

Untitled (Excerpt)

By Dan Lance

[Martin lives in peace with his mother, until one day he is mistaken for the runaway son of a crime lord and kidnapped. He awakens to find himself in the Metro Dome, a dome famous for its mission of reinventing the human culture after it was lost in an apocalyptic event in 2012. Once it is discovered who Martin really is, the mob intends to kill him, but the mysterious Roth Balas breaks into the penthouse where he is being held captive and slaughters the mob, and allows Martin to escape only because he wants the thrill of the hunt.

Alone and in the dome illegally, Martin evades Authority, the dome's peace-keeping governing body, while Roth, who Martin believes is dead, is slowly hunting him in a game of cat and mouse. Martin is saved from his first encounter with Authority by Romy Azeen, a beautiful woman that operates a small cafe and a secret capsule flophouse. Martin is living in a capsule and working in Romy's cafe when he meets Versa, an intersex musician with a checkered past. Versa at once feels that Martin is a user, an individual who can activate the special properties of unique items called artifacts, and is in possession of an artifact. Versa decides to confront Martin about his powers...]

“Give it another shot.” Versa called out to overcome the noise of the dark, halogen-lit bar. Martin steadied his hand and aimed at the dartboard. Versa stopped him.

“Don’t strike a pose and aim at it, loosen up and just throw.”

Martin relaxed and let his arms go slack, closing his eyes. Tossing the dart underhanded, he heard it connect to the board with a resounding thud. He opened his eyes: another bull’s eye

“Three out of five. That’s not bad, kid.” Versa declared, taking another drink from his glass. Versa was a slender, muscular person with a very feminine frame. His world-weary eyes were set deep under a soft brow. A small, pointed nose sat atop thin red lips. Even at night, a pair of worn sunglasses rested within his shaggy hair.

Martin rolled his eyes and tugged at his black polo in retaliation to the bar’s heat. “I still don’t see what this proves,” he said, “I was lucky.”

Versa sighed. “You blindly hit the bull’s eye three times and were close to it twice. You can’t explain that away with a fluke.” He said. “Let’s try something else.” Martin sat back down, sipping his water while Versa was deep in thought, looking around the room.

The bar Loyto was a sepia mix of browns and yellows. Most of the furniture was wooden, composed of a varied mix of found objects and handcrafted pieces. Metallic stools lined the bar, all full of people coming and going as the bartenders rushed around to serve every patron. A group of people at the table next to Martin & Versa drunkenly cackled and sang along to the song playing on the jukebox. An off-duty Authority officer with a pitcher of beer in hand walked by the table. Martin froze; Versa watched the man as he stumbled away as he noticed the song on the jukebox was about to end.

"Martin," he said urgently, "What's the next song?" Martin woke up out of his thoughts and named the first song that came to his mind. It was correct.

"See!" Versa exclaimed, raising his hands, "I'm telling you the truth, I can sense it. You're a user, and that necklace is an artifact."

"Right," Martin scoffed, "And why am I supposed to believe this? Magic totems? Do you realize how silly you sound?"

"It is a little hard to swallow, I know, but I'm not feeding you a line and this isn't a con."

"Sure." Martin replied with a sarcastic tone

Versa turned his head towards the door, thinking of another way to convince Martin. Meanwhile, he waved a hand towards Martin. "Quick, what's the next song?" Martin rattled off another song. The next song played, but was something Martin had never heard, an exciting mix of synthpop and folk. After a brief intro, a dark, bittersweet voice crooned haunting lyrics. Martin faintly recognized the voice.

"Versa..." Martin started, "is -is that you?"

Versa tilted an ear up, listening, and then replied with a chuckle, eyes still glancing around, "Yeah it is. Wow that's an old one; not my favorite." Versa stopped, as if something in the song caught his attention. He finished his drink, "Why don't we go for a walk?"

Versa paid their tab and the two exited the bar. The heavy wood door slammed shut behind them as they stepped into the sidewalk lit with artificial moonlight and streetlamps. While not overly crowded, the sidewalks were packed with people enjoying the dome's nightlife. The area was full of older brick and concrete buildings that housed bars, restaurants, and small stores that were all open late. A lone Authority officer stood surveying the streets a block away, wearing protective armor and carrying a geometric rifle. A few electric cars drove past on the road, however most people in the dome favored public transportation or could walk to everything they needed. A stretch of road ran overhead, blocking the dome's skyline from view.

Martin looked past the tall buildings surrounding them, at the artificial sea of stars that appeared way too close, or so his grandfather used to say; the only family member of his to have lived outside a dome.

"Follow me." Versa instructed Martin as he began down the sidewalk, stepping around groups of people and rude individuals who refused to move. Martin snapped out of his thoughts of home and hurried to keep up with Versa.

"So, how do you-"

"Not right now, wait til we get to where we're going."

"Ok..." Martin replied, staying in step with Versa. He turned into the alley between Loyto and a

closed restaurant. As they went down the rounded steps, light slowly died away until all that remained was the blue glow of artificial moonlight. At the end of the staircase, the alley split into two paths, marked by a dirty dumpster on the opposite wall. They turned right and traveled down a longer alleyway, littered with trash and old posters.

“Would ya look at that,” Versa proclaimed, tapping a poster on the wall with a knuckle, “an old concert poster.” Martin examined it as they passed by; a smoky gray-blue background nearly covered by other posters. Tall, letters announced a live performance by Versa at Red Neon. Martin was confused, “I don’t get it, if you’re in the dome illegally, then how do you have songs in bars and concert posters?”

Versa looked over his shoulder at Martin. “In case you haven’t noticed, this place is all about arts and culture. If you are an artist you’re treated like royalty, or at least given a free pass if you’re illegal.”

“So why are you still slumming it?” Martin asked. Versa let out a frustrated sigh. “Because I’m still considered illegal, even with the artist exemption. I’m still spat on by assholes and can’t do anything that requires an ID. The one good thing, though, is that Authority can’t pick me up as long as I have my exemption.”

“Lucky you.” Martin remarked, Versa’s comment reminded him of his own fugitive status with Authority.

The two rounded another corner and light flooded back into the alley as they arrived at the top of another staircase, offset and cracked with age. The bottom was an arched entryway emanating light and the sounds of people. Versa looked back to make sure Martin was still in tow then started down the stairs.

As he passed through the archway, Martin surveyed his surroundings. The location was an expansive area with a flat concrete ceiling held in place by numerous arched pillars. The lighting was mostly LED lamps attached to the pillars with some scattered free-standing lamps and bulbs in strands hanging from the ceiling. Densely-packed people hurried around looking at various booths, storage units, and stands, which were selling anything from clothing and electronics to food and art. The entire area was so busy that it gave Martin a headache trying to take everything in.

Versa made a small sweeping gesture in the direction of the shops and stands. “Welcome to the Tenenbaum Underpass Market. Stick close and watch your pockets.”

Martin slid his hands into his pockets and walked alongside Versa, who kept looking into the stands and over the crowd searching for something as they walked. Martin asked about their destination. Versa answered, “I’m looking for a guy I know. He should be running a food stand around here, makes some mean cevapcici.”

They found the stand minutes later near the center of the market, a fixture made of various materials with a makeshift bar surrounding it on two sides. Plastic chairs were either pushed into the bar or being used by patrons and the stand had no sign. The man behind the bar was in his

forties with short black hair that was beginning to gray. Scarred hands worked utensils and equipment. Versa sat far from the other patrons and Martin did so as well. The man noticed them in the peripheral of his tired eyes, turned to greet them, and then went back to prepping another customer's food.

"Hey Davey." Versa said with a smirk. The man froze, turning his head slowly in his direction with a frightened expression that abruptly changed into a smile and a soft, deep laugh.

"Versa! It's been ages. How are you?" he declares with a boom in his accented voice that made the patron he was serving jump, "And it's Mikhail, thank you." He approached the two. "I still remember when you were a naive girl; fumbling her way through the dome, now look at you! A successful, young..." Mikhail mentions, trying to decide the proper pronoun before admitting defeat with a dismissive hand gesture, "well, whatever you are. It's great to see you."

"Wait, what?" Martin exclaims. Mikhail chuckles and turns to Versa, who addresses Martin's confusion.

"Well," Versa begins, talking with hir hands, "you know the two genders, right? Male and Female. I'm kind of somewhere in-between, more of a neutral party."

"I see. Well, I'm sorry if I offended you by calling you a guy." Martin says, still slightly confused.

"It's fine, guess I'm something you don't exactly see every day." Versa replies passive aggressively, the insult going over Martin's head.

"So who's the new guy?" Mikhail jokingly asks Versa.

"Oh, just a friend of mine, met him a few days ago. Martin, Davey. Davey, Martin." Mikhail reaches across the counter to shake Martin's hand and correct Versa.

"Anyway," Versa begins, "Any interesting news lately?" Mikhail turns to hir, and looks at Martin. "Depends on what kind of news you are looking for." Versa gives Mikhail a look.

"Settle petal, no need for the evil eye. In 'that kind' of news there was a shootout in a high-rise penthouse the other day. A kidnapping gone awry so says Authority."

"Oh really?" Versa says without interest as Martin stiffens.

"That or a contraband deal gone bad. Anyway, they're looking for anyone involved, including some gray-haired guy who was seen leaving the scene with nary a scratch on him but enough holes in his clothes to turn him into a fountain." As Mikhail finished, Versa perked up.

"You don't think it's the ring, do you?" Versa asks.

"Perhaps. Some people have tossed the idea around." Versa bites hir lip, "Well that's just bad news bears."

Martin interjects with urgency in his voice, "What ring? What is it?"

Mikhail gives a vague answer, calling the ring a good luck charm.

“He knows, or at least I’m trying to explain it to him” Versa claims, pointing a thumb at Martin.

Surprised, Mikhail gives Martin a real answer, “A long time ago, there was this Russian guy. A real crazy motherfucker, going around doing whatever. Well, long story short, he was one of the first users and one of the artifacts in his possession was a ring that granted a sort of immortality.”

Martin went cold, remembering how the gray-haired psycho has gleefully slaughtered the men holding Martin captive, only to turn to Martin and said he should start running. The thought let slip a horrified expression across Martin’s face, one that both Versa and Mikhail noticed. Versa tapped Martin’s shoulder made eye contact and snapped hir fingers. Martin’s mind empties of any dreadful thoughts and lightens as his skin tightens and his eyes water. Laughter bubbles up from the pit of his stomach and escapes as large grin forces its way onto his face. He fills with joy.

“No way!” Martin accidentally shouts, regaining control of his voice afterwards but not his laughter. “What was that?”

Versa taps the sunglasses on hir head with a finger, and asks “Do you believe me now?”

Martin replies with a resounding yes and reaches for Versa’s glasses, only to have hir swat his hand away. Versa points a finger at Martin, snapping “Didn’t your mother teach you not to snatch?”

Before an argument could erupt, Mikhail served their food. Versa began eating at once, but Martin tried again to take Versa’s sunglasses and ze parried his attempt. Martin begins to eat the cevaps. After finishing their food and conversing with Mikhail about artifact shops, the two leave the stand.

“Hey, Sophia!” Mikhail calls out. Martin doesn’t pay any attention to it until Versa stops and turns around, similarly to Mikhail’s reaction to being called Davey. Versa is stone-faced, a look of fear in hir eyes. Mikhail calls out again, “You need to forget that name because unlike me, people are still after you.”

The two ventured deeper into the market to an artifact shop Mikhail told them about. Past booths with people buying and selling various goods to a large storage unit with a nylon cover over the open front. The cover was held in place with an awning and metal poles, while the front of it was unzipped to create an entrance. Versa and Martin stepped inside. Martin almost immediately gagged from the stench of aged leather and old junk. Various glass-covered cabinets littered the sides along with locked display tables and shelves in the walkway. Each held an assortment of seemingly random objects: watches, shoes, pieces of paper, even a cup of dirt. Each item had a tag attached with a number but no price. A woman in her thirties stood hunched over a rounded display counter that housed even more objects.

“Are these-”

“Artifacts, yes.” Versa answers with a nod, interrupting Martin’s question. “Do you feel anything? Maybe a tingling on the back of your neck, or perhaps an odd smell or taste?” asks Versa.

Martin breathes in, “No, just an old smell.”

“No, that isn’t it,” Versa remarks shaking hir head, “Man, if you weren’t such a nice kid I would’ve left you dead back in the alley and I’d have sold your necklace already.”

“What?” Martin almost shouts in shock. Versa looks around the room quickly, promptly replying, “I said focus, see if you notice any strange feeling.”

Martin shrugs off the previous comment and walks around, taking in the environment as Versa follows behind him. Martin moves toward the back of the shop, glancing at the sundry artifacts until he notices a strange smell coming from one of the items. He points to a dirty, broken cellular phone; the logo is indistinguishable except for a capital ‘N’.

“I think I get something off of that” Martin tells Versa, who scrutinizes the phone before turning back to Martin, proclaiming that the item is a fake. Martin is astonished, asking for an explanation. Instead Versa reads the tag then moves closer to the woman at the counter.

“Excuse me, what does number 34 do?”

The woman reaches under the counter for a thick blue binder and flips through the laminated pages until she slams her finger down on a section. She reads aloud “Item 34: the ‘N’ phone. If thrown at a person, it renders them unconscious. And it costs 435.” She gives Versa an ugly look as ze thanks her and walks back to Martin. “Hey, let’s go. I know of another shop in the market”

“So it was fake?” asks Martin. Versa replies with a nod as the two exit the shop. They turn left and walk in the direction of the market entrance.

“Hey Versa,” Martin begins, looking at hir. “You know that kidnapping Mikhail mentioned?”

“That was you huh?” Versa replies, surprising Martin, who answered yes. “Well I would-“ Versa stops talking abruptly, reaching a hand inside hir cloth jacket while picking up speed. Martin struggles to keep up.

“Please tell me you feel that.” Versa spoke at Martin. He tried to sense whatever it was Versa had, but felt nothing out of the ordinary.

Then he sensed it. It forced him to a halt. His hair stood on end, his eyes widened and mouth fell open. His eyes met those of the man from the penthouse. His spindly legs slithered out from beneath a large, black coat. The man’s eyes were wide and set deep, intently staring at Martin, who was frozen in place.

Versa continued walking a few feet before ze realized that Martin wasn't moving. Ze looked around, quickly drawing a small pistol to hir side and moving to Martin's side. Versa grabbed Martin's arm but couldn't move him.

The man from the penthouse started towards the two slowly, maintaining eye contact with Martin.

Versa pulled harder on Martin's arm to no avail. Hir eyes darted around the crowd in front of Martin. "Martin, snap out of it!" Versa cried.

The man in from the penthouse began to walk faster, a hand reaching into his coat.

Martin began to sweat as Versa continued to pull at his arm and search the crowd for an assailant.

The man from the penthouse continued toward them. A small elderly woman bumped into him, causing him to break eye contact. He grabs her arm and draws a large fillet knife with a wooden handle from his coat. He holds the knife out and yanks the woman onto it before pushing her to the ground.

Versa pulls again, this time Martin is freed from his trance and the two fall to the ground.

"What just happened!" demanded Martin.

"An artifact that-Shit!" Versa yells as ze looks up to see the old woman slump to the concrete as the man from the penthouse launches toward them with a look of bloodshot joy and red death in his hand. Versa avoids eye contact, raises his pistol, and fires three times at the killer. Two strike the killer while the other hits the roof. Versa pulls Martin to his feet and fires another shot at the killer's head. Ze notices the gray hair.

"A friend of yours?" Ze questions Martin, holstering hir weapon under the cloth jacket. Martin was shaken by the event and slightly deaf from the gunfire. Versa pulled Martin along by his arm.

Ze sighed, "Whatever, we need to leave. Now." Versa could already hear Authority wading through the market.