SHORT CHANGE

BOOK ONE OF THE RESONANCE SAGA

Brett P. S.
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The night air stung Paul with a fresh winter’s frost on his lips as he stood watch outside the new Savage Steel facility. His hands gripped his flashlight tightly as he stuck them underneath his coat sleeves. Construction was underway on the factory for some time, but that was during union hours. As it stood, Paul probably wouldn’t have much trouble climbing over a few steel bars to get inside, so the security door behind him was more or less for show. The siding on most of the walls was incomplete, and the place stunk of oil and grease, not that he could smell much in this weather.

There wasn’t much to look at either. Somehow, the fat cats at Savage Steel decided to set this one down on the outskirts of Manchester instead of within the major centers of domestic traffic. It was going to be hard to find people who had the petrol to burn. Damp, dark woodlands. Off road was an understatement, he thought.

“Jean!” Paul shouted.

“I’m coming!” Jean answered.

Paul glanced back to see him making his way, carrying two canteens freshly filled with a hot brew from inside their SUV. He could see bits of steam pop out from the loose cracks in the caps, letting out puffs of smoke as they shook. Jean handed one over and began to unscrew the cap on his own.

“We need to stay on watch, Jean,” Paul said.

“You worry too much,” Jean replied. “Nothing’s going to happen.”

“Something might, you know. You’ve heard ... haven’t you?”

Jean wiped the residue from his drink off his beard.

“Don’t give me that rubbish.”

Paul took a sip and felt the warm liquid fill his throat as it went down. It was good tea. Not too hot. Not too strong. If Jean was going to slack off, this was the way to do it. Paul’s fingers twitched at the sound of something ruffling the grass in the distance by the tree line.

“Qu’est-ce que c’est?” he shouted, pointing his flashlight in the direction where he heard it.

“What? I don’t see anything,” Jean said.

Paul shined it around the area but couldn’t make out anything more than a few shrubs. Definitely wasn’t anything moving, but it wasn’t very windy and the trees would have acted as a windbreaker. He scanned the area from his vantage point until ...

“There it was!” he shouted again. “Right over there!”
Jean spat on the grass.

“Well, I’m not looking. You go!”

“Fine,” Paul replied. Hunched over a bit, and with his flashlight held high, he strode out past unkempt grass and onto the old dirt road. “Bonsoir?” he asked as he crept forward. His fingers grasped the flashlight even more tightly. “Anybody there? Ca va?” He stood some ten meters from where he last saw the tall grass ruffle on the side of the road and kept his place for a good thirty seconds.

“Heh … you might be right after all!” Paul yelled back.

When he got no reply, he whirled around to see Jean lying in the grass with his canteen cracked wide open. He rushed over and noticed Jean’s forehead had a strong stream of blood running down from the hairline. He checked for a pulse. Good, still breathing. Paul pulled out his cellular phone from his coat pocket dialed the number, but there weren’t any bars and all he heard was an obnoxious dial tone. For some reason, he noticed something right next to Jean’s head also lying in the grass. Paul reached down and picked it up.

“A franc?” he said to himself. “No, it’s an American penny.”

Paul’s thoughts were broken by gunfire. It was the sound of dozens of automatic rifles lighting up at once, and they rang through the winter air like sirens. The pulsating waves shook his eardrums as he ran up to the automatic door. Hurriedly, he pulled out his key card and swiped it. The door unlocked with a clicking sound.

Paul saw hundreds … no, thousands of shrapnel shards flying about. Armed men in black gear were perched on top of the unfinished balconies, laying down bursts of gunfire that were concentrated in the center of the facility. A mass of shrapnel that coalesced around a person. Paul saw a good deal of the bits lying at his feet, but on closer inspection, he saw that they were in fact a very different kind of thing. Pennies, Yen, Francs, Pesos.

“Oh mon Dieu … it is him.”
CHAPTER 1

PARTY DODGER

Marseille, France

1 year prior...

Miles Emmerson. Age, 25. Recently hired employee of Savage Steel, the largest arms manufacturer in France and second largest in the European Nations. Miles inspected guns for a living. He would check for blemishes or mechanical defects and through a meticulous process, ensured a quality product met store shelves and private racks.

Miles stopped in the park to catch his breath. The cool autumn night air was almost enough to keep his temperature down. His shirt was showing a bit of perspiration, same as his jogging pants. Two kilometers was probably enough for now, he thought to himself. Two on and one off. That was a good regiment. He caught a glimpse of a park bench off next to the stone path he ran on, but he pulled his body back with sheer will. Walking was the plan.

The sky was mostly clear tonight, but there were some planes flying up high. He could see the lights as they passed by. It was a pretty good night. Pretty good run as well, but the street lamps were going to shut off soon. Miles pulled out his cellular phone and brought up a map. Due South East through the park. Then South a bit down the city streets. After that, being jumped wasn’t a possibility, and he should get a good view of his office. He was going to shove it back into his pants pocket, but the device vibrated. Unknown phone number? He swiped the screen and held it to his ear.

“Hello?”

“Hey, short stuff, where are you?”

Miles heard a good bit of noise coming from the background. He scratched his head a bit. Must have forgotten to add Beth’s contact info. There were plenty of productive things he could do tonight. A party wasn’t one of them.

“Sorry, on my way,” he replied.

“Please get here soon, okay?”

“Oui, be there in a few.”

Miles picked up the pace. He wasn’t ... all that short. 5’2” was ... decent? Miles forced himself to power walk through the park, and around the time he could see the gated exit, he caught wind of something odd. It smelled like a bit of ash, and he squinted through the distance to check. Sure as sulfur, the big old smoke stacks of Savage Steel were pouring out puffs of black soot.

It was so faint that he almost didn’t catch it at first. What little comprised the black clouds was well camouflaged in the backdrop of a starry night. Interesting. Union labor wasn’t working this hour of night, so who could it be?
“Never liked parties anyway,” Miles said to himself.
CHAPTER 2

CHANCE WITNESS

MARSEILLE, FRANCE

Miles strode his way to the outer fence of the compound. Quietly, he crept along the fencing, and he didn’t really understand why. There was ... this sort of feeling. The hairs on the back of his neck slowly rose, and his hands felt a bit clammy. He peered through the fencing and noticed that far into the compound and inside a window at the far end of the courtyard, the lights were on. That was the steel mill, where they made the raw materials.

Why in heaven would anyone be using it at this hour? There didn’t appear to be any staff around. Miles took out his phone and started dialing a number, but he stopped. His job wasn’t worth a false alarm. He needed to confirm that it wasn’t legitimate first.

He shoved his phone back into his pocket and looked around for an entrance. Over to his right, there was a security door. He walked over and jiggled the handle. His eyes lit up as the door swayed with the slightest bit of pressure.

“That’s not good,” he said with a chuckle.

While a poor job on the night watch was a feint possibility, it only gave credence to his darker suspicions. But life was too short to hesitate. Better go on in. Miles told himself a dozen times over; just get a look-see, then get out and call the authorities.

It became something of a mantra as he navigated dim halls lit by bare starlight. He heard the sounds of boiling molten metal churning in the far off distance. Miles never got a chance to see that part of the factory, but he imagined that brutes and workers with thick overalls normally filled it. A firearm would have been a nice addition right about now.

He stopped just short of the door that led to the facility. The viewport hung on the upper half, so he raised his head just high enough to see through. The heat soaked through the view port glass, warming the skin of his forehead on touch.

It was difficult to tell exactly what he was looking at. There were figures in various places. Some of them were armed. Others weren’t. Over near the northeast center of the room, three men were standing next to a working vat of molten iron. One of them was tall. He was very tall, like at least seven foot ... and he was holding something. It was a bag of some kind. It was a big bag.

The tall figure hoisted it up and threw it softly into the vat of iron. Miles watched intently as the object sank slowly into the mix. As it sunk, the bag caught on fire, but he squinted to make out a protrusion. It was something leaning out of it ... it was ...

“Dieu!”

Miles jumped back and covered his mouth faster than he could even think to do so. He bolted back down the halls, trying to put as much distance between them as he could breathe the midnight air, he slammed the door behind him.
“A hand,” he huffed to himself. “It was a ... hand.”
Miles stormed through the city streets of Marseille, pushing his heart and lungs to the limit. He looked back like he did several times before, frantically searching, scanning for any kind of activity that seemed out of the norm for pedestrians. Men in suits. Men with guns. They must have heard him. They must have seen him leave, but he didn’t see anything out of the ordinary.

Miles stopped to catch his breath. He must have run at least four kilometers, but the adrenaline made it feel like less than one. His concept of time was out of whack as well. With shaking hands, he pulled out his cellular phone and struggled to articulate half-numb fingers, but it was of no use. He looked up at the street sign. He ... he made it all the way home! This was his street and his new apartment was just two buildings down. Miles hobbled over to his apartment door. He searched around in his other pocket for the keys. Good, at least he didn’t lose them.

Miles hurriedly slammed the door and ran up the short flight of stairs that led to his second floor apartment. He used the second key and over the course of the next few fumbling seconds, finally stood right in the middle of an empty living room. Well, it wasn’t empty, exactly. There were a few stacks of cardboard boxes laid out beside his couch, and there was an old television set backed up against a wall that ran mostly parallel to it.

Once his hands ceased shaking, he drew out his phone and began dialing the emergency numbers ... but a thought jumped through his head. It wasn’t a pleasant thought. No, but it was realistic.

“The police can’t protect me,” Miles said to himself.

It occurred to him that perhaps those weren’t ordinary thugs in suits and combat overalls. There wasn’t a face in that factory that he could pin down, but ... no, he was sure of it. Those men WERE Savage Steel. No other explanation seemed more likely, and even on the off chance, putting himself into a death trap wasn’t worth risking his own life.

Savage Steel had its roots buried deep into the social and political structure of France as a whole. They were economical heroes to all of Europe, so if there was a single soul they wanted to eliminate, you could bet that few could do much to stop it from happening.

“I should call,” Miles started whispering quietly before he stopped himself again.

A cold thought sent a shiver up his back. One particularly important possession of his might actually outlast him come morning, and it might be best if he didn’t leave any loose ends for others to tie up. He gazed at his phone as he held it in the palm of his hand. His eyes glossed over. His face remained expressionless in a blank stare, but a loud banging at his door broke his state of mind.

“Ouvrir la porte,” said whoever was on the other side. “Nous sommes la police.”
They couldn’t come inside without a warrant … could they? Miles tried to think of what he was going to do. There wasn’t any other way out of his apartment … at least not conventionally. He scanned the room for something he could use as a weapon if he needed to, and that’s when he spotted his old little league baseball bat. He grabbed it, hoping he didn’t have to use it. He hoped they really were just the police.

Miles held it behind his back with one arm and cracked the door open with the other. He took care to leave the chain lock in place, for what little good it would do.

“Yes,” he said. “Can I help you?”

Miles caught a glimpse of them, a middle-age looking man and woman in police uniforms. He never paid close attention to the folks before, but he did notice they weren’t wearing badges.

“Is your name Miles Emmerson?” the one closest to him asked.

Miles glanced down through the crack in the doorway and saw that the officers were carrying SS-24 Assault Rifles. He didn’t even think. Instead, he did the first thing that popped into his head and slammed the door shut locking it down in a transition that was almost seamless. He hit the floor just as wood and metal splinters exploded through his apartment door in a steady cascade that lasted several seconds.

His eardrums were ringing, and all of his extremities ran numb. He gathered himself and tried to get up. Miles reached across the carpet for his bat, which he lost in the commotion, but it was out of reach. He got on his knees and crawled over, but as he gripped the bat firmly with both hands, the door came crashing down in a ripped mangle of splinters and metal shrapnel.

The two officers stood in the center of the room. One fixed his eyes on Miles while the other seemed more concerned with keeping watch.

“You always make a mess,” the woman said.

“Take it easy,” the man replied. “Nothing wrong with having a little fun, right, kid?”

Miles barely noticed that the man’s comment was directed at him. Instead, he took the chance to lunge at him with a firm swing, but the bat shattered to pieces with the resounding ring of an automatic rifle. He felt a tightening in his gut and looked down to see that a fist landed clean through his defenses.

He stumbled back and landed across his coffee table and partly onto his couch. His fingers raced to find anything of use as the uniformed man approached him with a grin.

“Any last words, kid?”

But all he could find was a handful of change, just a pile of pennies from his time back in the states. Of all the rotten …

“Sure,” he said. “Here’s my two cents!”

For what little good it would do, Miles threw up his fist full at the guy’s face. He hoped he would choke on it. He waited with his eyes closed for the final bang, but he didn’t hear anything … that was, until he heard the sound of a very loud thud. Miles opened his eyes and looked up to see two very small holes in his ceiling. He looked over the coffee table to see a body.

“The heck?” he said aloud.
He could almost feel something lodged in his ceiling. Yeah, he could feel two things, but the woman noticed now that her colleague was down for the count, and Miles could see her head turn away from guard duty.

Miles reached up and a pair of pennies darted back into his hand. He could feel it like there was some kind of resonance around them, as if they were extensions of his own arm.

“Hey, lady,” he said just as she was about turned around. “Penny for your thoughts?”

And like that, he willed the coins to zip clean through the air and cascade off her forehead. She was out like a light, just like that. Miles decided that he didn’t have time to dawdle though.
Franklin Beaudry, a man of many paths, A.K.A. ‘Arc,’ strolled up the granite steps that led to the Mr. Adamson’s conference room. A very large table sat in the middle with chairs reserved for representatives of the shareholders. For the moment, they laid open and empty.

A very tall individual stood at the farthest corner of the room, his attention preoccupied by the glowing lights of a Paris night. Franklin made his way across and stood silent. This was how it usually went, of course, so he’d grown accustomed to it. The Iron Giant seldom stirred, but there was something in particular that interested him. Franklin knew that much, watching the way Mr. Adamson gripped a manila folder tightly within his palm.

“You know why I’ve called you here, don’t you?” Mr. Adamson said, handing it over.

Franklin took care to keep the pages in place as he opened it and thumbed through. It was a lot to take in all at once. He saw some choice photos that resembled ID tags, like the kind a factory worker would have. Mr. Adamson’s very own Savage Steel currently employed this one, apparently. Last name, Emmerson. Age, 25. Sex, Male. Just moved from North America, by the looks of it. Poor chap.

“Understood. He’ll be dead by the end of tomorrow.”

Franklin slapped the folder shut and started to walk out, but he felt a firm hand grip his shoulder tightly.

“Not so fast, Arc,” Mr. Adamson said. “Word has it, this one’s special. He’s found a resonance … the same as you.”

“I doubt very much it’s the same,” Franklin replied.

“I don’t want him dead if I can help it,” Mr. Adamson insisted.

“But the merger is tomorrow. If he talks …”

“Negotiate first. Then decide if you need to resolve your differences.”

“I’m not a negotiator, sir,” Franklin said.

“You don’t need to be,” he replied with a grin. “You’ll be taking Leblanc.”

What?

“That witch?” he yelped.

Of all the rotten …

“Careful what you say, Mr. Beaudry,” he heard a soft voice reply. “You might wish you hadn’t.”
An older, middle-aged woman stepped out into the open, from a point that would have been just outside of Franklin’s current point of view. He scowled at her from arms reach but kept his distance. He thought to himself, there wasn’t anywhere to hide. He would have seen her while walking in. Then again, he probably did.

“You two will play nice,” Mr. Adamson told them. “That’s an order.”

“Of course, sir,” Franklin replied.


“Miles Emmerson was last sighted in Marseille, by the coast. Our sources report that he hasn’t left yet.”

“I will find him,” Franklin reassured the Iron Giant.

“And when you do,” Leblanc said with a chuckle, “I will make certain he can’t refuse.”
Night descended on Marseille. An obnoxious mixture of smoke and the billowing ocean air crept up into Miles’ nose. He paced through the city streets with a large duffle bag strapped to his back. A hodgepodge of old things that he couldn’t bear to part with filled the old sack. He managed to scrounge up a bit of cash too, enough to pay for transport if he needed it, but his belly ached from lack of nourishment. It wasn’t enough for both though. Maybe ... maybe just a cup of coffee.

He recalled passing by at least three coffee shops in the last hour of walking. Miles scanned the immediate area, and his eyes landed on a small shop that called itself, Café de Terre.

“Of the Earth, huh?” he said to himself as he walked over.

Miles was still getting used to the language, but with three semesters under his belt, the work wasn’t much difficult. Getting the gist was easy. Communicating full on foreign language ... now that was hard.

He parted open the door to the little café and took a seat near the entrance. Good, unobstructed path. Miles gently let his duffle bag rest underneath his table. He already looked enough like a convict. No sense scaring the staff.

A young woman in a staff uniform walked up to him and asked, “Your order, sir?”

“Coffee, s’il vous plait,” he replied to the server. “I’d like a bit of crème too.”

“Merci,” she said, while writing it down onto a thick notepad. After her pen stopped moving, she tore the paper off and walked in the other direction.

Miles sat quietly, noticing the cheap varnish on his table. This was probably an Americanized coffee shop, not much better than fast food. He didn’t leave the states for this. Now that he was thinking on it though, he might have been better off not leaving altogether. He focused on the act of contemplation so much, that when he looked up, he realized that somebody else was already sitting at his table.

“Please, don’t let me interrupt you,” the guest said. He was an older fellow. Miles reached for his duffel bag. “Oh, you can’t leave yet.”

“Why not?”

“Because your coffee’s almost here.” A second or two after the old man spoke, the very same server planted a cup of coffee down on his table. “I’ll take one as well, if you don’t mind, miss,” he said to her. “Black, if you please.” The woman scratched down something very quickly and took off.

Miles desperately wanted to savor a sip, but he set it down to cool off first. Until then ...
“Don’t worry, my boy,” he said. “I’m not aligned with those would-be thugs.”

“Sure,” Miles replied grudgingly, “then who are you?”

“My name is Simon Bogart, and I am a party of interest.”

Party of interest? How ambiguous, but at least the old man didn’t appear harmful. Still, it was worth asking.

“How did you find me?”

To that, Simon paused. He glanced down at the table and back at Miles. He smiled.

“There’s a price for everything, you see … well, almost everything.” Simon continued talking as the server arrived with his own very black coffee. “In the human body, for instance, each and every organ has a price … but what price can there be for a resonance?”

“The heck is that?” Miles stammered.

“It’s what you have floating deep inside your mind, boy. It was how I found you, because out of the whole of Marseille, you were the only person whose price I couldn’t discern.”
CHAPTER 6
CRIME SCENE
MARSEILLE, FRANCE

Franklin laid eyes on a sparsely crowded crime scene in the lower income district of Marseille. There were at least three officers policing the area to keep pedestrians from crossing the tape. One good thing, at least ... with Leblanc, getting in shouldn’t be hard. The door to the two-story apartment was hinged open, so there were probably a few inside as well. Franklin walked up to the tape and locked eyes with an officer who stood watch.

“Move along,” the attendant said to him. “And mind your own business.”

Franklin shrugged and replied, “We’re here from Interpol.”

“I’m going to need to see some identification,” he said.

“Of course,” Franklin replied. “Leblanc, hand him your ID.”

Leblanc stepped up in response and took out something from inside her jacket. She kept it hidden enough underneath her hand, but Franklin could tell that it was just a crumpled piece of note taking paper. Leblanc liked to doodle from time to time.

The officer held out an open palm to receive what he thought was an Interpol badge, and before he had the common sense to withdraw, she made contact. Franklin watched the man’s eyes go blank. She was erasing his short-term memory with physical contact ... rewriting it even!

Leblanc didn’t need Mr. Adamson with a resonance like hers. She could go anywhere and do anything ... or at least make people believe that she had. But, and Franklin gave this quite a bit of thought, maybe she remained employed to Savage Steel because she felt it was safer to be in Mr. Adamson’s hand than in his path.

Once it was finished, she drew her hand back and waited for the officer come to. It was a light rewrite, so his senses shot up nearly immediately. He looked at them with a confused expression on his face.

“Sorry, gents,” he said to them. “It’s been a hectic day.”

“What can you tell us?” Franklin asked as they both ducked underneath the tape.

“Residents heard gun shots. Two thugs were apprehended, affiliations unknown. The resident ... one Miles Emmerson was seen leaving the premises.”

Franklin followed the officer up the stairs with Leblanc tailing close behind. It was a shoddy apartment. Stains covered the walls, and the whole place smelled like mildew. Emmerson must have been more than poor to put up with these living quarters.

They stopped right outside the door to Emmerson’s living room. A barrage of bullets blasted it to bits. Mr. Adamson was going to have to rethink his interview process if this was what a ‘clean
kill’ was supposed to look like. He stepped inside and took a quick look around. Aside from the immediate and direct damage caused by the machine guns, not much else lent itself to a dire struggle.

“You can tell your men and women to leave for now,” he told the officer.

“Oui,” he replied.

After a quick bit of motioning, a crew of about five investigators with gloves and plastic bags in their hands huddled out of the living room through the narrow blasted exit. Franklin stopped for a moment and took it all in. There was a broken baseball bat splintered onto the carpet, though that wasn’t quite as intriguing as the two pot marks on the ceiling above him. They were small, like the two coin slots in a vending machine.

“He didn’t kill them. Strange.”

The notion took a while to come to Franklin. He was so preoccupied with the nature of the attack that he’d forgotten entirely that the thugs were ‘apprehended.’ Leblanc broke the silence that followed his statement.

“Not everyone’s a murderer,” she said.

“Right, I just kill people.”

“Don’t give me that look,” Leblanc replied.

Once he felt adjusted to the environment, Franklin felt the pull of a particular path. There were many, but this one was the most unusual, and it was the fastest one, which indicated he was in a hurry.

“One path leads out from here,” he said. “It’s definitely a resonance user.”

“Then let’s go.”

“Hold on, Leblanc,” he replied. “Something’s odd about this one.”

“Does it matter?”

It was very subtle, but Franklin couldn’t shake the feeling that he’d felt a course and flow like this one before. His perceptions reached as deeply as they could, but the answer always held itself on the tip of his nose.

“No, I suppose not.”
Miles followed Simon through a steep downward staircase. Simon parked his car just outside a dilapidated old brick building in Marseille, and it wasn’t more than a short hop from the parking lot to get here. There was an old smell, but it wasn’t particularly bad. It smelled less like a basement and more like an antique shop, like the kinds he used to visit in rural America.

Simon stopped in front of another old door, some twenty feet from ground level. He pulled out a set of what was probably twenty keys, but didn’t even spend time searching for the right one. He just whipped one out and twisted the knob.

Miles walked into a large, expansive basement with walls lined in concrete. There was ventilation pouring in through vents that he could hear just slightly. There were a few situated on either side of the room. He looked around to get an idea of exactly where they were. Old instruments lined the place. Record players, broken electronics and a heck ton of wires. Most of it looked like junk from the 1980’s.

“So, this is where you live, huh?” Miles asked.

“I own a few pieces of property in Europe, actually,” Simon said. “One or two in the Americas as well, although I haven’t visited in ages.”

It took a few seconds for the old bulbs to brighten the room completely, but once they did, Miles could see just how big it was. Areas previously hidden in a soft shadow revealed themselves larger than he previously imagined. A jolting thought overtook his priorities for the moment though.

“Okay,” Miles started, “so we have to think of code names.”

“Excuse me?”

“I want to be Short Change,” Miles said with a grin.

It made perfect sense! He could telekinetically manipulate pennies and he was ... er ... that is ... well, the name sounded cool at least, and it was the first thing that popped out of his head.

“Now is neither the time, nor the place.”

“C’mon, Simon!” he pleaded. “What do you do for a living?”

“I’m a pawn broker.”

“See? That’s it! You can be ... The Broker,” he ended in a cool voice.

“Are we done yet?” Simon said with a groan.

“What are your powers, anyway?” Mile asked.
“My resonance is tied to value. I see the worth in all things.”

“Like ... philosophical, metaphysical ...”

“Material.”

“For everything?” Miles said, leaning in.

“Well, I started out with antiques at first, which brings me to my first point.” Simon reached into his pocket drew out a single penny. “Mr. Emmerson, if this currency alone is the extent of your resonance, you’ll have a hard time making use of it in France.”

Miles recalled the car ride over. The vehicle’s windows had a pretty solid tinting, so he had a field day showing Simon just what he could do with the small amount of change he held in his pockets, but the only things he could manipulate were the standard pennies. Was it the material? The shape?

“I’ll just move back to the states,” he insisted.

“Oh. And do you think your former employer would allow something like that?”

“Guess you have a point.”

Simon walked up to him and held up the single penny, cupped in his palms.

“Listen, my boy. A resonance can’t be broken, but it can be expanded. I do believe that you can use more than pennies ... if you try.”

Resonance. There was the old man and himself. Who else was out there with powers over different things? It didn’t even have to be a physical object. If Simon could see values, maybe somebody could see sound or have powers over light.

“Well, I guess I could give it a go.”

“Good,” Simon replied as he walked over to an antique desk. “Hand over your pennies, boy. I should have spare francs in this drawer.” Miles followed him over and slid his pennies onto the top of the desk, where Simon promptly scooped them up. The old man reached inside a dim top drawer and pulled out a handful of change. “There we are. Six at your disposal.”

And Simon set them down on top of the wood. Miles tried concentrating at first. He did notice by now that he could feel the presence of nearby pennies. His face muscles strained to establish some kind of psychic connection, but he couldn’t feel a thing. It didn’t feel natural, but he tried moving them anyway. He strained until his face was beet red, but ...

“No good, Simon. I can’t even feel them.”

“I thought as much,” Simon replied. He swept up the franc coins and shoved them into deep pockets. “Take your pennies back.”

He chucked them into the air and Miles caught them with his resonance, six beautifully suspended pennies in between the two of them ... but wait. Miles had two ... and Simon had one ...

“Sneaky jerk!” Miles snapped, realizing that the other three shone a sleek silver.
“I told you, didn’t I?” But, as he spoke, a kind of alarm buzzed just once from the corner of the basement. “Ah, just in time, too.”

“In time for what?”

“Apologies, Mr. Emmerson. I didn’t want to alarm you, but it seems we’re having guests this evening.”
CHAPTER 8
DEVIL’S WORK
MARSEILLE, FRANCE

Simon grabbed hold of the handle and opened the door just a crack. He peered through to spot a young man in a long coat and a middle-aged woman standing behind. They were also resonance users. He’d known that for a while. He could see the price tags in bold green lettering that hovered above their heads and next to every article of clothing. The coat itself was 55 euros. The young man was carrying two SS-100 handguns carefully concealed underneath it.

The woman in back must have been a smoker. Her lungs were in considerably worse shape than someone her age. Other than that, however, she didn’t appear to be carrying any firearms. He did spot a fluctuation near her waist, but the price didn’t resonate anything in particular that he knew of. A knife maybe? He never put stock into knives.

“Can I help you?” Simon asked.

“Excuse me,” the young man said. “My name is Arc. May we come in? I have business to discuss with your guest.”

It was a long time since Simon laid eyes on that particular stare. It wasn’t exactly blood lust, but the look in Arc’s eyes told him the truth. This boy was prepared to kill the both of them … if it came to it. With a shaky hand, Simon opened the door.

“Mind the warehouse, now, Mr. Arc. There are lots of valuable things in storage.”

“Is there a different place we could talk then?” Arc replied. “I would hate to cause unnecessary damage.”

“Follow me,” Simon said.

He led them around a series of tables that housed wares from the fifties and onward. A larger warehouse portion stored crates and things. Simon never needed to pay rent on it since it didn’t exist on record.

The items there were much older, but at least there was room enough. Mr. Emmerson’s resonance was in its infancy, but there wasn’t any helping that. No matter what move he made, Savage Steel would have been right on his tail.

“Oh here we are,” Simon said as he made his way down some stairs. It was a much wider venue with somewhat more vertical space. The air here was stale, like that from a stone basement left to rot. Nobody cleaned it in some time either. Cobwebs and the scent of mold were abundant.

“This will do,” the woman behind Arc said.

“Allow me to explain the situation to Mr. Emmerson,” Arc began. “Last night, you witnessed the tail end of a murder, Miles … plain and simple.”
And you’re here to tie up loose ends, right?” Mr. Emmerson answered.

“Hardly. Leblanc and I are here to offer your job back.”

“Wh … what do you mean?”

“Savage Steel doesn’t care as long as you don’t talk ... and Mr. Adamson would like to make use of your newly acquired abilities.”

“Arc! Language!” Leblanc shouted.

“THE Richard Adamson?” Miles stammered.

“Apologies, Leblanc. I’m not good at this.”

“That’s the offer, boy,” she told him. “Your whole life back ... plus an opportunity to put those powers of yours to good use.”

There wasn’t a ghost of a chance that ...

“Sounds like a pretty good deal, actually.”

The nerve!

“Might I remind you, lad ... these two were sent to kill you.”

“But they’re not going to if I say yes, right?” Miles replied.

“Spineless coward!”

“Say what you want, old man. My life is valuable to me.”

So that’s how they want to play this game? Simon wasn’t going to have it. Not with this. He worked too hard to let it all circle down the drain.

“Shake on it, then?” Leblanc smiled as she held out her hand.

“Oh, they’ll put your powers to use, lad,” Simon blurted. “You’ll be doing the devil’s work.”

“Shut it, old man,” Arc said.

“That murder you witnessed ... that’s the tip of the Savage Steel Iceberg.”

“I said, shut it!”

“I will not be silenced! You are devils, all of you ... and this boy will be the same ... a cold blooded killer!”

That one made him stop, at least. Mr. Emmerson stood half a step from the older woman, his arm outstretched, though not completely. It all hinged on this ... on whether or not he accepted their offer. Simon felt the twilight years of his life begin to waver.

“On second thought,” Miles started, but Leblanc lunged forward and grabbed his hands anyway.

“Too late.”
“I won’t let you take him!” Simon screamed with a coarse breath.

“Seems the tables have turned, old man,” Franklin said, drawing one of his handguns. “Your life no longer has any meaning.”

He held the sight up high and aimed it at Simon’s head. Franklin let loose a sigh. His stare broke off toward the ceiling and the walls of the storage facility. Poor chap, but there were no paths that led away from this.

“A body would hardly put the boy in good spirits,” Simon blurted.

“Oh, him?” Franklin said, looking back. “He won’t remember a thing by the time Leblanc’s through. Last action Miles Emmerson will recall was working for Savage Steel. Completely loyal.”

“You wouldn’t.”

“Maybe she’ll give him a checkered past. Make him a mercenary. I don’t really care.”

“I see,” Simon said with his head drooped low. “So that’s how it’s going to be.”

“Any last words?”

Franklin waited for a reply, but the air was filled with a deadening silence for a longer time than he felt comfortable enduring. That was when Leblanc let out a shrill cry.

“Ouch! That stung!” she hissed.

“What’s wrong?”

“I ... I don’t know,” she answered. “Something’s interfering with my resonance.”

“That’s new,” Franklin replied hesitantly. Something in his gut made him feel uncomfortable. He just didn’t know quite what.

“I don’t like it,” Leblanc said. “Arc, it’s in your hands now.”

“Guess it couldn’t be helped.”

As Leblanc took a few steps back, Franklin steadied himself and fired a stream of fire and metal that rippled through the air in a fraction of a second. However, when his eyes finally caught up with the bullet, there was no blood shed. Rather, something peculiar happened.

“Not so fast!” came the kid’s voice from behind.

“You ...”
Unbelievable! He positioned a single coin at an angle 45 degrees perpendicular to the path of the bullet. His telekinetic powers were beyond impressive ... or maybe he had a little help. Regardless, this wasn’t going to be easy.

“You’re going to have to go through me first,” Emmerson said.

Simon cheered, “Good show, my boy! I’ll take care of the resident psychic!”

The old man ran off past them, giving chase to Leblanc, who’d since vanished. Not a very interesting fight, at any rate. This one, though ... this one was special.

“I don’t get it,” Emmerson asked. “You’re just going to let him get away?”

Franklin grinned and replied, “Leblanc can handle herself. Besides, it’s really you that I’m after.”
“You ready for this?” Arc said with a sigh.

“Heck yes.”

Miles tensed his muscles and focused on his remaining coins. He held thirteen altogether, but he could sense a few lying around the warehouse as well. It was going to take some concentration to draw them out though, and that was an unaffordable luxury. More importantly, one of his coins ... he felt a much weaker connection to it. It was as if he had less of an ability to control it. He glanced over and saw that while it deflected the bullet, there was some damage to the overall structure of it.

“Good,” Arc replied. “Let’s see what you can do.”

Arc strafed as he drew a second hand gun and fired both in rapid succession. Their thumping rhythm broke the deafening silence of the warehouse, but Miles was able to deflect them. Now it was his turn. With the few good coins he’d been saving, he flung them at Arc’s forehead ... but they missed? Arc’s body leapt into the air and performed a series of bizarre maneuvers that defied conventional physics. In mid-jump, he slid to the right and then up into a summersault before landing perfectly on the cement ground.

“You got some moves!” Miles stated.

“They’re not moves. They’re paths.”

“What’s the difference?”

“A bullet does not have ‘moves.’”

Arc fired only a single shot, and Miles could discern the trajectory. This one headed straight between his eyes, so he gravitated a lump of coins around his forehead. However, the bullet went right around them and tore a bit of flesh from his shoulder. The motion was swift, but he could tell enough to know that wasn’t where the gun aimed. So, this guy could manipulate paths. What an annoying power.

“Why the heck did you do that?” Miles groaned, clutching his shoulder. “If that was your power, you could have killed me easily just now.”

“Maybe,” Ark replied with a smirk. “What will you do now?”

Miles could feel the blood pumping throughout his whole body, and the rush of adrenaline made it so he could barely feel any pain in his left shoulder. Granted, this Arc fellow was pretty spot on. He was accurate enough to get the point across without hampering Miles’ fighting ability. For better or worse, Arc seemed to be issuing a challenge.
“Let’s see you curve a bullet around this, you jerk!”

Miles reached out with all of his conscious energies to find every scrap that he could use. A bit of change here and there. Miscellaneous items scattered throughout the warehouse ... and there it was. Among the myriad of coinage was a single vessel. A piggy bank jar. With his focus, they burst out of a cardboard carrier and made their way to him. Miles found himself surrounded by a cloud of medallions from many lands. Pesos, Yen, Pennies and ...

“Let’s be ‘Franc,’ Arc. You can’t beat me.”

“Was ... was that a pun?”

“Yes. Yes it was.”

Arc practically face palmed, but Miles didn’t care all that much. The real battle started now. He separated the change into two spherical layers, oscillating in opposite rotations, while at the same time, expanding and contracting with each breath he took. There was less than twenty dollars surrounding him altogether, but it was enough to block any bullet.

Arc fired quick successions of powerful bursts. His bullets swiveled through the air and made contact with the shield, but each attempt fell short with another coin. Miles stood his ground and waited for a ripe opportunity as soon as he could find one. If Arc could really manipulate paths, he shouldn’t have had much of issue getting through, no matter what the complexity. There must have been some kind of limitation.

There he was! Miles sent a barrage of metal toward him and in a flurry like a winter storm, he shot a coin from every angle. There was no way he was dodging. No chance in heck! A hundred cracks sang through the damp air as Arc fell to the ground with a broken arm. Oh yes, that one had to hurt. Still, to have come out of it without much more than a damaged limb. That was pretty darn amazing.

“Impressive, Emmerson,” Arc said.

He was breathing heavily as he spoke and seemed to wince in pain with each inhale. His working arm did the job of holstering his side arm, while the other one laid at his side. It flopped down, as if the willpower disappeared from it.

“You can call me Short Change.”

“You might really ... have what it takes, kid.”

The nerve to insist!

“I’m not joining up with you.”

Nevertheless, Arc just grinned.

“I know, but that’s ... not what I’m talking about.”

“Oh, really?”

“There will be others, kid,” he started, “who they’ll send to hunt you down. You want to stop that, don’t you?”

“Well ... yeah, that’d be nice.”
“Then there’s only one person you need to deal with.”

Yeah right, he thought to himself, “It’s never that easy.”

“The owner of Savage Steel, your former employer. He’s the one who has a vendetta with you.”

“Why is that?”

“The merger today just made Savage Steel the largest arms manufacturer in Europe. It was a pact made in blood, and you saw the trail. Richard Adamson wants you erased because you’re a danger to his whole empire.”

That explained the psychic he brought with him. She was probably going to erase his knowledge of the incident ... and if that didn’t work, it would have come to this anyway. Still, there appeared to be misaligned allegiances when it came to Savage Steel. Madame Emma Leblanc. She didn’t seem to be playing by the rules either.

“Why are you telling me this?”

“Because, believe it or not, I don’t only work for Mr. Adamson. There’s someone else, who I can’t name ... and I really think you have what it takes.”

“I’m not a killer,” Miles stammered.

“Nobody said anything about that, Emmerson,” Arc replied. He glanced off toward some corner of the warehouse. His expression was one of concern. “Looks like your friend took care of Leblanc after all.”

“What the heck?” Miles blurted. That old man?

“Time is short, kid. If you decide you’re up to it, you can find the Iron Giant at the new Savage Steel Mill in Paris, three days from now. He’ll be giving a press conference about the merger at noon so be there bright and early.”

Arc seemed to have regained most of his composure by the end of their conversation. He was something else, but the idea that there were others ... that thought planted a lump deep in Miles’ throat. However, there wasn’t much time to contemplate the idea before Arc leapt up to the top of one of the warehouse shelves.

“Where do you think you’re going?” Miles shouted, still itching to fight.

“Try and stop me, kid.”
CHAPTER 11
OF VALUE
MARSEILLE, FRANCE

Simon raced around the bend of shelves as fast as his legs could carry him, but as chance would have it, the home field advantage was his. Leblanc passed by the only other exit to the underground warehouse and ran herself into a corner. Boxes piled high on shelves to at least four feet above her head.

“There’s nowhere to run,” Simon said. “The only way out is through me, I’m afraid.”

“And what are you going to do?”

“A good salesman always carries insurance,” he replied, tapping with his index finger, a small knife adhered to his waist. “The mark of a great one is never having to use it.”

“I see,” she nodded with a sigh.

There wasn’t any reason to use deadly force … at least not just yet.

“Well, shall we?”

Simon put up his fists. The idea of hitting a woman made his stomach churn, but the alternative was much less desirable.

“I hope you know what you’re getting yourself into.”

“I’ve an idea. I imagine I’ll have a few less by the end of it.”

Leblanc took out the pin that held up her hair in a delicate formation, letting it all fall down. She tossed the trinket aside and exhaled a deep breath. Simon wondered about her resonance in particular. It seemed to have to do with the mind, but how much so was yet unknown. Physical contact appeared to be necessary at least, but how much could she affect with a glancing brush?

However, Simon did little more than blink in passing contemplation when Leblanc vanished completely. It was as if she was there, but then she wasn’t. A specter, but where in blazes did she … Simon felt a soft pat on his right shoulder. He swerved around and knocked her clean off her heels.

“Not so fast,” he said. “I don’t know how you did that, but I’m sure you can’t …” and then she was gone again.

This time, however, he caught her out of the corner of his eye. She was fast, incredibly so, but he could still track her movements as she darted around their small area of the warehouse. After her dancing around seemed an effort in futility, she stopped briefly. Teleportation? Increased speed? No, that wasn’t it.

“Memory!” he exclaimed. “You’ve been erasing my short term memory.”
“You picked up quickly,” she said.
“I see you don’t need physical contact to make that happen.”
“With a touch, I can do so much more!”

Leblanc vanished again, but reappeared with her fist barreling towards his face. He barely had time to catch it, much less react before the punch landed him square in the jaw. It threw him off his guard and a second later, she landed a kick and a quick jab, before he finally managed to block. Leblanc stepped back. She didn’t seem overly eager to finish the job, but instead revealed a smile.
“What’s so funny?” Simon asked.
“Do you recall your mother’s maiden name?”

Simon searched for the answer in his own recollection. He was certain that he possessed a mother, but no name came to mind. Maiden name was the least of it. First. Last. It didn’t seem to matter. It was all completely gone.

“So that’s the extent of your resonance, then. You can alter memories. Erase them, even.”
“If you don’t let me pass, you’ll lose everything precious to you.”

Simon paused for a moment. It wasn’t going to be easy to deal with this one. Aided by the powers of her resonance, she was faster than he was. Much faster. Simon collected himself on the situation and could not shake the feeling that this young woman might have been guided as much as he was by an overwhelming aversion to killing.
Still, “If that’s your strategy, then I’m afraid you’ll be unpleasantly surprised.”
“What?”
“I place stock in physical things, young lady. Memories hold no value.”
“Liar!”

Fired up, she ran at him and launched a flurry of blows. It all happened in flashes, much too fast for him to read. He felt the impacts moments after they’d actually happened, once her arms only started retracting. Simon’s muscles ached from welts that were bound to last for weeks. An attack that he barely comprehended bloodied and bruised his face.

However, Leblanc didn’t finish him. Instead, she stepped back. It was definitely taking a toll on her. Her breathing looked labored, and her arms and shoulders drooped from exhaustion. It was as if the fight had gone on for several minutes, although he’d only been conscious for less than one.
“Is that all?” he asked, wiping the blood from his nose.
“Remember any of your family?”
“Never cared in the first place.”
“What about your place of birth?”
“That was years ago.”
“How about your last wife, then?”

“She was probably a bitch.”

Simon watched as Leblanc whipped out a switchblade she previously concealed by her waist. So, it was a knife after all. She took it and dashed toward him at a break neck pace. He reached for his own weapon. He wanted to use it. He knew he should, but his heart wouldn’t allow it. He was not about to cut a woman, but ... for no apparent reason ... she stopped. Leblanc stood in frozen form, almost mid swing, and he didn’t understand why.

Simon stared at her awkward posture for a few before the physical reality caught up with him, and he noticed a small, reddened splotch on her suit that grew with each passing second. She staggered back, clutched her side and dropped her knife.

“How unlucky,” she said. “To end like this ... I ...”

Those who lived by the sword, it seemed. Alternatively, the gun. It really didn’t matter. What a waste. Simon took a step forward, but Leblanc disappeared. She faded in and out of reality several times while she made her way past him. She was still using her resonance, as if she believed it was necessary to escape, but Simon didn’t have the heart to stop her. He could see the worth of her vitals rapidly approaching zero. No organs felt the trauma of a puncture wound, at least, but two arteries were bleeding out. Her life was limited to minutes now. Little more than minutes.

She staggered out the exit door and up the stairs. Simon followed her into the city streets of Marseille and over through a quiet alley that overlooked a gently flowing river. She glanced back at him occasionally, giving wide-eyed stares as if it was all something from a dream. She stopped though, just in front of a guard railing that kept unwanted refuse from blowing into the river. Leblanc turned around and looked Simon straight in the eyes.

“If this is what you need to do,” Simon said, “I won’t stop you.”

The rest of it was also like a dream. It rattled through his mind like a slithering snake as he vaguely recalled walking back to the warehouse. Simon looked down at his hands on the way. For the first time, intended or not, they were sullied. It was only going to become worse from here on. This was a rude awakening and the vast bulk of it did not sit well with him ... not at all.
The carriage rattled along the tracks as fields of green slowly passed by through the tiny view of a window. Several hours passed since Miles last laid eyes on Marseille. He glanced over his seat to see the towering city of lights. The city of culture. The heart of France. This was the end of the line, one way or the other.

“Sit down,” Simon said. “We’ll be there soon enough.”

Simon sat next to Miles, with his eyes closed. Miles thought he’d fallen asleep, but that notion was mistaken. He did sit back down though. His nerves were getting to him, like bolts of lightning that made his hands sweat and tingle. He couldn’t make heads or tails on whether or not it was a good feeling or a bad one.

It happened so quickly that Miles felt like he was on the ride of something much larger and more complicated than he was. People all around him held serious eccentricities and hidden motivations, and that wasn’t even the half of it. Miles was the kind of person that … everybody laughed at because he made a fart joke in elementary school. He was the comic relief. Definitely not a hero. It was all happening … just a little too fast.

“Don’t worry, my boy. You’ll see it through.”

“I don’t know, Simon. I’m starting to get chills.”

“There comes a time in every young man’s life where he must grow up. For you, that time is now.”

“I just …” Miles started with a pause. “I wish it didn’t have to be this way. I wish I didn’t have to do it.”

“Do you have your things?” Simon asked.

Miles reached down by his feet and grabbed hold of his backpack. He unzipped the main compartment and ruffled around his hands to feel for the rolls of coins. Yep. All there.

“Everything’s accounted for. Sixty euros in change.”

“Good.”

“Simon, I … I don’t want to …”

“Listen, boy,” he said. “What makes a man is not what he wishes, but what he does. If you really don’t want to take his life, then find a way … but don’t run from it.”

Simon never struck him as the philosophical type, but the words brought a bit of warmth to the tingled chills that ran through his body.
“All right. I will.”

“A word of caution. If you fail, then my head will be next on the chopping block, so try to keep that in mind.”

“I’ll try to remember, Simon.”
CHAPTER 13
INTO THE FURNACE
PARIS, FRANCE

Miles stood several meters away from Savage Steel itself, a newly constructed steel mill in the center of Paris. It was a towering goliath built with sturdy plates of thick metal. It had a shape that felt like something different from the rest of France. It was three stories high, and though he could see a good deal of windows, there didn’t appear to be anyone inside. Apart from armed guards patrolling the exterior of the facility, the place was quiet.

Miles didn’t see an ad in the paper for anything about a press conference. The thought that they might have been chasing a phantom made his stomach rattle just a bit. But the place looked operational. There was smoke coming from the stacks up top, so somebody was inside for sure.


“I can hear you just fine, my boy. How does it look?”

Miles had a good view from where he was standing.

“The front gates are guarded. I could handle them.”

“You don’t need to make a ruckus yet,” Simon said. “How about the scenic route?”

“Give me a minute,” Miles replied. He broke into a light jog over to another vantage point. There was a clear spot alongside the steel mill. Still, he wanted to make sure. Once he got there, he said, “They’ve pretty much left the west side alone. There’s a third story window left open.”

“How about the scenic route?”

“Can you climb it?”

“Pretty sure.”

“Good,” Simon answered. “Let me know when you’re inside.”

Course, climbing was out of the question, but Miles had a trick up his sleeve that he desperately wanted to try. He took off his backpack and unzipped the main compartment, pulling out a roll of American pennies. He ripped open the roll and poured the contents into his hand, pushing them into a geometric design. Two circles made entirely of pennies. With his concentration, he lowered them to just a few centimeters above the ground and promptly set one foot on each platform.

Now, the next part was tricky. It was going to be like climbing stairs. He took one foot off and while doing so, shifted the untouched platform up and over just before his foot landed on it. Success! That wasn’t difficult at all. It was strange, but ever since the warehouse incident, it was as if his powers have been growing exponentially.
Miles hastily made his way up to the third story window of the Savage Steel building. With each step, it became easier to control the sets of coins. Blocking bullets was nice, but this took the cake.

“I’m in,” he said after climbing through the space. He glanced out of the window. Didn’t look like anybody took notice. There weren’t that many people walking about this time of day anyway.

“I’m looking at the building now, Short Change,” Simon said. Heh, he used the code name. “There are two resonance users present.”

“The heck? Two?”

“One is on the roof, but the one you want is standing in the atrium on ground level.”

“How do you know?”

“He’s the only one whose net worth is over one billion.”

Fair enough.

“Wow,” Miles exclaimed. “I guess your power does come in handy.”

“One more thing.”

“Oh yeah?” Miles asked. “What’s that?”

“Adamson is accompanied by a unit of armed soldiers on the second level of the atrium.”

“It’s a trap?”

“Too little can be said about our friend to be sure,” Simon explained. “Did he sound genuine?”

“Of course,” Miles replied.

“He could have sent us into an ambush without Adamson present. Let’s believe for the time being that his intentions are noble enough.”

Again, fair enough. Miles made his way down the halls of the third floor. It was very quiet, but from deep inside, he could hear something like the pumping and pounding of blood. It was the heart of Savage Steel. He shook off the fear as best as he could. Somehow, this was going to end the right way. He just didn’t know how.
CHAPTER 14
IRON GIANT
PARIS, FRANCE

Miles set his feet on a pedestal of coins and he lowered himself down to the floor of the Savage Steel atrium. He stood still, surrounded by an oscillating shield of coins. Triple layered, this time. Nothing left to the chance of a stray bullet. Through the debris, he could see a person dressed in a ritzy black suit whose back was turned. His posture was a bit slouched, lazy even.

“You can stop that, Miles,” he said. “Or do you go by Short Change now?”

“I didn’t come here to fight you, sir. I came here to talk.”

“Oh, really now?” he said. “I’m not convinced.”

The man turned around, revealing himself to be none other than the CEO of Savage Steel. Miles recognized him from a photo in his application form, but to see the guy in person ... it was something of a shock.

“It’s true,” Miles exclaimed. “I want you to call off your goons or assassins or whatever you call ‘em.”

“You know it doesn’t work that way,” he replied.

“Look, I don’t care about the way you run your company or what you do behind closed doors. Fact of the matter is that whatever I saw ... I don’t think anybody would believe me ... so I’m asking you to leave my life alone!”

The CEO paused and crossed his arms. He was looking up, like he was lost in thought, but it wasn’t much longer before his eyes leveled back down with a stare directed solely at Miles.

“I sincerely believe you.”

“Then stop this!”

“I would have. If you’d have just ran off, I probably would have ignored you.”

“The heck?”

“But two things complicated the situation, Miles. The first was you developing a resonance.”

“You got to be ...”

“And the second was that you CHOSE to confront me.”

Miles put up his guard. His goons must have been hiding, waiting for the opportune chance to strike. But why haven’t they yet? What was taking them so long?

“So, the answer's no.”
“Your very existence and nature makes you a threat to my world, Miles. You can only exist in two places ... beneath my heel or beneath the ground.”

“Allow me to ‘change’ your mind.”

Simon could feel the presence of his third roll of pennies. He drew out the charge and formed them into a small meteor. Like an energy blast of metal bits, he hurled it at the CEO, not nearly enough to kill him, but enough to crack a rib or two. The shot flew faster than he expected, zipping through the air. It was much more difficult to maneuver a lump sum than a single coin.

But what surprised him was that the CEO blocked it with his arms. The sheer force would shatter them in an instant. Miles pushed on anyway, sending his foe flying against the steel wall of the atrium before he gathered back the coins and added them to his shield. Miles started making his way across, but Richard lowered his guard.

“Was ... that ... a ...?” the CEO began before Miles cut him off.

“Pun? You betcha!”

“Insufferable,” Richard replied.

He fixed the placement of his tie with what still were two fully functional arms. Strange. That shouldn’t have happened. Miles needed to assess the situation. Simon did say that this one was a resonance user, but what exactly his was tied to was unclear. Invulnerability? Could somebody even do that?

“You look surprised,” he said.

Well, “A little.”

“Impressive, though. If you’d have hit with killing force, you might have actually harmed me.”

“Oh, this won’t be fun.”

“Men, shoot him dead.”

With the wag of his finger, a hail of gunfire brought itself upon Miles. His shield was taking a beating with each bullet. As the bullets hit each penny, they soon became unusable, and it took some quick thinking to switch them out. It was like thinking at the speed of light. It was like instinct to angle each coin just so much so to minimize the damage and still keep the rounds from clipping him.

After a deafening barrage that lasted several seconds, the rounds ran dry. Miles stood with his shield up, but nearly half of what used to make it up was unusable. Pennies and pesos laid themselves out on the floor, shot to death and bent to heck from the bullets.

“Is that all?” Miles said.

“Wonderful, Miles. Just wonderful,” Richard replied, clapping his hands. “Metallomancers really are the strongest.”

“Metallo ... what?”

“But there is a clear difference in the gulf between our powers!”
Richard grabbed hold of his suit and ripped it off. He clawed open every seam until there was nothing left to hide his true form. It was a body completely covered in thick iron plating. The suit itself had to weigh at least a hundred kilograms, and there was probably more on his legs as well. Miles was somewhat surprised he never noticed during the fight.

“So you can bench press a few hundred kilos,” Miles chuckled. “So what?”

“You didn’t notice anything strange about the bullets my subordinates fired?”

For the love of Pete! This guy needed to quit the speeches.

“Should I have?”

“They’re a special type of ammunition. High density rounds made of ... pure iron.”

Miles noticed a slight rumbling in the area as the floor began to shake, and the walls themselves vibrated with a terrible force. It was like an earthquake, localized in one building. He didn’t let his guard down, not for a second. The bullet fragments scattered across the floor slid towards the CEO and flew onto his face and his body. The fragmented bits of at least a thousand rounds covered Richard’s body with an extra thick helping of iron. Miles couldn’t even see his face anymore. It was like staring at a golem, something dark and terrifying ... something other than human.

“I am the Iron Giant!” he shouted. “Quake in my footsteps! Shatter beneath my heel!”
Richard came at him, dashing across the atrium with a ball of thick iron scraps wrapped around his fist. Miles braced for the impact, casting a solid wall of change, but the force of Richard’s punch was too fierce. It ripped through his defenses and drove a gaping opening straight through. Miles barely caught a second to spare as the giant planted its fist into his chest. Miles flew across the atrium and right through shattered glass. Quickly, he collected himself, but the damage was severe and his adrenaline was kicking in so much that he had no clue exactly what was broken.

Richard stepped over the glass and made his way into … this was the place where they made iron into steel. Yeah, that was about it. Miles was standing on the balcony, but below him and behind was a deep valley full of active pots of molten iron. Smoke stacks were nestled on the lower edges, which led up to the very top. Scraps of iron and carbon were scattered everywhere, and if this was how powerful he was with a few shells …

“You’ve finally realized,” Richard said. “You aren’t leaving this place alive.”

“Don’t sell me short!” Miles exclaimed.

“Your jokes are poor taste, Miles.”

“Then I suggest you pick up the peso.”

“That’s it!” Richard screamed. “I’ve had it!”

The iron shards from deep inside the facility began to tremble as they all gravitated towards the iron giant. From deep inside the dark corners of his own mind, Miles felt real fear. It was something he’d pushed back and aside many times before, but at this moment … as the whole factory shook in the presence of the Iron Giant … his whole body trembled as well.

But a completely separate feeling crept up in small increments. Miles didn’t fully comprehend the thought completely, but was still there. It said something like … the time to be a clown was over. This one needed to go … because whatever he was … he was no longer human … he was a danger to the world.

A thick assortment of compacted iron scrap enveloped Richard Adamson, fully transforming him into a massive metal golem. Miles could no longer see his eyes. They vanished into the mess of a towering goliath. As they both stood on the balcony, the giant tilted his head down on Miles.

“Are you ready, human?”

“Awfully bold, aren’t we?” Miles replied.
There was a lump stuck in his throat though, and it wasn’t going away. By his counts, he’d used up nearly half of his coins, and that armor wasn’t going to make things any easier. A vulnerable area necessarily existed on something that big. Somewhere, a crack lurked ... an opening. He just needed to look for it.

Miles jumped back just as the giant struck with a deadly force that ripped open the balcony. He caught himself on a coin bed and readied for the next attack. With ten dollars in pennies, he shot a meteor bolt at the giant with maximum strength, but to little effect, other than knocking him back few feet. Richard collected himself and prepared to charge again. Not good. Not good at all. Miles shot the same bolt again, but this time, Richard deflected it with his arm.

It wasn’t as powerful the second time around ... and it would be nice to assume that the beast was learning, but the truth of the matter was that each coin he hurled at Richard deformed itself just a bit. He was losing control with each strike, no thanks to the material and coarseness of Richard’s iron armor.

The Iron Giant struck again, but this time, he was too close. Miles didn’t have enough time to move, so he pushed himself back with hasty pesos. His feet slid across the ground as he narrowly dodged a blow that tore the ground where he stood.

Miles shot one to where the eyes used to be, but to no avail. The holes were too small to fit even a penny inside. He pegged two more into the joints, where the inside of the elbow and the back of the knee were, but the armor plating was too compact even there. It was as if Richard was able to move without restrictions, as if the armor weighed nothing.

“For one whose resonance is currency, you appear rather wasteful,” Richard said. “Why not use the coins from before?” Miles stood silent. Like heck if he was going to let the cat out of the bag. “Or is it that you cannot?” Richard let a bit of iron fall off, revealing a human hand as he picked up a bent penny. “I wonder what it is that stops you from using this one.” Miles stood still. “You’re not a true metallomancer, are you?” Richard said. “Your resonance is tied to shape as much as material.”

“What do you care?”

“You are good at running, Miles, but for how long? How much is left in the back pack of yours?”

“None of your business,” Miles snapped.

If he’d been counting correctly, probably less than thirty euros though. A good portion was sacrificed deflecting the bullets, and at least five to ten euros worth took their final flights against the Iron Giant.

“Good. That means you’re running low. Let’s finish this.”

Miles surveyed his surroundings. He wasn’t going to win on brute force, but maybe there was another avenue. An idea popped into his head. It was a gamble, but the odds were better than facing off with that titan. He took a few steps back as Richard readied a killing charge. The timing needed perfection.

Richard bore down the aisle at break neck speed, shaking the ground with each footstep up until he finally reached Miles. With tremendous speed, he swung his iron fist, and it slammed into a wall of something else.
“What’s this?” Richard exclaimed.

Miles rose up on the footholds of his last legs of pennies, but below him stood a wall of his secret surprise. Two rolls of quarters, the thickest bunch he could find and layered around the size of a fist. It was enough to stop him for the moment. That was about it though. Miles could only feel the presence of two rolls of pennies shuffling around in his backpack. He navigated over to a suspended beam that hovered over a vat of molten iron. He just hoped that Richard would take the bait and sure enough, the beast came climbing up. Richard clawed his way to the top until he stood safely on the edge of the beam.

“Seems you’re out, then,” he said.

“Guess so.”

“My offer still stands. You could learn the untapped secrets of resonance. You could become something magnificent.”

Miles sat, crouched down a shade, only a few feet from the Iron Giant. The fumes from the vat were going to make him pass out before long. For a moment, he contemplated Richard’s offer. It was … well …

“Your offer is tempting, Mr. Adamson.”

“Isn’t it?”

“I really would like to be a part of it, but …”

“But what?” Richard asked, with an irritable tone.

“But what you do to gain that knowledge … what I’d have to live with …”

“Yes?”

He let it hang in the air for just a little bit, before he smirked.

“Life’s too ‘short’ for that.”

“Confound you and your detestable puns, Miles Emmerson! I will carve you!”

Richard reached out to grab him, but Miles nimbly jumped back, just barely avoiding the gesture. He pulled out his last two rolls of pennies. The good old-fashioned standard. With one powerful punch, he lined them all up into a bar and pummeled it repeatedly into the iron clad Richard. Each pound rendered a few pennies useless from the attack as Richard swung left and right to diffuse them.

“It’s useless!” he shouted. “Each attack you make is one you can no longer use!” Miles kept up the pressure. Slowly, he worked Richard back toward the edge of the beam. “What do you hope to …?” he started, before he must have also noticed the overwhelming heat from below. “No!”

“It’s over!” Miles screamed at the top of his lungs with the final strike that shoved the goliath off and into the pit.

He watched with exhaustion and labored breathing as the piles of thick iron fully submerged into the molten metal. He didn’t hear screams or cries for mercy. Rather, it was swift, like
dipping into a pool. Smoke and fumes blew up and filled the air, and for a brief moment, it blinded him as he staggered back.

The path of the Iron Giant came full circle and with his passing, Miles breathed a deep sigh of relief. Whatever direction Savage Steel was going to take from here on ... well, he didn’t have much of an idea, but at least for the moment, things were going to die down. First thing’s first though. He needed to vanish ... and quickly.

“Simon? Still there?” Miles waited for a reply, but nobody answered. “Hey! Simon!”

He scanned his surroundings. There weren’t any employees. Apart from the suicide squad, nobody else would have seen him. He jumped off the beam and onto the balcony. Miles walked over to the gargantuan hole in the wall that led to the building’s atrium. He peered through to check for any signs of activity, but the unit seemed to have dispersed. It was getting close to noon. With careful hands, he stepped over broken glass and took a deep breath of fresh air. It was good to be out of the furnace, for sure.

“Can you hear me now?” Miles asked one more time.

“You did well.”

Miles whirled his head upwards from where he heard it. High on the second floor of the atrium, a man in dark clad gear and a long coat stood bearing down at him with a high-powered rifle.

“Arc,” Miles said with a grin. “Come to finish the job, huh?”

“I don’t think so,” Arc replied. “I couldn’t find Mr. Adamson’s killer. The fool escaped before I had a chance to confront him.”

“You’re serious?”

“Do you want me to reconsider? Go before I change my mind.”

“Right,” Miles said.

He started before he heard Arc mention, “One more thing.”

“What’s that?” Miles asked, stopping in mid step.

“Mr. Adamson knew of resonance for nearly two decades. He did extraordinarily well to keep it secret ... but that privacy won’t hold for much longer.”

“So, what do you suggest?”

“Be the voice of resonance in the new world.”