If she stopped moving, if she failed to ignore it all—the pain, the terror, the cramping in her legs, the burning in her abdomen, her heart beating like a drum—she would die. Up ahead, Abigail spotted a four-way intersection. The tunnel continued forward with a pathway leading off to her left and an alcove on the other side. The alcove was a few meters deep and hosted a collection of unidentifiable electrical equipment, most of it caked in flaking scabs of corrosion. Carefully, Abigail pulled off a shoe and set it on the ground at the front of the crossways, then nestled her small, skinny body into the space between one of the elec-

trical transformers and the wall, trying her best to crouch behind it and stay out of sight. The sound ceased momentarily as the jackboots stopped at the intersection. One spoke in a muffled voice, barely audible to her through their helmet.

“Lost visual on target.”

Abigail’s throat tightened; her heartbeat pounded in her ears so loudly she thought it might give her away. The air felt thick, like she was breathing through water. She heard a short crackle—like someone stepping on a day-old potato chip—softly shudder against the trooper’s ear. Every sound was sharp and jagged, cutting through her thoughts like broken glass.

“Affirmative.”

The troopers continued forward in the direction indicated by the shoe, and Abigail caught a glimpse of one of her pursuers from behind. She couldn’t tell whether the trooper was a man or a woman, old or young, because they were covered head to toe in a suit of black polyaramid armor with hard ceramic plates over their torso, thighs, calves, shoulders and forearms. A gas mask was built into the helmet, the beady goggles radiating a soft, infernal red glow through the built-in light amplifiers. The back of the armor was emblazoned with three white capital letters: *MRD*. *MRD*; Mutant Retrieval Division. *Retrieval*. She’d never actually heard of anyone being “retrieved.” The Federation government had a zero-tolerance policy toward mutant fugitives and usually marked them for disposal regardless of the circumstances.

Abigail cowered as she watched them leave. Once the coast was clear, she stepped out from behind the transformer, reached up and rubbed the nub that remained of the horn that stuck out of the right side of her head. It was wrapped in bloody gauze and tape, excruciating to the touch. It looked like an antelope’s horn, once stuck out from her head at a slight curve by over a foot. What remained was roughly the length of someone’s finger. Lingering voices echoed in the back of her mind: unpleasant memories angry that she’d ignored them.

“Abbie! Abby the abbie!”

“Genefucked freak!”

There was no going back now, and Abigail wasn’t sure she wanted to either. At first, she thought she’d be able to get away. Maybe they wouldn’t know who did it, maybe they wouldn’t believe she did it, maybe she could just slip into one of the world’s many bulging throngs of humanity and disappear. She was wrong. That much had become clear as soon as she saw her face on the news. She was a fugitive now. The only way to safety was down, inward, further into the lawless, dilapidated guts of the shell world that had long been forgotten by polite society.

The squelching sound of soaked footsteps trailed off into the dis-

tance, the echoes fading away. Finally, she could breathe a little. Abigail grabbed her shoe and shoved it onto her foot, then headed down the path across from the alcove, away from the MRD troopers. She moved slower now, walking to keep the noise down. There was no map of these old ancillary sublevels. How was she supposed to know where to go? The closer to the world's surface she was, the more danger she was in. A place where no one would find her—that's what she was looking for. The further down the waterway she went, the wider the tunnel became until it eventually opened outwards completely into an enormous reservoir. It was so big she could barely see across to the other side. The sewage trickled down a ramp with a grated staircase next to it and emptied into the artificial basin. Abigail walked down the steps and onto the catwalk that crisscrossed the room. Up above the reservoir the horrid stink lightened up a bit, and she could tell from the color of the water below that it was treated. *Thank God.* When she made it to the far end of the treatment chamber, she found another ramp leading downward. There were open sluice gates made of corrugated metal in front of each ramp that looked like they hadn't been operated in years, which gave her hope that the area was less monitored than the sewer sublevel above it. Abigail followed the catwalk, went down the steps on the other side and kept going. Down, she went, past spillways and adjunct tunnels, maintenance rooms and more arcane machinery. How long was it now? It was impossible to be sure—she lacked a clock after ditching her pocket computer. She did know something though; everything hurt, and she was getting tired and hungry. Her pace slowed as exhaustion began overtaking her, and after a while, she slumped against the nearest wall, curled up and passed out, too tired now for more tears.

Abigail woke up to the sound of someone talking. She immediately felt the throbbing pain in her once-horn return, the pangs of hunger in her gut. Who was talking? As her consciousness returned, the sound became clearer, and she realized that there were two voices talking in turn.

“Man, ain't nobody gon' buy a mutie. It's too much of a pain in the ass.”

“Yeah, but I bet they'd buy a mutie's goop. Tell 'em it'll make 'em psychics and they'll pay top cred, I'm sure.”

“Good point!”

Abigail's eyes opened slowly to the terrifying vision of a pair of mutilated cyborgs. One of them grinned toothily, the other glowered with his arms crossed. Their bodies were covered in mismatched prosthetics, many of which had clearly belonged to someone else once. They were covered in surgical scars, mostly self-inflicted, and what unmarred flesh they did have looked a sickly yellow-green from countless past contusions, infections and mistreatment. One of them was larger than the other, with a huge red eye-

piece that curled around his bald head from the side. The other was scrawny, with wild, stringy hair, but the numerous spikes protruding from his body made him just as imposing. They were both dressed in patchwork leather jackets and jeans that were in dire need of mending.

Abigail used to hear about people like this on the news, and they were popular villains on holovision. Scumps, they were called, people who specialized in trading all sorts of organs, whether internal or external, made of flesh or made of steel and polymer. She had no idea where the word came from, but it stuck well enough. The grotesque sound of it aptly conveyed the revulsion she felt at the sight of them. Never in her wildest dreams did she think she'd ever meet a real one. Goosebumps spread across her body as Abigail realized the depth of the shit she was in.

"She's awake!" The smaller one yelled in excitement.

"Keep it the fuck down, moron. It's a tunnel. It echoes. You want him to find us?" The larger of the two Scumps snapped at his companion. Abigail wanted to scream, but it stopped itself in her throat, escaping as a quiet, terrified yelp.

"Please... Just leave me alone. I'll go away. I'll hide. You'll never see me again!" Abigail begged and pleaded in fear as tears began to well up in her eyes.

"Afraid that's not gonna happen, sweetie. Now get the hell up. You're coming with us and you best keep any more whining inside before I shove it down your gullet, fucking mutie." He reached down and wrapped his hand around the grip of a pistol stuck out from his waistband, drawing it with an emphatic flourish. It was a conventional handgun, that much Abigail could guess—it was easy and legal to obtain reproduction firearms on most of the shell layers. Military-grade weapons were so tightly controlled, even the police didn't have access to them; too many instances of theft and loss. It didn't matter, a solid slug of lead nearly half an inch across was more than enough to put her out of her misery. It didn't feel fair. So, she had a horn—so what? These assholes were far more grotesque than she was, so why did everyone see her as beneath even them?

Abigail stood up and complied in resignation. What else was there for her to do? Whatever it was that she'd done to those people before, it wasn't something she knew how to do again. It was an accident, something that just happened. Things would have been much easier for her otherwise. She walked in between them, constantly on edge, constantly aware of the gun looming behind her. The Scumps laughed and chatted with each other as they led her away.

"Lucky us, huh? Payday's gonna buy me a new hand!" The scrawnier Scump held up his metal hands and flexed them. One of them, Abigail

noticed, had been damaged by oxidation and was starting to fall apart, while the other appeared a size too big for his arm. The other Scump hissed angrily.

“Didn’t I tell you to shut the fuck up? Keep your voice down, dumbass.”

“Yeah, whatever, dad. Gonna tell me to brush my teeth, too?”

The bigger Scump rolled his one organic eye and growled.

“Are you trying to lead that bastard straight to us? Quit your yammering or I’ll fucking kill you.”

The scrawny one quieted down after that. Abigail wondered if some of those bruises they wore had been left by each other. Through the tunnels and across the causeways, Abigail followed her captors. The narrow passages were laid out like a maze. They reached the edge of one of the cyclopean supporting structures that held up the planetary layers above. Crossing over from the sewers into a neighboring adjunct, Abigail found herself somewhere unrecognizable. The new tunnel was much wider, at least 30 meters across. It was a perfect cylinder, dry on the inside, and smelled slightly of ozone. The lights inside were brighter than those in the sewers, but many of them were flickering, dimming or plain broken.

As the door opened, a rush of air blasted through the doorway and nearly knocked Abigail off her feet. Inside, a powerful, constant gust of wind came from one side of the tunnel. It chilled her to the bone and was so loud she couldn’t hear herself think. The larger Scump grabbed her by the arm and pulled her along in the same direction the air was flowing. Then they walked in silence, unable to hear each other speak over the howl of the air. They walked for so long that Abigail noticed once more the pain in her shattered horn and muscles, her hunger, her thirst, and her slowly dying adrenaline. Keeping herself distracted by staying in her head was all she could do, thinking about happier times, like when Mom was still around. Keeping ahold of thoughts of pleasant memories was impossible, and no matter how many times she tried to turn her mind away, she was always pulled back to the day her mother disappeared. One of Mom’s friends—Kieva something-or-other, Abigail couldn’t remember her surname—had dropped Abigail off at a private orphanage called “Edenbridge Youth Sanctuary” around a month before she was to enter secondary school without any warning. Abigail cried for her mom, but nobody could tell her anything except that what happened was what her mother wanted. It always seemed impossible to her.

The orphanage itself had been ordinary enough: mostly mundane, with the occasional moments of neglect or discrimination over her mutation. Usually, it was the other kids that did it, not the staffers. Abigail real-

ized that none of the thoughts she was having were helping. She sniffled and held back tears at the thought that she'd never see her mother again. Her heart crawled up and caught itself in her throat. Mom was the only one who ever cared for her, ever treated her like the child she was, ever saw her for who she was instead of what she was. She was the only person who had ever loved her, and now she was gone. Forever.

As the three of them walked, the sound of the gust grew fainter and fainter, until it eventually died down to a whisper, and then—nothing. Abigail spent the entire walk looking for opportunities to make a run for it, but there was nowhere to run to. The entire path was one long, straight tunnel with no turns or corners. All the openings along the sides were closed up tight when the supporting structure was not lined up with the tunnels around it, and even when they were open, she was too afraid to try. What if she failed? What if they got angry?

At last, Abigail saw an exit on the horizon. It was an opening into an enormous wide-open chamber. The closer they got, the clearer it became, until they reached its border. The perimeter of the room was dark and drearily lit, with only a few sparse fixtures along the walls. It stretched vertically so far that Abigail could see neither the top or the bottom. There was a pillar in the center that looked like an axle, and she saw enormous fans the size of houses when she looked along the shaft. There was a catwalk with a grated floor surrounding the pillar, with bridges leading off in all four cardinal directions. Both above and below, there were identical catwalks for story after story. It became clear that they were trekking through one of the shell world's mammoth-sized ventilation systems, but the shaft they'd come to was old and decrepit, the axle broken and still. The Scumps began to lead Abigail across, and the larger one addressed his companion.

"Think it's close enough?"

"Yeah! Fuck it, man. Freezer's ten minutes away, let's just do it here. No way that guy's still tailing us."

"Good, 'cause I'm getting sick of this bullshit. I ain't no fucking nanny," the big guy said.

Abigail felt a sharp tug as the Scump pulled her toward the center of the catwalk, then shoved her against the axle in the center.

"Ow! Stop! That hurts!"

Abigail protested loudly, but the Scumps acted as though they couldn't hear her. His hands found their way to her shoulders and shoved her down towards the floor onto her knees. There was a sharp smack as one of them kicked her in the head, and she fell sideways, rolling in pain. She heard the sound of a pistol's slide being racked; a bullet loaded into the chamber. Turning to face her assailants, Abigail was greeted by its barrel.

She squeezed her eyes shut tightly – squeezed out the fear. It trailed down her cheeks. This was it—the end. Time to die.

BOOM!

The sound was so deafening it made Abigail's ears burn. A shrill, high pitched ringing overwhelmed her senses and reverberated through her head as though it were echoing in the hollows of her ears. Something warm and wet splashed across her face and chest. She instinctively reached her hands up to her head, clutching her ears.

BOOM!

Another gunshot echoed through the chamber, and Abigail felt the catwalk shake as something tumbled over and thumped onto the floor. Trembling with dread and uncertainty, she reached up to wipe whatever it was off of her face so she could open her eyes. A shrill scream flew out of her mouth when she saw the aftermath. The smaller of the two Scumps—who had held the gun to her head—was lying in a heap with most of his head gone. Bits of shattered bone and brain-matter littered the floor around the corpse, coating the grating a deep, shiny, curb-side red. The piecemeal remains of some metal neural implant in his head had been scattered everywhere, some caught on sticky splotches of dark blood that pooled all over his shirt. The larger one was several feet away with a hole in his torso the size of a melon. Shards of metal and circuitry were strewn across the catwalk behind him and what little remained of his viscera had spilled out to the side of his body, some of the smaller chunks sliding through the holes in the floor.

Still deafened, Abigail jumped to her feet in confusion. *Did it happen again? But a pistol can't do this, can it?* Her question answered itself a few moments later as a man strode into view from behind her. He was tall and slender with an ochre complexion, disheveled black hair and a poorly-groomed beard. His thick, green jacket and tattered chinos looked secondhand, and he was covered in grease and grime. An enormous handgun with a barrel like a brick swung on a holster at his hip. It was a C-Charger, a type of advanced firearm made entirely of high-tech poly-fiber capable of withstanding incredible pressure, and rarely seen within the shell world. They fired an explosive charge internally that blasted through a copper cap, which ejected from the barrel at such speed, it was reduced to a spear of molten metal that bored through solid material like a paper hole-puncher. Upon impact with something squishy and wet, like a human body, the lance exploded from sudden, high-pressure vaporization. The man walked straight past Abigail and approached the body of the smaller Scump. Though it was hard to hear, Abigail could make out his words by looking at his lips as he reached down and took the fresher of the cadaver's two mechanical hands in his own flesh-and-blood grip.

“This ain’t yours, asshole.”

**Levin**