

# Enter CyberSpace

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## Prologue: Compound Mysteries

IT WAS A PEACEFUL SUMMER NIGHT. The air, still carrying the fresh scent of damp earth, puffed gently. The three-quarter moon bathed the buildings below with a gentle, illuminating light, and scattered clouds threw shifting shadows skittering across the ground like frightened creatures.

Raven Laak gave a decisive snort. *Such lyrical garbage is for children. He told himself, ignoring the fact he himself was only ten, and not for someone like me.* He glanced around furtively, searching for movement across the open stretch of empty ground before settling on a target. With an ease that came from long hours of practice, Raven fitted from shadow to shadow, barely remaining still long enough to aim for the next fragment of darkness. Within seconds, he melted into the deep shadows, populating the ground around a large, smothered building. His gaze noted the sprawling metal and concrete compound labeled with a dimly lit sign: RDC.

Raven pondered the strange letters, jaw working as his mind attempted to place where he saw them before. He remembered Lucida impressing on him that anything showing RDC usually indicated a Research and Development Center. From some forgotten piece of memory, his mind supplied the second half: RDM stood for Rversy Technology Machines. Somehow Raven had stumbled onto the treasure trove of the second largest computer manufacturing company in the country.

Raven made a mental note of the location, showing the morsel of information to the back of his mind. He needed to return to the hideout before one of the others discovered his prize and stole the credit. From his crouched position against the wall, he swept the grounds with a keenly perceptive gaze, searching for anything, a flicker of movement or a glint of reflected light which might indicate the presence of another being. With infinite patience he waited, shrewdly examining the bits of information picked up by his finely tuned senses. The calm, innocent silence of the night stretched over several

minutes, unbroken save for the sighing of the wind and the clicks, clatters, and chirrups of myriad insects. He listened as a distant nightingale sent its mournful song shimmering through the night, carried by a cool breath.

The ten-year-old's fist connected with his own forehead. Stars exploded in front of Raven's eyes, but he waited until they faded into the night, shaking off the wave of dizziness. *What's the matter with me?* he asked himself, flexing his hand and scowling into the darkness. For the second time that night, he'd allowed himself to get distracted from his mission by the trivial details of the experience. *If the others ever find out such poetic nonsense goes through my head...*

The boy shuddered and wrenched his mind back to the task at hand, ignoring the pain throbbing in his forehead. A cold prickle of fear suddenly ran up his spine, and Raven stood still as he felt eyes staring at the back of his head. When he whirled around, he realized there were no feasible hiding places behind him. Snuggling off the incident as nerves, Raven turned back and struggled to push aside his lingering tenseness. Just as he unfolded himself from his cramped hiding place, intent on getting away as fast as possible, a metal door squeaked open and shut in one of the outer buildings nearby. The crunch of footsteps on the gravel pathway echoed sharply through the still air, unbearably loud after the intense quiet.

For a moment, Raven froze then eased back into the darkness once more and watched while the figure crossed the grounds. To the casual observer, the mysterious young man wearing an RDM employee uniform might appear to be just another security guard making his nightly rounds, but Raven trained himself to be more than just a casual observer. As he studied the security guard, he felt something wasn't right. Frothing, he tried to place the reason for his suspicion, knowing his instincts were usually reliable. It finally dawned on him there wasn't anything outwardly strange about the

guard's confident manner; it had more to do with his air of studied caution and heightened awareness. This suggested to Raven that if he truly was a guard there, his intentions didn't have anything to do with his job. The young boy gave an understanding smirk. *Amateur. He thought smugly.*

Regardless, Raven found the secretive aura about the security guard intriguing. An excursion following the young man could be profitable if he did things right. He waited patiently watching while the guard passed at a closed doorway, punched in a code, and stepped inside the pneumatic doors. Raven's interest in the guard's real purpose rising, he snaked closer to the open door

and paused for a moment in case the guard returned. When a few moments passed with no sign of the man, he dared forward with a rush of adrenaline, his oversized black tennis shoes making little noise on the concrete ground. A soft beep sounded from within the building, and the doors started closing. Putting on an extra burst of speed, he barely managed to slip inside seconds before the doors whispered shut behind him.

Within the dark confines of the Research and Development structure, Raven quickly stepped sideways and flattened himself against the wall, concentrating on quieting his breath, he waited for his eyes to adjust to the dimmer light. He hoped the mysterious guard hadn't heard him, but Raven felt confident. Blinking rapidly, Raven gave the room a cursory glance. He stood in a large entryway pressed up against one of the cold synthetized walls, a large expanse of sterile white tile flooring surrounding him. As his vision returned, he noticed a large number of doorways and a set of stairs leading up to a second floor. A soft

scraping noise to his right caught Raven's attention, and he jerked his head over just in time to see a pair of glossy black shoes disappear up the flight of steps. Curiosity growing even more, Raven cautiously pursued the mysterious man.

As the minutes and hallways stretched on, Raven's thoughts wandered, and he found himself wondering just what he was doing. *Why am I following some anonymous security guard when I could be getting back to the hideout to claim my reward?* He considered this for a moment and came to the realization he was afraid. *Not afraid of the guard, he corrected himself, but afraid the guard's going to take something incredibly valuable before I can get to it.*

His mind preoccupied, Raven brushed up against a tall stack of discarded computer boards. Shifting them caused the guard to pause, one hand hovering near the palm plate of another door. Panicking and cursing himself for becoming absentminded, he quickly slipped back around the corner. He

fell over backward as the edge of a small cart of assorted computer parts collided with the backs of his knees. Both Raven and the cart crashed to the floor. Loudly, the razor-sharp contents of the container flew everywhere, glinting in the dim light and filling his entire view. With barely enough time to register the pain along the left side of his face, he rolled out of the danger zone and scrambled into a nearby closet, pulling the door shut behind him without a sound.

Heart pounding in his chest, Raven waited with apprehension, holding his breath as he heard the guard approach. He stood immobile, shivering in his long, baggy denim coat even though the atmosphere in the small closet was stifling. There were a few crunches, and clatters as the guard moved about, and Raven fervently hoped he would only take the time to examine the crate. The door handle jiggled and the boy jumped in alarm, but the movement soon stopped. Believed, he realized instinctively looking the closer door behind him had probably just saved his life. After a long moment of tense silence during which he continued to tremble, the guard's footsteps faded back around the corner. The boy relaxed, but waited until he heard a door click shut before daring to breathe normally again.

Pain throbbled along the long, jagged cut running from his eyebrow to his chin, slashing over his left eyelid, but Raven ignored it as he groped blindly in the dark for the door handle. His fingers brushed something smooth, and he grasped it only to find, to his utter surprise, the door was jammed. No, not jammed, locked. He realized in confusion. *That's odd; locks aren't supposed to lock from within like that.* He considered the door in front of him as his eyes adjusted to the faint glow creeping from beneath the synthetized. As he felt the contours of the metal handle, he unexpectedly found a tiny keyhole. Raven paused to consider his options. Breaking the door down would be virtually impossible for a boy his age in such a cramped space, and removing the hinges would be too loud and take too long. The only remaining solution was to pick the strange lock. Raven wondered briefly why there was a keyhole on the inside of a closet door, but he struggled it off and reached into a coat pocket for the lock-picking kit he always kept there. Opening the wall-sized pouch and eyeing the old-fashioned tools within, he decided on a pick. He inserted the long metal instrument into the keyhole, wiggling it around to feel for the lock's tumbler. The door rewarded him with a loud click as the lock relinquished its hold. With a satisfied smirk, Raven replaced the kit in his pocket and pushed the door open.

“THE CALM INNOCENT THE NIGHT STRETCHED OVER SEVERAL MINUTES, UNBROKEN SAVE FOR THE SIGHING OF THE WIND AND THE CLICKS, CLATTERS, AND CHIRRUPS OF SEVERAL MYRIAD INSECTS.”



The streetwise boy continued his noiseless pursuit down the main corridor and peered around a corner. He saw the guard before a door without a handle. He could see the entrance spotted four security cameras and at least five different kinds of authorization devices including a retina scanner, voice decoder, DNA analyzer, typed password, and the expected palm scanner. Even as he raised an incredulous eyebrow at the copious level of security, Raven automatically scanned the area, searching for anything else he might have missed. He felt an unusual feeling of anticipation rising in him, a burning desire to discover what valuable thing needed such an excessive amount of high-level security. Wiping blood from his eye, he leaned forward to peer more closely at the scene before him.

The guard had already gone through the other security devices before Raven arrived. When the uniformed man placed his left hand on the palm reader, the door slid sideways into the wall with a soft beep of affirmation. The man moved through the doorway with caution, before Raven could follow the guard suddenly stopped, reached up inside the doorway and ripped something from the wall. He let it fall to the ground with a clatter and then continued into the passageway beyond.

Raven slunk across the floor, glancing nervously at the security cameras, but he realized at once that the intermittently sparking devices weren't going to be a problem. He crept over to the twisted object the guard had dropped on the floor and crouched to get a better look. The crumpled remains of another tiny camera lay before him, which confirmed his suspicions. The guard was up to no good. Yet, this puzzled him. If the guard really did work there, Raven couldn't figure out why he would break into his own company. With a thoughtful frown, he straightened and stepped over the debris.

Just as he passed through the still open doorway, a strong hand grabbed him by his shirtfront and dragged him inside, slamming him up against the wall with enough power to force the breath from his lungs, surprised and winded, Raven looked up into expressionless black eyes, mere inky pools in the blue halflight of the night fluorescents. Although Raven felt a chilling twinge of fear, he refused to allow the emotion to show on his face, difficult though he found it. The shadowy, unreadable expression on the guard's face was the most frightening thing he had ever been confronted with in his short life.

"Why are you following me, Boy?" An oddly stiff, controlled quality underlined the security guard's voice. His tone was low and as intense as his eyes. "I could easily kill you now with no one the wiser."

"Then why don't you?" Raven hissed, the thick ring of purple around his pale orange eyes disappearing as he narrowed them in defiance. Tentatively, he shifted against the powerful grasp pinning him in place, hoping the guard might consider him a low enough priority he wouldn't bother with a young, care-less boy.

It was a futile wish. In response to Raven's struggling, the guard twisted the handful of shirt in his fist, effectively cutting off most of the boy's air supply, then leaned a little

closer. "I don't want to waste my valuable time dealing with your worthless body."

Raven grabbed the hand choking him in an attempt to loosen it, the whole time staring boldly into the depthless black eyes of the guard. "I'm not afraid of you," he lied through gritted teeth. To his annoyance, his voice came out weak and squeaky, not at all as he planned.

The enigmatic young man didn't move for several heartbeats, studying Raven's face as though memorizing it, his own features still strangely blank. "You should be," he said again. Then, with a speed that left the boy dizzy, the security guard flung Raven back into the hall as though he were weightless.

Raven crashed into the wall and slid to the ground in a stunned heap. Just as the door closed, he managed to raise his head, registering the guard's name tag. This observation was cut short when the guard said in his flat, emotionless voice, "Think before you cross Strythe again, Boy."

The door slid shut, placing a barrier between them that Raven knew he could never breach without the proper tools. He sat by the wall in a state of astonished disbelief, wiping clotted blood from his cheek as he wondered at the name and warning he'd been left with.

