

The city itself is a lot like high school. It's all about presentation. There's the city that you see, all galleries and local businesses, and then there's the city beneath it. The Asheville that you only notice once you've lived here long enough, like seeing the framework behind the stage of a play. The homeless. The racial divide. The class system. The city has an identity crisis, trying to be a tourist spot and a college town and a representation of sustainability. But the only thing that ever happens is that it gets more expensive to live here.

Lyle and I walk a couple of miles through the overpriced residential district, talking occasionally about the cool architecture, but my thoughts keep drifting. I'm losing focus. The *Halo* match had erased my identity long enough to forget about Seria, but now her invisible presence is back, locking me inside my own head, and I can't stop thinking.

It takes us about an hour to reach downtown, and another two blocks finds us at our favorite hangout. It's a quirky start-up, a half bar half arcade, built in an old two-story brick garage. The locals call it "The Barcade" because this city is clever like that. Official rules dictate that underage kids aren't allowed, but I won a bet with the bartender by beating his high score in Space Invaders, so he lets it slide as long as I don't try to buy anything alcoholic. Which is fine with me, because their specialty drinks are priced for tourists anyway.