

I.

It was the sort of glare that would have bothered most people, shimmering and flickering against the afternoon sun as clouds moved past, refusing to let anyone forget that it was there. For John, it made him curious, as most things did, but it was almost two o'clock, and his mother had said to be ready by then. Still, something was out there in the sand causing the light, and if he didn't investigate it, who would?

The teen ran across the beach behind his house to the water's edge and crouched down above the light he'd followed, positioning his back to break its line to the sun. The gleam cooled at his shadow, finally allowing him sight of his discovery: a half-buried, metal-rimmed circle of glass edging shyly above the flattened sand below him.

John tilted his head to the side and saw numbers engraved on the glass along its curve. A small metal arrow was almost pointing at a carefully etched nine from underneath. He'd found a wristwatch. John lifted it from the sand and shook it clean within the ocean before bringing it to his ear. It was still ticking.

Dangling the watch by its leather band, John looked through the glass and noticed something odd. Seated behind

the hands was a network of crisscrossed wires, each hair-thin and pulled taut against the frame. The nest they formed was so tangled and thick that nothing but more wires could be seen beneath the top layer. He wondered what possible purpose they could serve for so simple a machine.

John placed the watch on his wrist. As the metal touched skin, he felt an instantaneous jolt, as if two magnets had been suddenly joined together. The skin of his left arm prickled, and the small hairs that lived there raised straight.

His arm jerked back sharply from the shock, and to his surprise, even though he'd yet to latch its band, the watch didn't fall. John quickly spun his wrist upside-down. The two halves of its band dangled down as expected, but the metal base remained stubbornly in place against his skin.

Confused, he shot his fingers around its face and pulled. For over a minute he tugged and yanked, strained and jerked, but as hard as he tried, the watch sat firm against his wrist as if glued. Out of breath and exasperated, John let it go. He'd made no progress; the watch was stuck to him.

Suddenly, John noticed movement behind the face's glass. The tiny metal threads nestled beneath the watch hands had come to life, intermittently vibrating at

different intensities as the second-hand ticked past the numbers that circled it.

At first, the resonations seemed random, but the longer John watched the wires stir, the more he sensed an indefinable order behind their movement. The effect was bewitching.

"John!" His mother's call broke the trance. "John, it's two o'clock!"

John read the time from the watch; it agreed with his mother. Quickly, he latched the band beneath his wrist and ran through the sand back to his porch where his mother stood waiting and smiling. Embarrassed by his predicament, he hid his hand and the watch in his pocket as he approached.

"Are you ready?" his mother asked.

"I'm not sure how to be ready when I don't know where we're going," he answered, unlatching the Velcro straps on his dripping sandals.

"What's that on your wrist?" she asked, eyeing the watch he'd exposed.

"It's nothing," John replied hastily, kicking the sandals from his feet. "Just something I found on the beach." He moved swiftly past his mother and walked through the wide sliding glass door behind her to her bedroom.

John lazily plopped down on the edge of her still-made bed, being careful to place his arms, and the watch now stuck to one of them, angled behind him. His mother stood for a moment looking out past the sand to the ocean before turning and joining him inside.

"Another late night?" he asked as she closed the glass shut behind her.

"It's not so bad," she said.

He watched his mother's reflection as she checked what was left of her make-up in the mirror above the dresser. A once-white plastic nametag with her name written on it hung sloppily from the front of her shirt.

She unpinned it and turned around. "Come on, get your shoes. You shouldn't be late today."

John bounced from the bed and walked to the shallow closet outside his room where he found the worn, brown tennis shoes he'd left there the day before. As he crouched and laced them onto his feet, his eyes drifted to the watch still gripping his arm. Surely there was something simple he was missing, some button, switch, or trick to it.

John stood and walked toward the house's front door with his head still turned down at his wrist. He began to pull lightly at different points around the watch's face, hoping to find its weak point. Nothing seemed to work.

Suddenly, a familiar, feminine voice called his name from farther down the hall. "Johnny!" it exclaimed in a high-pitched squeal.

"Johnny?" he heard his mother repeat. She'd never met anyone who'd called him that.

John raised his head and saw the two women close in front of him. His mother was standing addled at an answered front door, while his girlfriend stood happily on the other side, just a foot away. They'd met each other, and that wasn't supposed to have happened.

"Molly?" John remarked. He choked on the name.

"Happy three!" she replied. Molly clacked past John's mother in high-heeled shoes and threw her arms around John's neck in a familiar hug. "Daddy and I came all the way from the mainland to take you to lunch for our three week anniversary!" She looked over her shoulder at John's mother. "Your mom can come, too. We can wait while she gets dressed."

John's mother looked down at the clothes she was wearing and crossed her arms over the dried coffee staining her chest.

John slowly backed from Molly's embrace and opened his mouth to speak.

"You didn't forget our three week anniversary, did you?" his girlfriend accused.

"No, of course not," he answered defensively. It was an innocent lie. He hadn't known that three weeks was an anniversary couples were supposed to celebrate.

"John starts his first job today," his mother chimed in.

"Thanks, Mom," John muttered.

Molly seemed confused. "So you weren't planning on celebrating with me?"

"Of course I was," he said quietly, turning his back to his mother and walking Molly a few steps away. "I just had it planned out for tonight, not this morning."

Molly's lips were bulged into half of a frown. "You have *what* planned out?"

"It's a surprise," he invented.

His answer failed to cure her pouting. "Well, how will I know what to wear?" she asked.

"Just be ready by six, okay?"

"My favorite number," she answered him, lifting her shoulders and curling her smile as tightly as her face would allow.

"John, we need to go," his mother interrupted.

John turned and nodded to her before returning his attention to Molly. "I'll call you tonight."

"I'll be getting ready," she replied.

John's mother stepped between them and put a hand on Molly's shoulder. "It was nice to meet you," she said, ushering the young, pretty, blonde from the door.

"You too, *Mom!*" Molly answered, flittering out of the house to the front driveway.

John and his mother followed Molly outside and watched her enter the passenger's side of a bright orange convertible parked in the driveway. The driver turned down his loud music as Molly entered the car. He grinned and shot John and his mother a loose salute before revving his engine and wheeling out into the road. John noticed the car's vanity license plate shimmer against the sunlight as it left; it read: "Saturday."

"Are you angry?" John asked.

"No," his mother answered, keeping her hands on the steering wheel, and her eyes fixed on the road ahead. "Why would I be angry?"

"I don't know, you just seem--"

"It's just that we've always been honest with each other," she said quickly. "So why wouldn't you tell me you were dating someone?"

"Well, I--"

"It's not a big deal or anything," she said. "It's just your first girlfriend. Sort of big news."

John closed his mouth and looked out from his window to the line of identical houses passing his eyes at twenty miles per hour, exactly the island's speed limit.

His mother looked over to his uncomfortable face. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to be weird."

"It's okay," John answered. "It's my fault for not saying something about her sooner."

"So her name is Molly, huh? I like that. Like Molly Ringwold."

John looked down at the watch still adhered to his wrist and answered her absently, "No, not like whoever that is."

His mother briefly looked over again. "I saw you pulling on that thing earlier in the hall. If it's uncomfortable you should just take it off."

"It's not," he answered quickly. "I was just trying to set the time."

"So that watch was just lying in the sand?" she asked.

John changed the subject. "Are we going to be there soon?"

"Yes," she said, "it's close."

"Can you finally tell me where we're going?"

His mother smirked. "I guess it's too late for you to run away. It's a company that helps the elderly."

"So, you mean it's a company that helps everyone here on Longboard Key."

His mother laughed. "Business is good. I guess that's why they're hiring."

"Well, what do they do?"

"It sort of has to do with computers. That's why I thought you might be interested."

John perked immediately. "Really?"

"Sort of," his mother answered quietly, impatiently eyeing the slow-moving car in front of them. "The way Virgil explained it to me--"

"Who's Virgil?"

"The man who owns the company. He said he specializes in providing 'Internet services and benefits without resorting to the Internet.'"

"What on Earth does that mean?" John asked.

"I don't know, honey. I'm sure Virgil will explain it to you."

"But--"

"Oh look, here we are," his mother said, pulling the car from the road into a long one-lane parking lot.

John looked up through his window at the warehouse now beside them. He'd seen it in passing numerous times, but had never known what it was until now.

"So what do I do?" he asked.

"Just go inside and find Virgil," his mother said. "He'll explain everything. Now come here." She reached across the car and gave her son a sideways hug before kissing him on the cheek. "I love you."

John unbuckled his seatbelt and took his frayed brown messenger bag from the back seat before exiting the car and wheeling around the hood to his mother's window. She spun the short plastic handle beside her, lowering the glass in tiny spurts.

"I'll see you when you're done," she said through the thin opening she'd created.

"But I still don't know what I'm doing," John protested.

His mother smiled. "And now you and I have one more thing in common. Have a good day, kid."

As John lifted his left arm to wave goodbye, he felt a small electric jolt beneath the watch.

"Ow!" he yelled, whipping his arm back in surprise.

"John!" his mother exclaimed. "What happened? Are you alright?"

"It's nothing," John said swiftly, covering the watch with his hand and turning his body from the car.

"Was it that watch?" she asked. "Maybe you should let me--"

"It's okay, Mom. I have to go." He turned his head and smiled at her. "I don't want to be late on my first day, right?"

She looked him over suspiciously. "Just be safe today, okay?" she finally answered. John nodded and she backed her car out into the road.

After his mother's car disappeared down the same road that had brought them, John wrapped his fingers around the watch's rim and pulled, this time determined to not let go until finally breaking free of it. It held strong against his pull, and he increased his force. The skin around his wrist strained and turned red. Soon, his eyes began to tear from the pain. Finally, he let it go. Looking down at his wrist and the device now bound to it, the teen was no longer annoyed. He was worried.

A strong gust of breeze blew past John's face, and the loud creak of old chains sounded above him. He moved his

eyes up to a sloppily hand-painted sign swinging above his head and read the words "America Offline" made from large, stenciled letters. For now, the watch would have to wait. If he could make it through just a few hours of work, he'd have time to stop and think about how to deal with Molly, the watch, all of it.

John faced the imposing warehouse behind him and walked through its front double doors without further hesitation. The first step inside landed on a polished concrete floor with a bouncing echo.

The majority of the building's inside was wrapped in darkness, broken only by small, scattered, sections lit by low-hanging halogen lamps. The wall to his left was most illuminated. Over fifty people scrambled like moths around the light, huddled around what appeared to be a large map.

As John approached the wall, he saw the map for what it was, a series of regular, square corkboards hung edge-to-edge to form a large cohesive rectangle, easily twenty-five feet or more in length. Down its center was a thin, grey line representing a single road. Marker-drawn houses were outlined on either side, placed between the road and the blue water colored onto the board's edges.

John recognized the map immediately as Longboard Key, the island he'd spent his life on. Seeing it drawn out this

way made it seem even more simple and small than he already thought it to be. It further reaffirmed his desire to leave some day.

John leaned in closer and noticed photographs of people tacked inside most of the houses. White cards listing out birthdays, alma maters and spouses were furiously stuck and taped beside them. Some even held newspaper clippings, magazine cutouts, and scraps of paper filled with what looked like rumors and personal messages.

An older woman in a Hawaiian shirt and neon-pink vinyl shorts edged past John and ran a long yellow yarn between the house with her picture in it and another further down the island. It was one of many similar yarns and strings connecting the houses and photos to others along the boards.

John looked for where his house should be along the road and was surprised not to find it, empty or otherwise. Instead, someone had drawn in a new mortuary: *Priscilla's Prestigious Plots*.

Well, that's creepy, John thought.

"There it is boy, the future in front of you," a raspy voice whispered into his ear. "Now, what do you think?"

John quickly turned to find the source of the voice. The words had come from an older man, hunched in half over

a tall ornate cane. His skin was an elephant's, grayed and folding over itself in heavy wrinkles. From the golden monocle adorning his left eye to the identically colored chain circling out from a pocket in his striped vest, John thought the man looked like some sort of old-timey train conductor.

The man cocked his head and looked into John's eyes.

"You mean this board?" John finally asked him.

"Yes, the board," the man asserted. "What do you think of it?"

"It's long," John answered conservatively, not exactly sure of what to say.

"Quite right, lad, quite right," the man agreed, looking out across the boards. "I call it *Face Board*. It's just one of the things my company is doing to help curb the techno-tide." He turned his eyes back to John. "Jonathon, I presume?"

"Just John," John answered. This must be Virgil.

"We've much to do, much to talk about. Follow me."

Virgil jiggled his cane at the crowd of people behind him and they parted at the motion as waves. John followed closely as Virgil led him to a back wall, far from the group.

"Of course the board is just one of America Offline's ventures. Each of those people you saw back there pay a hefty subscription for the service, but it doesn't stop with the boards." Virgil pointed to a door on the wall in front of them, the first in an identical series. "Behind here is the Search Department. People can call in at all hours to ask us questions. Some are simple: 'How many ounces in a cup?' Others are more philosophical: 'Does God exist?' We research the answers and phone them back with top results."

John carefully hid rolling eyes.

"That next one," Virgil began, pointing at the neighboring door, "is *The Bay*. Soon, I'll grow it into a large weekly auction house. The restroom is there beside it, and the one after that is my office. We'll head there in a moment, but first let's take a look at that scooter we got for you."

"Scooter?" John asked.

"Yes, it's just back here in the ell."

Virgil led John around the corner at the end of the wall and pointed to a slim silver machine. John left the man's side and approached it in awe.

"What is this for?" John asked.

"What do you mean, lad? It's for you!"

"This is mine?"

"Yours after you work for me a few months, though you may take it up front. I'm beginning an Almost Instant Messenger Department that you'll be spearheading. I'm going to send you out scooting short messages between folks on the island. Here's the key."

Virgil extended his arm to John, holding a small key ring and chain between his fingers. As John took the key, it flooded him with visions of riding to and from his school on the mainland each day, swerving around the slow cars, a crisp wind rushing past his face, and Molly riding behind him in a bright pink helmet, squealing with joy as she held tightly to his midsection.

"Now follow me, lad," Virgil said. "You'll need to sign some insurance papers so your mother can't sue me once you've killed yourself on that thing."

John pocketed the key and followed the hunched old man into his small, dusty office. The walls inside were vacant, save a portrait of Virgil overlooking the room, painted in nineteenth century style.

An ornate desk took most of the floor space, though supported nothing more than a few overstuffed accounting books, a fancy looking Mont Blanc pen, and a messy Rolodex sitting slightly askew to its axel.

Virgil sat down at the desk and fished through a file. "Ah, here's the one!" he said, removing a form. "Come give it a sign."

John reached across the desk to Virgil's pen. As his fingers wrapped around it, Virgil's fingers wrapped around John's wrist.

"And what's this, then?" Virgil asked, eyeing the strange watch on John's arm.

"Just a wristwatch," John answered.

Virgil released the teen's arm and leaned back into his chair. "Well, you'll have to take that off. Leave it here on the desk along with your cellular phone, if you have one, and anything else that's digital or high-tech. We've a corporate image to maintain, you know."

John stood silent, unsure of what to do.

"Come on then, lad! Let's have it off!" Virgil said gruffly.

"Well sir, you see, the thing is--"

"Yes?" Virgil asked. The man looked to be growing more impatient by the second. He stood from his chair, placed his thumbs into his vest pockets, and expanded his chest.

"I can't take it off," John said.

"Of course you can, boy, just take it off."

"That's the problem. It's stuck."

"It's not stuck; you're just being stubborn."

"I wish it was as simple as that."

"Bring yourself here," Virgil said sternly.

John slowly walked around the desk to the elderly man, his embarrassment growing with each cautious step.

It's going to come off the second he touches it, John knew, and I'm going to end up looking like an idiot. Mom's going to kill me when he tells her.

Virgil hurriedly took hold of John's arm and turned the wrist upside-down. After unlatching the watch's band, he tugged on its face. "If you're going to take a job in the modern workforce," he said, "you're going to need to learn to--" The watch wasn't budging.

Virgil loosed John's arm. "Now, what's going on here?" he asked, sounding more than a little frustrated.

"I don't know," John answered honestly, almost glad that Virgil had been equally unsuccessful in figuring it out. "It was easy to put on."

Virgil muttered something under his breath and opened his desk's left drawer. "Now where did I put that whatchamacallit?" he asked himself as he fumbled through its contents. After a few moments his hand reappeared holding a large, wooden-framed Holmesian magnifying glass.

He lifted it to John's wrist and inspected the watch. "If this is some sort of trick, lad ... "

"It's not."

After a few passes over the watch, Virgil finished his examination. "Alright, son, this calls for some good, old fashioned ingenuity. Something you kids today never learned on your inter-webs."

Virgil opened his desk drawer again and traded the magnifying glass for what appeared to be a pair of old wire cutters. The tool was rusted, made only from two pieces of solid metal attached by a single bolt and spring. He flexed them open and closed in his hand.

"As good as the day I bought them," he said proudly. He took John's wrist at the watch and brought it close to his body.

"Wait!" John protested. "What are you going to do with those?"

"Don't worry, lad, I'm not going to cut your arm off. Just this newfangled thing stuck to it."

Holding the boy's arm with his left hand, he slowly slid the side of the cutters between the watch and John's arm.

As the tip of the tool connected with the metal of the watch's face, a bright-blue electric arc shot from the

watch to the wire cutters to Virgil's wrinkled hand and up the length of his arm. A high-pitched squeal and loud *pop* followed a split-second later. Virgil cried out, but only for a moment before releasing John's arm and falling stiffly from his chair to the ground with a thud, silencing the room immediately.

The surprise of the sudden noise had sent John tumbling backward onto his rear. After recovering from the fall, he held his breath, listening to the eerie silence that had taken the room. He looked to the watch on his wrist. It was still there. Nothing had changed.

"Mr. Virgil?" John called quietly. He waited a few moments for a reply before beginning a crawl to the other side of his boss's desk.

"*Ahh!*" he exclaimed as he found the body. "Virgil! Virgil, are you alright?" There was no reply.

John sprung from the floor and leaned over the desk for a different view. He found Virgil completely stiff, eyes wide open, face affright, lying sideways in a seated position on the floor.

He nervously extended his hand toward the old man's mouth to feel for breath. There was none. "Virgil?" he asked.

John had never seen a dead body before. It was surprisingly terrifying for something so still and quiet. While backing away from it, he noticed the mark on Virgil's hand where the electricity had entered him. Parts of the skin were now a darkened red, littered with small black scabs the size of pinpoints covering the area like a rash. It was the sort of electrocution wound one might expect to receive from a generator or breaker, not a small wristwatch powered by a dime-sized battery.

John felt sick. Nervously holding the corpse's gaze, he backed toward the door to leave the room. As Virgil left his line of sight, John bolted from the office to the bathroom next-door. Once inside, he leaned over the toilet and coughed against his nausea.

He glanced at the innocent and silent face of the watch beside his downturned head. Its entrancing wires still pulsed and waved beyond the glass, perhaps stronger than before. They held the same glowing blue as the electric arc that had leapt and struck Virgil.

It's 3:13 now, John thought. I've got to call the police, then my Mom, and then Molly--she's going to be angry. John shook his head. I can't think about that now! What am I going to tell the police? It's going to sound

crazy, but they'll have to believe me when I show them the watch. Right? Right.

Feeling secure with his plan, John rose and reached deep into his right pocket for his cell. Before he could lift it, a strange feeling of weakness washed over his shoulders and chest, as if the weight of his head and arms was suddenly too much for him to bear. The effect was radiating to his right arm and legs. John shook out the limbs as if they were asleep, trying to throw the odd feeling overcoming him. His legs went numb and collapsed.

John fell limp to the floor, finding himself unable to move the majority of his body. The sensation had spread evenly across him to everywhere but his left arm where the humming watch clung to the wrist.

John raised the arm and flexed it above him, first by choice, then by impulse. Moments later, it began shaking wildly in spasm, moving randomly and rapidly above his helpless body. He tried to fight against it, hoping to contain the raw energy forcing the frenzy. The arm went stiff. That's when it happened.

A pulsing wave of energy exploded outward from the watch's face, blinding John, and enveloping the bathroom in effulgent blue light. Only a moment later, the light was gone. And so was John.

II.

The sound began as a listless vibration buzzing past his eardrums. Soon, it grew to a muddled cacophony of tones: an air conditioner's hum, what may have been the sound of rushing water, a voice. It was saying something John couldn't understand. He straightened his back. His eyelids were heavy and lifted only to a blur of lights and vague geometric shapes. His arm twitched; he could move again. He checked his wrist for the watch; it was still there. He lowered his arm, and his fingers touched a cold surface beneath him. Moving his hand lightly against it revealed a shape and feel.

How did I get on top of the toilet?

It wasn't long before John's eyes could stay open without struggle. He immediately noticed the oddity of his surroundings. The bathroom was completely different than it had been a moment ago. The décor had changed, but even stranger were the newfound fixtures, a large, curtained shower in front of him and a porcelain sink to his right.

The shower was in use, and a cloud of steam billowed from the opening at its top. The silhouette of a man cleaning himself stood behind its curtain singing the refrain of a song John didn't recognize. He had a terrible

voice for the song he attempted, but that didn't stop him from continuing on and on in forced falsetto.

Being as quiet as possible, John stood from the toilet and crept to his left where he spied a small window, closed but clear. He carefully approached it and stood on his toes to reach the glass. Just tall enough, he looked through the window and saw a fenced back yard, complete with a barbeque grill and child's playhouse.

The bathroom didn't change, he suddenly realized. I'm just not there anymore.

John looked behind him toward the bathroom door. An addressed letter sat beneath the foggy mirror above the sink.

This has got to be some sort of alien planet, he thought, taking soft steps toward the letter. Or a parallel dimension where people eat Styrofoam and bugs run the post office. Or-- John paused his thoughts and picked up the envelope. The address of his location read clear across the front: *Tallahassee?*

John had never been to Tallahassee before. It was a solid 250 miles from Longboard. This new information had him more confused than ever.

How long have I been out? he wondered. John looked at the watch. 3:15. Only a minute had passed since his collapse. *That can't be right.*

The door that led out of the bathroom had been left ajar, and John woefully decided it to be a better exit than the tiny window high on the wall. Timing his steps with the words of the showering man's song, he crept to the door, taking a moment to pray that its hinges were well greased before summoning the courage to test them. *One, two, three,* and he opened the door just wide enough for his body to slink out into the connecting room.

Safely on the other side, John swiftly returned the door to its original position and listened. The man in the bathroom was still singing. The operation had been a success in its silence, and John smiled at his accomplishment. *Ninja skills,* he thought.

Turning from the bathroom confidentially, John suddenly found himself face-to-face with an attractive woman sitting on the edge of a large bed, staring straight through him.

"Adam?" she asked.

John swept his eyes across the room.

"What?" yelled the man in the bathroom, pausing his song to answer.

"Oh, sorry," she replied, "I heard the door. I thought you were coming out."

"I am," he answered, turning off the shower. A few seconds later, the sink in the bathroom coughed to life.

John stood petrified, not sure of what was happening. He was standing right before her; could she not see him? *Am I invisible, too?*

He looked closely at the woman's eyes, still staring through him, past him. There was something about them that didn't look right; perhaps it was their shape, or perhaps it was the slight scarring he thought he saw against the whites. He thought for a moment.

Oh, he decided, *she's blind*. John waved his hands in front of her eyes to make sure. He made a stupid face at her and danced with his arms to double check. With amazing reflex, the woman reached out and grabbed onto his right elbow.

"There you are," she said quietly.

John pulled his arm from her grasp on reflex.

"Oh, you want to play," the woman cooed seductively.

John looked toward the room's exit to his right and longed to be there. He cautiously moved one foot toward it. The bottom of his shoe lightly brushed the carpet beneath its sole.

"Can't get away from me," the woman said, purring the words. Her hand swiftly shot out at John once more, this time catching him between the legs.

"You're not Adam," she said loudly.

"What was that, sweetie?" Adam called from the bathroom. Less than a second later, the woman was screaming with a voice so shrill and shattering that John squinted his eyes closed.

"What the--" came Adam's voice, rushing into the room with his body soon behind.

"Let me explain," John said to him, not sure how to address the man standing before him, angry, naked, and twice his size.

"What are you doing to my wife?" he yelled, pointing his finger at John in judgment.

"Nothing! I was just--" John began, soon cut off by another of the woman's screams.

"He was trying to ... to ... touch me!" she yelled.

"No! What? I wasn't!" John stuttered, backing toward the exit.

"He was what?" Adam yelled, charging headfirst at John. Bug-eyed and terrified, John quickly u-turned and ran for the bedroom door. The woman screamed again, this newest

screech assaulting John's ears just as harshly as the first.

Dashing from the bedroom, John found himself at the end of a long hallway. The walls on either side were packed with family photographs matching in size and brown wooden framing.

Something sharp and forceful struck John between the shoulders. The impact sent him to his knees. Beside him on the ground was the projectile, one of the family portraits, this one shot during a lunch on the beach. In the picture, Adam was standing on a towel on top of the sand, his arm around a woman whom John recognized as the blind screamer from the bedroom. Between them was a small child. John smiled at the incredibly exaggerated grin the little one wore across her face. Then, another wooden frame collided with his leg.

John looked back and saw Adam pursuing him, lumbering but determined, ripping pictures from the wall and flinging them forward as he ran. John leapt from the ground and continued running ahead, not sure of where to go in the house's foreign layout.

He decided to hook right at the hallway's end, hoping to break vector with anymore of Adam's missiles. Ahead was a small kitchen, still dirty from breakfast.

No, John thought quickly. *Kitchen, bad. Kitchen has knives.*

He pivoted quickly on his heel, hoping to change course before becoming trapped by the man raging closely behind.

As John turned, Adam leapt. The large man's pounce afforded him a quick grip on John's left foot, and they both tumbled backward and tangled onto the carpeting below.

John struggled to regain his footing, but was locked in place to the floor by Adam's iron grip. The hold on John's shoe became a hold on his leg, forcing him back down to the ground. The grip on his leg was soon a grip on his torso, and from his torso, his throat.

Adam knelt on top of his trespasser and squeezed the boy's neck.

"I didn't ... try ... to ... " John coughed.

"Save it!" Adam yelled, lifting his right hand from John's throat. "Who takes advantage of a blind woman?" A moment later the hand returned as a fist, striking the side of John's jaw with a crushing impact. John had never been in a fight before and easily decided he wasn't fond of it.

He squinted his eyelids closed and open, closed and open, trying to recover from the blow. Adam lifted his hand once more to a striking position.

With his arms pinned at the shoulders by Adam's knees, John swiftly raised his right forearm and forced it past Adam's leg, using the edge of the watch's face to hew at the man's exposed skin. The resulting cut was trivial, but the surprise was enough to cause Adam to loosen his grip just long enough for John to break free from the pin and roll back onto his feet.

"You're a coward," Adam taunted.

"You're the one throwing pictures of your family at the back of my head!" John retorted.

Adam yelled incomprehensibly and jumped for John's feet again. The teen deftly side-jumped, and used the small advantage he gained to run from the kitchen to the family room nearby. He paused there and swung his head left and right, looking for an exit.

Where's the front door in this place? he wondered in exasperation. It was too late; Adam was back on his feet, standing confidentially on the other side of the room in front of the house's large wooden front door. *Well, that answers that question.*

"Where're you going?" the man asked snidely.

"Let's just calm down," John tried. "You could put on some pants and we could talk about this. Something crazy happened to me. I don't know how I got here."

Ignoring him, Adam slowly began to cross the room. Frantically, John looked around again, this time noticing a large oval mirror hanging on the wall next to him. He lifted it from the nails mounting it and heaved it at the large wooden coffee table standing between his body and Adam's. It shattered apart on impact.

Adam covered his face and jumped back from the table. He landed and looked first at the broken mirror, then up to John. He laughed. "You either need better aim or bigger muscles."

John smiled. "There's glass everywhere. You've got bare feet."

Adam looked down and saw that John was right. Small jagged shards of the mirror were scattered across the floor between them, some almost certainly hiding invisibly in the carpet's thick shag.

John offered Adam another smug smirk, earning a moment more to further survey the room. There were a set of stairs to his right that climbed to the second floor, equally far from him and Adam. *It's either up or out, and Adam's still at the door.*

John's thoughts were interrupted by a plastic CD case flying closely past his ear and crashing into the wall behind him. He turned back to the large naked man across

the room and saw him pulling more jewel cases from a large vertical rack beside him next to the room's entertainment center.

Soon a second and third disc flew at John's chest, neither missing target. The hard, sharp plastic corners of their cases stung and cut as they made contact with the thin t-shirt protecting him. John successfully swatted the fourth case from the air before it could connect, but could do nothing to stop number five or six as one struck his knee and the other, his side. Two more sailed past John's head, one just narrowly missing his nose.

The blind woman ran into the room behind Adam and screamed again. A young girl, looking to be four or five-years-old, appeared at the top of the stairs to John's right.

"Daddy?" she asked.

"Go back to your room!" Adam yelled in reply. "It's not safe here right now!" The young girl toddled back out of view.

John counted fourteen CDs that had hit him thus far, while counting only three or four that he'd been able to deflect. *Not good odds*, he thought.

Using the short pause in Adam's assault, he ran forward to the large wooden coffee table he'd used to break

the mirror. Careful of any shards on its surface, he lifted the table in front of him and ducked behind the wood just moments before the next wave of projectiles launched. Hard plastic shattered against the table as three new CDs broke against the surface of his improvised shield.

Adam called out to John, "You're a coward!"

Faced with a decision of changing to offense or standing indefinitely behind a heavily assaulted piece of furniture, John took the table's legs atop his shoulders and charged forward across the room at his assailant. He and the table crashed into Adam and the rack of CDs in one clunky blow, landing both John and his shield awkwardly on top of both. Only slightly dazed from the impact, he dismounted the upturned table, stood, turned, and ran for the stairs.

Once safe on the second floor, John fled into the first room he saw. Inside, he closed the door behind him and took a moment to catch his breath, leaning his elbow on the golden-painted doorknob. A tiny hand tugged on his shirt as he panted.

"Um, who are you?" a small voice asked. John turned his downward face toward the tug and spied the young girl he'd seen earlier looking up at him accusingly. She held a

large, well-worn pink stuffed rabbit beneath her arm. "Are you a bad guy?"

"No," John answered immediately. He forced a smile and gently knelt to face her directly. "Your daddy is sort of mad at me. Does he ever get mad at you?"

"Uh huh," she answered through a puffy, scrunched up face. "I don't like it sometimes."

"Me neither," John replied quietly. "So, we can be friends, right?"

"Um, okay," she agreed.

"So, when your daddy comes up here--"

"Who are you?"

"I'm John."

"My name is spelled like this: c, a, l--" she began, making the shapes of the letters with her hands as she spoke them slowly. Past the room's door, the sound of carefully placed footsteps began to creak up the stairs.

"Alright, whatever," John interrupted, gently lowering the girl's hands to her sides. "I don't actually care what your name is."

The girl scowled in reply and a second later began to cry. The footsteps on the stairs sped to a run and, before John could think, the door to the bedroom flew open. Adam stood in its frame like an enraged naked superhero, legs

shoulder-width apart, arms bent and planted firmly on his hips.

He looked at John, then to his daughter. His anger had grown to the point of quieting him. "Step away from her and into the hallway."

"You don't understand; this is a big mistake."

"I said," Adam repeated calmly, "step away from her and into the hallway."

John stood frozen, looking at the man before him. Adam's face twisted and crunched, growing ever more impatient and turbulent as the long seconds passed. It was a face that no longer knew of restraint, if it ever had. John turned his own face slightly and eyed the large window behind him. It wasn't ideal, but it was the only way down.

Adam took two careful steps toward John, placing his hand on the long white wicker dresser to his side as he walked. John's eyes followed the motion of the man's hand, worried about what he might do with it.

A foot away from Adam's hand on the dresser sat a snow globe, thick and rounded. John locked his eyes to it and heard Adam's now-sandaled foot take another step forward. John snuck his hand toward the globe, creeping his fingers toward it from behind to camouflage the action. Adam took another step, almost to him now.

It was the small girl who broke the tension. "Daddy, you're naked!" she exclaimed.

In a flash, John clutched the snow globe. Adam reached for his daughter with equal speed and spun her deftly behind his body to safety. John covered his face, closed his eyes, and threw the globe through the window behind him, smashing it open at impact.

Without looking back, he ran behind the snow globe he'd thrown, jumping through the broken window after it to the thick grass one story below. He landed sorely, but uninjured. Adam was quick to the window frame.

"Coward!"

"Stop calling me that!" John yelled back. "That was pretty awesome just now, actually. And listen, I didn't try anything with your wife, okay?"

"Come back up here!"

"No thanks," John replied casually. He looked around. He was standing in Adam's front yard. It was one of many in what appeared to be a large suburban neighborhood. The street in front of him ran in two directions, neither of which led somewhere John was familiar with. He ran to the right, figuring it was as good a direction as any.

Once two blocks away, he turned and looked behind him. Adam was nowhere to be seen. *I guess he didn't want to run outside naked, chasing down a teenaged boy.*

John took a moment to stop and catch his breath. He felt his jaw where Adam had hit him minutes earlier. It was starting to swell, but the pain was subsiding. He spun his messenger bag around to the front of his body and cleaned it of the small pieces of broken glass lodged in its thin front flap.

My phone, he thought suddenly. He patted the sides of his pants and smiled in relief at the lump in his right pocket.

John removed his cell phone and opened it. He frantically dialed his home number. It rang seven times before switching over to the answering machine.

"You've reached the Popielarski residence. Please leave a message." John cringed when he heard his last name play on the machine. He hated it. John hung up and dialed again. "You've reached the Popielarski residence. Please leave a message."

This time John waited for the beep. "Mom! Are you there? Pick up the phone. I really, really need to talk to you." He waited for a few moments. "Mom, why don't just

have a cell phone like normal people?" He heard a small click.

"Because it's too expensive just paying for yours!" his mother suddenly responded. "What is it, John, and you'd better be on fire. I'm missing my show."

"You want me to be on fire?"

"Speak, speak!" she said. "I've got four minutes of commercials, max."

"Okay, listen, and try not to freak out. I'm in Tallahassee."

"*What?* Try not to freak out? What are you doing in Tallahassee? Virgil said you were only going to be working on the island. I would have never allowed you to go all the way up there on a dinky scooter! I'm going to kill him!"

"It's too late for that, Mom. He's already dead."

"*What?*" she yelled, doubling in volume. "John, what on Earth is going on?"

"I don't know." A quiet beep played in John's ear over the conversation. He looked down at the phone's screen and saw that Molly was calling on the other line. "Mom, can I put you on hold for a second?"

"Absolutely not!"

"Just a second," he said, switching to Molly.

"Hey, Molly, listen," he began.

"Johnny!" she exclaimed. "I'm so excited about tonight. I decided to call my aunt and have her come over to do my hair and nails. She's over here now."

"Your aunt?"

"Yeah, but I was wondering, how are we going out tonight? Are you borrowing your mom's car?"

"Molly, listen--"

"I was going to say that I could borrow my dad's, but I think that you should drive, right? Boys are supposed to drive the girls."

"Molly--"

"I guess I can borrow my dad's car, then you can drive it. Does that still count like you picked me up?"

"Molly, I can't go out with you tonight." The statement was followed by silence, then a quiet response.

"What did you say?"

"I'm in Tallahassee."

"What are you doing in Tallahassee? Are you standing me up?"

"It's not actually standing you up if I tell you about it."

"Don't talk to me about the rules of dating, John Popielarski!" she yelled.

"Can you hold for a second?"

"No!"

John clicked back over to his mother.

"Mom?"

"John, damn it, don't put me on hold when we're having an important conversation. Who was that, Virgil?"

"No, Mom, Virgil's dead."

"*What?* And what are you doing in Tallahassee? You need to start making sense right now!"

"That's asking way too much of me at the moment. Can you hold on a second?"

"John, I swear, if you put me on hold again, I'll--"

"Mom, it's Molly."

"That's who you put me on hold for? Damn it John, don't you put me on--"

"Just a second," he interrupted, clicking the call back to his girlfriend.

"Molly?"

"Did you just put me on hold?"

"Yes, listen, I'm really sorry that I can't go out tonight."

"I can't believe you put me on hold."

"There's this watch, and--"

"What? You have to watch something? That's what's so important?"

"No, I found this watch and now I'm in Tallahassee or something. I don't actually know what's going on."

"Are you drunk?"

"No!"

"I can't believe you're doing this to me. You have no idea what I've gone through today for you and this dumb date of yours!"

"Well, we can go tomorrow," John tried. The quiet noise of his call waiting started beeping between his words. He looked down at the screen. It was his mother calling back. "Molly, someone's on the other line. I have to take this."

"No, you don't," she replied defiantly.

"No, really, I do," he answered quickly, looking at his phone flashing *Mamasama* across its screen.

"John, if you take that call ... " she started. There was moment of silence before she continued. "You know what, John? Take it." She hung up.

"Molly? Molly?" John clicked quickly over to his mother.

"This isn't acceptable behavior, Jonathon," she said in a chilling voice.

"Mom, I'm sorry. I should have thought about how to explain this a bit more before calling you. I'm really weirded out and I just need your help right now."

"Okay," his mother replied, calming. "Explain to me what's going on."

"If you knew what was going on, then you'd know why you wouldn't know what was going on even if I tried to tell you what was going on," he answered.

"What?"

"Okay. Short version; You know that watch I found? It won't come off. Virgil tried to take it off. It electrocuted him. I passed out and woke up in Tallahassee where some guy thought I was trying to have my way with his blind wife."

"Wait, what?" she exclaimed. "Is Virgil alright?"

"No, Mom, for the last time, Virgil is dead. He has stopped breathing, seeing, tasting, hearing, touching, and smelling. He's no longer alive. Dead. Okay? The man is deceased."

"Oh, my God," she answered. "Are you okay?"

"No!" he yelled back. "I'm in Tallahassee!"

"I can't even understand how you got up there. Tallahassee is at least five hours away by car, and you're on a scooter!"

"I'm not on the scooter. I just sort of woke up here."

"Now you're making me seriously worried."

John heard a quiet beep invading his conversation once more, but this time when he looked at the screen he saw that it came from his dying battery, not Molly calling to make-up with him as he'd hoped.

"Mom, my battery is dying. I'll explain everything when we meet up. I don't know where I am in the city, so I'm just going to find a bus or something heading back toward Longboard. I'm going to call you when I get there and you can pick me up from the station and drive me back to the island, okay?" Nothing. "Okay?" he repeated. Soon he heard soft sniffing. "Mom, don't cry, I'm fine, okay? I'll call you when I get there. I have to save my remaining battery life and get off the phone now."

"Okay," she replied slowly. "Be safe. Call me the second you get back."

"I will. I love you. And don't worry, everything is fine. I'll be back as soon as I can."

"Alright," she answered. "I love you, too."

"Make some tea or something. Try not to worry."

"Yeah," she answered.

They hung up their phones.

III.

John looked outside the window to his left and saw an illuminated bank sign poled high above the street. Its sharp, flashing red LED lights begged for attention as they burned against the night's darkness: *87 degrees Fahrenheit, 3:08 a.m. Get \$50.00 free when you open a new checking account at Commerce Bank!*

He shivered against the torn plastic of his seatback and struggled to fit underneath his messenger bag. He'd been trying to use it as a blanket against the cold now welling inside him. Normally, he would think the bank's signboard was wrong about the outside temperature--a typo from the controller, or perhaps a faulty thermometer--but for this time of year in Florida, it had to be right. So why, then, was he shivering? It had been like winter for him since the warming adrenaline of his encounter with Adam had worn off earlier that day.

John considered the time displayed on the sign, and the truth of it saddened him. His underdeveloped plan of finding a bus home hadn't been half as simple as he'd hoped. Once he'd been given directions to the station, there'd still been the long walk through an unknown city to get there. By the time he'd finally arrived, it was already

midnight, and the next bus hadn't been leaving for another hour still. To make matters more stressful yet, his phone had died just minutes after the phone call with his mother. Certainly she'd called and called him in a panic since then, but John had no way of knowing nor answering if she had.

He tightened his body into a ball on top of the seat and put his hands beneath his armpits for warmth. He could see his mother at their home on the beach; she was sitting wide-eyed on the couch, torn between waiting by the phone like they'd agreed and jumping into her car to gun for Tallahassee. He hated what he was putting her through.

John removed his hands from under his arms and looked at the watch still attached to his wrist. He punched it with his left hand.

"It's all your fault," he said, unsure if he was speaking to the watch or to himself. His mind fell instantly back to Virgil's horrified face, unwittingly frozen in time with the rest of his body on the cold, hard floor of that plain and dreary office where he'd left him. He saw the arc of electricity that entered Virgil's hand and heard the sound of the *pop* it had made as it killed him.

John drew his wrist close to his face and examined the watch again, hoping to accidentally stumble upon its secrets. As he looked through the glass at the tiny humming wires beneath its hands, the bus drove over a large pothole in the road. The sudden impact sent the watch sharply against his forehead. It stung.

"Truce?" John asked the watch unemotionally, slipping his attention back to the world outside his window.

He uncurled and sat slumped in his seat, trying to empty his mind of the day's events. He didn't want to think about any of it: not the watch, not Virgil, Molly, his mother, Adam, or his swollen and aching jaw.

His mind quieted but for a moment before a familiar sensation overcame him. His heart began to pound strongly against his ribs. His limbs were quickly becoming limp, and the energy they lost was funneled in pulse to his left arm, energizing it just as it had before. John slid uncontrollably downward into the bus seat, hoping he could avoid flopping to the floor and drawing unwanted attention from the other passengers.

He lifted the watch to his tilted face and noted the time: 3:14. The watch's hands sat in the same position they'd sat in when he'd been mysteriously brought to Tallahassee earlier that afternoon. His mind raced,

fighting the unconsciousness that he knew was soon to follow.

3:14 again. Is this going to happen every twelve hours? It was his final thought before blacking out.

One minute later John was awake again. He waited patiently through the moments it took to regain movement in his body. While he waited for his vision and hearing to return, he slid his hand beneath his legs to the cold porcelain seat of an open toilet. He could hear the voice of a man speaking from outside the room, then another more metallic, crackling voice through what sounded like a walkie-talkie. Soon John was aware of many voices, all men, all serious in tone.

Was he back in Tallahassee? Would he walk out of the bathroom once more to find Adam, calm, composed and clothed, telling the police about a young rapist who, as they would soon discover, was dumb enough to reenter the house? The idea chilled him.

Gathering his courage, John opened his eyes and saw that he wasn't in Adam's bathroom at all. He was back in the bathroom from which his journey had started, the bathroom in the back of America Offline's headquarters.

Did I imagine all of that? He pondered for a moment before seeing the watch still on his wrist and feeling the swell of his jaw. *No.*

Fully recovered from the travel's side effects, John slowly rose from the toilet and crept to the door. It was open, though only slightly, and revealed just enough of the outside warehouse for him to see who was out there and just what was going on in the warehouse at this time of night.

Peering through the crack, John saw that he was correct about the police presence in the building. Multiple officers were moving through the scene. Two were within his limited field of vision, but he could hear others milling about, just to the side of where his eyes could monitor.

Feeling daring, John inched the door open just a little more, giving him a better view of the main warehouse. He saw a large black plastic bag, zipped closed upon a metal table with wheels on the bottom of its legs.

That must be Virgil, he thought.

Two men next to the bag were having a conversation. "And the janitor who called this in?" One of them said. "He saw nothing? He telling the truth?"

"Nothing. And we still can't find anything here that could have caused an electrical burn like this."

"Well, if nothing's here then someone took it with them. Means they probably also brought it with them when they came. Sorry to say, it's looking more like homicide after all."

"We interviewed a few ladies who were here earlier today. They said there was some young kid lurking around with a 'sinister look.'"

The other man laughed. "'Sinister look?' I love it."

"I still can't believe it, though. Longboard Key ... who would have thought."

"I know. This is the first major crime scene here since I've been on the force."

A third man entered the conversation. "We just got an ID on the kid, one John Popielarski. Goes to high school right across the water. We're pulling the address now."

John stood in horror as he heard the man say his name.

"Ah, man, is that what the world's coming to? Used to be teenagers just broke windows with fly balls. I'll send Charlie over there to pick him up."

Maybe it was homicide, John thought, even if it was an accident.

John quietly, but quickly, paced back and forth behind the door. *I need to get home, he thought. I have to tell Mom what's happening before the police show up and freak*

her out even more. He knew there wasn't much time to do it. Looking out into the warehouse once more, he saw the small team of officers who'd been speaking walk back toward Virgil's office.

John pushed the bathroom door open slowly, but despite his best efforts, a loud squeak escaped from its upper hinge. Not waiting to see if anyone had heard it, he rushed from the room and moved back toward the ell where Virgil had left the scooter. He was relieved not to hear anyone yelling or the sound of frantic footsteps racing to catch him as he ran.

He approached the corner, and on blind faith, whipped around it recklessly, hoping no lingering officers awaited him on the other side. There were none.

Thank God, he thought. The silver scooter sat against opposite wall, alone and unmoved.

John took it by the front handles and quietly rolled it toward the back door. He decided not to press his luck further by starting its engine while still inside the warehouse.

As soon as the back door closed behind him, John mounted the scooter and jammed his key into its ignition. He'd never driven a scooter before, but took to the task easily. After slowly piloting the machine in a circle

twice, John decided himself ready for Longboard Key's solitary twenty-miles-per-hour road, and sped across the lot, down the curb, and into the street, hoping he could make it home before the police found his address.

Ten minutes later, John's house appeared ahead of him in the distance. A car was pulling out from his driveway. It was too dark outside to determine the make or color, and at first he thought he was too late, that the law had beaten him there. He imagined them driving away with his mother to question her about birthing and harboring a known murderer. He sped up.

Drawing closer, John was surprised to make the car in front of him as his mother's own blue sedan, picking up speed and roaring down the road away from him.

He raised his left arm to wave as he called out to her. "Hey!" he yelled. "Hey, Mom! Come back!" Without his left hand to help steer the scooter, its front wheel pulled sharply to the right, sending John tumbling from his seat to the asphalt below.

He quickly rolled back onto his feet and looked out at the empty street in front of him. It was too late to hail the fast moving car, now a mile away from him down Longboard Road.

John sighed and lifted the scooter upright. As he wheeled the vehicle toward his house, he noticed that the front door had been left open. Curious and worried, he dropped the scooter in the grass of his front lawn and ran inside.

The house was empty, but not quiet. His mother had left the television on in the living room in front of a still-steaming mug of tea. He looked around the area perplexed, wondering what could have caused her to leave with such haste. A news report blaring out from the television gave him an answer.

Authorities in Clearwater, FL have reported twelve dead and twelve more injured after a bus headed from Tallahassee fell off an elevated road and crashed to the ground approximately thirty feet below. Police say the bus was carrying two-dozen people and crashed when the driver and passengers were simultaneously stricken unconscious by an unknown cause. With the driver asleep behind the wheel, the bus soon drifted off the road and

eventually down to a drainage ditch below, as you can see in this live feed of the accident's aftermath. Authorities say the injured are being treated at a nearby hospital and that most survivors are not in serious condition.

The feed changed to a man lying in a hospital bed with a bandaged eye. John recognized him immediately as the man who had sat across from him on the bus.

We were just sitting there, you know, and all of a sudden there was this like, blue light, but, uh, I only remember seeing it for about a second. That's all I remember. I couldn't really tell where it was coming from, but I think it was inside the bus.

The camera returned again to the attractive young newscaster, who stood out starkly against the smoking wreckage behind her. The right half of the bus was almost

unrecognizable, a twisted nest of metal and plastic caused by its impact with the ground.

What you just heard is the story told by most of the survivors: a strange blue light, and after, everyone on the bus, including the driver, unconscious. Here's Jordan Ford speaking with Detective Irving Meller who will attempt to speculate on what's happened here tonight.

The story continued, but John could no longer hear it. *Twelve dead*, he thought. *Did I do this?* His head spun as his mind remembered each of the faces he'd seen on the bus earlier that night. Who were they, and where were they headed so late? Did some of them have families? Children? Which of them survived and which are now crushed in that smoking wreckage he saw on TV?

John dropped to the couch in front of his mother's mug. Four used tea bags were strewn across the coffee table next to it. *So this is why Mom left. She must have seen something about the crash on the news. What's going to*

happen when she doesn't find me in the hospital? Damn it, Mom, why don't you have a cell phone like normal people!

John heard a car pull up outside of the house. *That must be the policeman they were sending over,* he realized, jolting from his seat. He turned and saw the front door still open behind him. A cruiser with its lights off was sitting in the driveway, its driver still inside. Further news on the accident drew his attention back to the television.

We've just had an update on the bus crash in Clearwater that happened only half an hour ago. This footage was pulled from the bus' interior camera and clearly shows the light that many of the victims reported. It seems to have come from this man, who has not yet been found among the survivors or the deceased.

John looked at the screen and was surprised to see a low-quality, black and white video recording of himself on the bus and a bright light beetling out from his arm. As

the light faded, the bus's twenty-two passengers were motionless, and he was gone.

The policeman's voice called from just outside the front door. "Hello? Is anyone in there?"

John lowered to the floor and swiftly crawled his way across the carpet to his mother's bedroom. Softly, he closed the door behind him.

Making his way to the back door, John stopped and looked at the top of his mother's dresser. A dark-blue eyeliner pencil rested against other small containers of assorted make-up.

He lifted a tissue from the nearby box and quickly wrote: *I'm fine. I promise. Don't believe anything you see or hear about me. I'll explain. I love you.*

John carefully set the note on top of her dresser and turned his attention back to escaping the officer in the living room. Quietly, he opened the sliding glass door at the back of her room and stepped out into the night. He could hear the policeman inside his living room only a few feet away, offering the house cautious "hello"s and "is anyone here"s. He climbed off the porch and into the tall grass by the side of his house.

After making his way to the front, John found the scooter he'd abandoned on its side in the lawn near to

squad car in the driveway. He considered driving off with it now; the officer would notice it missing from when he'd arrived and the whole island would soon be buzzing with police, each hoping to be the one to snare the fugitive trying to flee justice on a silver scooter.

It doesn't matter, he thought. I just need to get somewhere close, that isn't here, fast.

With no one he knew or trusted on the island other than his mother, his hideout would need to be somewhere on the mainland. John lifted the scooter and quietly walked it a block, careening between the harsh spotlights of the lampposts as he went. Once far enough from his home, he turned on the engine and raced toward the island's bridge.

John racked his mind for a place to go. There were those few friends from school that he joked with between classes, but he'd never visited them at their homes across the water. He did know where to find Molly's house--she'd made him memorize the address--but had never actually been there. And even if he had been, now was not the best time to appear uninvited. John sighed, realizing where he'd already been driving since mounting the scooter, Ronika's small apartment by the park.

John slowed to a stop at a yellow traffic light hazing through the light fog above him. He wondered how Ronika was

going to handle seeing him again. In his mind, the situation couldn't be worse.

Even if she opens the door this late, the last time we saw each other in person was years ago. Now, here I come with some insane story that only a insane person would believe, my face all over the news, and, oh yeah, the police are after me for murder. Maybe this is a bad idea.

The light turned green. John gripped the right handlebar of his scooter and accelerated past the intersection.

No, it's definitely a bad idea, he concluded.

Unable to think of anywhere else, he resolved to keep driving toward the girl's apartment. But, he told himself, just until he could come up with a better plan.

IV.

John turned east next to the park and rounded into *The Napoli*, the large mazelike apartment complex where he hoped to find his estranged friend. Inside and past the fence, the grounds were beautiful, if not somewhat tacky. Everything within *The Napoli's* property had been painted, sculpted, and decorated in the styling of renaissance-era Italy. Small fountains adorned the courtyards between the blocks, featuring naked dice-white men and women balancing leaky satyrs, grapes, and pots. The attention to detail was encompassing, but nothing on the planet could make John forget that he was living in Florida.

John circled the buildings of the complex on his scooter and desperately tried to remember which one belonged to Ronika. It was a difficult task; all of the buildings looked the same, but John was convinced that if he just kept looking, something would jar his memory.

Soon the persistence paid off. As he passed the front of Block D, he caught sight of an armless cherub statue planted in the ground. It was the apartment association's feeble attempt at creating the classical version of a lawn gnome. He remembered it from his sole previous trip to *The Napoli*, when his mother had tumbled carelessly over it,

tearing a small hole across the knee of her jeans. John smiled at the memory.

First floor, 3-D, he suddenly remembered. *3-D! Of course! I should have remembered that.*

Knowing what to search for, John found Ronika's apartment easily. Hers was the only unit in the long concrete corridor of doors that had a welcome mat. It was the same one he remembered from his previous visit, and still looked just as new as it had back then.

Not many people coming over, I guess, John thought. *Or Ronika herself isn't coming and going often. Probably both, knowing her.*

John read its message, written starkly in black Helvetica: *There's No Place Like 127.0.0.1.* The joke made him laugh, and briefly, only briefly, he forgot the grim circumstances that had brought him there. He closed his eyes and knocked.

Within seconds the apartment door flew open, revealing Ronika standing wide-eyed in an A-shirt and pajama pants. The girl's body was almost inhumanly slender, leaning effortlessly flush against the right side of the doorframe. As her body curled around its border, John remembered how strangely captivating he'd thought her movement had been during his first visit. Even in open spaces, she'd always

seemed to move and flow like an ermine slipping deftly through a twisting maze or flexing through the slightest crack beneath a doorway.

Her hair was October-pumpkin-orange, unique in its constancy, not changing even slightly in tone or hue between strands. Its front was styled into rounded bangs cut carefully in varying lengths to circle her pale face. The back lifted slightly before draping down long and straight beneath her shoulders.

Separating the two sections was a headband--at least, John thought it was a headband--that supported two orange, fuzzy fox ears with white tips on either side of her head. With her thick, similarly colored hair covering her human ears, the fox ears seemed an almost natural addition to her face. The ears were simply a part of her, and she was infrequently seen without them.

Ronika slunk her way toward John's body until their faces were separated by an inch. She held her right hand out flat and rested it on his head. From there, she tilted it dramatically upward and brought it to the top of her own. She smiled widely.

She'd always been a few inches taller than John--even without the added height of her headband--and she liked to remind him of it whenever possible. John had always

considered her height to be a temporary advantage, one he blamed solely on their small difference in age. He hoped that someday she would finally stop growing so he could catch up.

"John," she said.

"You recognized me," he replied, backing away to widen the awkwardly small distance between them.

"What time is it?" she asked casually.

John looked at his watch. The sight of it gave him a stomachache. "4:15 A.M.," he said.

"Almost bedtime."

John's expression was pained. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be," she answered smoothly. "You can take the couch." She turned and moved back into her apartment with John following nervously.

The apartment was clean, but cluttered with carefully organized collectibles, action figures, stuffed animals, comic books, and novels. John looked over Ronika's left shoulder and noted a medieval battle-axe hanging on the wall next to what could only be described as a pedestal holding some sort of science-fiction space-marine helmet on top of it.

"Where's your mom?" she asked.

"Oh," John began, unsure if this was the best part of the story with which to begin.

Ronika turned back toward him and smiled. Whenever she smiled, she tilted her head to the right. This was a habit, as she had explained to John years before, which stemmed from the colon-and-open-parentheses-smiley-face she so often typed online.

"I'm just kidding," she said. "I figured she wouldn't be here, it being four in the morning and all. I was just giving you a hard time. It's nice to see you in person though. For, like, the first time in six years or something."

"Ronika," John said, "please let me explain what I'm doing here so late."

"It's not late," she answered. She scratched the back of her head as she stretched her torso, putting her spine at an almost ninety-degree angle backward. "For me, this is like ten o'clock in normal-person time."

"Okay, but I need to--"

"Give me a second, Popielarski; let me tell my clan that I'm off for the night." She turned away from him and moved back toward the large desk in the corner of her living room. After dropping lazily into the blue, fluffy recliner at its front, she slipped on a headset.

She craned her neck toward the left monitor of her dual-screen setup to read something too small for John to see.

"Just a second," she mumbled. She started talking quietly to someone else through the microphone in her headset.

John walked slowly around her apartment while she finished, checking out the assorted treasures stashed around her living room. Some he recognized from different animé series, others from video games.

Soon, he brought his attention to a worktable in the far corner of the room. Its surface was littered with wires, clamps, bits of plastic, screws, tools, a microscope, solder, solar cells, and numerous half-built devices, the practical purposes of which were difficult to guess. It was the sort of table one usually saw in the lab of a mad scientist on television, even without the bubbling beakers and Bunsen burners.

John knew that Ronika had been offered an unsolicited scholarship to M.I.T. last year, and again this year, but had never really understood why until seeing the intricacies of the gadgets she'd presumably been working on in her spare time. He had no idea what good combining a blender with vacuum cleaner would do, but thought it was

darned impressive all the same. Ronika had told John during one of their many online chats that she'd declined the scholarships, and decided against going to college, M.I.T. or otherwise. She'd said it was because of "people." She was convinced that she'd never learned how to interact with them properly and the thought of being isolated with a large group of them terrified her.

John heard a ticking noise that drew his eyes upward to a clock hanging on the wall above the table. It was large and analog, but without numerals circling its face. An assortment of math problems was in their stead. *630 divided by 126* for the 5 and $-8=2-X$ for the 10.

"Weird clock, right?" Ronika asked from behind him.

"I've seen weirder," John answered.

The next day John woke from a dream involving a zombie apocalypse, his mother doing laundry, and a secret steering wheel deep within the Earth that let him pilot the planet out from the solar system. He sat straight up, still wrapped in the feathery bright-pink blanket Ronika had thrown at him, and wondered if the dream had any arcane wisdom to offer his current situation. He drew a blank.

John flicked at a piece of hardened sleep in his left eye and reacclimated to the wakened-world. It was strange

waking up somewhere other than his short, blue house on the shore. This was the first time he'd ever done it. He and his mother had never gone on vacation, and during the age when sleepovers are common, he hadn't any friends other than Ronika, whom, at the time, he'd known only as an internet screen name.

The night before, John had told Ronika everything. He'd told her about the glare on the beach, the embarrassing job at America Offline, and about how Virgil had died in front of him on an office floor. He told her about his experience in Tallahassee, the bus that was supposed to take him back home, and the thirteen deaths for which he felt personally responsible. He even told her about the note he'd scribbled to his mother on a tissue in eyeliner pencil.

To his great surprise, Ronika hadn't second-guessed any part of the story. She hadn't said he was crazy and she hadn't complained about, or even approached, his unexplained absence from her life for the past six months. She hadn't asked if he was "sure he was remembering everything correctly," or worse, if he'd been "abusing any substances." She simply believed him, or at the very least seemed to, without reservation.

She'd just sat there for the remainder of their time awake last night, letting him speak, listening to the facts, and his feeling about the facts, while holding his arm and gazing into the humming wires of the watch stuck to his wrist. They hadn't gotten to sleep until the sun was first starting to shine through the vertical venetian blinds adorning her living room window.

John considered just how late they'd stayed awake the night before and quickly covered the face of his watch from view. He closed his eyes. *Please, let it be later than 3:14*, he thought. *If it's later than 3:14 and I'm still here ...*

He removed his hand from over his wrist and looked at the time. It read 2:55 P.M. John paled. His mind swam, fast muddling with thoughts of appearing back in Tallahassee with Adam. He also imagined himself in the warehouse again, being found by the police or the old, snooping women who'd betray him to them.

John ran in a flustered panic across the room to the back hallway of Ronika's apartment. There were two doors at its end. John banged on the one to his right with his fists and did the same to one on his left.

"Ronika," he spoke loudly, "we don't have a lot of time!" He turned back to the right door to bang on it again

just as Ronika opened the left. She stood there in front of him, rolled into a large white comforter and wearing her fox ears. John whirled around to face her.

"Why are you banging on my spare bedroom's door? No one's in there," she said though a yawn.

John turned back to the other door and opened it. There was a mostly empty room behind it, save a large, queen-sized bed and a small television set on a barstool.

"If you had another bedroom, why did you make me sleep on the couch?" he asked. The question had no anger in it, just confusion.

"Sometimes I switch beds in the middle of the night," she answered casually. "Or the morning." She took him by the shoulders and gave him a light shove back to the living room.

"I have to get dressed," she informed him. "We don't have a lot of time."

"I know we don't have a lot of time," John grumbled.

"And no more shouting or banging, geez," she called out to him before closing her door.

John walked back into the living room and paced. He looked at the watch. Three o'clock. He checked the clock on Ronika's wall to make sure. *198 divided by 66* o'clock. He was running out of time.

Ronika reappeared a moment later and leapt onto the couch in the living room. She grabbed the pink blanket John had used the night before and curled up into a ball. "So now what happens is you disappear, and if things go like they did on the bus, I pass out, or something. Right? I'm getting comfy."

"This is serious," John answered back, still walking back and forth across the room.

"I know that," she said. "Would you prefer I'm holding a knife or something when I go unconscious?"

"What? No. Sorry," he said quickly. "I'm nervous."

"I know," Ronika said warmly. "But, hey! I just had an idea. Hold on." She slid out from under the blanket and bounced to her feet. "I don't know why I didn't think of this last night."

She ran to her desk and leaned behind it to the back of her monstrous computer tower. Her head reappeared a few seconds later with an enormous grin slapped across the front of it.

"Check this out," she said smugly. In her hand she held a small, boxy, humanoid machine. It was a robot.

"Mouse," Ronika said.

"What?"

"This is Mouse. M-O-U-S-E. Multi-Option Universal Service Entity. I built him ... well, only sort of," she explained, handing it to John. "The casing, bipedal function, and so forth were already there when I bought the little guy. *But* I've made some significant modifications." She tilted her head and smiled.

"Are you going to try and use it to remove the watch from my arm?" John asked excitedly.

"No!" Ronika reeled, shocked at the question. She took Mouse from John's hands and held it defensively against her chest. "Not after what you told me happened to the last man who tried it. Are you crazy?"

"No," John replied, more a question than an answer.

Ronika reservedly handed him back the robot.

"Okay, check it." Ronika bounced back to her desk and pulled out a pair of ordinary arm-length gloves that had been deliberately hand-marked in a rainbow of colors. She slid them over her hands and sat in front of a large, modified webcam sitting between her twin monitors. After a few clicks of her computer's mouse, she held the gloves up to the camera. As she moved her arms to the left, John was surprised to find Mouse's arms mimic the action precisely. Ronika grabbed the headset from next to her on the desk and put it over her head. She unhooked it from her computer and

plugged it into the front of her webcam. Mouse continued to replicate her movements.

"Nice to meet you. I'm Mouse," Ronika said into the headset's microphone. Her voice played simultaneously out of a tiny speaker in the robot. She extended her hand toward the camera, as if to shake its hand. Mouse extended his pincher-style hand to John in tandem. John took it gingerly between his left pointer-finger and thumb. He shook it in introduction.

"This is amazing," John said.

Ronika beamed at the comment. "You really think so?" she asked.

"I really do," John answered. "But, Ronika, how is this going to help?"

"Well, I can talk to you and stuff. Maybe help? Plus, I can see what Mouse sees, too. Look."

John looked toward her monitor and saw himself from the robot's perspective. He looked into the metal visor where Mouse's eyes would be if it were human. He waved his hands in front of it and watched the live video of him doing so on Ronika's monitor.

"This is great," John began, losing volume as he spoke. A weakness was washing over him. It was almost time.

He backed up and sat on the couch before his condition forced it.

"John!" Ronika yelled. "Is this it? Is it happening?"

"Put Mouse in my messenger bag so I don't drop it. Get in your feathery blanket thing," he said as calmly as possible, losing strength in his voice.

Ronika quickly followed his instructions. After securing Mouse, she curled tightly into her ball of fluff on the couch and watched in wonder at John's arm as it began to spasm wildly.

"Amazing," she whispered.

John groaned and tried to steady his arm.

"John," Ronika said quietly, leaning into him, "would you be angry if I told you I was excited?"

John disappeared.

January 31st, 1972:

With each left step, Felix absently dragged the bottom of his foot across the floor as he made his way toward room B13. The friction of his sole against the freshly polished tile caused a choppy vibration that hummed down the corridor between his footsteps. The noise was a welcome one, and for him, oddly calming. He'd never liked the quiet, and certainly wasn't likely to find much else down the long, lonely halls of Harvard University during this time of night.

He took a moment to look down at the partially cracked face of his wristwatch. In three minutes it would be precisely one thirty in the morning, which meant that come three minutes from now, he will have missed the entire class he was supposed to be arriving at one hour and fifty-seven minutes ago. He wasn't particularly sure why he was still on his way to the soon-to-be empty classroom after its dismissal, but assumed that he'd figure it out by the time he arrived.

Felix heard the professor speaking in his head: *What's the point in participating in the program if you refuse to apply yourself and take part in our discussion?* It was the same tired objurgation he'd heard many times before. He

could recite it backward by now and decided to do so in his head as he walked farther down the way.

A foreign noise echoed from the stretch of corridor ahead of him, interrupting his train of thought. Felix stopped for a moment and listened; it was a pair of footsteps trotting toward him, followed by a second. It wasn't long before the soft light of the hallway's faded bulbs revealed the culprits, Jenn and her boyfriend Bradley. At least, he thought Bradley was her boyfriend; they certainly spent enough time together. Since meeting them both at the start of the program three years ago, Felix had never been able to pinpoint the precise nature of their relationship.

He pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose toward his eyebrows and peered out at the pair. He wondered what sort of person goes by "Bradley." "Brad" just seemed much more efficient.

"Felix!" Bradley shouted. The muscular, blond nineteen-year-old chuckled a bit before jogging ahead of Jenn to meet Felix head on.

"Why is it that no matter what the conversation, you always laugh before you speak?" Felix asked, not expecting an answer.

Bradley complied with the assessment. "What's going on, bud?" he asked. "Where were you tonight?"

"Oh, you know me, Brad," he replied. "Just busy, per usual."

Bradley smirked. "It's *Bradley*, actually. As I know you already know."

"Well, if you'll excuse me, Bradley," Felix replied tiredly, "as you yourself have pointed out, I am quite late for class this evening."

Bradley chuckled. "Late? You're a bit more than late, pal. Class ended just a minute ago."

"Then I suppose," Felix said, "I am exceedingly early for tomorrow's. Either way, if you'll excuse me."

"Huh?"

"I am trying to ... "

Felix paused his response, interrupted by Jenn's noisy approach. He looked past Bradley to her feet and watched her clonk briskly toward their conversation in those purple high-heeled shoes she so often wore. She strolled up to Bradley's backside and parked herself directly behind him, peering from over his left shoulder at Felix. Her slender body was completely concealed by Bradley's large frame, giving Felix the illusion that Bradley now had two heads, albeit one much more attractive than the other.

Felix had always found Jenn appealing, but her physicality was where any thought of interest halted. She was attractive enough--good complexion, light eyes, athletic build--but something was off.

What's wrong with this one? he wondered. *It's the way she always says my name,* he immediately decided, *like she's spitting out something pickle-flavored. Or maybe it's simply that insufferable Bradley who's always hanging from her bodice like a vestigial appendage. And the hair,* he added. *Yes, her hair is just a bit too short. Five centimeters perhaps.*

"Felix?" Jenn asked, a puzzled look on her face.

"Oh, sorry," Felix stumbled. "Did you just say something?"

"Yes," she said, a smile forced across thin lips. "I was asking where you were tonight. I would really have liked to hear your input on the relationship between the quantum state and cellular mitosis."

"Is that so?" Felix wasn't sure whether to feel complimented by the comment or annoyed about the delay that came with it. He wasn't sure why, but at that exact moment he felt an increasing urgency to speak with the professor. He had no logical reasoning behind the impulse, but he

didn't like to be stopped from doing something he wanted to do, even if he didn't know why he wanted to do it.

"Well, I'm sure the professor had much to say on the subject. Perhaps if I hurry now I can catch him before he turns in for the evening."

Jenn spoke quickly, seeming to take his hint. "Yes, well, I truly hope to see you next class. I expect you understand how much everyone benefits from full attendance by all members of *Curriculum B*. Especially you. It would be good of you to think about the rest of us every once in awhile and what we're trying to accomplish in there."

So much for subtlety, thought Felix. "I'm just a colleague, Jenn. A peer, nothing more," he said aloud.

"I know." She nodded and turned her attention. "Come, Bradley." Jenn lifted her arms behind the muscular teen and gave him a gentle two-handed push forward. Bradley said goodbye and Felix watched the two of them as they walked off down the corridor, speaking about something or other, with about half a meter between them.

This was the sort of thing that bothered Felix. He was almost sure that they were a couple, but if so, then shouldn't his arm be around her shoulders, or their hands be held together? Shouldn't they be doing anything other than just walking half a meter apart?

I guess it really doesn't matter, he thought. I won't see them again anyway. Felix stopped walking. Won't see them again? Why did I just think that? he pondered. Maybe I want to leave the program. Is that why I feel like speaking with Professor Linus tonight? Felix continued his walk down the hallway toward room B13.

A few minutes later, Felix passed another group of students leaving the classroom. Some ignored him, others shot a quick and disapproving glance.

It's not like the institution is paying me, Felix thought. I should be the angry one.

Soon, Felix arrived at B13's door and knocked against its old thick wood three times. He wasn't surprised by the, as he presumed, intentional lack of response. After all, the professor had to know it was he. Who else would be arriving at this hour?

He sighed and cracked the door open slowly. As predicted, Professor Linus was standing on the other side, well within audible range of the earlier knocks, erasing various equations from his oversized chalkboard.

Linus was an extremely tall man, only a few inches short of Felix himself. He looked enough like what one might expect from a prominent Ivy League professor, except for, perhaps, his infamous hairdo. The gray-speckled brown

mane he sported looked more like the nesting place of an Amazonian bird than the quaff of a prominent academic. Yet, somehow, as many students had pointed out to the professor in the past, the look oddly seemed to fit him.

If the professor heard Felix enter the room, he didn't betray it.

"Professor," Felix said. He waited patiently for a response before trying again. "Professor Linus, I'd like to speak with you."

"And I with you," Linus quipped, "about two hours ago."

"I know. You have my apologies." Felix entered the room and walked toward one of the desks at its center.

"Pressing business at eleven thirty on a Wednesday, have we?" Linus asked without turning to face his absentee pupil.

"No, it isn't that."

"Then," Linus took on the voice he normally reserved for lectures, "would it be safe to assume that we've made an active decision to not attend class tonight?"

"I suppose that would be a practical assumption."

"Of course it's a practical assumption," Linus quipped, "but is it accurate?"

Felix lifted his glasses above his forehead and rubbed his eyes between his right index finger and thumb. "Yes," he admitted.

"I thought so," Linus said, quieting. "And would it then also be safe to conclude that the only reason you would be coming here tonight at one-thirty in the morning, after class has already concluded, is to ask me for permission to leave the program at a time when I'm clearly exhausted and therefore less likely to have the stamina to try and talk you out of it?"

"Yes," Felix responded curtly, "that appears to be the long and short of it."

Linus finished erasing the board and turned to face Felix for the first time since he'd arrived. "Good," he said. "I've been waiting for it."

"A little harsh, don't you think, Professor?" Felix asked, slightly annoyed by the man's reaction.

"No, no, don't misunderstand me." Linus took a step toward Felix and gestured at the chair behind his desk. "Take a seat."

Felix, unsure of what to make of this unexpected line of discussion, cautiously sat in the professor's puffy leather chair. Linus walked to the other side of his desk

and pulled one of the loose plastic chairs from the main classroom to the front of it. He sat down.

"Listen, Felix," Linus said, "you aren't a humble man, but you aren't a prideful one either, so this might be a slightly awkward conversation for both of us. I'm going to be completely honest with you, and I would like you to take what I am about to tell you seriously." Felix nodded, his curiosity rising with each of the professor's words.

"There are three things important to any scientist who wishes to affect his or her field. The first is breadth of knowledge, a collection of facts, theories and equations that exist in your brain-space instead of your textbooks. It's the ability to answer relevant questions on the fly and reference your memory like an encyclopedia.

"The second is genuine ingenuity. This is something that can't be achieved through mere hard work. It's a raw talent that most people show before the age of four if they have it to begin with. If you weren't born with it, then there isn't anything you can do to achieve it."

Felix skillfully internalized a yawn. This discussion was turning out to be a lot less intriguing and a lot more clichéd than he'd previously hoped. After all, it was almost two in the morning; almost time for bed.

"The first two," the professor continued, "are something that everyone who was invited to participate in *Curriculum B* share. Each student who attends this private late night course is one of the brightest scientific minds alive in the world today. But you, Felix, are something more. You are the only one of my students who shows the third quality, the ability to synthesize that wide knowledgebase with ingenuity on an enlightened level: true, genius-level thinking and comprehension. And I'm not talking about some six-year-old with an early penchant for chess. To what I'm referring is the combination of a genius thought-process with a practical understanding of science. It's the ability to produce and manipulate what we like to call 'super science.'"

Felix stood out of Linus' chair and stretched his lengthy arms toward the ceiling. "Very well, Professor. You've convinced me to stay. No need to keep us both awake any longer for the needless coddling of my ego. We'll see each other tomorrow."

Linus jumped from his chair and confronted Felix before he could move.

"You aren't listening to me, Son." Linus placed his hands on the sides on Felix's arms just below his shoulders and guided him back down into his seat. "I'm trying to say

that your abilities are beyond anyone's in the classroom." Felix started to stand again, but was stopped once more by the professor's grip, this time, pressing him down into the chair with more force than before. "Felix, your aptitude in quantum biology, theoretical and applied both, surpasses even my own. In fact, I would go so far as to say that it surpasses anyone known to us here, in Europe, Asia, or beyond. And I have an offer for you."

"An offer?" Felix asked. The professor sharply released his hold on Felix's arms and took a step backward. The hook was set.

Felix shook out the wrinkles Linus had caused in his shirtsleeves and brought his glasses back down to his face. "What sort of offer?"

"An offer from the funders of this program," Linus replied.

Felix squinted and straightened his spine. "I thought Harvard funded this program," he yawned.

"Harvard doesn't even know about this program," Linus continued. He walked back toward the chalkboard and absently gazed at the equations unwritten. "At least not all of it. The person, well, the *company* who finances this is interested in finding people like you, Felix. We've had

absolutely no luck with it for the past two years, but this year we are going to make up for that with you."

"We?" Felix asked.

"Well, I do accept a stipend from them for my own research. Did you think I ran this class out of the goodness of my heart and a blanket love of academics?"

Linus laughed. "Everyone needs money, no matter what one wants to do with one's life." Linus whirled back toward Felix and stuck his index finger at him poignantly. "And it's not like I'm doing anything illicit or immoral. Just moonlighting."

Felix chuckled at his professor's defensive explanation. "So, tell me, Professor, what's this offer of yours?"

"Do you remember when you first made the decision to attend this school? It was an investment of four years of your life. An investment which was made so that you could leave with debt, hoping to recoup it somehow, and get back into the black with whatever it is you hypothetically gained from these self-described hallowed halls. And what are you going to gain exactly? A scrap of paper from a recognized institution, proving something to the world that you yourself already know?"

"No special insight there," Felix responded. "I think that's what you'll find in the O.E.D. when you look up the word 'college.'"

"What I am offering you is the chance to make one more investment, four more years of science. And this time, when you finish, you won't have any debt. In fact," Linus said slyly, "you'll come out on top."

"How much on top?" Felix asked.

Linus answered rapidly, his voice like a hammer against a board. "Six million dollars."

Felix tried to look unimpressed by the mention of such a figure, but containing the reaction welling inside of him was difficult. "Can I finish my doctorate first?" he asked, more weakly than he'd have liked.

"Yes," Linus answered easily. "In fact, all of your school loans will be paid, additional to the six million."

Felix let out a small hiccup of a laugh. "Is that so?"

He sat quietly for another few moments before letting the inevitable suspicions catch hold of him. "So what's the catch then?" Felix asked. "And if you say 'no catch' like they do in those films, then I'm forgetting we had this conversation."

"The catch," Linus said, "is that for these four years that you work for them, you will be owned by them. You will

live on site, follow their regulations without question, and have no contact with the outside world while you're there. You can tell no one where you are going and give no explanation as to where you were when you come back."

"Come back from where?" Felix asked, bringing his eyebrows closer together.

"I don't know," Linus answered. "Wherever it is that they put you."

V.

John awoke more pleasantly than he had from his previous two journeys. Perhaps his body was growing accustomed to the travel, or perhaps it was the gentle swaying of the floor beneath him that comforted him, but regardless of reason, John's reentry was smooth, quiet, and dreamy. Slowly, he opened his eyes.

The room around him was dark but for a few thin bands of brash light shining through cracks in the door. As John leaned forward to stand and investigate, the room and the light tilted sharply left, knocking him back to his seat. The short relief he'd felt upon arrival was gone, already replaced by stress and worry. A moment later, the room was steady again, and he allowed himself to calm.

John moved his hand low to touch where he was seated, expecting the cold, slick feel of a porcelain toilet. He found a toilet beneath him, however, this one felt as though it was made of polished wood, smooth to his touch and lacking a lid.

He stood onto his feet and extended his arms. His fingertips connected sharply with smooth, wooden-planked walls closely surrounding him. He felt his way around the

room with his hands and discovered the entire space to be just three feet deep.

The floor shifted again, and John put his arms forward against the wall where the stripes of light broke though. He ran his fingers and palms across it for a doorknob. Soon, they touched a cold metal handle and pushed it down. The door opened easily, and the small wooden bathroom flooded with afternoon light.

John carefully peered out from the door and found that he was standing at the end of a small hallway connecting to the deck of what seemed to be a large boat. Beyond the deck, John saw only the water, and above it, dark clouds swelling in the sky. There was a light drizzle coming from them, but not enough to force one indoors.

"Excuse me, sir?" a voice asked impatiently from his side. The accent it carried held a slight twang. John turned to find a young man of about his age dressed as a waiter, holding a tray of champagne flutes sloppily splashing their contents as the boat swayed lightly from side to side. Behind the young man were double doors in the hallway, swinging lightly open and closed, intermittently revealing a kitchen behind them.

"Sir?" the teenaged waiter asked once more, sounding his frustration at serving someone his own age. Without

much thought, John accepted one of the drinks from the silver tray and nodded. The waiter shot one of his eyebrows up and walked back toward the main deck.

John smelled the drink, then tasted it. *Cool*, he thought. Drinking alcohol was a first for John, champagne or otherwise. He enjoyed both the taste and the feeling of the bubbly brew as he swished it around his mouth with his tongue.

John looked out toward the noisy deck by the water and ambled casually after it, flute in hand. After all, the waiter had thought he belonged here. Maybe he could get lucky with any others he encountered.

"John," a familiar voice called from his bag. "Can you hear me?"

John stopped. *Mouse*, he thought. *I completely forgot*. John swiveled his messenger bag to his front and took Mouse out into his hands.

"John!" it said. "You're alright."

"For now."

"I just woke up. That was crazy-pants!" Mouse exclaimed.

"What happened?" John asked the question quietly, knowing that any chance he had of blending in would soon be dashed if caught speaking with a robot.

"Just like you said, things got really blue really fast, and the next thing I remember, I woke up on the couch without you next to me. Dude!"

"You're okay?"

"Fine! Where are we?"

"A boat."

"Let me see," Mouse said, pointing its arm upward. John lifted the small robot above his head and swiveled its body like a periscope around their surroundings.

"Yeah. It's a boat, alright. Maybe a yacht," Mouse concluded.

"Glad we agree." John rolled his eyes.

"If it's still docked, I bet we can make a break for it and get back onto shore."

"Okay, good idea," John said. "I'm going to put you back in the bag for a moment. Stay quiet while I sneak out there and see where we are."

"10-4, commander."

John lowered the robot into the front pocket of his bag. As he walked toward the deck, Mouse climbed to the edge of the pocket and lifted the cover-flap behind its head so it could see.

John reached the yacht's railing and followed it toward the back of the craft. They weren't docked. In fact,

John couldn't so much as see shore in any direction around him. They were at sea, surrounded by endless blue, and too far from land to have an honest hope of docking anytime soon.

"John," Mouse called.

"There are people ahead," John said back, hushing it. "Stay quiet and hide."

Mouse pulled the pocket's flap over its head like a hood.

John traveled farther toward the back of the yacht and saw almost a hundred people milling about, drinking drinks and picking from a well-decorated buffet table set up near the aft cabin entrance. A low-volume jazz track floated between their conversations.

The women were in semi-formal attire, most wearing elegant sundresses and holding large, paper hand fans or parasols. The men were under suits and sport coats, mostly white in color, with some of the more rebellious among them sporting only a dress shirt with rolled up sleeves.

John slowly approached the party from its side, but stopped behind the back corner before continuing around it. He chose a small bench leaned against the outside of the yacht's main cabin to sit down on.

"Why did we stop? Go talk to someone and find out where we are," Mouse urged.

"We're on the ocean?" John answered. "Why does it matter where we are?"

"The more data we have, the better chance we have at solving this thing."

John looked left and right to make sure of their privacy. "I can't go back there."

"Why not?"

"Look," he said, lifting Mouse around the corner and pointing it toward the crowd. "I'm in jeans and a T-shirt."

"Put me down."

"Why?" John asked suspiciously.

"Just do it, man," Mouse answered. "I'm helping."

John put Mouse down on the deck near his feet. As he let go of its body, the robot bent its knees slowly and tumbled clumsily onto its back, ending stiffly in a prone position on the deck. He quickly leaned down to lift it back to its feet, assuming the fall was accidental.

Before John could reach it, Mouse rolled away from his hand like a small go-kart and raced around the corner using four small wheels on its backside. John stood up quickly and chased after the bot, but stopped suddenly at the

corner, afraid to be seen by the mob of people on its opposite side.

With Mouse gone, he sat back down on the bench and lowered his head into his hands.

Maybe if I just sit here for twelve hours I'll pop home again, he thought. Maybe this time I'll appear in my own bathroom and come out to find Mom fretting over some tea in the kitchen. She'll see me, get excited, and drop her mug on the ground as she runs over and hugs me. She doesn't ask me anything, and we go to the police department where everything gets explained to them, and they have some sort of specialist who gets this watch off my arm. We find out that Virgil isn't dead, just a bit injured, and Molly hears that I'm back and comes to the police station to meet me. She cries and tells me she's sorry she ever accused me of--

John's fantasy stopped abruptly when he spied a white jacket sliding across the floor between the fingers of his hand. He raised his head and stared at the possessed jacket in confusion.

"Take it," the jacket said. John lifted the white coat to find Mouse underneath, standing back to its feet once the weight of the jacket was removed from its body.

"Where did you get this?" John whispered loudly.

"Put it on," Mouse answered. "Get out there."

John sat defiantly.

"Oh. My. Gosh. A bedroom in the cabin, okay? There were a bunch of jackets there. No one will miss it. Put it on!"

John stood and put the jacket over his T-shirt. It fit, but had obviously been intended for a slightly taller man than he. The tails dipped low to his mid-thigh, and the sleeves extended past his wrists to his fingernails.

"Good enough," Mouse said, tugging on his pant leg. "Let's roll."

John picked up the robot and placed it back into his bag's pocket. With a deep breath he walked around the corner toward the party.

"I look way more suspicious than before," John said under his breath toward his bag. "This is a bad plan."

John made his way to the large buffet and looked at the amazing variety of food lying across it. Other than the vegetable and cheese platters, John was having trouble even recognizing the options. At least the caviar and escargot he knew from a show he'd once seen on the Food Channel. Most everything else on the table was an alien concoction to him, made of varying colors and smells with which he wasn't familiar.

"Snails!" Mouse shouted suddenly. It must have noticed the escargot at the end of the table

"Excuse me?" replied a large, Southern-sounding female attendant on the other side of the buffet. John quickly grabbed at Mouse's head and shoved it down to the bottom of his bag's pocket.

"Sorry, nothing," John mumbled, grabbing a small plate from the side of the table.

"You know," the attendant said, leaning in toward John, "ya'll're paying for it, so if you want to keep stuffing it in your bag there, you don't have to try and hide it from me. This ain't the free breakfast bar at the Charleston church now, hear me?" She smiled mischievously.

"Thanks," John replied. "I'm just a little hungry," he said, adding his own version of a Southern accent to the back half of the sentence. The woman looked at him suspiciously, perhaps deciding if he was trying to make fun of her.

"And just who in the hell are you?" a man yelled from the party behind John. John's heart raced, but he kept his attention rapt on the table ahead of him.

"Don't touch me," the man yelled again loudly.

"Now what in the hell's going on back there?" the attendant asked, looking out past John.

John turned to see two men in worn gray suits and thin leather gloves confronting a portly gentleman about twenty yards aft of the buffet. One had dark hair, the other had blond. Both wore a strange-looking, flat black bag across their chests. John thought they looked like diagonally seated fanny-packs, but wider and shallower.

The blond-haired man grabbed the portly gentleman's arm violently, thrusting the sleeve of his jacket up and off his wrist.

"The rest of you line up over here," the dark-haired man stated loudly to the crowd.

"I do say!" the portly man responded gruffly. He shook out the sleeves of his tussled jacket and approached the blond-haired man. "Explain yourself this instant!" he demanded.

The blond-haired man pulled a small gun from the inside of his coat and fired it into the air above his head. The portly gentleman stumbled backward onto his rump and scrambled away from the armed man like a frazzled crab.

The dark-haired man then revealed that he too had a gun and moved it slowly across the party. The sweep of his weapon created a wave of ducking and whimpering across the crowd that matched its lateral motion above them.

"Everybody needs to listen clearly to what I say next and do exactly as I say," he commanded. "In a moment, my friend over here is going to check each of your arms for something that belongs to us. The sooner we find it, the sooner we leave."

The blond-haired man coughed loudly.

John dropped to the ground and rolled under the white-clothed buffet table. The maneuver tangled him with his messenger bag, and he awkwardly tried to disentangle himself from it without drawing the attention of the two armed men.

"You almost crushed me!" exclaimed Mouse.

"Who in the twelve hells said that?" asked the buffet attendant, her whisper strained. John looked to his left and saw the woman suddenly lying a few feet from him underneath the same table, her hair now frazzled as if she'd been rubbing it wildly with her large meaty hands. Apparently, she and John had shared the same idea about where to hide from the frightening commotion at the party.

"What are you doing down here?" he exclaimed quietly. "Get your own hiding place!"

"Don't make me jack-slap you, boy; I don't work for nobody when I'm in a crisis situation," she said.

"Okay, okay," John whispered. "Let's just both shut up so they don't hear us."

"Name's Rodney," she said quietly.

"Rodney?" John replied on reflex. "That's a weird name for a woman."

"Boy, I'm fixing to--" she started.

"Okay, okay, I'm sorry I said anything. I love your name. Just be quiet."

"You don't get to tell me--"

John rolled out from under the table to behind it. He slowly peered over its surface and watched as the two men systematically checked the passenger's wrists.

"They must be looking for the watch," John said quietly.

"Who are *they*?" Mouse asked at a low volume from his bag.

"I don't know."

"What are we going to do?"

"I don't know that either. I'm still new at this, remember? All I know is that we need to get out of here."

"Lifeboats," Mouse suggested. "I saw some on the side rail by the bench."

"Oh, I saw those," John said. "Good idea. Five points." Points were something John and Ronika arbitrarily

assigned one another when they did something well that the other noticed. The points never added up to anything and weren't recorded anywhere, but both John and Ronika were convinced of their lead over the other.

John hunched down and slowly steeped forward. Before he could move, one of Rodney's large callused hands reached out from underneath the table and latched onto his ankle.

"You ain't leaving me here to die!" Her whisper was so loud that John thought she may as well have just spoken in regular tone. He shook off her grip and stumbled toward the corner of the cabin.

John found the pulley for the lifeboat tied off on the railing and slowly undid its knot without taking his eyes off the two men on the back deck. The gunmen still hadn't noticed him, but from the look of things, they were almost done with their check of the deck crowd.

The knot came loose suddenly in John's hands, and the weight of the lifeboat pulled the rope supporting it rapidly through the metal hub of the pulley. He grasped at the rope to stop it, but the speed of its movement burned his hands. Suddenly, a large hand appeared above his, and quickly squeezed the rope to a halt. John immediately recognized the goliath hand as Rodney's.

"Boy, you sure don't know nothin' about nothin'. We need to get in the boat first. How were you planning on getting down there? Jump yonder on your little chicken legs, I suppose." She easily raised the boat back up to the railing's edge.

"Thanks," John responded begrudgingly, knowing she was right.

"Get in," she said.

John slowly climbed over the rail and moved into the boat. "Don't drop me," he said.

Rodney shook her head in frustration. "Hold this rope with me now." She handed him the end of the rope while maintaining her own grip a few inches above his and awkwardly entered the small lifeboat. It tipped heavily to the side she sat on.

Her large hands began to move quickly, one over the other, lowering the boat to the water below. John watched the movements and tried to get the timing of his hands to match hers. Soon, they touched down quietly on the water's surface.

John felt something wet splash against the top of his head. He looked up and another drop broke against his nose. It was starting to rain.

VI.

"Thanks for your help, Rodney. I thought they were going to kill me," John said as he removed the stolen white jacket from his shoulders. He grabbed the oars from the center cross thwart and lowered them into the water at his sides. He heaved the handles back against ocean's body and began to row away from the hijacked yacht.

"Kill you? Why would they want to kill some kid?" Rodney asked, looking back toward the yacht behind them.

"Oh, I don't know. You know, they looked like they were going to kill everyone, right?" he answered dismissively.

She gasped dramatically. "It's you, isn't it! I thought you looked weird, stuffing your bag with food and wearing blue jeans," she said. "Stop rowing, we're heading back." She leaned forward and grabbed on to one of John's oars. He refused to let go, and the two began to pull back and forth against one another.

"Why do you want to go back there?" John exclaimed.

"Because, I'm giving you up!" she answered, pulling back hard on the oars.

"Why?"

"I ain't dying for some dumbass kid, kid!"

"No one's going to die," John said, trying to lower the volume of their conversation. "We're escaping!"

"We won't be soon!" she yelled. "These pirates are good. They're going to find out you ain't on that yacht and come snatch us up out of the water!"

"No they ain't!" John yelled back.

"Oh, yes they will. What kind of a pirate wears a suit out piratin'? One who can afford it! A pirate who's damn good at his job, that's who!"

"Shut up and give me the oar. We're not far from the boat; they're going to hear us!"

"Good idea," she said. "Hey, mister pirate-man!" she screamed past John toward the boat. "Over here, I got him for ya! I got him!"

"Quit it, Rodney!" John yelled as he wrestled the oar free from her grip.

"Yeah, Rodney, shut your face!" Mouse shouted.

John turned back toward the ship. The two armed men were standing by the edge of the yacht's railing looking directly at him and his rowboat.

"Yeah! Yeah!" Rodney yelled. "I've got him for you!"

One second later a bullet fired from the blond-haired man's gun. One second after that it bored cleanly through Rodney's neck, silencing her instantly. The large woman

flopped down heavily into the back of the boat, dead before her head hit the planks. The sound of sickness came through Mouse's tinny speaker.

John had heard the explosion of the gunpowder, the whirring of the bullet rip through the air past his ear, and the sound of Rodney's body meeting the bottom of their rowboat. He'd known exactly what had happened without seeing a thing. He sat in stunned silence facing out at the sea before him.

"Row, row, row!" Mouse yelled. The words increased in volume and concern with each iteration.

"Yes, rowing," John finally answered, breaking trance and taking his first breath since the shot.

"Row, row, row," Mouse quickly rattled off again with increasing anxiety. The robot climbed all the way to the top of John's shoulder and sat, keeping its balance by tightly clamping his shirt collar. "I'll watch our back, you keep your eyes on the road!"

"What do you see back there?" John yelled over the crash of his oars against the surface of the sea.

Mouse watched as the men in suits bounded down the side of the yacht, attached to its rail by thin repelling wire and modified carabineers. The blond-haired man opened his chest pack and removed a small jar filled with blue,

translucent putty. He pulled out a handful and slapped it to the side of the yacht. The two men nodded to each other and disconnected their wires in tandem. A moment later, they splashed into the water and began swimming rapidly toward John's boat.

"John," Mouse said timidly. "They're coming, John."

John turned his head back just in time to catch an explosion burst from the side of the large yacht, shredding its hull into twisted curls of metal. The impact instantly flipped the ship onto its side, catapulting numerous people upward and outward toward the two swimming men and John's rowboat. Well-dressed ragdoll bodies dropped one by one like massive hail, smashing through the surface of the water. The two men swimming didn't react to the explosion they'd created, nor the bodies that began to litter the waves around them.

John returned his focus to the sea ahead. "Are they gaining?" he yelled over the splashing of his oars.

"No," Mouse replied at high volume. "But we aren't losing them either. Do you know where we're going?"

"Nope."

"I have to stop," John panted loudly. "I can't keep this up." He'd been rowing without pause since the

explosion two hours ago. His arms were aching badly and his rowing had slowed significantly. The rain was falling faster now.

John stopped rowing and drooped his arms down to his sides. "Tell me they've stopped."

"I haven't seen them in about fifteen minutes," Mouse responded.

"It's getting windy and the waves are getting choppy. It's got to be getting too difficult for them to keep swimming at that ridiculous pace. They have to be getting tired. I mean, think about it. We're in a boat; they're just free-swimming."

"You need to get rid of Rodney's body," Mouse said softly. "She's weighing us down pretty badly."

"You're right," John said. "I'd forgotten she was back there. Didn't want to think about it."

"I know."

"But you're right."

A familiar silence hung in the air for another few minutes.

"She was trying to get you killed," Mouse said. "You know that, right?"

"It doesn't matter."

"Do you want to say something before we, um, put her overboard?"

"I don't know," John said. As he put the oars down and stood to stretch his legs, his body bent over. His hands fell to the sides of his waist. He was breathing harder than he thought, obviously still winded from rowing.

"I don't know much about her," he managed.

"That's okay," Mouse said. "Anything is better than nothing."

John looked down over Rodney's body. The sky was raining steadily now, and the large, shaking drops broke silently against her corpse. This body was different than Virgil's, not frozen in time with a startled expression. This one was just limp and wet. It was as if it had never been alive at all, just a fleshy mass crumpled up in the back of his small rowboat.

Gallons of saltwater mixed with blood splashed at his footsteps as he walked toward the boat's rear. Rodney's right leg was flopped over the edge and dragging in the water.

Well, that explains why my left arm is more tired than my right, John thought.

"She was a buffet attendant," he suddenly said aloud.

"Food service professional," Mouse interjected.

"She was a food service professional," John said. "She didn't like being told what to do. She knew what she wanted, and that's a lot. Um ... " John stalled, thinking of what else to say over the body. He looked at the hole that had been placed with precision through her neck and wondered in passing why it wasn't through his.

"She tried to kill me," he continued, "or to get me killed, anyway. That wasn't a very nice thing to do, but then again, she got the boat in the water that's saving me now, so we're even. Amen."

John closed his eyes and bent down to lift her body from the boat as a high-pitched squeak shrieked from the small robot perched on his left shoulder.

"John!" Mouse shouted after the scream. "John, look!"

John opened his eyes and looked back across the water through the rain. His mouth opened in shock as he saw his pursuers breach the horizon. Temporarily lifted and boosted by a rolling wave, the two men in suits were swimming steadily toward his boat like sharks, dead-eyed and determined, two expressionless machines propelling through the water at John without pause.

"John, go now!" Mouse shouted.

John stumbled back to his seat and picked up the oars he'd left there. He sat down, this time facing the two men,

hoping that rowing in the other direction would be less tiring. He dipped the oars back into the water and pulled hard for acceleration. His eyes teared at the pain of the first stroke. His arms were already in serious need of rest.

"Rodney!" Mouse shouted. "We still need to dump her!"

"No time now!" John hollered back. "If I stop now, we're dead!"

"If we don't get rid of that 250 pounds now, we're dead in another hour when your arms fall off!"

"Okay," John said. "I'm going to try to rock her out." He began to sway the small rowboat back and forth against the water.

"Are there any other abilities Mouse has that might be helpful?" John asked.

"I'm sorry, John," Mouse replied.

"Hold on to me tightly," he said as he pushed and pulled on the sides of the boat. Soon, the rocking became so powerful that John thought the entire craft might flip over. Much to his relief, it didn't, and Rodney's body finally slipped out over the side. The sudden loss of weight jolted the boat strongly and Mouse's grip on John's shirt failed.

"Ronika!" John shouted.

"Still here," the robot called from the back of the boat.

Mouse dug its left hand between the tightly fitted boards making up the bottom of the craft and pulled itself a few inches forward. It moved its right hand to the next plank and repeated the process. The crawl was slow, and more than once Ronika thought the small robot would be lost to the red, sloshing water that crashed against its body, often pushing it back or forward without warning. Slowly, Mouse made its way back to John and climbed onto his pant leg.

"Get under my shirt," John yelled over the howling winds and crashing rain. Mouse inched up his jeans and ducked beneath his wet T-shirt. Clamping to the fabric, the robot climbed to its top and popped its head out from under John's collar.

Mouse looked back upon the two mechanical men behind them. They were still swimming strongly through the storm, just as fast as they had been two hours ago, fixed on their objective.

"Unbelievable," Mouse said quietly.

John looked up to the sky and noticed the sun setting stealthily behind dark storm clouds hanging low in the evening sky. Though the gap between him and his pursuers was widening, the light of the day was dropping, making the men in grey suits more difficult to see against the choppy waves of an angry ocean.

He leaned his head forward to his working forearm and roughly wiped the rainwater from his eyes. He looked back the ocean and could no longer see either of the men who were chasing him.

"Can you see them?" John shouted to Mouse, still under his shirt, clinging onto the collar beneath his chin.

"No," Mouse answered.

"I think we're gaining ground, or water, whatever. Now that Rodney's gone, we're going a lot faster."

"Yeah, but for how long? Aren't you getting tired?"

"Don't remind me."

Over the course of their departure from the sinking yacht, the sharp, hot pain in John's shoulders and arms had settled to an even burn across his upper body. If he stopped thinking about his discomfort long enough, he could almost forget the pain and concentrate solely on escape. His discomfort was growing by the minute, though, and ignoring it was becoming increasingly difficult. He worried

that his muscles might give way at any moment, leaving him helpless against the men's mad strokes across the waters behind them. He needed a plan.

"We need to stop again," John called to Mouse, spitting the rain sharply from his mouth as he spoke.

"Are you too tired to continue?" it asked.

"Not right now, but I might be soon. We haven't seen them for fifteen minutes. I think that's a good point to break. I need you to keep watch for them when I rest. If you see them, let me know."

"Aye, aye," Mouse answered, already vigilantly scanning the black waves of the darkening sea.

John braced himself and pulled the dripping oars inside the boat. He dipped his head down until the side of his wet cheek was touching Mouse's plastic head. The rain quieted, halving in volume and speed.

"How much longer can they keep up that pace?" he asked tiredly, closing his eyes.

"I don't know," Mouse replied quietly.

John sat in silence for minutes, letting the boat float free while resting his eyes and arms. Finally, he broke the quiet with a soft voice.

"I didn't mean for it to go so long," he said.

"What?" Mouse asked.

"The time since we last talked to each other," he said. "I know it's been months."

"Six."

"Yeah."

"What happened?"

"I don't know," he said. "I don't have an excuse. But I want you to know that I didn't just go to your apartment last night for help. Okay, that's why I went there *last* night, but I really wanted to see you. I mean it."

"I tried calling you."

"I know, I--"

"John, they're coming again."

The robot's sudden warning was surreal. It was as if it had told him a television show was on, or that dinner was ready in the kitchen. John responded accordingly, raising his head swiftly, and answering with a calm "Alright."

He lifted the oars from the boat's bottom and put them back into the water. He began to row, taking a few cycles to warm up before reaching full speed. His arms were numb, but operable.

John looked up at the sky and saw nothing but darkness above him. It was same thing he saw while looking in front

of him, behind him, and to his sides. He'd never imagined that the ocean could be so frightening when no longer blue.

The rain picked up again, this time stronger than before the break. John shook the clinging wet hair from the skin of his forehead and continued to row. He watched the two men swimming behind them slowly, so slowly, shrink back into the distance as he gained speed.

John repeated the process six more times, rowing away from his predators until having not seen them for a quarter of an hour. If he could row for fifteen minutes without the men appearing, he found it was usually safe to stop and break. The breaks were short-lived, generally only ten minutes before the two armed men showed once more over the horizon, forcing him to begin his endless row again in an overlong game of cat and mouse. It was a game that needed to end soon; John could feel his muscles finally begin to fail.

Now hours since John and Mouse had first entered the lifeboat, it had been just twelve minutes since their last sighting of the two men pursuing them. John sat slumped in his seat, overcome by fatigue and exhaustion. Mouse watched the edge of his chin fall slowly in front of its visor.

"John!" Mouse shouted over the rain. "Don't fall asleep! We're almost at the next break! You have to hang in there!"

John didn't respond. His chin dropped farther down, soon knocking Mouse to the side. His rowing slowed to a halt.

"John!" Mouse yelled again at the peak of its volume. A large black wave crashed into the small boat's side, knocking John suddenly alert. The dripping oar he held in his left hand slipped from the grasp of his shaking fingers to the water below. He quickly pulled the right oar back into the boat and leaned his head past the edge, straining to find his missing left oar.

"I'm sorry!" John yelled in a panic, not seeing the oar.

"Don't apologize!" Mouse yelled back. "What are we going to do?"

John rose from his seat and stood shakily to his feet against the rain.

"I have to find it!" he yelled. "I have to get it back!"

"Where did it go?"

"There!" John exclaimed, seeing the oar flipping back and forth against the surface of the ocean ten feet from the boat. "I'm going in after it!"

"No!" Mouse screamed.

It was too late. He'd already decided. "If I don't get it now, we're stuck here! Those men will be here any second!"

John placed Mouse quickly onto the seat beside him and held his hand on its back until it could take hold of the wood beneath it. Without further delay, he jumped into the choppy sea that raged beneath his boat.

The chill of the water took hold of him first, icing his skin and slowing his movement. A large, heavy wave crashed over him from behind. John was sucked deep below the water with the force of its weight struggling to keep him below its surface. He kicked his legs furiously, hoping that he was pointed up toward the air above. He opened his eyes, stinging their surface with the salt of the ocean's water. He couldn't see. His chest tightened, and the air in his lungs had lasted as long as it could. He exhaled the oxygen. A few moments passed, and John lost hope.

Suddenly the side of his arm breached the surface and John compensated his swim to push for the air above. His mouth touched the rainy wind above the water a moment later

and breathed in deeply, inhaling a small amount of salt water in the process. He coughed violently and looked around him. He saw his rowboat rocking against the waves just ten feet to his left. Something struck the side of his head from behind. It was the missing oar.

John shouted in victory at the heavens and clasped strongly onto his buoyant prize. He kicked toward the boat. Soon, it was getting closer.

I can do this, he thought. I'm going to make it.

As John approached the rowboat he could hear Mouse yelling to him. Its words were lost against the storm.

"I've got it!" he yelled back. "I found it!"

Two feet closer, John could hear the content of the robot's scream, "They're here! They're here!"

John looked behind his shoulder and saw the two men close and swimming at him. Another wave overtook him, breaking his line of sight to the hunters and pushing him forward onto his face. John flipped around in the water, coming back to the surface moments later at the edge of the boat. He looked behind him as he treaded water. Perhaps it was the darkness, perhaps the thick black rain, but he could no longer see the men in grey.

Quickly, he threw the oar into the rowboat. It landed noisily against its twin.

"Hurry, John!" he heard Mouse yell.

John grabbed onto the edge of the rowboat, turning it completely onto its side from his weight. The small black robot slid across the curvature of the boat's bottom, finally stopping just next to John's hand.

"Hold on!" John yelled. Mouse pinched onto John's shirt as he climbed into the boat, tumbling into its center and landing on his stomach. John powered from the floor to his feet and made his way to the seat in front of him, grabbing both oars as he went. With John back in the boat, it leveled, only to rock from weight in the opposite direction a second later.

Suddenly, Mouse was yelling again. "Look out!"

John looked to the newly dipping side of the craft. A bolt of lightning quickly illuminated two gloved hands and a blond head of hair making their way into the boat. John dropped the left oar to his feet and gripped the right with both hands. He raised it and threw his body's weight behind a heavy strike to the intruder's forehead. The man's grip gave and boat jerked back to level on the waves.

"Row!" Mouse screamed.

John lifted the other oar from his feet and put both into the stirring water at his sides. A burst of deafening

thunder cracked and rolled across the flashing dark sky above him.

He rowed forward into the night, stronger and faster than he ever had before. Despite the tired, despite the pain, John refused to break for even a moment during the last of the long, wet night. Hours later, and for the first time since finding it, John felt a great sense of joy the watch's hands reached 3:14.

VII.

24 HOURS EARLIER:

Dr. Robert Castler stood next to his large, rounded thirty-story window and gazed out to the clouds forming and breaking in the sky beyond his office. He noted the ratio of cumulonimbus to nimbostratus hovering above the building and carefully predicted the afternoon's weather. He scowled at the low-hanging, thick clouds that obscured his view of the mid and upper-level formations and tried to shoo them past with a frustrated wave. They refused to obey him.

One of these days, cirrus kelvin-helmholtz. Wouldn't that be a sight! he thought. Cloud analyzation was one of the doctor's less strenuous hobbies, though he had little time to practice it. Castler had little time to peer into the sky at all, as his work took him so often underground.

An extremely pressing matter had been brought to his attention earlier that morning, and to ensure proper resolution, he would, as usual, be required to offer it his immediate and personal attention. He sighed audibly and looked back toward the zebrawood desk at the center of his elegant, yet Spartan office. It was always like this when something called him to the surface, his beautiful window

teasing him, that elusive sky expanding beyond it, no time to spend enjoying it.

"Tell me that you're sure," he'd told the man who called his phone at four o'clock that morning. Though Castler had already been awake, he didn't like being disturbed in the quiet hours of dawn, nor at any time on his *personal* line.

"Once more. I want to hear you say it one more time so that I can hold you personally responsible if you misread the data. We don't hear anything in thirty years, and you're telling me that such an arbitrary day as today is when the silence breaks?"

Castler had listened as the man on the other end of the line repeated his analysis of the data in a nervous, wavering voice. "Pack up your office Mr. Carroll," Castler had answered, "because once I get there, you're moving out. A promotion to an office one floor up if you're right about this and fired without severance if you wasted my time. I'll be there this afternoon." He'd arrived by helicopter two hours later.

Castler sat in the black leather chair behind his desk and spun the seat away from the window behind him. He had no more time for distractions today, not even minor ones. Not with this news, he thought, and certainly not with the

Advocates on their way to his office. He exhaled his stress and flattened the collar of his white polo shirt before depressing a small blue button on the corner of his desk.

"Yes, Dr. Castler?" a woman's voice answered quickly through a speaker housed somewhere in the surface of his workstation.

"How long?" he demanded.

"They're headed through security now, sir."

"Buzz Franklin if they don't get through in the next minute. We all have things to do, and there's no point wasting my time or theirs with a lengthy check. They aren't going to do anything ... untoward."

"Yes, sir," the woman's voice responded.

Castler cracked the small bones in his hands and mentally prepped himself for the meet. He knew that pulling these men from his tool belt was a necessity, but that didn't make him any more comfortable in having to deal with them face to face. Those unlucky few who were aware of the Advocates knew them to be ruthless men, made dogged and untiring. They were necessarily vicious, sharply efficient, and the progeny of a program that Castler himself had established over thirty-five years ago.

At first there had been twenty of them, but over time most had been destroyed on assignment or by company orders

when Castler deemed the act necessary. Two now remained from the original twenty, and both had survived solely on the merits of their abilities and fealty. Castler owned them but, like a lion tamer, had quickly learned the boundaries of their relationship and the mélange of dangers that accompanied working with beasts.

The voice buzzed from his desk. "Dr. Castler?"

"Yes?"

"They're here."

"Send them through."

"Yes, sir."

A moment later, a loud click sounded from the entry. An automatic mechanism quietly whirred to life and Castler's office door slid smoothly upward into the ceiling above. Two similar men dressed in grey suits with thin black gloves on their hands stepped through the opening.

The man on the left was the tallest of the pair by an inch. His dark hair was cut short, its two halves pushing upward toward the center of his scalp to form a one-inch point at their meeting. His eyes wandered across Castler's office in a melancholic gaze, drenched in apathy and boredom. His partner wore his blond hair much longer. It draped down effortlessly to meet his level, squared

shoulders. Both men nodded slightly upon sight of the doctor.

"Gentlemen, welcome. Over here, please," Castler instructed. The Advocates moved in toward his desk without speaking. The blond-haired man removed a handkerchief from his coat pocket and coughed into it violently for a few moments.

Castler patiently waited for the man to finish before speaking further. "I've lost something, and I'd like you two to get it back," he explained.

"Stolen?" the dark-haired man asked absently.

"You could say that," Castler answered, leaning back in his chair. "It's property of the company. It was lost over thirty years ago, but has recently reappeared."

Castler canted right and effortlessly typed in the six-digit combination to the filing cabinet under his desk. He removed the file that rested flat atop the others and placed it on his desk. After dislodging the elastic band on its front, he opened the top cover.

"This is the Diaspora, an infiltration device we developed in the 1970s." Castler sighed. "Something that could have changed everything if given the chance." He spun the folder around toward the Advocates and landed his left pointer finger onto the schematic that was paper-clipped to

the topmost sheet. The men leaned in and examined the image. "But, maybe it still can."

The schematic showed what looked to be an ordinary wristwatch with a section of its face magnified on the bottom right corner. An endless number of carefully penned technical notes covered the sketch, written in a language understood only by those with an extensive background in the sciences.

"The Diaspora is a transporter," Castler explained. "It has the ability to almost instantaneously take its user anywhere. Anywhere at all. It's perfect for military operations, assassinations, theft, or any number of things."

"Why don't you just have its creator replicate it?" the dark-haired man interrupted. "I know you don't usually ... discard your assets."

"True," Castler responded honestly, "however, I don't believe that to be a viable option. It's been a learning experience for us, working this way, and the methods by which we handled these things in the sixties never really panned out as we'd hoped. Firstly, to extract an asset, you have to securely evacuate an entire facility. And that operation comes with its own miasma of delays and headaches." Castler rolled his eyes upward and scrunched

his eyebrows together as if the mere mention of the procedure pained him.

"Second, when we *have* gone through the mess of extracting them in the past, we found it extremely difficult to achieve anything from it. You can coerce a man to do lots of things, reveal lots of things, but intensive scientific development?" He chuckled. "I'm afraid not. Even if we were to go through the process, who knows where it would take us now, so long after the fact. No. That's a last resort that will more than likely never be undertaken."

The dark-haired man nodded, satisfied with the explanation. Castler wasn't normally in the habit of explaining himself or his policies to employees, but Advocates were a special case. Between their discretion, loyalty, and the fact that they could be permanently eliminated with a signature, Castler considered the risk of disclosure to lie somewhere between low and non-existent. And men always performed better when they understood the "why." That was something else Castler had learned since the sixties.

"Where do we start?" the dark-haired man asked. The blond-haired man coughed into his handkerchief. It was less violent than before, but lasted for twice as long. The

other men didn't acknowledge it. Once he finished, Castler reached back into the cabinet beneath his desk and removed two small boxes. He placed them in front of the Advocates.

"We think the Diaspora is malfunctioning," Castler explained. "The data we've pulled is difficult to understand. Currently, we don't have the ability to track the device's real-time location, except for a brief moment during the reentry phase. All of that to say that we can only see where the thief is going once they've gotten there."

"It's going to be difficult to catch up with your thief if they can travel anywhere like you say," the dark-haired man pointed out.

Castler gestured to the boxes he'd placed on the desk. "Go ahead."

Each of the men took a box and opened its top flap, revealing identical wristwatches strikingly similar to the device they'd seen pictured in the file's schematic moments before.

The blond-haired man lifted his watch from its box. As he dangled it in front of him, Bob leaned and looked for himself. He'd seen it before, but still found himself marveling in silence at the intricate wires that crisscrossed behind the watch's hands. The sterile

stillness of their web entranced and disturbed, like a jungle predator frozen before its prey, still and cautious, striking at any moment.

"These watches are set to activate upon detection of the Diaspora's Q-frequency," Castler explained. "When our thief moves again, you two will automatically be taken there as quick as our system can relay the data. It should drop you roughly within one hundred meters or so. We don't know where you'll drop in exactly, so not being seen might be difficult. Go in hot, no witnesses. Alright? No one who sees you breathes."

"Its Q-frequency?" the dark-haired man asked.

"Don't force me to bore you with the science," Castler answered, allowing the change of subject. "I neither have the patience nor the time to give a lecture on Schrödinger's Cat just now."

"So you have replicated it already," the dark-haired man remarked, checking the size of the watch's band against his wrist.

"Only just," Castler responded through a frown. "The truth of the matter is that we had the methodology of quantum displacement understood by the late sixties. The power required to actually make it work is immense, and certain types of energy outputs are more efficient than

others. The users themselves power the device you two will be hunting. The body's energy is clean, renewable, and efficient, but damned difficult to wield and funnel. That's what we *don't* have."

Castler stood from his chair and assumed a professor's posture. "We had a working model at some point, but the man who designed it rigged the device to malfunction after only one use. We're still not sure why. And that, gentlemen, is why I still require its brother, this *rogue* device. We need to reverse engineer it, discover its methodology. Until then, the rest of the technology working for us is unfinished and practically useless from a feasibility standpoint."

The dark-haired man put his watch back into its box. "So, these don't actually work, then?"

"They work, they work," Castler said, covering a sigh and turning back toward his window. "They currently operate on something we've devised in these past few years. Development is calling them "Sand Dollars" for their size and shape. You both have one seated beneath the face of those devices. The power contained in each Dollar is enough to power a third-world country for a year." Castler turned back toward the men. He found them inspecting the watches in their hands more closely.

"This method of powering the device is, of course, not sustainable," he continued. "It's the cost, you see. I'd tell you the how much each of those batteries buried in there are costing me, but I'm afraid I might actually tear up if I heard it out loud. I'd write it down for you, but I worry my pen would run out of ink before finishing the last zero. Do you understand?"

The Advocates nodded.

"How, uh, resilient are these?" the dark-haired man asked as he turned the device in his hands.

Castler's stark expression morphed to a quick smirk as he sat back down at his desk. "You want to know if you can get them dirty," he said.

"Yes," the Advocate answered plainly, "or wear them underwater, or get them caught in a fire. Would the vibrations of machine gun fire dislodge their circuits?"

"We've done our best to encase the device in the strongest shell possible," Castler replied. "We've tested them in multiple circumstances; water and vibrations shouldn't be an issue. As far as anything else, let's just hope there're no *issues*."

The dark-haired man nodded. The blond-haired man coughed.

"Oh, that reminds me," Castler added. "Just one last thing before I forget. You're going to need to take this thief alive. It's not that I want her for torturing or anything ghastly like that; it's simply that the device can't be removed without a special instrument calibrated to the biometric signature of its power source, or in this case, the user. I'm concerned that if she dies before a proper removal then I'll lose the ability to get the signature and reconfigure the device for someone else."

"Killing the thief disables the device?" the dark-haired man asked.

"The truth is that I don't know what I'm talking about," Castler admitted. "When it comes to the technology behind the Diaspora, we're shooting in the dark. All I'm interested in is the device. Just try to take her alive. It's the safest way to ensure functionality."

"Her?" the dark-haired man asked. "So you know who has it? A woman?"

"I have my suspicions," Castler answered.

The blond-haired man coughed into his handkerchief.

VIII.

Ronika beamed as she opened the present she'd just found lying on her bed.

"What's this for?" she asked. "It's not my birthday."

"No, it's not," a man answered.

Ronika smiled and ripped the remaining pink paper from the gift in a single tear. Her eyes widened at the box beneath it. She jumped from her bed and ran to the man standing by her bedroom door.

"This is for me?" she asked, staring up at him.

"Yes," he answered, lifting her into his arms.

Ronika giggled. "For what?" she asked.

"For being you," he answered sweetly. His daughter closed her eyes and scrunched her face as he kissed her forehead. "Go ahead. Let's hook it up." He put her down and she ran back to the unopened computer on her bedspread. That's where the memory ended.

Ronika shook a tear from her cheek and drew her focus back to the long, dark road in front of her. The endless gleams of lane reflectors made it difficult to stay awake, and she blamed their entrancing, blurry pattern for the memories of her father.

Ronika hadn't been in that boat last night, at least not in person, but the experience had terrified her nonetheless. The guilt she felt from feeling scared was even worse.

After all, John had been the one who'd actually lived through the night. She had eyes and ears there, but poor John had all five senses about him. John was the only one who'd actually smelled the burn of the bullet wound in Rodney's neck, and the only one who'd felt the weight of the oars as they pushed stubbornly through the water, over and over and over again. It was John who'd tasted the salt of the ocean's water on his tongue instead of the citrus in the energy drink Ronika had sitting next to her on the desk.

Through the entire ordeal, she'd felt helpless to fix things, helpless to save John if the men had caught up. It reminded her of her father's passing, and how little she could do but stand silently on the other side of a hospital window while he died.

The cool wind of fast movement blew through Ronika's hair. She leaned back slightly and pushed up against John's body, slumped behind her on the scooter. He'd inexplicably appeared back in the warehouse just half an hour ago at

3:14, and Ronika had driven to him carefully, watching ardently for the police all the while.

He'd first wanted her to take him home, but finally relented that it wasn't the best time to try and explain things to his mother. The summation of events had surely already felt like a long time for her, and he'd hoped that making her wait just a bit longer wouldn't make too large a difference.

Halfway back to Ronika's apartment, John had begun to fall asleep uncontrollably. After almost slipping from the bike at thirty miles per hour, Ronika had pulled over and tied him to her with the strap of his messenger bag. It wasn't the most elegant or comfortable solution, but it worked, and the warmth of his body, coupled with the weight of his resting hands around her waist, had served to calm her nerves.

Ten minutes later, they were back in *The Napoli*. The pull of their turn into the complex forced John awake.

"Hey, we're here," he said groggily.

"Yeah," she said.

"Thanks for driving."

"Sure."

Ronika slowed the scooter as she pulled into an open parking space in front of her apartment block. She took the

key from its ignition and unlatched the strap that attached her to her passenger. They stood from the scooter and faced each another.

"And thanks for last night," John said, swaying from exhaustion like a drunkard.

"I didn't do anything last night," she replied, staring into the ground.

John stepped forward and flopped his arms around her in a hug. He leaned his head on her shoulder and spoke quietly to her ear. "Yes you did."

Ronika lifted her arms to hug him as his slid slowly down to his sides.

"John?" she said, still holding his body. He was asleep.

Ronika sat in her recliner across from the sofa where John was sleeping and thought about her friend. She'd gotten him awake just long enough to get him into the apartment and down on the couch. She'd never seen someone so tired.

She watched his pulsing lips and pumping chest as he breathed heavily in slumber. *In, out. Up, down.* She wondered about John's future and the mysteries of the device attached to his arm.

Ronika slunk from her chair and crawled across the floor. John's left arm was draping from his body to the carpeting. She slowly approached the watch that rested there, like a fox to a henhouse, pausing and glaring at the infernal device as she snuck at it. The darkness made the faint blue light of its humming wires appear stronger than usual. She looked closely as they shivered. There must be a pattern!

She stared deeper and deeper through its weaving layers, searching, hoping, begging for an answer. When the wires remained stubborn, she eyed the band. She carefully opened its metal latch and examined the cracked, brown leather around it. A line of small holes ran down one side of the band, allowing wrists of different sizes to wear it comfortably. Most of the holes were cracked along their sides, proving use. She wondered if that was significant.

Ronika reattached the latch and thought on John's story. The details played through her mind. She searched for the small detail that could grow into an answer.

After ten minutes of eying and thinking, she rocked back from the timepiece suddenly as if it had bitten her. She smiled. She had an idea, a good one, but it could wait until morning.

The next day at noon, John woke to the tickle of fox ears on his nose. He sneezed.

"Gross!" Ronika exclaimed, pulling her head back from his face.

"What? What time is it?" he asked, sitting up.

"Now I have to wash my hair," she complained, patting at the top of her head.

"What?" John asked, not sure of what was going on.

"One minute!" she exclaimed, slinking back toward the bathroom.

John stood from the couch. Soon, the sound of running water filled the apartment. He stretched his arms toward the living room's vaulted ceiling and was immediately reminded of the swelling pain running through his chest and shoulders.

There was a small notepad and pen on Ronika's desk. He pulled off the top sheet--it was covered in symbols belonging either to a math equation or a videogame cheat code--and took the pad back to her coffee table by the couch. He began to write as the sound of running water abruptly stopped.

Things I Need To Do

1. Explain to Mom

2. Have Molly forgive me
3. Get the watch off
4. Avoid jail

John became frustrated after writing the fourth item on his list. Each thing he'd written was exponentially harder and more complicated to do than the last, and the sudden realization of it struck him hard. He tore the list in half and slumped back into the couch.

My phone, he thought suddenly.

John quickly checked his pockets and found his cell. He opened it and jammed on the keys. It was dead.

The water, John remembered.

Ronika appeared soon after with a wet head, wearing the same clothes as before. The tips of her fox ears were dripping and John wondered if she'd showered in the headband.

She walked over to the table and picked up half of his abandoned list. "Who's Molly?" she asked.

"Girlfriend," he answered absently, lost in his thoughts.

"Oh," she answered, "that's new." Ronika swiftly discarded the torn note back to the floor. "You want something to eat?" she asked.

John perked at the idea. "Would you mind?" he asked.

Her face lit up. "Not at all."

"Can I help make it? We can both eat."

"Sure, come on. I don't have much, though."

"Whatever, dude, I'm starving."

They walked to her kitchen where she opened the fridge.

"Cheese, mayonnaise, venison," she said, pulling each item from the fridge as she mentioned it.

"Venison?" John asked.

"It's deer meat," she answered, moving a pack of energy drinks from her line of sight to the back of the fridge.

"I know what it is," he said, chuckling. "Why do you have it?"

"Do you think that's weird?" she asked.

John shrugged. "I guess not. What else is in there?"

"Potato chips," she continued, "biscuits--"

"In the fridge?" he asked.

"It's raw dough, dork," she replied.

"I meant the potato chips."

"Okay, so, pickles, milk, energy drinks, more energy drinks, and, uh, I think there's an egg in here somewhere ... " She trailed off, reaching into the back.

"I think we can leave that one back there," John said. "Let's see." He looked over the potential ingredients on the counter. "Alright, how about we make some venison, cheese, and potato chip biscuit sandwiches."

"Great," she answered. "Those are really good. I'll preheat the oven." She bounced to the other side of the kitchen and set the oven's temperature to 350 degrees. Twenty minutes later, eight sandwiches were done and on paper plates. John and Ronika each took four and brought them to the coffee table where they happily began to eat.

"So, John," Ronika said between biscuits, "I have an idea about your watch problem."

"Really?" John spurted, dropping his sandwich to his plate.

"Don't get too excited," she said, taking another bite. "It hasn't worked yet."

"So what's the plan?" he asked excitedly. "Do you think you could get it off?"

"No, I don't think so. It's impossible to even try and think about how to do that without knowing what's causing

the attraction. Especially impossible if you consider that the last dude who guessed wrong is dead."

"Oh," John said melancholically.

"But!" Ronika exclaimed as she finished the last of her lunch. "But, but, *but!* I *do* have an idea, possibly ingenious in its simplicity. I don't know why we haven't thought of it yet."

"What is it?" John asked.

"So what do we know? What do we really, really know about this thing? Let's look at the data. At 3:14 P.M. the watch takes you from the warehouse and brings you to a Tallahassee bathroom."

"Right," John agreed, mouth full.

"Okay, now, at 3:14 A.M. that night, you're sent back to the warehouse again. Then, at 3:14 P.M. you appear on a boat. Somewhere south, possibly Charleston, South Carolina based on the reference Rodney made at 3:32."

"I'm with you so far," John said, not remembering any reference from 3:32.

"So, what have we learned? One, you always appear in a bathroom. Conclusion? I have no idea. It's pretty weird. Two, you always come back to Longboard during the A.M. jumps. Conclusion? Comforting to know, perhaps, but unexplainable just the same. Three, all jumps happen at

some form of 3:14. Last night I noticed a knob on the side of the watch's face," she said happily.

"What if we change the time?" John blurted out, leaping onto his feet.

"Oh, my Gosh, John, seriously? I just went through that whole thing and you totally stole my thunder."

"Sorry," John said, sitting back down. "Please continue."

"Thank you," she said. "Okay, so what if we change the time on the watch? It's not perfect, and it doesn't get it off, but if you always change it before it hits 3:14 then at least you stop teleporting everywhere."

"You're a genius!"

"Oh, I know," she replied with comical confidence, flicking the hair from her face.

"But, wait," John said. "What if one of us tries to pull out the knob to change the time and the thing freaks out like last time? I don't think it likes it when we try and screw with it."

"It's not a magical creature, John, it's science. But you do have a point." She paused a moment. "Okay, I'll have Mouse do it," she decided.

"But won't Mouse explode or something if an arc shoots out at it?"

"Yeah, probably. But weren't you the guy who was ready to let that happen by having it do something you *knew* would cause the arc *last* time you were here?"

John smiled. "Yeah, but Mouse and I weren't friends then," he said.

"Oh, shut up and come over to my workstation."

John walked over to the worktable standing underneath the math-problem clock and sat in the small, wooden chair by its side. Ronika sat at her desk and equipped the rainbow-colored arm-length gloves that controlled Mouse's movements.

"Why is this chair so uncomfortable?" John asked, trying to find a way to sit that evenly supported his weight.

"Keeps me focused while working," she answered dismissively. "Put Mouse on the table's top, please." Ronika turned on her webcam and calibrated her gloves with the software running on her screen. Soon, Mouse was accurately mimicking her actions.

"How do you make it walk if you only wear the gloves?" John asked.

"Geez, you're so inquisitive," she answered. "There are gestures I can do with my fingers that are mapped to physical responses other than its arms. Mouse doesn't have

fully articulated hands and fingers, just clamps like you've seen, so that frees my middle, ring, and pinky fingers for customized gestures. My pointers and thumbs control the clamps, while I alternate touching my middle fingers to the inside of my palms for foot movement. My pinky fingers dictate horizontal direction, while my rings control vertical movements such as bending. The arms are, of course, completely articulate, and match x, y, and z-axes to my actual arm movement. Does that answer your question?"

"Yeah, that pretty much answers it," he said, sorry he'd asked. John sat quietly for the remaining thirty seconds Ronika needed to finalize her setup.

"Ready?" she asked quietly.

"Yeah, I guess so," he answered. John had an odd sensation swelling up through his stomach. It reminded him of the time he'd gotten his gallbladder removed and the butterflies that he'd felt while being wheeled into the operating room.

"Okay," Ronika said from her desk. Mouse walked slowly over to John's wrist and extended its arms. "Can you lift it a little?"

"Like this?"

"Yeah, now just turn it slightly ... yeah, right there. Hold it still."

"Okay."

"I hope this works, man."

John closed his eyes and nodded in agreement. The plan seemed solid, but that didn't stop him worrying about *any* new interactions with the bizarre machine stuck to his body.

He watched Mouse move slowly toward him like a bomb technician deep in the field. Time slowed as the robot carefully placed its right hand over the watch's knob and clamped to it. Across the room, Ronika took a deep breath. She moved her hand, and Mouse pulled the knob.

A loud *pop*, like a microphone being pulled quickly from its amp, shot loudly from the watch. John tumbled backward to the carpeting as Ronika swallowed a scream.

He opened his eyes and looked up past the table's edge in front of him. Mouse was perfectly intact. Next, he looked at Ronika, also intact, but now staring wide-eyed past his face toward his wrist.

John quickly followed her gaze to a blue cone of light projecting out from the watch's face. The light was rife with static, but was slowly forming into a shape.

"What's happening?" John exclaimed.

"I ... I don't know," Ronika answered. She melted from her seat and crawled across the floor to John. After sniffing and blowing at it, she poked at the light with her fingertip. "It's light, not energy," she said. "Well, light is energy; I meant electricity. You know what I mean."

The projection finished taking shape and soon the image of a tall man with glasses was standing on top of the watch's face.

"Not a magical creature, huh?" John said without taking his eyes from the man.

"I think it's a hologram. Maybe a recording," she replied, bringing her face closer.

"Karen? Is that you? Where's Karen?" the hologram demanded.

"It's got to be some sort of recording," John said. "I saw this in Star Wars."

"I'm not a God damned recording," the hologram retorted. "Now where the hell is Karen?"

June 3rd, 1972:

The car ride had been long and without break. Felix sat crookedly, too tall for the back seat. His head cocked awkwardly to the left as it pushed against the torn, brown fabric of the car's ceiling. Each bump in the road made his neck feel worse, and there were a lot of bumps on this long, blind ride.

We must be out west now, he thought. *The roads can only be this bad out west.*

"Is this truly necessary?" Felix asked abruptly. He knew that whining wouldn't take him anywhere of relevance, but he was bored and it was the sort of thing he thought people typically asked in similar situations.

"Of course it's necessary, Doctor," a man's voice answered through a slight Southern accent. "If you weren't blindfolded, then where we're headed wouldn't be much of a secret, now would it?"

Hick, Felix thought. He wasn't sure which was worse, the slight, unrefined twang in the man's voice or the fact that he was trying to cover it up.

"I understand the concept of blindfolding just fine," Felix answered. "It's the means by which it's executed that is presently baffling me." He waited for a reply. He got

none. "What I mean to say is that I assume this is a technology company, correct? There are multiple types of innovative, unobtrusive, and at the very least, less malodorous ways to blindfold a man than using what's presumably an old tie wrapped around my face."

The car stumbled through another pothole, forcing the side of Felix's face to push against the ceiling again. He released a loud and pronounced groan.

The man with the Southern accent chuckled. "Would you like to hear a joke?" he asked.

Felix closed his eyes beneath the blindfold and exhaled loudly through his nose. "No, I would not," he replied definitively.

"A shame," the man said. "It was a real boot stomper."

"To be sure," Felix responded curtly.

"Just as well. We'll be gettin' where we're goin' in a minute."

"Thank goodness."

Twenty minutes later, the car slowed. Felix could hear the sound of dirt kicking out from below its tires as it curved to a halt.

Please, invisible super-being that people pray to, Felix thought, let this place at least resemble some semblance of a laboratory and not be some Podunk shed in

the desert. And let not this hillbilly in the seat across from me rape me out here in the middle of nowhere. And if that does happen, then let there be a bar nearby where I can at least have a brandy after. Amen.

The doors opened, and a few moments later, Felix was led softly from the automobile by his elbow. Two cool palms brushed against his heated cheeks and slowly lifted the necktie from his face. The light of the afternoon sun was harsh on his eyes, having just spent the last sixteen hours in darkness. As his pupils slowly contracted, Felix found himself looking into the eyes someone he'd never seen before. She was beautiful.

"Well, you certainly look different than you sound," he said, cupping his hand over his eyes as he examined her. She seemed mildly confused by the comment, but only for a moment. Her eyes darted left to the man standing by the open car door. He was busy rubbing an oil of some type into the brim of his cowboy hat. Its turpentine scent wafted across the thin air to her nostrils, causing them to crinkle.

The Southerner looked up at her and grinned. "And here we are," he said, placing the small container of oil back into his pocket. "On time and everythin'." He put his hands on his hips and stuck out his ribs as he looked back and

forth between Felix and the woman, fishing, perhaps, for some further instruction. There was none. "Best get back to HQ then," he finally said. He deflated his chest and got into the back seat of the van. The van coughed to life and quickly sped toward the horizon, leaving a dusty haze trailing behind it.

Felix looked around his surroundings. Other than an old wooden fence that didn't seem to serve any particular purpose, he saw nothing ahead but a sea of brown dirt. His brow furrowed.

"Are we waiting for another transport?" he asked. The attractive woman smiled and pointed directly behind him. Felix turned around and saw what seemed to be an old farm silo. It was the only significant break in the horizon for miles. "Oh," he replied, "and there that is."

"Let's go inside," the woman said, turning him by the shoulder.

"She speaks!" Felix exclaimed in an exaggerated tone. The pair began their stroll toward the building.

"Yes," she replied. "Quite frequently, if you must know."

"Well, you weren't doing any of it in the car during our trip, now were you?"

She didn't respond.

"I spent hours deflecting off-color stories and jokes about hillbillies, of all people, for hours," Felix whined. "I can only imagine how much more stimulating a trip it may have been had you chosen to grace us with your voice. I'm sure you're filled with a novel's worth of interesting things to say. At the very least, maybe you could have given me a primer on what's exactly going on here. Do you realize that you just wasted half a day's time not explaining what I'm sure you're about to begin to explain?"

He paused for a moment and stopped walking. "Unless, of course, the reason you didn't speak for that entire trip is because you weren't in the car and were simply waiting for us to arrive here. Oh dear, being around that man in the cowboy hat seems to have lowered my I.Q. by osmosis." Felix clenched his mouth closed and resumed following the woman.

She snickered. "Yes, all signs do seem to point toward that conclusion. Here we are." She pulled a small key ring from her pocket and opened the two-dollar padlock on the silo door. It creaked open loudly. A sharp gleam quickly escaped from the building, its brash light causing Felix to shield his eyes again. The woman took his left hand and guided him inside.

The silo's interior was rotting and dusty. It looked precisely as one would expect it to, save the oversized and obtrusive giant metal cylinder at its center. The woman walked toward it and entered numbers into a touchpad on its face. The cylinder split apart vertically, revealing a small area inside with three red upholstered chairs surrounding a small lacquered table.

"If you tell me that's my office for the next four years, I'm leaving," Felix said, unsure if he was kidding.

The woman laughed. "You've never seen an elevator before?" She softly put her hand on the small of his back and guided him forward into the little room. Felix mumbled something inaudible and followed her to the inside of the cylinder.

"Have a seat," the woman said.

Felix did as he was asked. "Thank goodness you all thought far enough ahead to put chairs in your elevator. After a sixteen hour car ride I don't think I could actually stand on my feet for thirty seconds," he said sarcastically.

The woman laughed.

"You're a giggle-box, you know that?"

"The elevator ride is going to be substantially longer than thirty seconds. Faster than to what you're accustomed as well. *Ipsa Facto, chairs,*" she said smugly.

"Lady, you blindfolded me inside of a car with a provincial and made me sport a dirty necktie around my face for more than half a day's time. Then, you led me to a farm silo in the middle of the desert with a huge futuristic elevator inside."

"Yes, I'm quite on top of current events, Mr. Kala," she responded.

"It's *Doctor*, actually, and all I'm trying to communicate is that you keep laughing at me for either making perfectly reasonable assumptions or having perfectly reasonable confusions."

"And that's the first thing I'll teach you about where you're going," she said. "Leave all of your assumptions here. They're of no use where we're going." She raised her eyebrows at Felix and smiled. "Ready?"

"Yes?" he responded, more of a question than an answer.

"Good." She ran her hand over the left wall of the elevator. Multiple blue illuminated circles the size of quarters appeared on the metal's surface. The rows of

lights were identical in size and shape, but the woman knew exactly which to press and in what order.

Felix heard a quiet mechanical buzzing and the doors of the elevator moved toward each other. As they shut, he leaned his head to its side to catch a final glimpse of the outside world he was leaving behind. The light of the evening sun began to shrink between the hulking doors, thinner and thinner against their edges until completely locked from the elevator. Though most of his life had been spent indoors, Felix began to miss the sun's light, just moments following its absence.

The tiny room began to descend, and he kept his eyes fixed on the doors as the woman sat in the chair across from him.

"Don't worry about that," she said. The question broke his train of thought.

"Hmm?" he mumbled, shifting his attention back to her.

"The sun," she said. "Don't worry about it."

"Oh, I'm not worried about the sun," he replied. "I'm fairly certain it can handle itself just fine without me for at least a short while."

"I meant, don't worry about a lack of exposure to the sun. The facility is equipped with special solar bulbs

which serve to process your Vitamin D even more efficiently than that big star they're designed after."

"That puts my mind at ease about damn near everything then." Felix sighed and leaned his chair back on two legs without lifting his feet from the floor.

The pair sat in silence for a few seconds before the woman spoke again. "So, there are a few things we need to go over before arriving at the lab."

"Speaking of which, when is that going to be?" he asked. "This thing feels as though it's moving at about two meters per second. Where are we going, the center of the Earth?"

"Don't be ridiculous," she replied.

"Oh, sure, now I'm being ridiculous."

"There are a few things--"

"Stop."

"Yes?"

"What's your name?"

"My name?"

"I'm sorry for assuming you have one," he said, "but at least where I hail from, you know, the surface of the Earth, it's considered polite to introduce one's self before engaging in any sort of meaningful conversation."

"It's Karen," she said.

"Now that was easy," he replied.

"As I was saying," she continued, "there are a few things I would like to go over with you before we arrive."

"I assure you that you have my rapt attention," he said, "unless, of course, the table has something to say." Felix poked the small table at the center of the room with his index finger as if trying to wake it.

"You're dead," she said.

"Someone's a bit sensitive," he replied. "I'm sorry about the table jab, I didn't realize you legitimately believed yourself in competition with your own furniture."

"I meant, *Felix*," she said, "that you are *legally* dead. The police have already found your body in what remains of your apartment, which burned down this morning."

"And they think it was me in that apartment?" he asked.

"Yes, they found your teeth, which match perfectly with your dental record," she answered. "Felix Kala was pronounced legally dead as of 3:14 P.M. this afternoon."

Felix started to respond, but instead, quickly jammed his hand into his mouth to feel for any missing teeth.

"They're all still there," Karen assured him. "Just who exactly who do you think we are, anyway?"

"I don't know who you people are," he answered, removing the hand from his mouth. "All I know is that you are well funded and tricky. Possibly amoral. I know you probably don't have much regard for the law, but if you used fake teeth, aren't you concerned that person the police would notice something like that?"

"Oh, they aren't fake," she said. Felix stuck his hand back inside of his mouth and began counting aloud as he felt each tooth.

"They're real," she said, "but not from your mouth. We grew them."

Felix pulled the hand from his mouth. "Ew," he said. "Let's stop taking the conversation in this direction, shall we? Let's get back to the fact that you killed me today. I want to know why this was done, and what makes you think you can get away with it. I still have to worry about coming out after this odd affair is said and done, and being dead will likely have an adverse effect on any attempt to reintegrate with the populace, wouldn't you say?"

"Don't worry," Karen replied, "it's just so that no one needlessly searches for you. As you know, our work is confidential. Any contact with--"

"Yes, yes," Felix answered, "I suppose I shouldn't have asked the 'why' part. I'm mainly just curious about what happens to me in four years. I don't want to assume some other identity. I do have a life, you know."

"Actually, Felix," she said sharply, "I do know. I have your file, and no, you don't have much of a life. That being said, don't worry. You'll return as yourself. You'll go to the local authorities, state that you faked your own death, plead the fifth as to why, and pay the fine. There's no jail time for the offense. The amount owed will be covered by us in addition to your stipend."

Felix leaned back in his chair once more and mulled over this new information. "Really?" he finally asked. "There's a fine for faking your own death?"

Karen nodded.

"You should have asked before killing me," he said.

"No," she responded, "you should have asked. If you had questions about this procedure, you could have contacted us. It was in your contract."

Felix hadn't read the document closely. He'd tried, but each time he looked down at it, all he could see were imaginary dancing dollar signs that made him giddily turn back to the page where the amount of his payment was spelled out digit by digit. It was the same page, just one

line above the payment details, where his signature had been required.

"Fair enough," he said.

Karen looked at him, her expression confused. "Thank you," she said hesitantly.

"I'm not an unreasonable man, you know."

"I never stated such."

Felix looked at her and smiled. "Let me ask you something," he said.

"If I can answer it, I will."

"If I'm dead, should I be concerned that we're travelling straight down?"

IX.

"Let me see her!" the hologram demanded. The projection's voice came through crisp, clear, and agitated.

"See who?" John asked.

"Karen. I heard her."

"Me?" Ronika interjected.

"Let me see her!" the hologram repeated.

"You're looking right at her," John pointed out.

"I'm looking right at ... no, you idiot! The eyes of my hologram can't see anything! The watch face; that's where the lens is. Turn it!"

John pointed the watch at Ronika, who waved and smiled at its face.

"Alright, you two," the hologram said, "I want some answers."

"Oh, *he* wants some answers," Ronika said.

"Where's Karen?" the man asked again.

"We don't know a Karen," she answered combatively.

"Where did you get the device?"

"Whoa, hold on," John said. "We're not answering any more questions. It's your turn."

The small blue hologram paused, let out a roar of frustration, and relented. "Fine! What?" he asked.

"What's your deal?" John asked. He brought his face in close to the projection and waved his hand in front of it, then through it. "Are you trapped inside the watch or something? I mean, what are you doing in there?"

The hologram lifted his glasses up to his forehead and rubbed the corners of his eyes between his thumb and pointer finger. "Oh, God, if there is one, help me. You. Let me talk to the female one again."

"Answer him," Ronika said, backing John's question.

"No, you ignoramus," he answered. "I'm not *in* the watch. It's just a hologram, projecting my image remotely."

"Then where are you *remotely* projecting from?" John asked.

"Now *that's* the question, isn't it?" answered the light. "Well, the truth is that I don't know exactly ... but I have my suspicions," he added, mumbling.

John thought for a moment. "So, *where* are you exactly?" he asked again, hoping for a better answer.

For the first time, the man in the light seemed to calm. His voice became lower, more saturnine, and its natural deepness became apparent. "Tricked, trapped, stuck, imprisoned, occluded, and stationary. What did I just say? I don't *know*." The man sighed. "Listen, let me propose something. You tell me everything you know; I want your

entire autobiography since you acquired this device. You do that and I'll tell you some of what I know. I'll do my best to answer your questions about the watch, but not about me. Fair?"

"I--" John began.

"Just say yes," the hologram said, restraining his temper, "and make this easy for everyone."

"Yes," Ronika quickly answered. Immediately after, she looked to John for approval. He nodded.

"So, do you have a name? It might make a good place to start," the man said.

"John Popielarski."

"I'm Ronika. Like Veronica without the 'ver.'"

"Kala," the hologram said. "Doctor. Dr. Kala."

"Wait, your name is Dr. *Claw*?" John asked. "The villain from Inspector Gadget?"

"No, no," Kala answered, shaking his head into his hand. "Ready? Say *Ka*."

"*Ka*," John repeated.

"Say *La*."

"*La*."

"Now put them together."

"*Kala*," John said.

"Okay, kindergarten is dismissed. Now, Mr. Popielarski, please proceed in giving me the facts. No fanciful elaborations, please; just tell me everything." The hologram sat down, though no chair was visible in the projection.

John proceeded to tell Kala the entire story, where he had found the watch, where it had taken him, and about the two men who'd come for it. He neither embellished nor omitted any of the events. For over two hours the hologram listened silently, sometimes taking notes with an unseen pen and paper. He was so quiet during the story that twice, John had stopped and shaken his watch, curious if they'd lost connection.

While he spoke, he watched Ronika listen to him quietly but intensely. Knowing Ronika, her mind was likely sifting through the details just as intently as Kala, hoping to solve at least some of it before this man in the hologram inevitably spoiled some of the answers for her.

John ended his story with the day's afternoon at Ronika's idea to change the time. Kala broke his silence with laughter.

"Simply change the time. Clever thinking," he said. Ronika couldn't hide a grin. "However," he continued,

"absurdly moronic in practice. That's not how these things work, you know." Ronika's grin flipped upside-down.

"How was I supposed to know how it worked?" she asked confrontationally.

"Indeed," Kala remarked, pacing back and forth across the watch's face. "I've heard your tale, dissected its content, and drawn some conclusions. Would you like to hear them?"

"Talk," John answered.

"My first conclusion is that you're not lying, nor working with my enemies, and indeed, the enemies of all," he proclaimed.

"Enemies of all," Ronika repeated. "Sounds epic."

"Does it?" Kala asked. "Sorry, I've been cooped up for awhile and may be blowing things out of proportion."

"So, who are these 'enemies'?" John asked.

"We'll get there. Calm yourself," Kala answered.

"Okay, here it is. The watch is mine. I invented it. I built it."

"Really?" John asked, incredulous.

"And here's a real humdinger for you," he said. "I did all of this in 1975."

"Impossible," Ronika protested. "He's lying. This sort of technology doesn't even exist in this form today, let alone in the caveman days."

"Caveman days?" Kala laughed. "I like that. But I'm afraid, my little miss, that it did indeed exist then as it does today. It's simply not its time in *the cycle* for you to have seen it yet. You'll be seeing it emerge in, oh, let's say about four more years. Not teleporting exactly, but holograms, etcetera. It will be the next 'big thing.' What's popular nowadays? Touch screens? Basic robotics? The early foundations of artificial intelligence, and ... " He paused and rubbed his chin theatrically. "Egad, perhaps even glasses-free 3-D televisions?"

"Everyone knows that," Ronika said, crossing her arms and wholly unimpressed.

"Not everyone," Kala answered. "One might say that I've been living under a rock for the last thirty years." He waited for a response, but received none. "I've been living underground, in a room, a lab, since 1976. Or 12,902 days, if you prefer."

Ronika appeared to do an equation in her head, and soon nodded her approval of the doctor's number.

"And how did that happen?" John asked, much more willing to believe odd occurrences now than he'd been three

days ago. "What are you eating down there? Where are you, uh, relieving yourself?"

"No, that's more than enough about me," Kala said. "All you need to know about my predicament is that it is as I have described it to be. The deal was about the watch, and according to my count, you may want to find out a bit about it before, let's say, sixteen minutes from now? That's when class breaks for recess, after all."

John looked down at his watch. It was 2:58 P.M.

"Okay, let's talk about that technology thing from before. What did you mean, *the cycle*?" Ronika asked.

"*The cycle* is a continuing process designed to develop and introduce technology to consumers in a timeline conducive to maximizing profit," Kala explained matter-of-factly.

John opened his mouth to speak.

"And before you ask any questions, Mr. Popielarski, I'll explain it just a bit better. There is at least one company, possibly many, dedicated to recruiting the most intelligent people on Earth to their cause. And what is that cause, you may ask? It's exactly what it always is: money.

"After Albert Einstein's unpredicted popularity in the twenties and thirties, certain people realized that some

humans walking around were much smarter than others. Not just a small bit smarter, mind you, but worlds and perhaps universes smarter. Certain people throughout history have always held this mental distinction, but it wasn't until the early fifties, the true dawn of modern Capitalism, that anyone discovered how to take advantage of men like Einstein, though he himself was, of course, dead at this point.

"It was then that someone thought up *the cycle*. It's ingenious in and of itself, really. First you hire, or otherwise cajole, a great mind to develop some bold new advancement. Next, you suppress it and build companies, portfolios, markets, and sometimes even militaries that can sit peacefully in wait until the world is positioned just right. Then, *wham!*" he yelled loudly. "You release it at just right moment and make a fortune."

"But, I don't understand," John said. "Why not just sell something when you make it? Why develop all this technology and hold it back?"

"Because," Kala said slowly, "first, they like to set you up, and your children up, for the big buy. They call it 'priming the market.' Think about it. What if touchscreens had come out twenty years ago? They would have become the standard immediately. A phone with a touchscreen would've

been interesting and profitable, sure, but not at the peak of the technology's potential.

"Instead, the company chose to make handheld technology develop slowly and specifically push the trends to perfectly accommodate the technology they'd hidden. Text messages, email? See what I'm getting at? Touchscreen technology in 1980 would have made approximately two billion dollars over ten years. If released in 2005, I saw it projected to make twice that amount in half the time. Perhaps it's even leading to the next tech-fad on the company's list.

"They call the process 'Wait-Gain.' Cute name, isn't it? These things are planned out years in advance. Some tech sits on the shelves for a year or two, others sit for half a century. It all depends on the economy and the trends. That's *the cycle*," Kala finished. "And you probably thought planned obsolescence was a bitch."

Ronika collapsed to the floor and landed cross-legged on the carpet. "You just completely--"

"Bogarted your brain?" Kala mocked in his best teenage-sounding voice.

"So, someone's planning on selling a teleporting wristwatch that sticks to your arm and kills people?" John asked.

Kala laughed heartily. "Not quite. The watch is something different. It's a development important enough to be sold to a militia, government, or perhaps an entire country. I don't know for sure; I'm just hypothesizing here. As to who first discovered quantum displacement--teleportation as you've been calling it--or why, I don't know either. That information was classified during my time at the company. I was simply brought on board to figure out how to power the process. My hypothesis and eventual working conclusion was to use the body's natural energy."

"The body doesn't have the sort of power to create something like ... like ... some sort of forced quantum event!" Ronika argued.

"Something you'll learn--actually, scratch that--something you'll probably never learn is that different types of energy operate at different efficiencies. The variable for their efficiency isn't standard or linear either. They fluctuate depending on for what you're using the specific type, especially when we're talking about acting on a quantum level. The world isn't just watts and calories, you know."

"Okay, stop. I'm running out of time and have no idea what you two are talking about," John protested. "So, the

watch is using body energy, or something. That's why I feel tired when I teleport?"

"Duh," Ronika said quietly.

"There's a strong connection that needs to be maintained at all times for it to work. That's what's adhering the device to your arm. There's a special tool that's used to remove it. If you don't have it and try to force yourself between the connection ... well, you saw first-hand what can happen," Kala explained.

"Then where can I get the tool?" John asked.

"From me," the hologram answered. "But you have to come and get it."

"Okay, how do I get there?"

"An entrance would imply an exit, and if there was one of those, I certainly wouldn't be sitting here, underground, speaking with a two-legged high school science textbook and the inquisitive son of whom I assume to be a working-class Pole."

"A what?" John asked.

"Your last name," Ronika explained.

"It's easy from this point forward, kiddies," Kala said. "From the tale of your travels, though it's admittedly not perfectly conclusive, it sounds as though someone has set the watch to a calibration cycle. During

this time, the watch is set to test the limits of the bio-energy of its user. Teleporting somewhere specific must be accomplished precisely. Because of this, the device needs to know exactly how much power will be required from its user.

"Different ages, genders, and brains will produce slightly different results. Normally, someone like myself would be directing your jumps and guiding you back once the cycle completed, or at least that's how it was designed. I'm not sure what's happening now. If you appeared in a boat then I must assume your jumps are unmonitored. I can't predict how this turns out," Kala said.

"You said it was easy from this point?" John reminded him.

"Yes, it is," Kala answered. "I'm going to tell you the emergency code to point the watch back at my lab. You're going to put it in. Then, I'll take the watch off your arm."

"Where would I put in a code?" John asked.

"You were right in thinking you can set the time on the watch. The code is nothing more than an hour, minute, and second. All travel is dictated to the watch thusly. That knob you pulled out has two settings. You've pulled it out to the first click; that activated this interface.

There's one more, though. Pulling it further will allow you to change the hands."

"So my plan would have worked," Ronika interjected.

"Not exactly," Kala said. "Changing the time is irrelevant. You would just be changing your destination and point of operation. Since your current point of operation is set to a warehouse close to your home, I wouldn't be haphazardly playing with the hands unless you want it to accidentally become a Chinese submarine. Additionally, the farther you jump, the more energy it takes from your body. The body can regenerate this energy, but not immediately. Use too much in one go, and--"

"And?" John exclaimed, looking down at the time. Four minutes remained.

"What happens when a battery is drained?" Kala asked. "It dies. This is what will happen to you if you accidentally go too far."

"But that doesn't matter, right?" John asked. "You're going to give me the setting to your lab so you can take it off."

"That's exactly right!" the hologram exclaimed. "Write this down. Six o'clock, four minutes, twelve seconds. Set the hands counterclockwise, biggest to smallest. Set it there, and next time you teleport, we'll meet face to face.

I'll remove the watch from your wrist, and we can both go on with our lives."

"That's not exactly true, is it?" Ronika interjected. "If you're stuck down there, then what happens to John when you take the watch from him? You get the device, and you know how to use it--*which is scary on its own*--and John will have no way out. He'll be trapped in some lab underground, just like you claim to be now."

"Yeah, wait a second!" John said, realizing the truth of Ronika's conclusion.

"I'm not going to lie," Kala said. "That's precisely what will happen. I don't want to trick you into imprisonment, kid. I'm not an evil man. The situation is simply thus: each time you jump, the watch is set to take you farther. There will come a point, and soon, when the watch takes you so far around the Earth that you actually end up closer to your point of operation than farther. When that happens, the expenditure of energy will be so great that no user could survive it. You're going to die if that happens, Mr. Popielarski."

"But you said this was programmed in; you said it was a test cycle," John argued hurriedly. He wished Dr. Kala would speak faster.

"Yes I did. But I also said that it's meant to be controlled. This isn't some commercial technology with a manual and a 1-800 number. It's tricky and dangerous. You have no one to stop you. Six out-jumps and the test cycle goes too far. By my count you have four left before that happens. And I can't even guarantee that the second or third jump from now won't kill you on the spot.

"As I said, you weren't vetted for this. No one knows your capabilities, and no one is monitoring you for safety. This is the real thing, kid. You do it my way, and yes, you get stuck here. But you get to *live*, and who knows, maybe I can find a way to come back here and save you after I take care of my other affairs. No lies, no manipulation, just the logical--"

The hologram lost shape and fizzled. John began to feel the drain on his body from the watch. Ronika jumped from the floor, grabbed Mouse and thrust it back into John's bag. Carefully avoiding John's spastic arm, she wrapped his bag's strap around his shoulders. A moment later, he was on the floor. Ronika hugged him quickly and bounded back onto her couch. It was the last thing John saw before falling unconscious.

X.

John awoke in a grey haze of plastic-diffused light. The first thing that struck him was the biting cold welling in his bones. He breathed in strongly, shivering.

"It's a side effect of the watch," Kala said, suddenly perched back atop John's wrist. "And it's only going to get worse the farther you jump."

"Shut up," John said quietly, currently the loudest he could amplify his voice. Carefully, he slid his hand beneath him. His fingers felt damp plastic. He quickly pulled his touch from the surface and wiped the wet onto his jeans.

John opened his eyes and found that his vision had already returned to normal. A sound rumbled beneath him; a car honked its horn. His hearing seemed fine as well.

That recovery was faster than last time, he thought. At least something's getting better.

"John, we need to talk about your situation," Kala said.

"No, we don't," John answered, sitting up from his slouch.

He looked around and knew immediately where he was, a portable bathroom unit, the type people used at public

events. Where the unit was, however, was an entirely different question. The constant vibration at his feet paired with the airflow quickly seeping through the small holes in the bathroom's sides told him that he was probably experiencing the "portable" part of this particular portable toilet.

"And what's with all the bathrooms!" John suddenly shouted at his watch, not really expecting an answer.

Kala chuckled at the question. "I know it seems odd, but there's a perfectly reasonable explanation for it."

"What possible explanation could there be?" Mouse asked, climbing from John's bag.

"How did the girl one get here?" Kala exclaimed.

John turned the watch's face toward Mouse.

"Well, you really are a little-miss-science, now aren't you?" he said patronizingly.

Mouse quickly bent its right hand upward at the hologram. Kala was probably intelligent enough to realize that if the robot had been built with fingers, its middle one would currently be seated in the upward-position.

"Did you have a nice nap?" Kala asked her.

"Yes, actually," Mouse answered as though the question had been sincere.

"That's another thing. You never explained why people around me are passing out," John added.

"It's an infiltration unit designed to operate in secret," Kala said. "It emits that light as a way of rendering any potential witnesses near the event unconscious before, well, witnessing anything. It's meant strictly for emergencies. Normally, you'd use the watch in private, thereby making the function arbitrary. Don't worry, it's not damaging."

"Where are we, John?" Mouse asked.

"Pretty sure it's a Port-a-Potty. Maybe on a truck. Feels and sounds like it, anyway," he answered. "I'll check."

John stood shakily on the plastic floor, walked to the door, and tried to push it open. When it stubbornly refused his first attempt, he pushed harder, eventually inching the plastic outward just enough to spy a thin, yellow rope tied around the outside of the unit.

"Try the bottom of the door," Mouse suggested. "If there's no rope there, we might be able to slip through."

John bent down awkwardly in the small space, being careful to avoid backing into the damp toilet space behind him. He pushed at the bottom corner of the door with

success. Its cheap plastic bent easily, and John peered through the opening he'd created to the outside.

The only sight available was the swiftly moving asphalt of a highway and the sides of two other units tied to his left and right. The unit he was in seemed to be located on the rear edge of a large truck's open flatbed, one stall in a large shipment of portable toilets. There was no tailgate securing him. John took a moment to appreciate the thin yellow rope he'd been annoyed with just moments before. He backed slowly to the seat behind him.

"Well?" Mouse asked.

"Just road," he answered. "We're on the back of a truck tied to the rest of the cargo. Looks like we're staying put."

"Might be a bit boring, but that's not such a bad thing," the robot answered.

"Where are you *precisely*?" Kala asked.

"No idea," John said. "All I could see outside was the road."

The doctor sighed loudly. "Stick your arm outside for another moment," he said.

"What, no G.P.S.?" John asked.

"We were missing the whole "S" part of that in the seventies," Kala answered snidely. "Not very subtle

shooting them into the sky from underground silos, you know?"

John followed Kala's suggestion without further comment and stuck his arm out from the bottom of the bent-open door.

"Either Vermont or Montreal," Kala said confidently as John brought him back inside the Port-a-Potty thirty seconds later. "Probably a trucker's route on whatever highway they've built up here since my day."

"You can tell that just from the road?" John asked.

"The trees," Kala explained. "Plantae, Magnoliophyta, Magnoliopsida, Fagales, Betulaceae, Betula," he rattled off quickly. "Birch trees. Judging by their height, yield, health, coloring, and positioning, we're most likely moving north from Vermont to Canada. Somewhere in the middle of there, anyway," Kala said.

"I could have told you that," Mouse mumbled quietly.

John raised an eyebrow toward its visor.

"Okay, maybe not," it relented. "But I knew the genus."

"We got lucky this jump," John told the robot and hologram. "I'm just going to sit back and enjoy the quiet." He sat back down on the shoddy plastic toilet seat and

tried to find a comfortable way to position his body.

"Maybe I'll even take a nap."

"Someone else in one of these things?" a voice called from somewhere else on the truck.

John tensed at the sound of an unfamiliar voice.

"Come on, now," the voice said, "I heard you in there. You and your girlfriend. Don't worry, now; I'm not with the fuzz." The voice laughed wildly as if someone had just told an extremely funny joke.

"Who are you?" John called back accusatorily.

"Just another rider like yourself and your lady," the voice responded. "Name's Boone. King of the Open Road!" He laughed again.

"Are you in one of the units?" John asked.

"Sure am. Got one of those urinal cakes in here putting off a good flame to fight the cold. You got one of those over there? It's a little pink disk. Lookalike a hockey puck," Boone said.

"No," John answered without checking. "What are you doing here?"

"Don't know what the confusion is," he answered. "Just riding the train."

"This isn't a train."

"It's better than one!" the man replied enthusiastically. "Goes about the same speed and I got myself a private room to travel in style with. It's got a fire, a bathroom, and a sun roof."

John looked up and saw vented slats that he assumed Boone was referring to.

"Train bums never had it so good, Boone continued. "I once knew a guy who took the ... " He paused. "More of you guys back here?"

"No, just me and the girl," John answered back.

"There's just some banging going on toward the back here," Boone explained. "So much for my quiet ride."

John stood and cocked his head slightly to one side, hoping that directing one of his ears to the open venting at the top of the Port-a-Potty would help him hear what Boone was referring to. His experiment was a success, but soon the noise became frequent and loud enough to have been heard by anyone nearby.

"John," Mouse said quietly, "not to be an alarmist, but--"

"I know," John answered in whisper. "I'm thinking the same thing. We need to get off this truck."

"I'm just going to assume you two are speaking of the men who gave you such chase the night before," Kala chimed

in. "You're probably right, you know. If the Advocates knew how to track you before, they could certainly use the same method again."

"Advocates?" John asked.

"There's no time to explain them to you, Mr. Popielarski, and there would be nothing much to explain even if there was. Everything you need to know about them you've already personally experienced. You need to get away from here. If they catch you, you've doomed both of us. Move, now!" Kala shouted. The banging was getting stronger, and the loud sound of a man's violent cough sounded between them.

"Boone, you need to start getting out of there!" John shouted.

"Shut up, you imbecile; right now those men are fishing blind," Kala exclaimed. "There must be fifty units on a truck this large. Is it your intention to telegraph which one is yours?"

"I don't care," John said. "Boone!" he yelled. "Are you hearing me?" He rifled through his messenger bag for something that could cut the yellow rope binding his door. "I'm not letting any more people die because of me and this stupid watch."

"Aren't I also someone worth saving?" Kala asked quickly. "Keep yelling and you'll never have the chance to do it!"

Boone shouted back over Kala's voice. "What did you say, pal?"

John started to yell back. "Get out of--" His shout was interrupted by the deafening sound of a gunshot. John looked around his unit. There were no small, circular holes in any of the walls. Then, a second bullet was fired, somehow even louder than the first.

Jordan Hal let his eyes leave the straight, unchanging road in front of him to glance at the leather-bound journal resting on his passenger seat. An idea for a new poem had just struck him, and he was feeling anxious to write it down among the others before he forgot its words. The next stop was still another fifty-three miles out, and he was in serious danger of losing at least some of the carefully chosen stanzas before then.

He'd managed 148 poems in his eighteen years of trucking, though not even one had he shared with his family or friends. No one but the other boys at the depot could understand road-poems, and though outsiders wouldn't know it to be true, most of the truckers he knew shared the same

hobby. After all, there wasn't much else to do on those long three-day drives up the coast.

A deafeningly loud noise suddenly broke Jordan's train of thought. His hands inadvertently jerked the steering wheel of his truck. He recovered from the sudden swerve quickly and checked all five of his mirrors. *Thank God*, he thought. *No one else on the road*. Even a small swerve could mean catastrophe in a vehicle this size. He eyed his mirrors again and glanced to the back of his cab. What was that noise? It had almost sounded like a gunshot.

Crinkling his nose, Jordan sniffed at the air. The cab smelled like melting plastic. That's when he noticed the small hole in the passenger seat beside him. He reached his hand to the tear and felt the hot, blackened edges around it. What was going on here?

A second sound, identical to the first, exploded through the truck. A bullet tore into the cab through the metal behind the seats and passed through Jordan's right forearm. He screamed out in pain and clutched the wound with his other hand. *Hijackers*, he thought through the sting and shock. *But why would they want a shipment of Port-a-Potties?*

With his hands off the wheel, the truck moved right, slowly drifting into the opposing lane. Jordan released his

wound and grabbed at the steering wheel with his good hand. He caught its top and spun it left with more power than he'd intended. The truck jerked again. Worried he was losing control, Jordan straightened the wheel and applied the brakes, but the torque of his previous turn had shifted the weight of the truck's bed too quickly.

He looked outside to his modified side-view mirror in horror as he watched his truck's bed now swiveling independently of the cab toward the deep, forested hill bordering the left of the highway. Panicked, he yanked the steering wheel right again and crashed his boot onto the gas pedal, hoping to power back onto the road. Despite the effort, the back of his truck continued swinging wide until finally placing the majority of the vehicle's weight along the side of the steep hill to the cab's left.

The next sound Jordan heard was an awful creaking as his vehicle's balance finally shifted and the cab lost control to its weighty cargo-area, now dictating a new and opposite direction for his truck. Led in reverse by its bed, the vehicle began a furious and uncontrolled descent down the steep, wooded incline of the hill toward an unseen bottom below.

A moment later, the back left tire blew out. The bed spun over wildly, releasing its cargo to the hillside. With

the cab on its side and backward, Jordan weakly lifted his body enough to see from the window. An avalanche of Port-a-Potties was snowing past him down the side of the steep hill to its bottom, harshly colliding with the forest flora and each other.

Jordan felt the temperature of his cab rising. Then, he saw the smoke. Using the last of his strength, he reached for his poetry journal lying open on the metal beside him. His fingers caught its spine and dragged it close. Against the shaking of his truck and through the black smoke filling his cab, he was able to read the first few lines of the first poem he'd ever written before the engine exploded.

After the second gunshot, John heard the thin yellow rope snap just before his unit, along with the rest, was upside-down and tumbling out from the back of the truck and down the slope. His body lifted and bounced against the grey sidewall. He reached down for the hard plastic toilet seat beside him, still hinged to the unit's most sturdy section. It was wet, but so was everything else.

Suddenly, the Port-a-Potty's door snapped off sharply against a log. John watched a green blur of grass and

wildflowers wash quickly past the newly created opening as his unit continued to spin down the tall hill.

"What's going on?" he thought he heard Kala yell between the harsh bangs and bumps of the circling tumble.

Meters later, the unit stopped suddenly, sending John's backside uncomfortably against the wet plastic toilet seat behind him. From the open side of his Port-a-Potty, John watched ten other units break apart higher on the hill and trundle toward his at frightening speed. He braced his body for the coming impact.

The first stall collided with John's unit just a moment later, shaking him to the ground again and breaking itself in half upon impact with the side of his unit. A second and third unit crashed behind the first. Their impact shot its contents into John's Port-a-Potty. A grisly looking man with a knotted beard tumbled uncontrollably on top of him.

Looking past the man, John could see the cab of the truck and its flatbed, mammoth and twirling, headed down the hill after them, breaking small trees in its wake. John stood from beneath the grisly man and, moving solely on adrenaline, grabbed his tattered collar.

"Ready?" John yelled into the man's ear over the noise of the spinning carnage above.

The bearded man wobbled his head. John couldn't be sure if it was a nod or a byproduct of his daze, but there was no time to decide.

John bounded deftly from the wreckage of the portable toilets and landed roughly on the grass a few feet to its side. The bearded man had leapt with him, but less aptly, and had only narrowly avoided losing both of his legs to the cab of the truck that smashed to a halt behind them a moment later. Its impact splintered and launched sections of grey semi-translucent plastic from its previous cargo into the air.

John and the man looked over the flaming wreckage in awe of its scope. The bearded man shook dust and plastic from his beard before speaking.

"Boone," Boone said.

"John," John replied, breathing again.

"Those your friends?" Boone asked, pointing toward a dark-haired man in a gray suit twenty yards away trying to help a blond-haired man from underneath a large tire.

XI.

John cupped his hand over Boone's mouth and shook his head. He slowly removed his hand and used it to gesture Boone to follow him. With his other hand, John lifted a finger perpendicularly to his lips.

Boone looked at John with confusion and shook his head. "We need to help them," he asserted.

"Who do you think fired the gun?" John whispered rapidly. "They're here to kill me and anyone who's seen me. I'm sorry you got wrapped into this, but we have to move if you don't want to die."

Boone looked stunned by John's assessment, but slowly walked after him when John turned and moved quietly away from the hillside toward the thicker part of the forest.

"What about your lady friend?" Boone asked, moving a branch from his face.

"We'll check on her in a few moments when we get somewhere safe," John responded.

"Are these men tracking you?" Boone asked.

"Yes."

"See what it's like when someone is constantly asking you inane questions?" Kala interjected.

"What was that?" Boone asked.

"A walkie-talkie," John answered, not allowing himself to be distracted from moving as quickly and as far from his pursuers as possible.

"If these men are tracking you, you're sure leaving them an easy trail to follow."

John stopped and turned back toward Boone, annoyed past his limit.

"I can help," Boone said. John calmed immediately.

"How?"

"You're breaking twigs and snapping branches," he explained. "It won't even take much skill to find us. I'll tell you what. Keep moving straight toward the sun. Be careful not to disturb more of the forest, even if it slows you. I'm going to break off and circle a fake trail in the other direction and catch up to you after. Just keep moving at the sun."

Before John could respond, Boone sped off quickly, skillfully shooting his hands in and out of the foliage and lightly shuffling his feet beneath him as he left.

"He's right," Kala said. "Follow his instructions."

"Yeah, what else am I going to do?" John answered.

Mouse, he thought suddenly. John looked into the pocket of his bag and found *Mouse* turned upside-down and missing an arm.

"Hey! You there?" he said to the robot.

"Yes!" Mouse replied, whisper-quiet. "Couldn't you hear me?"

"No," John answered, "and I can't hear you very well now."

"Turn the horizontal dial on my chest where the ribs would be," it responded.

John looked more closely at Mouse's torso and saw the dial. The robot's entire body was solid black, so seeing small components was difficult without first knowing where to look. He spun the dial to the right.

"Better?" Mouse asked at normal volume.

"Much," John answered.

"That's the master volume for the unit. It must have been turned down by accident when we were rolling down the hill. I have a volume control on my end, but it's superseded by Mouse's dial," Mouse explained. "What happened? I missed everything."

"I'll explain later," John said, carefully ducking beneath a delicate-looking branch. "We're in the forest."

"Well, I can see *that*," Mouse said.

"And those guys with guns are out here somewhere too," he explained. "Boone, that hobo guy from before, is leading them off our trail, or something."

"My arms aren't working," Mouse said. "I think something happened to them during the crash."

"One of them is still in the pocket," John said.

"What? For real? Oh well, I guess I can fix it later. Just bring the arm back with you if you can."

John continued through the trees for hours more, scared to stop for even a moment. The sun was setting and he worried at the prospect of late-night, pitch-black Canadian forest-travel. He'd been carefully following Boone's earlier instructions and wondered when and if the man would return. *Maybe they got him*, John considered.

"This can't be fun for you, Mr. Popielarski," Kala said.

"I've never been hiking before," John answered happily, already seeing where the doctor's comment would lead. "I think I like it just fine."

"I mean living like this," the hologram replied. "Running for your life from two men trained to find and capture you. You've been lucky thus far."

"You call this luck?"

"Come to my lab. Let me help you!"

"You sure define a lot of words differently than I do. Getting me stuck in a concrete box underground sounds a lot like *not helping*."

"Play the odds, John! What's more probable? The eighty percent chance that I find a way to get you out in a few years or the zero percent chance you have of surviving otherwise. Even if the Advocates don't get you--and they *will*, eventually--the sixth jump will kill you. What part of this do you not understand?"

John ignored him and kept walking.

"If you die before the last jump," Kala continued, "or get caught by those men, then it will be too late to come to me. *Too late*, Mr. Popielarski."

Boone somersaulted in front of John from behind a nearby bush. John stumbled back in surprise.

"Boone! Wow. What are you doing?" he asked.

"We're going to finish this conversation, Mr. Popielarski!" Kala yelled. The hologram vanished.

"Who's that on the other end of that walkie-talkie there?" Boone asked, back on his feet. "Was that a little blue man on your arm? Who are you people?"

"Boone, can we talk about the little blue man later?" John asked. "How are we doing? Did you fake the trail?"

"Only so much you can do," Boone said. "Now it depends on how good they are at tracking folk. Almost dark though. Maybe they'll quit and go home. Speaking of such, we need

to stop for the night. Dangerous out here when the sun ain't up."

"Stop and do what?"

"Just follow me a bit. I'll find the right spot soon enough. I'll show you what we do for the predators, animal and person alike."

Forty minutes later they came upon a giant mass of leaves beneath a tree. The sun had set, and moonlight alone now illuminated the forest floor, giving the edges of John's surroundings a surreal blue highlight. The noises coming from behind the trees had changed, as had the types of insects buzzing about his neck. The forest had a much different feeling after nightfall, more menacing and secretive. John was glad Boone was with him.

"We stay here," Boone said. "Under the leaves like the brocks."

"And what's a brock exactly?" John asked.

"I'll show you," Boone answered. "Hang on to your butt."

John raised an eyebrow.

"Kyyyyyyuuuuuuu!" the man shouted in a high-pitched holler. He dove into the leaves and thrashed about, yelling.

"Kyyyyyyyyuuuuuu!" he called again. Seven angry badgers emerged from the leaves, growling and grumbling, rolling and tumbling from the pile as Boone scooped them out of the leaves. One turned and hissed at him, and he responded by playfully pawing at the animal's face.

Another badger ran straight at John and crashed hard into his leg. John stumbled onto one knee and felt the badger bite into the back of his leg. He yelped in pain.

"Did he get you?" Boone asked from the leaves. Only his head was exposed above the pile. "Darn little ankle-biters! Git! Git!" he yelled at the badgers. The cete hustled away into the darkness of the forest at Boone's insistence.

"All clear," Boone called to John. "Come on in. The bottom leaves are damp. With both of us down here, it'll warm up in no time."

John felt the back of his leg. It was wet and stung to his touch. He brought his hand back to his face and saw blood on his palm, dripping down his wrist toward the watch. He twisted his arm and the dark red blood pooled on the front glass.

"You two go together perfectly, don't you?" John said to the watch and the blood.

"Me and the brocks?" Boone asked. "Nah! They're little bastards, you ask me. You just got to bite back sometimes and they stop buggin'. Guess that's why they call me King of the Open Forest!"

"I thought it was 'King of the Open Road,'" John said.

"Well, that too."

John wiped the blood from his watch and approached the large pile of leaves beside the tree. He turned his messenger bag to his front and slowly slid his body down next to Boone. The leaves changed in texture as he lowered himself deeper into their mass.

The first layer crunched at his weight and the dried-out plants that composed it scratched at his skin like an angry cat. Moving beneath them, however, John found the bottom soft, damp, and oddly inviting.

"Not so bad?" Boone asked.

"You know a lot of weird things, Boone," John said, maneuvering in the leaves to get comfortable.

"I know a lot more, too," he responded.

"I'll bet."

"I used to be rich, you know."

"Let me guess," John replied. "Millionaire real-estate tycoon gets crushed by the housing market and ends up homeless."

"Good try, but the truth is more ironic still," Boone said. "When I was a little one, my family was poor. I wanted nothing more then to make it big. *Big!* As big as they come. 'One day,' I always said. I thought I'd be an actor; get rich, famous."

John smiled and closed his eyes. Boone had an odd way of pronouncing most words, but his voice was soothing and John was tired.

"One day I got me a small part on the stage as a hobo. Don't know if it was a train hobo or a city hobo, now I think of it. Don't matter. Anyway, they got me in costume for rehearsals. Once all dressed up, I went outside for a cigarette. A man on the sidewalk asked me for the time. We had a little conversation, and afterward he hands me two dollars! Two dollars! For what? I have no idea. Then, I remember the bum costume and make up. That's when I heard it, my true calling."

John smiled and sank deeper into the leaves, stretching his legs and arms out under the pile.

"For the next several years I pretended to be homeless," Boone continued. "I was damn good at it. A terribly strange thing to be good at, I admit. I got a lot of the same guys passing by giving me something every day. You might not believe it, but eventually I was making

sometimes six hundred dollars a day up in New York! It's the truth! I was making about a hundred thousand dollars a year, all cash, no tax. Had a nice car and a pretty wife with a well-to-do father who thought I was a salesman.

"Soon though, other bums, real bums, got suspicious and jealous. One of them found out about the secret. My work was getting dangerous. He followed me home one night and ... well ... I came out fine, but I knew that things couldn't stay the same. I left."

John waited a few moments before realizing Boone had ended his story. "Yeah?" he asked, half-asleep. "What happened then?"

"I left," Boone repeated quietly. "Left my wife, my kid." He paused and looked past the trees to the moon. "I just ... you know what? Let's not talk about Boone. Tell me about the little blue man, John. Or tell me about your life. I want to know."

A cough sounded from somewhere in the forest. Boone's hand struck out from the leaves like a snake and landed softly on John's head, waking him instantly. Slowly, he pushed John down farther into the pile until completely submerged.

John's first reaction was to struggle, but he stopped once he heard the coughing Boone had heard moments before.

Boone slid himself beneath the leaves as well, leaving no trace of either him or John beneath the tall tree beside them.

John struggled to breathe beneath the top layer of leaves. Each time he tried to inhale, small bits of dirt and leaf sailed into his mouth, risking a revealing cough or gag. Boone's hand slid silent through the pile and latched itself supportively to John's shoulder. The warm contact calmed him, but only slightly. That cough in the woods was getting closer.

Soon, the cough was accompanied by careful footsteps. The Advocates were coming toward him. John thought he could see a shape through the thick clump of leaves, maybe even two, moving toward his pile. They were getting closer. He worried that if he could see the men, they could surely see him too. He closed his eyes. The footsteps were falling all around them now; the two men were at the pile.

Someone began coughing madly above John. Moments later, a black military-style boot crashed through the leaves next to him and stepped blindly onto his watch. Its back and sides bore into the skin of his wrist. The pain was crushing, and John was stricken with an immediate wave of nausea trying to contain the scream that would have normally followed the pain.

After what seemed an eternity, the boot finally lifted from his arm and stepped down again, this time missing his head by inches. Then, the boot was gone and the forest fell silent.

John wanted nothing more than to clutch his injured wrist, take it close to his chest, remove the watch and tend to the wound beneath it. But no matter the fantasy, John knew he could do nothing but lie helplessly, motionless and silent.

Something small, wriggling, and damp crawled onto John's cheek. The short steps of its tiny feet brushed against his skin, creating an itch that grew more and more maddening the longer he focused on it. The creature made its way to his eye and rested still on his closed lid.

John tried to listen for further footsteps, but heard none. *Are they still there? Did they leave? Where are they? They know where I'm hiding; they're toying with me. Why haven't they caught me? What are they waiting for?*

He strained his ears, hoping to hear some clue to the Advocates' whereabouts. Boone's hand, still resting on John's shoulder, squeezed lightly as if he could hear the frantic thoughts running through John's mind. It was good to know that someone else was there with him.

John continued to wait--they both did--hidden beneath the leaves, motionless and silent, for the remainder of the long black night.

XII.

Ronika piloted the scooter back into *The Napoli* and walked with John to her first-floor apartment. He'd spent most of their ride explaining what exactly she'd missed during Mouse's hours of darkness.

"You just laid there like that? All night?" she'd asked.

"Until 3:14," he'd answered her.

"That's horrible."

Kala hadn't said a word since his argument with John in the forest.

From the story he'd told her, she knew John had to be glad to be out in the open once more, free to breathe, talk, and move as he pleased. She was happy to at least share that with him.

Ronika wore a worried look as she unlocked her front door. While John had been beneath the leaves, she'd been at home with one eye on a dark monitor, the other on a notepad by the keyboard. She'd brought it with her to the desk to write down ideas for removing the watch from his arm. It was still blank.

Dr. Kala had done a thorough job of explaining John's options, and had even made his own intentions perfectly

clear. There was no deception to see through or riddle to solve; everything Kala had told them lined up perfectly. Why else would he tell John that he intended to imprison him if it hadn't been the truth?

No, Ronika thought. He isn't lying. He just knows that the only logical outcome of this is for John to follow his advice and go down into the lab.

She didn't feel outsmarted, just predetermined, as if hopelessly tangled between the fine, humming wires in John's watch, helpless to affect them, helpless to free herself or her friend from their web.

She looked at John as he slumped onto her living room couch. His expression was blank, mirroring the monotone in which he'd told her the details of last night's events.

"Do you want something to eat?" Ronika asked.

"Water, maybe," he answered.

"Are you okay?"

"Yeah."

Ronika turned and walked into her kitchen.

"I've been thinking a lot since last night," he called to her from the living room. "I really can't fight this thing, you know?"

"I know," Ronika answered, scratching one of her fox ears with one hand while pouring him a glass of water with the other.

"Only one of two things can come from this," John said. "The first is that I don't make it. One of the jumps is going to kill me if the Advocates don't do it first."

Ronika walked back to the living room, holding his glass of water and listening intently.

"The other option is imprisonment," John continued. "Alone, underground, and in the dark."

"There are fluorescent lights, actually," Kala interrupted as his hologram reappeared on the watch's face. "With panels optimized for processing vitamin D."

John ignored the comment. "If these are my only options, then I only have two or three days left. I just want to spend as much of that time as possible with the people important to me."

Ronika couldn't help but smile despite the obvious pain of John's epiphany. She walked toward him and offered him the glass.

"So, I'm leaving," John finished.

"What?" Ronika blurted, nearly dropping the glass.

"I have to see Molly, then maybe explain this whole thing to my mom," he answered.

"Oh."

"Here," John said, pulling Mouse from his bag. "I brought the arm, too." Her handed her the damaged robot and fished into the pocket of his messenger bag. He found the missing arm and placed it on the table.

"Will it live, Doctor?" John joked. Ronika struggled a weak chuckle in reply.

"Alright, I have to go," he said, standing. "I'll be back before the next jump."

"I'll just work on this, then," she said softly, putting the glass of water she'd brought him down on the table and lifting the small robotic arm into her hand. She turned and walked toward her workstation while John left through her front door without saying goodbye.

Outside, John mounted his scooter and drove straight for Molly's house, thankfully nearby.

"Mr. Popielarski," Kala began. His hologram was faint and shapeless in the wind, but his voice held clear. "I think that you--"

John interrupted him. "What did I just say about spending time with people I *care about*? I don't want to talk to you."

"I know you inaccurately think me a monster trying to eat you up," Kala said, "but tell me what you would do in my situation. Do you think it's my fault I ended up down here? No. It was bad luck. It was the end result of reprehensibly evil decisions made by men with power over me. It's unfair, but out of my hands. Your situation is unfair and out of your hands, too. If you take my place down here, then that is simply an extension of the situation that has already happened to you. It's not *me* who's doing it."

"You're just trying to use me to escape," John said. "You don't want to help me. If I came down there, you could just give me the tool and let me leave."

"I could," Kala admitted, "but why would I? Would you do that for me? Do you honestly think you're the hero of some grand adventure and that each of the side characters in your story should all leap at the opportunity to sacrifice themselves for you so that you can carry on with whatever life some spoiled sixteen-year-old has made for himself in Florida? I have a life too, John. I have people I care about, and goals, and aspirations. Why do I have to throw all of those away for you? Because you're a kid? Well, grow up."

John considered Kala's point. He found himself understanding it and feeling uncomfortably empathetic.

"Look. You don't need to try and convince me to come down there, okay?" John said, his tone friendlier than before. "I understand what you're saying, and I understand how much sense it makes for me to come down there. I just don't want to be reminded of it constantly."

"You're right," Kala admitted. "I'm sorry. I'm not very good ... " He paused as a loud car passed them going in the opposite direction down the road. "--with people," he finished.

"Maybe a miracle will happen and it won't be necessary," John said.

"Miracles are just improbabilities that occur at odd or convenient times," he said. "There is nothing that can help you now, improbable or otherwise. I'll stop bothering you, but the longer you search for a magic trick, the more risk you put me in. And yourself. There. That's the last I'll say of it."

John slowed, now travelling down the street where Molly lived. He watched the addresses printed on the mailboxes as he drove by and searched for the number that would identify her house.

"Who is this Molly person, anyway?" Kala asked.

"My girlfriend," John said. "Why does everyone keep asking me that?"

John found Molly's house and turned into her long driveway. He cut the engine and walked his scooter the rest of the way up the pavement toward her sprawling one-story house.

"Oh," Kala said, "I thought Ronika was--"

"Was what?" John asked sharply.

"None of my business," Kala muttered.

"That's exactly what she is," John said. "Can you turn off the light show? I don't want Molly to freak out."

"As you say," Kala answered. His image dissipated.

"Can you still hear everything?" John asked.

"Yes, believe it or not, the microphone is located in the watch, not the hologram," Kala answered.

John ignored the jab. "Can you turn off your speakers, then? I'd like some privacy."

"I *can* turn off my speakers."

"Will you?"

"Fine."

"How will I know?"

"That I'm not listening?"

"Yes."

"You won't."

"Can I trust you to do it?"

"Scout's honor."

"There's no way you were a Scout."

"Scientist's honor then. What do you want from me?"

"I have no idea."

"If I do as you ask, then how will I know when to turn them back on?"

"3:14, the next jump."

"Alright, then."

"So you promise? No speakers until 3:14?"

"Turning off now."

"I'm trusting you."

There was no response.

John walked up to Molly's front door and looked at her white rectangular doorbell. He imagined Molly's father opening the door instead of her, yelling, and maybe even calling the police if he recognized his face from the news.

Dismayed by the idea of it, John decided against the front. He circled her house to find a better way in. There was a side door that led out into the yard, but he knew that disturbing it carried similar dangers to the front.

He continued to scout the house's perimeter, now focused on the windows instead of the doors. Most were closed with white slat blinds or bland beige drapery. In

John's mind, Molly's window would be dressed with large pink curtains. To his amazement, he was right.

A large window, completely enclosed by wavy white and pink curtains, was in front of him on the wall. First he considered knocking on it, or maybe throwing gravel at the glass like people did in the movies. After quick consideration, he decided against both. Molly was already furious with him, so being scared abruptly from sleep wasn't going to help his chances at a calm and reasonable dialog. And anyway, he thought, throwing gravel at a first-story window would seem a bit silly.

John wanted a foolproof strategy before destroying what would probably be his only shot at saving a relationship with Molly. He bent down and sat in the grass under her window while he thought of one. He was still tired from last night's hike through the woods and had gotten no sleep under the leaves as he'd originally hoped. Sleep had been impossible knowing the Advocates were hunting him nearby.

Thank God they can't find me here, he thought.

A moment later, he realized that he had no idea why they couldn't track him back to the Longboard warehouse. He opened his mouth to ask Kala before remembering that his

speakers were turned off. He thought about Boone. He wondered if the man had survived the night. He hoped so.

John awoke the next day to the swift kick of a rollerblade. Its front wheel thrust into the punctures of his badger bite. He winced and opened his eyes upward to his assailant. It was Molly. The girl was difficult to see beneath the harsh reflection of the sun off her bright red helmet, but John knew it was she. Molly lifted her rollerblade to kick him again.

"No, ow, stop," he said, scuffling onto his feet. "Didn't you see the dried blood there where you kicked?"

"What do you think I was aiming for?" she said. "And what are you doing beneath my window, Creepy?" She asked the question between two pursing, accusatory lips. John preferred the name "Johnny" to "Creepy," but decided her pet name for him wasn't top priority in this already difficult conversation.

"I fell asleep," he said, rubbing the back of his head where he'd been leaning against the brick.

"You've been here all night?" she asked.

"Yes," John answered, thinking it might earn him some sympathy. He was wrong.

"That's disgusting. Tell me why I shouldn't call the cops!" Molly demanded.

"Tell me why you *should*," John retorted.

"Uh, murder much? It's all over the news, John. That one guy from that business place on the island or whatever, and that thing with the bus or something," she said.

"Well, at least you're well-informed."

Molly kicked him again.

"Quit it," John protested. "I've got a brock bite there."

"A what?"

"Listen, Molly," John said calmly. "I came over here because I wanted to explain everything to you."

"Okay, go," she answered abruptly.

John suddenly realized he had absolutely no plan to explain something so complex and unbelievable. He had neither Mouse nor Kala to admit into evidence, and he couldn't have her try to take the watch from his wrist without risking her safety.

"I, uh," John started poorly. "All you need to know is that I didn't kill anyone. I'm caught up in something, and it's not my fault."

"Of course it isn't," Molly mocked. "And standing me up three days ago? Was that your fault?"

"I ... what? You mean our date?" John asked, incredulous. Molly stood silent. "Is that all you can think about? I'm suspected of murder!" he yelled. "Don't you care about me at all? Don't you know me well enough after our three weeks of dating to know that there's a reasonable explanation?"

"I'll tell you what I know," she spat. "Everyone is looking at me funny now. No boy will ask me out. I had to join a roller derby league just to get friends who'll talk to me without making fun of me because of you!" she exclaimed, loudly flicking her plastic knee guard as if to prove her tale.

"Ask you out? *What?* It's only been three days!"

"Of hell!"

"For *you*? You have no idea what I've been going through."

"You're so selfish!"

John was taken aback. Every wound on his body hurt at once: his jaw where Adam had punched him, the rope burns on his hands, the badger bite in his leg, and the cuts he couldn't clean beneath his watch. He closed his eyes, forgot it all, and rebooted. Slowly, he raised his eyelids and looked at Molly. She really was pretty.

"You mean everything to me," he said.

"You mean nothing to me," she replied. "Get your criminal self off my street and away from my house. Take your electro-bike thing with you. It's in the middle of my driveway, and Daddy is leaving soon. I don't want him denting his bumper by backing over it."

She turned and skated away from him before allowing a response. Soon, she was six houses away, and soon after that she was gone from his sight completely. John walked slowly to the curb in front of her house and sat down. He cradled his face in his hands.

"I have no idea what I'm doing," he said. His eyes swelled with water.

"Who does, really?" Kala answered softly.

"I knew you wouldn't turn off your speakers," John said, his words muffled by his hands. "I knew you were there the whole time."

"No you didn't," Kala replied.

"You're an asshole."

"I can be." Kala's hologram appeared on top of the watch as John lifted his head. "Honestly, though, I *am* sorry about Molly. But there's no going backward, John. Not from here."

John turned the camera in his watch from his face and batted away a tear that had slipped from his eye to his nose.

"I lost someone special once," Kala told him sincerely. "A girl. She's why I'm trying to get back to the surface. By the time I find her, I don't know if she'll even remember who I am. She might not even be alive. But I have to find her, John. I have to."

"I can't believe you didn't turn off your speakers."

"I've been alone with no one to talk with for over thirty years. I couldn't bring myself to turn them off."

John laid back into the grass behind the curb and looked into the clear, blue sky expanding above him.

"I'm not spoiled, you know," he said.

"What?"

"Earlier, when we were driving here, you called me 'some spoiled sixteen-year-old.'"

"I just assumed--"

"Why? Was it because I live on the beach?" John answered quietly. "It's not what you think. My dad left my mom three days after getting her pregnant. Three days. He didn't tell her goodbye, he didn't explain anything. All he did was leave her a house key in a crumpled up piece of paper with an address written on it. My mom won't sell the

house because she thinks it's the one nice thing we have, but she's wrong. It's the worst thing we have. My mom has to work as a waitress, barely making enough for us to live on, while everyone else on that island has never worked a day in their life. We'll never fit in there. We'll never be accepted. All I've wanted my entire life is to get off that damn island, so yes, I understand. There's nothing worse in life than being trapped."

"I'm sorry that I jumped to conclusions before," Kala said.

John sat up. "When you do get out of there, I hope you find that girl you're looking for."

"Me, too, Mr. Popielarski. And don't worry about all this," Kala said reassuringly. "Maybe that miracle you want is just around the corner. Maybe there's some other solution I fail to recognize. What do I know?"

"Yeah," John said. "Maybe."

June 3rd, 1972:

The elevator slowed to a stop, decelerating so smoothly that Felix didn't realize the ride was over until its large curved doors slid open before him. Karen stood up from her chair and offered a hand to him.

"We're here. Are you ready?" she asked.

"If one can ever be," he answered, accepting her hand and standing to his feet.

Felix peered out of the elevator to the massive room beyond. He tried to think of a comparable space, *a shopping mall lobby, perhaps?*

Hundreds of people buzzed throughout the room, each carrying a clipboard or file folder toward an unseen destination. The clockwork of their motion was staggering, and Felix struggled to determine from where they started and ended, finding neither. The room was in a state of perpetual motion, and none of its inhabitants paused for even a moment to eye the facility's new addition: the tall, gangly man in glasses stepping awestruck from a giant elevator.

"Welcome to *the hub*," Karen said, watching his reaction with glee.

"That's a good name for it," Felix replied. "Though the term 'beehive' comes to mind equally fast. How does anyone get any work done? I see no tables, no equipment, no science being done at all."

"The labs are private. This is more of a bureaucratic station, a place for the Red and Blue Badges. And before you ask ... " Karen pulled a lanyard from beneath her coat and held the solid blue card it supported toward Felix.

He took the card by its edge and examined it. The glossy plastic was completely blue. There were no markings, lettering, nor images present. "I'm failing to ascertain the purpose of such an indistinct square of plastic," he said.

"The information it contains is invisible to the eye. A special light is needed to see it. It aides in confidentiality."

"And the difference between the red and the blue?"

"It's a distinction of responsibility, job tasks, and importance."

"And which is superior? The red or the blue?"

Karen grinned wryly. "I'll let you figure that one out on your own." She placed the blue badge and lanyard back beneath her coat.

"Ah, Karen!" a voice called from the crowd ahead of them. A gruff-looking man was walking toward her and Felix. The Red and Blue Badges parted as water from his path, allowing him quick access to the elevator doors.

"Dr. Castler," Karen said in a professional tone. She turned to face the man as he approached. "Let me introduce you to Felix Kala, quantum biologist. Mr. Kala, this is Dr. Castler."

"Doctor, actually," Felix grumbled.

"Yes?" Castler replied.

"No, I meant I'm--"

Castler reached for Felix's hand and shook it heartily. "A pleasure," he said. Castler failed to make eye contact, seemingly distracted by something across the room. "Karen will show you the ropes from here." The man departed as quickly as he'd appeared.

"Who was that?" Felix asked.

"That was the overseer," Karen answered. "He's in charge of everything at this location."

"You mean there are more of these?"

"Let's continue the tour, shall we?"

Karen lightly placed her hand on the small of Felix's back and guided him in a walk around the perimeter of the large room.

Felix looked at the wall beside them as they traveled. Its tall, curved steel supported no art or special design, just one large imposing door after another. Only two meters separated each door from its neighbors, and all were closed tight with no marking to suggest what rested behind them. Felix counted them as he passed.

One, two, three, four, five--

"There isn't much to say about *the hub*," Karen explained as they moved, "as it fails to concern you or your work. As a researcher, you're not encouraged to spend time here, though you're not prohibited from doing so."

Thirteen, fourteen, fifteen--

"We understand that there will be times when you need to look at something other than the walls of your lab, though you'll soon find that the atmosphere and décor of *the hub* is not substantially antithetic enough to invoke any sort of significant difference to your mental health."

Twenty-nine, thirty, thirty-one, thirty-two--

"If you ever feel truly claustrophobic, we have an area of the facility designed specifically to aid you."

Felix paused his count. "Oh?" he said. "Is there a field or sandy beachfront hiding in one of these back rooms?"

"More like a series of experimental injections," she answered.

Felix thought about that for a moment. "Is there a suggestion box around here? I'd be much more in favor of my idea." He looked behind him and quickly caught up with his count. They'd passed forty-seven doors during their walk, having not even passed one fourth of the total wall.

"We'll be at your lab soon," Karen said.

"Wait," Felix replied, stopping in place. He reached out for Karen's shoulder and touched it.

She paused and looked back to him. He was facing the wall when she looked. "Yes?"

"There's no door here," he said.

"Is that so astounding?"

"It just seems odd. The room is patterned precisely except for this precise section of the wall. In fact ... "

Felix stepped back and held his arms out wide, guessing the distance. "In fact, it seems like the exact amount of space that the other doors occupy."

"Not everything is symmetrical in--"

"Wait, look over there," Felix interrupted. He ran ahead twenty-one more doors before Karen could catch up. He halted at another empty space in the wall.

"It's the same size as the last," he observed. "Is that odd to you?"

"No," Karen answered sternly. "I don't know about you, but my background is in the applied sciences, not architecture and interior design. It's just a wall, Felix. Can we move on please?"

Felix walked toward the blank space on the wall and lightly knocked on the metal with his fist. It chimed at his touch as expected. "Sure," he answered her. "I'm sorry. Please continue."

"Thank you," she said brusquely. "I'm sure you'll find much of interest in your lab and dormitory. Follow me and I'll show you."

Felix followed Karen quietly, forgetting about the doors lining the wall of *the hub*. It wasn't long before they reached their destination.

"Take note of our position relative to the room," Karen told Felix. "As you've seen, the doors are not numbered or marked. You'll need to remember precisely where the entrance to your lab is if you wish to venture out into *the hub* during the day and find your way back."

Felix looked out across the room to its single elevator. It was located 134 degrees west of his position if his back was directly against the center of the doorway.

"Done," he said.

"Good."

Karen approached the door. It shook as she stepped closer and raised open, revealing its thickness and design to Felix's curious eyes. He quickly estimated the width of the metal composing it. *That's at least a meter*, he thought.

"Steel?" he asked.

"A titanium alloy," she answered.

"Are you trying to keep people in or out of here?" he asked as they walked through the opening.

"Its just a security measure," she answered plainly.

"You don't say," he said, looking up at corridor they'd entered.

Stretching out for more than half a mile in front of them was a large cavernous hallway leading to another metal door down the way. The sides and top of the path were uncovered stone, a large cylindrical hole cut roughly through the Earth. Except for a few construction lights and some odd looking plastic-covered wiring, the pathway was a cave, plain and simple.

"I know!" Felix said. "You people drilled all the way underground, building this massively expensive complex as

you went, only to run out of budget to finish this hallway at the last moment.”

Karen giggled. “All of the hallways look like this. We feel that having a solid conductive surface running through the entire facility is unsafe considering much of the work going on in the labs.”

The large door at the entrance slammed closed behind them. The noise startled Felix considerably.

“Come on,” Karen said warmly.

He followed the woman down the path, circling the tunnel’s stones with his eyes as they walked. The lights in the hallway had brightened as the door closed, washing the area with an eerie dull yellow glow and bringing with it a vacuum silence. He felt the need to speak to abate it.

“And what exactly is going on in these other labs that could cause your company to electrically isolate each lab space?” he asked.

Karen remained silent. He knew he wasn’t going to get much information from her. *That’s alright, he thought, I’ve got years to find the answers. Four long, long years, he thought, shuddering at the words in his head. Just remember the pay out, Felix.*

“Generically, I can understand your reservations about full metal paneling when dealing with large quantities of

dangerous energy," he said aloud, "but, honestly, maybe some fashionable nonconductive wood paneling in here would do some good? It's downright creepy in here with all of this ... " He paused and looked above him. " ... stone and rock. That's one more free for the suggestion box if you ever find it."

"The whole facility is laid out like this," Karen told him. "You already saw *the hub*; we call these *the spokes*. The whole place is like a bike wheel without the tire. Each door leading out of *the hub* connects to a tunnel like this one, and a lab behind that. You're only cleared to enter this one, by the way."

Karen and Felix approached the door at the end of the tunnel. It was identical to the one they'd just entered except for a small porthole window at what would be eye-level for an average man. Felix had to lean down significantly to look through it. Before he could see what was awaiting them on the other side, the door rushed open past his face.

"How do you keep opening these doors?" Felix asked, turning toward Karen with interest.

"There's a chip implanted in my skin."

"Your skin? Did I hear that correctly?"

"Yes. It transmits my security clearance to the doors I'm allowed to open. It's much safer than a key or card, which could be easily lost or stolen," she explained.

"And if someone was to steal your skin, I doubt your priorities would include the little garage door opener that was inside of it. I am, however, curious as to what happens when you or this company chooses to terminate your employment," he said. "Are these people comfortable with allowing you permanent clearance? And please don't tell me they'd extract it surgically."

"If there was a reason for my clearance to raise or lower," she said, "then they would update my chip remotely."

"But how is that possible?" Felix asked.

"Through a network of computers run by the facility that have the ability to transmit and receive data packets wirelessly," she said matter-of-factly.

"Amazing," Felix responded genuinely, lifting her arm and looking at it closely. He saw nothing out of the norm.

Karen playfully jerked her arm away from Felix's curious grasp. "Each lab is set up to interact with the network. I'm sure learning it won't be a great difficulty for you," she said.

"I hope not," Felix replied. He took a moment to consider the implications of networked data transferal. *Fascinating.*

Felix raised his eyes to the space before him and gazed into the room in which he was to live and work for the next four years of his life.

"Well?" Karen asked. "Is it what you expected?"

"No, but that's not to imply my dismay," he replied.

The room was well furnished, with a couch and a large, blue, comfortable-looking chair in its far side. Three tables surrounded by stools were at its back.

Amazingly intricate paintings of framed and curtained windows lined the walls, each with a different scene beyond the glass. One showed a lush tropical rainforest with a friendly looking jaguar stretching across a tall branch. Another showed what appeared to be a middle-class neighborhood in December. Snowflakes were falling lightly to the grass and someone had built a funny-looking man from them with a carrot for a nose.

Twelve of these complex window paintings adorned the room, and Felix decided to leave earnestly peering into them for later, during those times when he would inevitably feel the sting of boring confinement.

"Interesting decorations," Felix remarked.

"Their purpose shouldn't be difficult for you to ascertain. We are underground, after all."

"You've thought of everything, haven't you?"

"Not me," she said.

Felix left Karen's side and sat in the large black chair near the couch. It faced back toward the entrance. He noticed two small wooden doors along the same wall. He pointed randomly at the left one and asked, "Bedroom?"

Karen shook her head no and pointed to the right.

"Bathroom?" Kala asked.

"In the bedroom," Karen answered.

"Then what's over there?" he asked.

"Why don't you try the scientific method here?" she suggested. "You've already constructed your hypothesis; why not test it with an experiment?"

Felix peered at her quizzically.

"In other words, get off your ass and go look for yourself."

Felix stood from the chair and walked toward the left door. "Some host you are," he mumbled.

Karen giggled and followed him.

Felix opened the plain-looking door in front of him. "Impressive," he said at its contents.

"I'm sure you're going to hate it all before long," she said.

Thousands, if not tens of thousands, of foil-wrapped pre-made food packages were shelved and racked before them. The egg-shaped room bowed three meters deep with, as Felix had counted, twenty-seven horizontal shelves. A tiny stepstool stood at the base of the wall.

"This is enough sustenance for a lifetime, maybe two," Felix said. "I couldn't consume this much food in four years even if I was foolish enough to attempt it." He read the labels on some of the packages, trying to get a sense for the variety, or lack thereof, awaiting his future meals.

"We don't like making shipments from the outside," Karen explained. "As you can imagine, construction of this facility was already difficult enough to carve out without unwanted detection. Meals Ready to Eat are extremely lightweight with an extraordinary shelf life. And so, unsurprisingly, the company decided to bring them in all at once. You'll find that, if you stop and think about things long enough before asking questions, there's usually an extremely practical and logical answer to be found. There's a reason for everything the company does here. Everything."

Felix noticed a slight change in tone and cadence as she finished the statement. For a fleeting moment, he wondered if she was trying to tell him something. *Probably not*, he decided quickly.

"You'll find the water store below," Karen continued quickly. She gestured toward a wide metal door seated in the center of the floor. There was a small, knotted yellow rope attached to it. Felix pulled the rope toward him and looked down beneath the hatch.

"Ah, my own swimming pool," he commented. "How thoughtful of you. And such a lovely location."

The water beneath him pooled up to the brim of the small reservoir. It sparkled a faint green glow.

"I wouldn't recommend diving in there. That'd likely contaminate your drinking supply," Karen said.

"Drinking supply?" Felix replied. "Why is it glowing?"

"We've bred a special sub-species dinoflagellate which inhabits the water," she explained. "This colony is already into the hundreds of thousands. They keep the water hyper-oxygenated, and interestingly, chilled."

Felix touched the surface of the water with the tip of his finger. It was cold to his touch. "And they're safe to drink?" he asked.

"Not only are they safe to drink," she explained smugly, "they're actually highly beneficial to your physical well-being. Imbibing them will provide your brain with a heightened level of oxygen and a regulated temperature balance. They also provide aid in digestion and maintenance of your telomeres."

"Maintenance of my telomeres? You surely aren't implying--"

"Yes," she answered. "They slow their shrinking."

"Impossible," Felix responded.

"You'll physically age less quickly while drinking from this culture," she said.

He looked toward Karen and ran his eyes quickly over her face and body. While beautiful, he now wondered if a wrinkled crone was lurking just beneath the surface.

"How old are you?" he asked suspiciously.

"Seventy-six," she answered.

Felix's eyes bulged.

Karen laughed. "I'm only kidding. It isn't as drastic as all that. Think about it like this; you're giving us four years of your life. When you leave here, you won't have actually lost those four years from your aggregate lifespan. Maybe two point five at most."

"I'm not sure whether I should be impressed or horrified," Felix said, closing the hatch. He turned and left the room. Karen followed him to the workroom.

"There is something I still fail to understand," Felix said.

"Ask me anything."

"What am I working on and what am I working on it with?"

"This is your station," she answered, pointing him toward three long empty tables in the main room.

"I saw these before," he told her, "but unless I'm to be working on the observation of furniture mating habits across an extended timeline, I'll need a bit more equipment."

"This is a good time to explain how the system is going to work while you're here," Karen said, sitting on a black stool by one of the tables. "One of my functions here is to oversee your progress. As part of that, I'll be the liaison between your work and the company. You get to tell me what you need, whether it be test tubes or tiger testicles, and in most cases, I'll have it for you by the following day. Each morning at 8:00 A.M. I'll bring you the device and your supplies, and each evening at 7:00 P.M. I'll be back to pick up the device for the night."

"And what device is that?" Felix asked.

"Your project," she said, slapping the large manila folder she'd been carrying under her arm onto the table. "The Diaspora."

She opened the cover of the folder, revealing a blue and white schematic paper-clipped to the inside flap. The paper showed a small device at a 1:1 scale. It looked like a wristwatch. A magnified section detailing its face appeared in the lower right-hand corner of the page.

Felix bent down over the schematic and peered closely into the magnified section. It looked exactly as any watch face should, three hands seated on a rod over a basic metallic-patterned backing.

"I'm not quite daft enough to imagine this is simply for telling time, so perhaps you'll enlighten me; what am I looking at here?" he asked.

"The product of countless years of work," she answered. "But it's still not finished."

"Well, tell me what it's supposed to do and maybe I can fix it."

"Oh, it already works quite well," Karen explained. "What we need you to do is figure out how to power it."

"I've just had a divine flash of scientific inspiration," Felix said. "What we need is one of those little dime-shaped batteries."

Karen raised her right eyebrow high above her left.

"We can throw it right in the back. The tricky part is remembering which side is positive and which is negative. I suppose there's that little dash on one end to--."

"If the Felix Kala comedy-happy-hour is over, I'll continue," she stated impatiently.

"Please," Felix replied quietly, nodding slightly toward her.

"The Diaspora is a quantum transporter," she said. She looked coyly toward Felix and watched his mind ignite in response to her statement. "No more jokes?" she asked, smiling.

Felix remained still and stunned, extrapolating and processing the possibilities of such a device.

"The process is there, but we have no way to power it," she continued. "Every proof we have of the device's functionality is on paper."

Felix raised his hand slightly as if in class. "May I?" he asked.

Karen nodded.

"If what you're defining as quantum transportation is similar to my own understanding of the, let's face it, hypothetical process, then the power you require to achieve such an event is astronomical. You'd need ... " Felix paced his eyes left and right, performing rough calculations in his head. "I don't know, ten bolts of lightning, three power plants strung together like Christmas lights; I don't know. I just can't even conceive of--"

"You either need a tremendous amount of electricity," Karen interjected, "or the right *type* of it."

Felix froze. "You read my second-year dissertation."

"I did," she answered.

Felix brought his right hand to his heart and spoke half-jokingly, half-sincerely. "I'm touched."

"It was truly remarkable," Karen said with more ardor than she may have intended. Her cheeks reddened.

"And the only thing I ever did in school that got me something less than an 'A'," he muttered.

"But doesn't that just cement that you were on to something big?" she asked excitedly. "How can you expect someone else to understand something that you were the first to consider? It must be a truly amazing feeling."

Felix looked confused. "Honestly, I haven't thought about that paper since I wrote it. I was always told that

to pursue the theory would be a waste of my efforts, so I stopped, then I got into Curriculum B, then I ended up here."

"That theory is what makes quantum transportation possible," she said. "Dr. Lawrence had a similar idea at the start of his project. That's why he made the device into a wristwatch, a form perfectly suited to conduct the body's energy."

"Who is Dr. Lawrence?" Felix asked.

"He, um," she said, audibly losing the excitement in her voice. "He was the one who pioneered quantum transportation. He invented the device."

"Then I would very much like to speak with him if it's his project I'll be attempting to complete," Felix said.

"That will be impossible," Karen said sternly.

"Alright," Felix replied with thrift. Something about the tone of her response informed him that either arguing or joking about this topic would lead nowhere but trouble. "So where is this device?" he asked instead.

"I'll be bringing it to you in the morning," she answered. Something in Karen's voice had become deliberately colder, and Felix ran through the last few sentences they'd spoken at one another in an attempt to discover the culprit.

"One more thing," she continued, "and then I'll leave you to become acclimated to your new environment."

Karen walked from the room to the bedroom area swiftly. She soon returned carrying a small crate.

"And what, pray tell, is in that crate? I'm allergic to cats, you know," Felix said.

"It's not a cat." Karen placed the crate down onto the table. Her hands reached inside and reappeared a moment later holding a small tortoise.

"*Geochelone nigra*, if I'm not mistaken?" Felix asked, keeping his distance from it.

"Very good," Karen replied. "We've been calling her Isabela, from the island in the Galápagos that she came from."

"Isabela? That's a terrible name for a boy," he said.

"A boy?" Karen repeated, flipping the tortoise upside-down and examining it. "How can you tell? It needs to grow another ten years at least before anyone should be able to determine gender." She spun the tortoise back around and continued her examination.

"Trust me, that's a male," Felix said. "Now what is it doing here?"

"It's a requirement."

"Having a tortoise is a requirement?"

"We call them companion animals."

"Oh, good grief."

"Our studies have shown--"

"Alright, just leave it on the floor if you must."

Karen lightly placed the tortoise on the ground. It craned its head upward at Felix and made an odd sound somewhere between a meow and a bray one might find from a dinosaur.

"What was that?" Felix exclaimed.

"Isabela has a few quirks," she replied. "She, sorry, he came from another lab. He's been the subject of some testing."

"It won't exhibit any *dangerous* tendencies, I hope," Felix said, taking a step back from the small animal.

"No, no," Karen replied. "We're quite careful of that."

"Last I checked, you people didn't even get its gender right."

"An aberration, I assure you."

"So what other little quirks can I expect?"

Karen shrugged. Isabela stood on its hind legs and took a step toward Karen before immediately losing its balance and falling backward onto its shell. Felix raised his eyebrows at Karen.

"You'll be fine," she assured him.

"He'll need a better name. I don't want him growing up thinking he's a lesbian when the girl tortoises start to flirt."

Karen laughed. "Feel free. I'll leave you two to get acquainted." She turned and walked to the door. It rushed open at her approach.

"Karen," Felix called.

She stopped and turned back to him. "Yes?"

"Do you have a boyfriend?"

She looked puzzled. "That's an odd question," she said.

Felix shrugged at her.

"I'll see you at 8:00 A.M.," she answered. Karen turned and left the room. The door slid down closed behind her, impacting the ground below with a loud *thud*. Felix looked around at his new home.

"Four years, huh?" he said to the tortoise, now spinning slowly on its back like a weighted top. He reached down and stopped it before flipping it back onto its feet. It made an odd cooing sound.

"I'll take that as a thank you," Felix said. "Four years is a long time. Judging by your size, you can't have been down here for more than two years at most, and you're

already going crazy. You're failing to inspire much of hope for my future sanity."

Felix walked over to the big blue chair in what he'd just decided to be the living room. The tortoise followed near his feet like a dog.

Felix sat on the recliner's pillowy bottom cushion and stretched out his legs beneath him. The tortoise pushed its front feet against his ankle until he bent down and lifted the animal to his lap.

"What do you think, my little oviparous friend?" he asked. "Worth it?" The tortoise turned its head to the side and stared at Felix curiously.

"I just thought of a good name for you," Felix said. He placed the tortoise down on top of his thighs and fished a black permanent marker from his left pocket.

"I think I'll call you 'Calendar,'" he said, marking a thin black tally mark on the side of the tortoise's shell.

XIII.

As John pulled into The Napoli, he looked at his watch. It was a little past two in the afternoon. He sighed. There was no time to tackle a conversation with his mother before his next jump.

As he approached Ronika's door, he looked down at her welcome mat before knocking. *There's no place like 127.0.0.1.*

The first thing I do is go home, he promised, the second I get back, if I get back at all.

Ronika opened the door and stood in the doorway like a wall.

"You're back," she said stonily.

"I am," he responded, not sure why they were having this conversation outside.

Ronika lightly bobbed her head as if rolling a decision around the inside of it. Eventually, she rolled her eyes, shrugged and moved from the entry. John walked through, puzzled about the small encounter they'd just shared.

"That was, like, eleven hours," she said to him.

"I--" he began.

"He slept for almost all of the that," Kala interjected.

Ronika's body tensed.

"Outside in the grass," Kala clarified.

"Why did you do that?" she asked.

"I was more tired than I thought," John explained.

"Did you get some quality time with your girlfriend at least?" Ronika asked passively, sitting at her computer and resuming the video game his knock had apparently interrupted.

"We broke up," John said quietly. "We saw each other for five minutes and we broke up." He took his place on the couch and looked up at her ceiling fan as it spun. He tried to follow one blade with his eyes, round and round, until he couldn't. Feeling dizzy, he looked down to the carpeting.

Ronika closed her game and swiveled her chair around to face him. Her eyes appeared sad, but the rest of her expression was more difficult to read.

"I'm sorry, man," she said plainly. "That sucks."

"Thanks," he replied.

"What about your mom?"

"If I don't have long enough to explain *all* of this, I'm afraid it'll just make things worse," he replied. "I'll go next time."

"Sounds like I'm not going to see you much before--" she said, stopping before finishing the thought.

"You'll be with me the whole time," John said, jumping into the silence she left. "Or Mouse will anyway, right?"

"Not this time, John," she said. "Mouse can't go with you this time."

"Why not?" John asked, standing quickly from the couch.

"He's broken. I must have hit something when I was reattaching his arm. I can't get Mouse to hold a charge for more than a second. I need a whole new power source," she explained. "Then I need to replace some of the wires."

"Let's go to Radio Shack or something!" John exclaimed. "Come on, we have time."

"No, John," she said, "this is specialty stuff. I ordered it off the internet with the fastest shipping possible, but its still not here."

"You mean, I'm going alone?" he asked.

"I'm sorry, John," Ronika said sincerely, "I don't know what else I can do. I don't know how I broke it." She began to cry.

John was confused, but felt somehow guilty for the tears. He ran to her chair and bent down on his knees to hug her.

"Ronika," he said.

"I just," she managed between sniffles, "I don't want you to go out there by yourself, but I can't fix it. You might not even, I mean, this is the fourth. Things are getting worse." She wiped her running nose with the back of her hand.

"He won't be alone," Kala said. "I'll be there with him."

John forced a smile and nodded in agreement with the hologram, trying to abate her fears. She looked at John's face, then at Kala. She started crying again.

An hour later, John woke atop a wooden toilet seat without Mouse in his bag. He considered running his hand beneath him, but decided against it after remembering the unwelcome dampness of the public Port-a-Potty's seat a day before. Instead, he sat patiently for a few minutes, then open his eyes and looked around the room. Somewhat unsurprisingly, it was another bathroom.

I'm in a house, John thought. And a really nice house by the look of things.

He felt comforted by the normalcy of the location despite his run-in with Adam the last time he'd appeared in someone's home. Regardless of what situation awaited him on the other side of that door, he knew he could deal with it better in a living room than on the deck of a boat, or seated precariously in the back of an open-bed truck.

"You made it," Kala said, his hologram seated on an unseen chair. His arms were crossed over his chest and his face wore a tired smirk.

"What do you mean?" John asked, sniffing a nearby bowl of colorful potpourri.

"As I told you, we have no idea how far the watch will take you with each jump. If it goes too far, it will kill you," Kala said plainly. "I was, therefore, merely pointing out that I am glad it did not."

John decided against engaging in that particular discussion. "So," he said, "what do your remarkable powers of deduction tell you about where we are?"

"Judging by the room, its architecture, design, and contents," Kala answered austerely, "I can confidently conclude that we are squarely in the middle of a restroom of some kind."

"Yeah, but where?" John asked.

"I have no idea. I'm not a magician, Mr. Popielarski," Kala said. "Why don't you pop your head out there and find out for yourself."

"Fine," John said, sighing. "Just you and me this time, huh?"

"I'm afraid so."

John walked to the door and slowly turned its golden knob. After briefly peering out from its side, he stepped past it into the long, well-furnished corridor outside. The hallway was empty, but the sounds of muffled voices held faint in the distance. He looked to his feet, and found them standing on a red carpet adorned with golden-colored inserts along its sides.

Framed portrait paintings of important-looking men were patterned along the wall in front of him, some with small animals in their laps sitting as austerely as their owners. Between the frames were ornate candelabra jutting from ornate golden fixtures. Each candelabrum held three sticks, and each stick supported a small, controlled flame.

John approached one of the candles and blew it out. "More snobs," he commented. "Like the boat."

"Either that or we've time traveled to the Victorian era," Kala responded. John froze in place, terrified. "Oh,

don't be so absurd. I was joking," Kala said, "That would be impossible ... "

John shook his head in annoyance and followed the hallway to his right.

" ... with your current equipment," Kala finished quietly.

As John walked further down the corridor he passed seven other doors, each closed shut with a golden-colored doorknob. The sound of voices was getting louder, though he was still having trouble understanding anything specific.

He reached the top of a circling staircase and spied a man with a thin mustache working his way to the top.

"Lights out," John said.

"Roger," Kala responded, turning off his visualization.

The man in the mustache reached the top of the stairs and stopped in front of John. John stood silent, waiting for him to speak. The man with the mustache did the same.

After a few moments of awkward silence, the man was starting to look impatient and spoke. "*Puis-je vous aider?*" he asked.

John's eyes grew wide. After a few moments, he replied the best he could. "No?" he asked, unsure of what the man had said.

The mustachioed man shrugged and continued past John down the hallway. Once gone from earshot, John spoke quietly to Kala.

"France. I'm in France," he said.

"Yes, I think that's a fair assumption," Kala responded, invisible.

"Just great," John said, meaning the opposite. He walked slowly down the long, circling staircase. "You know," he said smugly, "Ronika speaks fluent French."

"As do I," Kala responded casually. "As well as other languages common to the area, Bourguignon-Morvandiau, Lorrain, Champenois, and most of Walloon."

"Seriously?" John exclaimed. "How am I the only one who doesn't speak French?"

Kala didn't respond.

"Well, you'll have to translate for me."

"Yes, that will go over very well," Kala said. "Nothing better to keep you incognito than a English-speaking watch hologram."

"*Shhh*," John said, "there're people ahead."

"Exactly my point."

"*Shhh*."

John walked downstairs into a large foyer. A massive crystal chandelier hung above from the ceiling. A few

people were hastily walking in and out of the area, most moving toward somewhere farther back in the house.

Suddenly, a young giggling boy crashed into John and hid briefly behind his legs. Another man, worried and tired-faced, walked swiftly toward the boy while repeating "Arrête!" between heavy breaths. The small boy let go of John's pants and ran toward the back of the room. The worried man begrudgingly followed.

John kept moving toward the door near the back he'd seen the others funneling toward. He put his hand over the handle, looked left and right quickly, and walked inside.

He found himself in a kitchen, mammoth in size and scope. Its scale was so immediately impressive that he turned his watch around the room so Kala could see it for himself. The doctor counted ten burners, two large ovens, two very large ovens, four identical toasters next to two identical toaster ovens, three different blocks of expensive-looking knives, four of each size of pot and pan, two refrigerators, one massive stand-alone freezer that opened from the top, one small microwave in the corner, two commercial-grade dishwashers, six sinks, and an incalculable number of wine glasses in a variety of shapes and sizes seated in low-hanging wooden blocks above the countertops.

There were a number of younger people in the room as well, dressed in stark black and white grab, preparing foods and taking them through the back door on large silver serving trays.

John slipped through the kitchen unnoticed, shadowing a server all the way through to the back door. The exit led him outside to a flat, grassy field. A wide white tent stood twenty yards in front of him housing 150 people beneath its shade. Most sat in groups of eight around square wooden tables dressed in white tablecloths. Servers buzzed between the groups delivering food, clearing plates, serving wine, emptying crystal ashtrays, and refilling the pitchers of ice water and lemon slices that sat center of each table.

John was pleased to see people his own age dressed somewhat similarly, allowing him to walk safely disregarded into the party. He moved toward the left end of the tent where the attendees were fewer and looked for a place to sit, maybe eat, and hopefully remain anonymous.

Two cool fingers lightly touched the side of his neck from behind. John jumped at the touch and whirled around. A girl of similar age stood behind him wearing a plain yellow sundress that whipped against her body in the light breeze that moved through the tent. Her hair was brown and full,

bouncing in large rings atop her shoulders as she cocked her head to the side. He decided immediately that she was the most beautiful girl he'd ever seen.

"Bonjour. Qui êtes-vous?" she asked, smiling.

Knowing he couldn't answer anyway, John took advantage of the few moments he had of the girl's attention and looked alternately between her eyes and mouth. Her eyes were wide and friendly, circled in a dark black liner. Her mouth was small with raspberry lips and he wished that she would speak again so he could watch them move.

"I don't know you," she said in a thick, but warm French accent.

He was surprised, but happy to hear the familiar words. "I'm John," he answered. "You speak English?"

She smiled. "A little, yes," she answered. "You are family?"

"I *have* a family," he answered, trying to determine the meaning of her question.

She chuckled at his response. "Yes," she said, "but not this one?"

"Oh, these people?" John pointed his finger across the occupants of the tent. "No, I don't have any family here."

"Then why are you here?" she asked, taking one distinct step closer.

"I'm just visiting," he answered.

"But this is a family, eh ... together. Where the family comes together."

"A reunion?" John asked. "A family reunion?"

The girl shrugged.

"Yeah, it's a family get-together. I understand," he said.

"So, no French?" she asked.

"No, sorry."

"But this is France?"

"I know."

She looked puzzled. "So, who are you?"

"John," he answered.

"American?"

"Floridian."

"Okay, Funny, come sit," she said. The girl took him lightly by the arm and led him to a table nearby where two other teens were already seated. They glanced at John as he sat, but only for a moment before quickly losing interest and returning to their conversation. The girl in the yellow sundress sat down next to him.

"My name is Amandine," she spoke to his ear. He loved the way she said her name. "That is my father," she continued.

"Who?" John asked.

Amandine pointed to a thin man in a light jacket on the other end of the tent. He was standing from his chair with a wineglass in hand.

"This is his house," she said.

"It's a nice house."

She nodded in agreement. "How did you get here?" she asked.

Amandine's father tapped his fork against the side of his glass loudly. Once the crowd quieted, he began to speak.

"What's he saying?" John whispered.

"Thanks to all the Abercrombies for coming and sharing food," she said, tilting an ear to her father's words.

"Like the clothes?" John asked.

"Clothes?" she repeated.

"Never mind."

"He says that it is important to be together. That we should not need events to be together." She listened to another few sentences. "He's just being boring now." She giggled.

A loud *clang* sounded from the kitchen. It was the noise of pots and pans colliding, possibly with the floor or each other. The sound interrupted Amandine's father, who

turned and looked toward the door. John tensed. The man turned back and continued speaking to the crowd.

"What did he say?" John asked frantically.

"A joke that meat was fighting back with the chefs. I am sorry, I do not know how to tell it well in English," she explained.

"No, I know what that sound is," John said quickly. "I know exactly what that sound is. You need to come with me. We have to go. Now."

"Please, slow down," she urged.

Two men appeared from the kitchen door, one with dark hair, the other with blond. John grabbed Amandine's arm.

"Those men, they're killers. They'll kill you, me, and everyone here. You have to show me the best place out of here. We have to run. Hide. Both," John whispered, slinking down in his chair.

"They what?" the girl asked, pulling her arm sharply from his grasp.

"Those two people," John said slowly, "are going to *kill* your family." He made the shape of gun with his hands and performed a shooting motion into the crowd.

"Are you telling the truth?" she asked, shocked by his words.

"Yes!" he exclaimed. "You don't recognize them as family do you?"

"I don't recognize you as family either," she answered sharply.

"Trust me."

Suddenly, the girl stood and screamed something in French at the top of her lungs. Her father turned and looked at the men approaching his tent. He asked them something in a demanding voice. The dark-haired man didn't reply. The blond-haired man coughed briefly before looking to the dark-haired man for instructions. Amandine yelled something else to her father.

"I don't speak French!" John exclaimed.

"She's not talking to you," Kala said. "And anyway, she's simply repeating what you told her to her father and the crowd. I'm predicting a fantastic diversion for you to make your escape through momentarily. I suggest you take it with haste."

The doctor's prediction was accurate, and the large French family stood panicked in near-unison upon hearing Amandine's worried announcement. Frightened squeals and angry yelling consumed air within the tent. People began moving hurriedly from their tables. The frightened ones moved out from the sides as the angry ones rushed forward

toward the men in grey suits. The sound of glass breaking brought John's attention to someone's table tipping over in front of him.

"Please trust me and come with me," John said. It was his final attempt to save her. If she didn't come now, he knew he'd have to go alone.

Before she could answer, the loud rattle of automatic gunfire overshadowed the commotion. Short, controlled spurts of bullets shot into the crowd, downing the first wave of men who'd stepped forward. High-pitched screaming competed with the sound of gunfire through the massacre.

"And now they have machine guns," John said. "I have to go, with or without you. Last chance."

Amandine stood still, watching more and more members of her extended family drop to the ground dead or wounded. She eyed one woman in particular, hit in the arm and struggling on the ground crying and squirming. As Amandine moved a foot forward, a well-placed spray of bullets entered the lady's chest and silenced her instantly. Amandine's stunned trance died with the woman in front of her. She grabbed firmly onto John's arm and pulled him away from the tent.

"Okay, come with me now," she said.

John didn't argue and let her pull guide his run.

What was I doing even sitting down with this girl?
John thought. *I knew those men were coming. What was I doing sitting down at all? More people dead because of me. This whole family, dead because of me. Generations of possible Abercromies dead because of me.*

The sound of gunfire continued behind them, but grew fainter as they gained more distance from the tent.

He berated himself frantically as they ran. *And now I've endangered this girl who's been nothing but nice to me. Maybe I should just go underground to the lab. It's not just me; it's all of these people. All of these lives on my shoulders.*

"Thank you," Amandine said suddenly, a tear flying from her face in the wind as she ran. "Maybe some could get away, like we do now."

John said nothing.

"And you saved my life, too."

XIV.

"Sixteen," Amandine answered.

"Me, too," John replied.

The teens were lying on their backs, staring at the stars that had just begun to appear in the early night sky spread like a blanket above them. Since fleeing to the center of the estate's vineyard, they'd been asking each other simple questions about anything other than the afternoon's tragic events. Amandine had spoken about her school, last year's trip to Scotland, and did her best to explain the concept of *terroir* to John, who knew nothing of wine and vineyards.

Sometimes during her stories, Amandine would accidentally drift into her native tongue, then giggle at her mistake before returning to English. She'd asked John about his own interests as well, but when he'd spoken to her briefly of computers and videogames, he'd immediately noticed an understandable boredom and stopped himself. After that, he'd been content just listening to her speak instead.

It was as if nothing horrible had happened beneath the tent at lunch, but John was happy not to speak of the blood-soaked afternoon they'd shared. Harping on the death

of this girl's family, crying, worrying, or panicking wasn't going to fix or change things. He knew the impact of what had taken place was going to hit Amandine eventually, possibly soon, and that letting her talk and laugh while she could was probably the best thing for her.

The lea in which they rested was expansive and verdant. John looked west past the vines and saw the last inch of the sun's top flash brightly as it descended into the horizon's edge. The light's glare obscured the back end of the vineyard, making its long, evenly spaced rows of plants stretching out toward the sun seem blurred and unending. He inhaled deeply through his nose. The air smelled of honey and flowers.

They'd neither seen nor heard from the Advocates since reaching the vines. Amandine had assured John that her father's grounds were enormous, containing numerous leas, stables, pastures, wine cellars, sheds, and woodlands to keep his pursuers occupied.

She'd also had the idea to hide flat beneath the vines, as they'd be able to see any moving shapes approaching them from between the plants long before she and John could ever be seen themselves. She said she'd learned of the advantage as a small child when looking for

somewhere to hide from her nanny. He felt lucky to have found someone so familiar with the terrain.

"John, no more avoiding," Amandine said. Her question broke the silence that had grown as the sun had begun to set. "Who are those men?"

John propped himself up onto his elbows. "Avoiding?" he said. "I'm not avoiding. I thought you didn't want to talk about it."

"Well, I don't," she admitted, "but I still want to know."

"They came for me," he said.

"Yes. Why?"

"They think I stole something from them."

"Did you steal?"

"No."

"Can you not say that to them?"

"No. There's already a gun in their hands by the time they get within two hundred feet of me."

Amandine nodded. "Why are you in France?" she asked bluntly.

"That question is a bit more complicated."

"Do you not have time to explain?"

"I was kidnapped," he lied. "A man brought me here to frame me and make those men think I stole something from

them. Now, I'm stuck here with no passport, money, or phone. And I don't speak French, as you already know. It's a terrible situation." John didn't like lying to Amandine, but explaining everything wasn't much of an option. This way was easier, he thought, and the lie wasn't hurting anyone.

"Framed?" she asked, drawing a rectangle in the air with her fingers.

"Pretend," John explained. "He wanted to make it look like I stole it."

"Okay," she said. "But, I still don't understand."

"I know," John said. "Honestly, neither do I."

She looked at him with concern. "What are you going to do?"

"I'll be fine," he said. "What are you going to do? I mean, after everything that happened. It's terrible. I'm sorry about your family." His next question was more timid. "Are you alright?"

"Yes," she said, "and I do feel sad. Very sad." She looked distantly toward the horizon, speaking to the aging sunset past the vines instead of John. "It is always a shock to lose someone whom you love. My family and I spent much time together. But what you must remember is that all of those moments we shared had already passed before what

happened today. I still have them in my memory, and now, all that is different is that I will have no more of those moments with them in the future."

Amandine sat up and stretched her back. She moved her eyes to John's. "It is sad I will spend no more time with them now, but is that something to cry for? Misery comes only from expecting. But, what if you expected nothing? A bird would be sad if she woke up tomorrow and found that she could no longer fly, but would you weep in the morning from the same? No, because you never expected to fly.

"That is how I try to live, without expecting. I try to appreciate moments as they happen, not just when they've gone. And if they do go, then that is life." She chuckled to herself. "*C'est la vie*. There is something beautiful about the short-lived things. If you expect them to stay forever, you take something beautiful from them."

The sun finished its fall from sight behind the vineyard as the night's moon slowly took shape among emerging stars.

John took a moment to digest the girl's words. He couldn't grasp their full meaning, but in that moment, he understood that Amandine's capacity for dealing with life and loss surpassed his own. Whether that capacity came from wisdom or callousness, he couldn't tell.

"I *am* frightened, though," she said, turning her body toward John's. "How long do you think we must stay here before things are safe?"

"I don't know," John answered.

"You said they've come after you before today?"

"Yes."

"What did you do then?"

"I waited and hid, just like we're doing now. Once I was in a boat. This is much more relaxing."

"You do not call the police?"

"I can't."

"Why not?"

"It's complicated. I'm sorry. I wish I could explain."

"It's okay."

"Listen," he said, "when I leave, they'll leave with me. And I'll leave tonight. Late tonight. Then you'll never see them again."

"You do not have to go."

"I do."

"Where is your family?"

"Florida, in the United States," John answered. His eyes followed a short breeze as it weaved through the girl's thick, chestnut curls. They bounced and tussled as it travelled them.

"I know where Florida is," Amandine said. "Do you live with them?"

"It's just me and my mother. We live on a small island full of old people. I'm the youngest person there by at least thirty years."

"Oh," she said. "So there is no one else in your life but your mother?"

"I have a really good friend who lives on the mainland. She's about thirty minutes from where I live," he answered.

"A girlfriend?" she teased.

"No," John said, "but I do have one of those, or at least, I did until recently. She didn't understand the situation I'm in and broke up with me."

"It sounds like no one understands this situation you're in," Amandine said through a laugh.

"Tell me about it," he said, stretching his arms and legs as if making a snow angel in the grass.

"I'm sorry she broke up with you," she said reassuringly. "How long were you together?"

"Twenty-five days, though the last three are something she might disagree with if you asked her that same question. Let's call it twenty-two," he said.

"I'm sure you'll find someone else."

"I don't know about that. She was my first."

"Your first what?"

"Girlfriend," John said, wondering what else she thought he could have been referring to. "Embarrassing, right? I shouldn't have told you that."

"I'm just surprised. It's not embarrassing, though. I haven't had what you would call a 'boyfriend' either," she said. "You wouldn't think it, but boys I meet want to start dating so seriously. They want to bind you to them; like we are supposed to get married someday soon and tell our kids how great it was that we found each other at such a young age." She shrugged. "What is the point of it anyway?"

John laughed. "Yeah, maybe. But you never know when you'll find the right one, so you may as well start looking early, right?"

"So, if you disagree with me, why did you wait so long to get a girlfriend?" she asked.

"Well, it isn't like I was sitting around rejecting girls until I was sixteen. Molly, that's her name by the way, was just my first opportunity," he explained. "Like I said, I grew up homeschooled on an island inhabited by senior citizens. It was hard to find a friend my age, let alone a date. My mom finally let me enroll in public school for the first time earlier this year."

Amandine looked at him sympathetically. "I know what you mean. I was homeschooled here. I don't get much opportunity to leave the estate," she said. "Was Molly special to you?"

"I think so," John said honestly, "but it's hard to tell."

Amandine laughed at the confession. "How hard is it to tell? She either was or was not."

"Well, I'm definitely upset about it," he said. "But then again, I've always had a thing for 'firsts.' So maybe that's it."

"Firsts?"

"Yeah," John answered. He rolled onto his side to face her and she did the same toward him. The sun was gone from sight, but a residual light from its setting hung in the air, turning the sky a fading purple. A cool breeze shook the vines on either side of them, surrounding their conversation with the soft sound of stirring leaves.

"I feel like there's just so much that I've never had a chance to do. Most of my life has been spent in front of a computer screen. That's even where I met Ronika, my one friend. It's only a coincidence we lived so close in real life. People say the internet is a window to the world, sure, but that's just it. It's a window. I've spent most of

my life looking at things, never able to touch or take them. I've read about things, and I've seen videos about them, but I've never actually done them. So, every time I get to experience something new, I try to take note of it, really enjoy it, since ... " John trailed off. He was going to finish his sentence with *I don't know if I'll ever get to do it again*, but instead, stopped and thought about the words Amandine had spoken to him just minutes ago. Maybe he did understand her.

John looked at Amandine's face in the emerging moonlight. Thick tendrils of her dark brown hair sailed softly in the wind against the side of her face. She was smiling at him, doe-eyed and contented. It was then that John knew he could have told her everything when she'd asked. He could have explained the watch and his adventures, and she would probably still be lying there, her face inches away from his, lying on her side in the cool thin grass, not judging him, smiling the same smile he was enjoying now.

John thought of the men chasing him and how, even then, in that perfect moment, they could appear to end everything. Yet, to even his surprise, he let the thought of them slide cleanly past him and kept his focus on the beautiful French girl in the yellow sundress whose gentle

breaths he could feel against his face between the gusting breeze.

"John," Amandine said quietly. Her hand floated to his and grabbed his wrist where the watch was stuck to him. The cool grip of her fingers depressed the small knob on the watch's side.

Was this what it was supposed to have been like with Molly? he wondered.

John suddenly realized that Amandine was speaking to him. Something had escaped her lips after his name, but he couldn't remember what it was. He hadn't heard it. He stared into her eyes, wondering what he should say when she leaned her face close and brought her lips against his.

John embraced her as they kissed, and his clutch sent both of them tumbling gently into the grass. They rolled twice beneath the vines before stopping with Amandine on top of him, staring down past his eyes into something beyond them. Her long hair cascaded down from her head and tickled the sides of his face as it swept lightly against his skin. He felt a drop of water land on his cheek and noticed that it had fallen from one of Amandine's brown eyes.

"Did I do something wrong?" he asked.

"No," she said. "But this is one of those times that we can't expect again tomorrow. I won't be sad when you are gone, but I will remember you fondly, as long as I can."

She leaned down and kissed him again, harder than before, and their lips remained pressed against each other while the purple sky faded into black and the moon shone full. That night in the vineyard, John experienced one more first, and from that point forward never again thought about Molly.

XV.

Ronika tackled John off the toilet the moment he reappeared in the America Offline bathroom at 3:14 A.M.

"I'm so glad you're here," she cried from the top of him.

John tried to speak, but his body was still in recovery from the jump.

"I was so worried," she said. "I tried to stay optimistic, of course, but it was almost impossible knowing that those men are out there. John?"

John moaned and fluttered open his eyes. "Huh?"

"Look, John!" Ronika said, picking up Mouse from the ground beside them. "It's fixed! Everything is working! The parts came in like thirty minutes after you left. I was so angry; I missed going with you by less than an hour! Thank goodness you're okay!"

She leaned her head down and tickled his nose with her fox ears. He sneezed. She laughed and dismounted him.

John slowly sat up and looked around the small room.

"So, what happened?" Ronika asked excitedly. "Did they show up? How did you get away? Where were you? A concert? A spaceship? That would be so cool."

"France," John replied. "At a family reunion."

"*Bor-ing*," Ronika said. "Too bad I wasn't there. I speak French."

"I know," he said, slowly standing back onto his feet. He crossed his arms, placing his hands inside of his armpits for warmth.

"Oh, I almost forgot. Look what I brought," she said. Ronika held out her couch's blanket to John.

"You're a life saver," he said. She smiled.

"So, did the men come?" she asked, quieting. "The Advocates?"

"Yes."

Ronika's eyes widened as her mouth puckered into a frown. "What happened?"

"They killed most everyone there," he explained. "I was able to escape with someone from the party. We hid in a field somewhere. The Advocates never showed up. I guess it's harder to track someone through the grass. I don't know."

"So pretty boring, then? Minus the reunion holocaust, I mean. How was ... " She nodded toward the watch.

"The watch?" John asked, still slightly dazed from his reentry.

"No," Ronika said coyly. "I mean ... " She did a silent, spirited impression of a tall man lecturing. John laughed.

"Oh, fine," John answered. "Right, Doc? We came to somewhat of an understanding, I think." There was no response.

"How was France, Kala? Bet you don't even speak French," Ronika jeered smugly. Still, he said nothing.

"Kala?" John asked. Ronika leaned in and examined the watch. She noticed the depressed knob.

"Crud," she said. "I think you turned him off. When did that happen?"

"I don't know," John said. "We can turn him off?"

"Certainly makes sense," she answered. "Pulling the knob out made him appear, so it's certainly possible that doing the opposite would turn him off again."

"I'm going to turn him back on," John said.

"Why?" Ronika asked. "Just leave it."

"He can help us more than he can hurt us," he said. Ronika raised an eyebrow.

John carefully pulled the knob out one click. The doctor's hologram appeared immediately.

"What in the hell do you think you're doing?" it yelled. "I've been stuck down here for over thirty years

and you're just going to turn me off, just like that? You can't do that to people. I'm in the dark down here!"

"I thought you said you had florescent bulbs," John said.

"I meant figuratively, smartass! How was I to know if you were coming back?" Kala yelled. "How can I monitor what's going on if you just arbitrarily turn me off?"

"Wait a second," John protested. "I didn't mean to turn you off."

"You didn't turn me off at all; it was the girl. I saw her hand go over my lens and then, *wham*, nothing!" he said. "How did she know about the knob? She's working with the Advocates!"

"What girl?" Ronika asked.

"Amandine," Kala said.

"Who's Amandine?" she asked.

"She's the one I told you about, the person I hid with."

"Seems like you two were about to do a little more than hide," Kala said angrily.

"What?" Ronika said.

John pushed the knob back into the watch quickly, vanquishing Kala's hologram instantly.

"John, what happened out there?" Ronika asked.

As John began to answer, a sudden wave of fatigue overcame him. His eyes closed, and he slowly crumbled to the floor asleep. Ronika leaned down over him and shook his body. He didn't wake.

Forty-five minutes later John opened his eyes to the sight of Ronika sitting against the wall of the bathroom, knees pointed upward to support her resting head. She was sleeping. John tried to piece together what had just happened.

Unable to reach an answer, he crawled across the floor and tugged on her pajama pant leg.

"Hey," he said lightly.

Ronika slowly opened her eyes and lifted her head.

"You're awake," she said.

"Did we pass out?" he asked. "I'm not sure what just happened."

She yawned. "You passed out. I couldn't wake you up, but you were breathing, so I figured you were alright. I just meant to sit down for a moment, but I must have dozed off. You were really tired, huh? I thought you were faking or something at first, but you really wouldn't wake up."

"Yeah," John said, sitting up from the ground. "I don't know. Did you turn Kala back on?"

"No," Ronika said bluntly.

"I'm going to turn him back on now, okay?" he said. "I feel bad. Like he loves to remind us, the guy's had no human contact in over thirty years. I don't want to leave him in the dark."

Ronika nodded in agreement, but the disapproving scowl hadn't left her face. John pulled the knob out from the watch's side. Kala appeared in a seated position.

"I'm sorry I got heated," the doctor said immediately. "Obviously, when the girl turned me off, it was an accident."

"It was," John said.

"It was *not* an accident, however, when you did so again, almost an hour ago," Kala said calmly.

"True," John replied, "but I only meant to for a moment. I actually, well, seem to have fallen asleep, or passed out, or something. I don't know what happened."

Kala nodded grimly. "Yes, it's the same thing that happened at Molly's," he said.

"I was just tired."

"Yes, but you have less control over that than you think."

"What are you talking about, Claw?" Ronika asked.

"It's 'Ka-La', thank you," he said. "Now, Mr. Popielarski, think about your body like a rechargeable battery. You have a portable phone, yes?"

"Not with me," John answered.

"Right, but you understand the way its battery works, I imagine," he replied. "When you first got that phone, I'm sure its life was long and impressive. Those are the numbers they probably used in the advertisements. But manufacturers aren't exactly forthcoming about what happens to a battery after even the first time you recharge it. Slowly, over time, its maximum life will get shorter and shorter until the time eventually comes that it doesn't work at all. It's that same process that's happening to you now. I can remotely adjust the power the watch pulls while in standby, but doing that won't effect how much energy the watch uses during quantum events."

"I need to ... wait, what?" John asked.

"The farther you jump, the more of your body's energy it uses," Kala explained. "And to keep you ticking, your body has to recuperate that energy quickly. Like the phone, however, the more times you do that, the worse your 'battery' becomes. That's why you're passing out. When you're low on energy you can sleep and recharge, or you can ignore it and you'll pass out. The number of jumps you've

been experiencing recently is difficult on that process, and it will only get worse."

"What can I do about it?" John asked.

"I would answer 'come to my lab and let me take it off of you to save your life,' but you don't want to hear that, right?" Kala said.

John stood silent.

"It's also how you die, by the way," he added.

"What do you mean?" John asked quietly.

"You drain, like you just did. But when it happens this time, you won't be asleep. Your body will just be lifeless, so taxed that regeneration will be impossible for at least an hour. Within that hour, everything in your body shuts down. Your brain goes first, then the other organs. I suppose the good news is that it will feel like going to sleep. Much like what you felt about an hour ago, I'd imagine. Yes, much like that."

The grim nature of Kala's explanation hung in the air for a few moments before someone decided to speak again.

"I don't want you to die, Mr. Popielarski," Kala said.

"I know."

Ronika put her arm around John and walked with him out of the warehouse toward the scooter parked in the lot. John stopped before mounting it and looked above him. The sky

outside was black and lightless. Thin clouds blanketed the stars and moon, obscuring any light they'd hoped to produce.

The sun will be out in about an hour, John thought. *That will be nice.* He didn't know why the thought passed through his mind.

"Don't be upset," Ronika said to him. "He's just trying to push your buttons."

"I can hear you," Kala noted.

"I'm not upset," John said. "We knew that anyway. Maybe not the specifics, but we knew. We're getting closer, you know."

"Closer?" Ronika asked.

"To whatever comes from all this."

"Yeah, I guess you're right," she said. She wrapped both of her arms around one of his and hugged it tightly. "What really happened out there?" she asked. "Who's Amandine?"

"Just a girl," John said. "In a way, she made me feel better about certain things. Her whole family died in front of her, and she seemed completely okay afterward. At first I thought it was weird--well, I still think it's weird--but at the same time, it made me realize that no matter how

many awful things come from all this, life will keep moving. Just as stupid and as funny as it ever did."

Ronika released his arm and turned from him, taking a few steps away. "I'm sorry I didn't make Mouse strong enough to stay together. If I'd done a better job, I would have been there with you."

John brought his eyes from the stars to Ronika, whose head was turned away from him and angled at the pavement.

"So, hey," John said, touching her shoulder. "Do you remember how I told you I want to spend more time with the people I care about?"

"Yes," she said quietly.

"I still need to do that. I have to go see my mom," he said.

"I understand," Ronika replied.

"But," John said, "I was wondering if you'd maybe go with me."

"Are you sure?" she asked, turning to face him.

"Yeah," John said. "I am."

Ronika beamed. "Well, of course, then, yes. Okay. Let's go. Right?" She smiled her head-cocked smile and took the keys from her pocket to offer John.

"You should drive from now on," he said, "I don't want to risk falling asleep at the wheel."

"Good point."

Ronika lifted a leg over the scooter's seat and leaned her slender body forward as John mounted the vehicle behind her. He put his arms around her torso and leaned his head against her back between her shoulders.

"Still tired?" she asked.

"I'm alright," John answered.

Ronika placed her left hand on John's arm across her belly. With her other hand she put the small key into the ignition and started the scooter. Her touch reminded him of Amandine's, and he thought back to their night in the vineyard.

"Do you know what *terroir* is?" John asked.

"No idea," Ronika answered, removing her hand from his arm to place it on the handle of the scooter.

They drove down the road and arrived at John's mother's short blue house just six minutes later. Her car was parked in the driveway. Ronika slowed and stopped the scooter next to the sedan. She and John dismounted and walked to the front door.

John tried the handle, but found it locked. He didn't know if this was normal or not; he'd never tried entering his own house at this hour. He tried the doorbell next.

"She's going to freak," John said.

"Probably," Ronika replied.

"I'm inclined to agree," Kala added.

"She's not going to answer," John said only a moment later.

There was a back-to-back marathon of *Starship Love* *Affair* playing, and though it was her favorite show on television, its frequent plot twists and intrigues could do little excite John's mother. Even while watching her characters fall in love or murder each other, she was stuck in delirium, caught within that limbo between dreams and reality. She hadn't slept more than a few short hours since last she'd heard from her son, and the caffeinated tea she brewed hourly was becoming less effective with each cup.

A doorbell rang. She examined the set of the spaceship on her television. *There are no doorbells in space*, she thought. *How strange*. The doorbell rang again. The second noise forced her slightly more awake. She sat up and swiveled her legs in front of her. *Oh, that must be my door*, she concluded. *It's probably the police again. Maybe they re-opened the case*.

She stood from the couch and shook her face left and right, trying to wake herself enough to hold a semi-lucid

conversation. Leaving her mug on the table, she dragged her feet crossing her living room to the front door. Bleary-eyed, she opened it and looked at what stood waiting for her on the other side.

She closed her red eyes tightly, as tightly as she could, and opened them again at John. After making his shape from the blur, she gasped. Choking back a torrent of nascent tears, she stepped forward and embraced him. He hugged her back with equal strength. They stood in the doorway in each other's arms for a full minute before John spoke.

"Hi, Mom," he said, his face crushed into her shoulder.

Reinvigorated and alert, she released her son and looked him over. He was wearing the same clothes he'd been wearing the night of his disappearance. She turned her head left to Ronika, recognizing her immediately from their sole introduction years ago. She noticed the small, black humanoid robot in the girl's left hand.

Her eyes travelled back to John again, this time seeing the small tears in his clothing that surrounded dried bloodstains and an assortment of bruises living across his body. Then, she noticed the same strange-looking

watch on his wrist that he'd found on the beach behind their porch.

"Let me make some tea," she said suddenly, turning sharply back into the house.

April 1st, 1974:

It had been almost two years since Felix had begun his work on the Diaspora. Progress had been gradual, but steady. Karen never mentioned anything about the speed of his progress, and so Felix had maintained his pace, working as quickly and as well as he knew how in the relatively short time he was allowed with the subject of his research, the large enigmatic wristwatch intended to transport a man from one place to the next.

Felix had tried to explain to Karen that he wanted more time with it, that nights of potentially break-through research were often wasted when he was interrupted mid-thought by her consistently punctual 7:00 P.M. arrival.

Like the end of a high school pop-quiz, Felix could almost hear Karen say "Pencils down!" when she visited him in the evenings, abruptly halting his day's progress to take the device from his laboratory. The visits had been so unvarying each day that, eventually, Felix's internal clock had become wound to her precision. Each morning at 8:00 and each evening at 7:00, he could nearly sense her presence five minutes prior to her arrival, saddling his mind with a constant, looming sensation of premonition.

But despite the impediment she brought with her, Felix had come to truly enjoy the few moments of time he could spend with Karen each day. Originally, he'd considered this due to the fact that she was his only real human contact. She'd been right about *the hub*, after all; visiting it was simultaneously boring and overwhelming. No one had time to stop and talk with him, and the mere sight of hundreds of people was an intimidating change of environment for one so often alone in his room.

He'd recently begun to feel a more genuine attraction to Karen, a feeling that someone may have for another regardless of whether she was the last person on Earth or one of millions. She was beautiful and intelligent to be sure, but not unlike other beautiful and intelligent women he'd met at Harvard. Perhaps it was the way she flattened her upper lip and widened her nostrils when trying to contain a laugh, or perhaps it was the fact that she could always admit when she was wrong--such an uncommon trait among intelligent people. Perhaps it was the fact that she'd been the first to remain in his life for more than a few passing months, and perhaps, Felix feared, perhaps that was only because she had to be.

He'd never in his life been good at understanding people, especially women, and Karen was no exception. He'd

tried his best to flirt with her on occasion, though his awkward efforts were usually met with an odd reaction and followed by him lamenting his attempt and telling Calendar about it later after she'd left.

There were, of course, those few and memorable times when she seemed as if she'd actually been warming to him. There were even those times when Felix was sure that it had been *her* doing the flirting: an oddly placed giggle at a bad joke, lavishing praise at the most minor of breakthroughs, and once, just once, a possible sexual innuendo veiled beneath a talk on Galápagos tortoise mating behaviors. Yet, it always seemed that at the peak of her warmth an unpredictable chill wind would blow between them, returning her to a cold and apathetic supervisor.

Historically, Felix had considered such amorous considerations foolish. The only reason he'd never mastered the wooing of women, he'd convinced himself, was because he'd never wanted to. Women, dating, and even sex were major time-wasters to some degree. The pursuit of women was nothing but a distraction from the truly important things in life--things like chromosomes, atomic orbitals, and bracket notations.

Once, during his second and final year of high school, Felix had actually, to even his own surprise, been with a

member of the opposite sex. The unlikely reaction had occurred primarily as a product of the female's exuberant interest and Felix's own lazy curiosity. A quiz bowl competition had been held an hour prior, and he'd, unsurprisingly, single-handedly decimated the opposing team in a record-shattering time.

The female in question had been the leader of the fallen faction, and had seemingly discovered herself entranced by the young, tall, intellectually confident boy sending her and her team home empty-handed.

The plump, golden-haired girl had followed him after the match and located him sitting outside by the back door while his ineffectual teammates claimed the small, golden-painted, poorly sculpted, trophy bust of Einstein's head as a reward for his efforts. She'd made the proposal, provided the contraception, and imposed the will necessary to cause the coupling.

Felix had found the affair dull, feral, and slightly base. She'd handed him her phone number scrawled on the back of a piece of torn notebook paper when they were finished. She never heard from him.

Thus far, Felix had been finding his experience with Karen much different than his previous, and admittedly, limited experiences with the fairer sex. Instead of

hampering his work, he'd actually found his affections motivating progress.

He woke each morning with the happy knowledge that he would soon see her again, and that perhaps that morning would be the morning in which he would finally discover the elusive secret keeping him from being with her; the secret of her cool, often cold composure. Each day, he could work with fervor on the device, hoping to share some new moment of eureka with her that evening.

Lately, though, he'd been short on new discoveries. He was getting closer to powering the device, but had reached a point in his research that required physical tinkering, nothing as flashy or impressive as the colored cloud burst of a chemical reaction or the spontaneous transport of a small piece of organic tissue from one side of his desk to the other.

After two years of work, he'd had finally discovered a way to efficiently provide power to the quantum transportation process. Instead of wastefully flooding the device with the already limited supply of energy in a human body, he'd realized that assigning each component of the process its own conductor would increase the efficiency of power usage by over three hundred percent. Doing so meant installing hundreds of thinner than hair-thin wires

throughout the center of the device. It was a process that he'd been working on for months, and one yet to be even half accomplished.

Each wire had to be affixed while beneath an extraordinarily powerful electron microscope, using tools Felix hadn't previously been trained on. Allowing other, more skilled, physical engineers into the process was highly impossible, or at least, that's what Karen had told him when he inquired. And so, he was forced to both learn how to attach the wiring, then master the difficult art in a relatively short amount of time.

Attaching that wiring was exactly what he was doing just then in his lab, with a familiar feeling of Karen's near presence looming over the work. It was almost 7:00 P.M. *It must be,* he thought.

Felix carefully moved his hand from underneath the microscope and wiped a bead of sweat from his eyelid beneath his glasses. He fluttered his eyelashes up and down rapidly, trying to clear his vision from a moisture-induced blurriness that had overcome it.

Just one more wire, he thought. *Let me get one more attached before--*

The loud door slid vertically open and the familiar clopping of Karen's shoes paced into the room in front of him.

"It's time, Felix," she said.

"Almost done."

"It's seven o'clock."

"Stop me now, and you'll cost me an hour of work starting on this again in the morning."

"Alright," she said.

After a quiet moment of focus on the intricate wire clenched between the jaws of his precision clamps, he processed her answer. "What?" he suddenly asked.

"I said alright," she repeated, sitting in the blue chair across the room. "Don't get used to it, though," she warned through a smile. "This is a special occasion. It's Castler's birthday and all the other Badges are celebrating in the *terrarium*. No one's paying attention tonight. We can get away with a few extra minutes."

Felix carefully drew a wire taut against the inner-rim of the watch's face and fixed it there temporarily while he switched tools.

"*Terrarium?*" he asked.

"Yes," she replied. "It's the only place down here that actually has plants. It doesn't seem like something

you'd miss, but after awhile, you miss the strangest things. I heard there used to be tons of plants down here, you know, for the oxygen."

"Don't you go to the surface? I met you there. Remember?"

"Only for new scientists, which is rare. And even then, it's a desert, man. You saw it."

Karen pulled the small wooden handle on the side of her chair, causing its footstool extension to spring out from beneath her feet. She stretched her legs on top of it and closed her eyes. "No plants down here anymore, though. Now they have some *machine* processing our air for us so they don't have to 'expose us to the unnecessary risks of superfluous biological contact,'" she said in an exaggerated, mannish voice. She laughed at herself.

"Have you been drinking?" Felix asked, remaining focused on his work.

"Huh?" Karen replied. "Why would you say that?"

"You seem different than usual," Felix said. "Bad jokes, impressions, leniency. All could point to minor inebriation. And did you call me 'man' a second ago?"

"Well, they're drinking at the party, which I know since I went into the wine store where there was only one bottle left."

"And now there are no bottles left?" Felix asked.

"Stupid party," Karen said.

"Why weren't you invited?"

"Someone had to tend to the rounds. I guess I'm the *only* one capable."

Felix finished attaching the last wire and began slowly reassembling the watch's casing.

"Normally, I wouldn't care," she continued. "It's just so boring down here sometimes, you know?"

"Yes, I've noticed," Felix replied.

She laughed. "It's like, the one time they actually do something ... whatever. Anyway, sorry for whining. What's new with you?"

"Um, same old, same old," he replied dryly. Felix finished closing the watch's casing and carefully placed it into the metal container that he always returned it to before handing it over to Karen for the night. He lifted it from the table and brought it with him over to the couch across from her.

Calendar, who'd grown considerably in two years, was lying between them on the floor, asleep. Felix sat on the couch and rested his feet on top of the tortoise's heavily tally-marked shell.

Karen opened her eyes as Felix approached. She stood from the chair, walked over to Calendar, and lightly began petted his resting head.

"He's getting big," she said.

"Yes. I worry about him."

"Why?"

"His species don't reach peak size until approximately forty years of age. He's halfway grown already, but can't be more than four. Whatever it is that you people were doing to him--"

Karen stood and walked to the couch angrily. "Hey! I didn't do anything to him or to anybody else, okay? I just work here. Everything that happens here isn't on my personal shoulders."

"Oh, I apologize for the phrasing," Felix said. "I didn't mean to imply ... "

Karen's eyes saddened at his non-combative response. "No, I'm sorry," she said, sitting next to him on the couch. Felix handed her the metal box with the watch inside and she spun it round in her hands as she spoke.

"Sometimes this place can make you kind of crazy," she said. "Who'd have thought being trapped in a box with 312 other people could make you feel so ... alone."

"You're not actually alone though," Felix said, wondering if this was his opening. "I'm here for you."

"I like you, Felix," she said. "I like you a lot. But you're not here for *me*."

"Well," he replied, now murmuring at a lower volume, "I could be."

"No, Felix, you couldn't," she said, leaning against him. She put her head on the back cushion of the couch instead of his shoulder. "You don't understand this place."

"Is there someone else?" he asked meekly.

"Sort of," she said absently. "But he's not here anymore."

"Not here?"

"Well, he's here, just, well, it's complicated."

"It isn't that Castler guy, is it?"

"Oh, God, no," she said, almost choking on a laugh. "But, it's not funny," she quickly continued, becoming instantly serious again.

"Have I met him?" Felix asked. "Maybe in *the hub*?"

"No," she responded. Then, she suddenly began to cry.

Felix glanced at her face, fast turning wet and red. He sat still and watched her sob, completely unsure of how to proceed. It was just so sudden. He could hug her, but what if that made things worse? What if she threw his arm

off of her in a fit? He could verbally console her, but what if that made her feel as though he truly *didn't* understand her, making them even more distant by result?

Locked by fear and indecision, Felix could only remain quiet, and the silence that resulted was terrible. Soon, she stopped crying and stood from the couch.

"I'm sorry," she said, sniffing up the rest of her tears. "That was unprofessional of me. Good night." She left through the door, and it slid closed with a *thud* behind her, locking itself for the evening.

Felix stood and walked to the door. Leaning down, he peered through its port glass at Karen. She was walking away from his lab quickly, almost running, with the small metal box containing the watch curled in her left hand. He sighed as she shrank from sight.

He turned away from the window and found Calendar looking up at him from near his feet.

"Yeah? Well, what would you have done?" he asked the animal. Calendar stood silent.

Felix walked to his blue chair and sat on it in reverse, his knees burying deep between the back and bottom cushion as his arms folded around its back. He looked at the wall now in front of him. One of the twelve windows decorating his laboratory was painted there. It was the one

he looked into least often, partially due to its placement and partially because it was the picture he connected with least.

Beyond the painted frame of the window was the outside of an airport on a seemingly normal, sunny afternoon. There was no strange biome depicted featuring some exotic animal or plant to catch your attention like the other windows, nor was an extrinsic climate portrayed, like a storm made of rain, snow, or sand. It was simply the front exit of an airport and the image of a man returning home, bags in hand, from what looked to have been a business trip. There was a woman there, too, running to the man with one arm open for embrace and the other carrying a small toddler equally excited for the pending reunion. It was a simple scene, the reuniting of a family long apart.

Felix wondered what his own return from this "business trip" would entail. He wondered who would be waiting for him on the surface with open arms, waiting to kiss and hug him back into a normal life. He, of course, already knew the answer. There was no one there waiting for him on the surface. No wife, child, nor family to speak of. No one to cry and to thank God that he wasn't actually dead for all those years; no one with whom to share this vast fortune he was earning by being here. There were only two Felix cared

about now, and both were underground with him: Karen and his tally-marked tortoise.

"It's not real, Calendar, so stop fretting over it," he said. "Just a painting on the wall, nothing more."

Felix dismounted the chair and walked to the computer terminal at his desk. His pet followed him happily and lay next to his feet as he sat. Felix powered on the computer's monitor and stared into the white text prompt blinking in the upper-left corner of his otherwise black screen.

"Let us see if we can find this mysterious man to whom Karen was referring," he said down at Calendar. The tortoise produced a happy yip and spun around in a quick circle before settling again.

Felix punched a flurry of letters and numbers into his keyboard and was soon presented with a list of the facility's security camera archives. He'd known nothing about networked computer systems when he'd arrived, yet only two years later had been able to break through the most technologically advanced security measures available for the facility to install. This relative ease of entry onto its internal network was probably the exact reason, Felix thought, that only *the hub* was video surveilled.

"Let's see," Felix said under his breath, "it would have to be recent, but maybe not since I arrived."

Felix scrolled through the archives until coming across the months in 1970. "As good a place to start as any," he mumbled.

Felix began to fast-forward through the footage, watching month after month until, an hour later, the year was exhausted.

He'd seen Karen often enough in the videos, though never speaking with anyone out of the ordinary. The likelihood of randomly stumbling across an answer in *the hub* archives was unlikely at best, but Felix was stubborn and had nothing better to do with the next few hours of night.

By 11:00 he'd sifted through a few more years of the company's archival footage, starting with 1969, then moving to 1971. Finding nothing of interest in either, he checked farther back to the months in 1968 and finally 1967 where he found no trace of Karen at all.

At least I know when she started working here. At least that's something, he thought. Felix let out an audible sigh that woke Calendar from his nap. *No, it isn't,* he admitted.

Defeated, but still awake, Felix scrolled back to the earliest year available on the network: 1961. He chose the first month in the list and yawned as he watched recorded

footage of company employees milling about *the hub*. The pixilation of the footage had increased while the frame rate had dropped, but other than the video quality, not much had changed in the twenty years since the facility had opened. *Or at least, Felix considered, since the cameras were installed.*

There were less people than he was now accustomed to, but those who were there still wore the red and blue badges over their long white lab coats as they did now. Like clockwork, at the 8:00 A.M. mark, a small army of Blue Badges entered the doors around the perimeter. He scrubbed forward and watched them all reenter the same corridors at 7:00 P.M. He played the footage forward and backward over and over again by dragging his cursor along the bottom timeline. The effect was entertaining, *like little mechanical birds in a cuckoo clock*, he thought.

When his eyelids grew heavy, Felix knew it was time to abort his unfortunately unfruitful endeavor and finally get some sleep. He had a long day of attaching small wires to small conductors, and a morning saturated with what Felix knew would be an awkward conversation with a newly sober Karen.

As he moved his cursor to close the computer's connection to the network, Felix noticed something so odd

that it snapped him awake. His spine straightened and his eyelids shot wide as he leaned in toward the screen to examine *the hub's* walls. From the four angles present in the footage, he could see the entire surface of the room's curved wall. One hundred and seventy-two doors were present, twelve more than stood presently.

Felix rifled through the subsequent months sequentially until coming across the first instance of a door's disappearance in the April of 1963. He moved the slider through the thirty days of linked video stream until finding the exact moment of the door's disappearance.

What in the ...

Felix monitored the time stamp as he slid between the door's existence and disappearance. Footage had been removed between 7:15 P.M. and 7:45 A.M. The transition was seamless, too, something no one would have noticed who wasn't looking for it. At 7:15, the "1" in the timestamp simply changed to a "4," and one of the 172 doors on the wall changed to flat concrete like magic. It was as if the door's removal had never happened.

Felix clicked out of the year and began to progress through the recorded timeline, observing each of the twelve disappearances individually. He found each event the same: at 7:15 P.M. the door was there, and at 7:45 A.M. it

wasn't. There was never more than one disappearance per year, and not all years had one.

Felix found the twelfth vanishing door in 1972 on Christmas Day. He was surprised to soon see Karen as the Blue Badge entering and exiting it each day, presumably taking care of the laboratory beyond it. When the timestamp changed to 7:45 the next morning, Karen was attending to a different laboratory as if the other had never existed.

Felix shut off the computer monitor and leaned back in his chair. He arched his neck toward the ceiling and shut his eyes. He sat like that, thinking and thinking, piecing and placing the data together, waiting for the answer to come to him. The contract, the job, the money, Dr. Lawrence, the design of *the spokes*, the doors, the food and water store, Karen's tears, and what she said about that other man: "*Well, he's here, just, well, it's complicated.*" There had to be a connection. *What's the narrative?*

He sat there, eyes closed, and he thought, and he thought, until an answer that accommodated all of the evidence finally arrived. His eyes shot open as the truth of things came to him.

XVI.

"Just like on Starship Love Affair," John's mother muttered, poking at Kala's hologram with her finger. "But he's not this small in real life, right?" Kala released an exaggerated sigh and dissipated his visage.

John, his mother, and Ronika were sitting on the oddly-patterned green couch in his living room. John's mom was wedged between Ronika and her son, who'd just finished telling her about the watch, the robot, and the hologram. He'd explained most of what he knew about the way it all worked, and had even told her some about the places he'd seen and visited. He had, however, left out multiple details and never so much as mentioned the Advocates, knowing that telling her everything would have led to nothing but more heartache, fear, and grief for his already worried mother.

John's mother had believed all of it, and how could she not? Ronika was there to corroborate everything, the small black robot from the stories was in her lap, a grumpy blue hologram had been standing on John's new watch until a few minutes ago, and all of the other details seemed to fit with the few things she'd already known. But even without the proof, John would have had an easy time convincing her

of most anything. She wasn't gullible, but she was in a highly vulnerable state, willing to happily cling to almost any explanation that accompanied her son back home.

"It all makes sense," John's mom said as she leaned back into the couch. "Well, as much sense as it can. But John, I still don't understand how you got hurt."

He was sitting as he usually sat on the couch he'd grown up with, pushed back against the corner by the pillowed arm with his feet up close to the rest of his body, knees bent and flat against the bottom cushion. His mother noticed a particularly mother-frightening set of small tattered holes along the denim covering the back of his calf, circled in dried blood. John noticed the expression it gave her.

"Believe it or not, it's an animal bite," he explained. "Remember, I told you about when I ended up in Canada? I got bitten by a badger there," he said, closely examining his own wound for the first time. "It's alright, though. It hurt at first, but it's okay now."

"A badger?" she asked.

"While I'm here, I'll clean it up and get some fresh clothes," he said. "A shower wouldn't hurt either."

"While you're here?" his mother asked worriedly. "Are you leaving?"

John looked down at his watch. "Mom, I don't have a lot of control over it. At 3:14, I'm gone again."

His mother's face saddened. "I thought," she said quietly, "since you were here, I guess I just thought that this was over. I thought maybe that's why you hadn't come back in three days, that you were just waiting for all this to be over before coming home."

"No," John answered solemnly. "I'm sorry, I, um, it's not over yet, Mom."

"Oh," his mother sounded. She picked up a mug of tea from the coffee table in front of her and sipped it. It was her third cup since her son and his friend's arrival.

"I didn't come back sooner because I wanted to have the time to explain it all," John said.

"But you came now, right?" she replied, forcing a smile. "That's what matters." She placed her mug back down on the table. "So, how does all of this end?" she asked.

"What do you mean?" John said, knowing exactly what she meant.

"How do you stop this? You can't just jump around the world forever."

"No, no I can't."

"I know you said you can't force it off your arm, but do you have some other plan? Some way of fixing this?" She

turned to her son's redheaded friend. "Ronika, you're smart. Have you thought of anything?"

"No," Ronika replied distantly. "I haven't."

"But she's been trying," John jumped in. "And we're close to figuring this thing out. She's been a great help so far."

Ronika smiled at John's defense of her.

"What about the man in the watch?" his mother asked. "If he built it, doesn't he know how to get it off of you? Why doesn't he try to help?"

"I *am* trying to help him, but--" Kala began before John silenced him with a quick push of the watch's knob.

"He's trying to help, like Ronika," John said. "Both of them have been trying to think of something for me."

"Okay," his mother replied. "As long as everyone's trying."

"I'm going to go take a shower and throw on some fresh clothes, alright?"

"I'm surprised you didn't go sooner."

John stood from the couch and exited the room, leaving his mother alone with Ronika on the couch.

"He seems more, I don't know, confident," John's mom said. Ronika nodded in agreement. "It's like he's the one

explaining everything to me, telling me that it's all going to be fine, even if it isn't. Usually that would be reversed. I wonder where that's coming from."

"He's had a lot to deal with these--" Ronika began.

John's mother interrupted. "Are you two--"

"No," Ronika answered.

"I'm going to get more tea," John's mom said quickly, standing from the couch. She picked up her empty mug and plopped the used tea bag inside. "You want some?" she asked, walking into the kitchen. "This blend is called Samurai Chai, and it's packed with caffeine."

"Sure!" Ronika answered back, usually perking at the mention of anything with "samurai" in its name.

"So what *is* going on with you two?" John's mom asked from the kitchen.

Ronika tried to answer her. "I don't know. Sometimes I think--"

"He's been spending a lot of time there, at your place, I mean. That's got to count for something. He obviously trusts you."

"Yeah, he does."

"How old are you?"

"I just turned nineteen."

"Do you live by yourself?"

"Yes." Ronika looked down at the scattered *TV Guides* across the coffee table. Most were open with various listings circled in a wide red marker.

"Were you one of those kids who couldn't wait to turn eighteen and move out of her parents' house?" John's mother asked.

"It's not like that," Ronika said. "My father died a few years ago. And my mother, well, I don't know much about her. I don't think I've ever met her."

John's mother finished preparing the tea and brought the two mugs back to the living room.

"I'm sorry. I should have remembered. John had said that your--"

"That was fast," Ronika interrupted, motioning at the tea.

John's mother looked down at the mugs as she placed them on the table. "I use a little instant boiler instead of a kettle. Boiling water is boiling water, you know? It's not as romantic as a chirping kettle, but hell, it makes a hot cup of tea in about thirty seconds. Still needs about five minutes more to steep, though."

Ronika picked up the purple polka-dot mug that had been brought to her and smelled the brew inside. "It smells excellent," she said. "Thank you."

"John can be an odd kid sometimes," his mother said. "He can be completely oblivious to certain things. I don't want to say he's self-involved. No, that's not it. He's just the sort of person who convinces himself of what's important and zeros in on it. Usually he's wrong." She chuckled. "About what's important, I mean. But that's just how he is. I find that usually just talking to him about things helps, if he *is* missing something, whatever that is. So, maybe what I'm saying is, just talk to him about it. If there is an 'it.'"

Ronika stared down into her tea and watched it darken slowly. She stirred the bag around the mug by its string.

"Thank you, for taking care of him," John's mother said.

"I haven't been, really," Ronika answered back, feeling more than a little uncomfortable.

"But you have," she replied. "He used to talk about you all of the time."

"Used to."

"Tell me the truth," John's mother said. "How dangerous is this? I know you guys didn't tell me everything. What are you two hiding?"

Ronika was taken aback by the suddenness of the question. "There are two men," she began to explain.

"Don't tell me," John's mother said. "On second thought, I don't want to know. Just ... you're keeping him safe, right?"

"As best as I know how."

John reentered the room in a towel as Ronika finished her sentence. "You guys have no idea how great that was," he said, approaching the couch.

"John, would you get dressed? We have company over," his mother fumed.

"Geez," John replied. "Sorry." He left as quickly as he'd come.

"See?" his mother said. "Oblivious."

"I guess," Ronika replied.

"I'm sorry for the inquisition before."

"There's a lot to take in."

John's mother stirred her tea with the bag still inside. "Hey, do you watch Starship Love Affair?"

"Oh!" Ronika exclaimed, lighting up. "I love Starship Love Affair. Did you see the last one?"

"Not yet," John's mom replied. "So no spoilers! I just haven't had a lot of time. I've been out looking for John, talking to the police, drinking tea--"

"Mom!" John said, appearing behind them again, this time fully dressed. "I forgot about the cops! Are we putting you at risk by being here?"

"Oh! No, I forgot to tell you," she said, turning her head back toward her son. "They're not looking for you anymore. Though, that's not entirely true. They still have a missing person report on you, but I can call that off."

"Really?" John said excitedly, climbing over the back of the couch.

"Yes, and I don't know much, but Tom, the officer in charge of the case, told me that they found an older woman at America Offline who was apparently always hanging around the warehouse playing with that board they have over there. They heard her talking to someone about how she was constantly having to reject Virgil's 'advances.' When they questioned her about it, they found some sort of high-powered Taser in her purse that she claimed she was carrying for self-defense."

"I'm sure it was to protect her from all of the muggers, murderers, and old-woman-rapists lurking around the island," John added flippantly.

"Anyway," his mother continued, "Tom put it together that perhaps Virgil had tried to hit on her, and that she zapped him. When they confronted the woman about it, she

became so frazzled that she had a heart attack right then and there."

"Oh, my goodness," Ronika said. "Is she okay?"

"No," John's mom replied. "She died from it. The police are writing it off as an accident and blaming her for Virgil's death."

"They're wrong, though," John said. "That's not fair. It was me."

John's mother placed her hand over the watch on his wrist. "It wasn't you," she said. "It was this thing attached to you. It's not your fault."

"I know," John said sullenly, "but, still. Now everyone thinks some poor grandma did it."

"Not everyone," his mother said, letting go of his arm. "And it's not like they're drawing up posthumous charges against her. They're just closing the case."

"John," Ronika chimed in, "I should go."

"Why?" he replied. "You don't have to."

"No," she said, "I do. I have to get back to my place and get Mouse ready so that it's online as soon as you jump. Plus, it will give you some time alone with your mom."

"Alright," John said. "I'll walk you out."

They stood from the couch and walked outside to where Ronika had parked the scooter.

"Thanks for bringing me," she told him.

John looked up at her and gave her a half-smile and a half-nod, seeming unsure of what to say.

She reached for him. As they hugged, she whispered in his ear. "You know this is the fifth, right?"

"I know."

"Okay," she said, releasing him.

"What's farther than France?" he asked absently.

"A lot of places," she answered. "But whatever happens, we'll get you back home again. We're a great team, right?"

"We are."

"Then I'll see you at 3:14. The next 3:14."

"Yeah," John said, starting to move back toward his house.

"John?"

He turned back to her.

"Do you think I'm selfish?" she asked.

"What? No. Why would you say that?"

"Sometimes I don't think my priorities are," she looked down at the ground, "what they should be."

"I don't understand," he said.

"Um," Ronika muttered, raising her head. "Forget it. I'll be on Mouse by the time you jump, okay?"

"Yeah," John said, looking puzzled.

Ronika mounted the scooter and turned the key in its ignition. "See you on the other side!" she said through a newfound smile. She revved the scooter and sped down the street, quickly gaining enough distance from the house to disappear from John's view.

John walked back into his house where he was greeted by another hug from his mother.

"I seem to be getting a lot of hugs lately," he said, his mouth again squished against her shoulder.

"Sorry," she replied, letting go of him. "I'm just so happy to see you okay."

"Me, too," John said. He walked with his mother past the living room and through her bedroom to the porch outside.

Two lawn chairs sat behind the sliding glass door facing the sea. Both of them sat, he in the right, she in the left. The breeze sailing in from the ocean was strong, and John lifted his knees to his chest, balling himself to protect from its chill.

The rhythmic crashes of the rolling waves were something John had heard daily since his childhood. Their sound was as natural to him as the air he breathed and John realized that at some point he'd become accustomed to tuning them out, accidentally not hearing them at all.

Tonight was different. He listened to each with a sense of renewal, fearing secretly that he'd neither see nor hear them again. He looked out across the water to the slowly flashing buoys that floated at a distance from the shore, still visible against the light from the half-risen sun behind them. He counted six from where he sat, one less than he remembered counting each day as a child. He wondered when the seventh had gone out.

John found himself calmed by the remnants of his childhood that enveloped him. He wondered why he'd never taken the time to appreciate them again as a teenager, as he knew he must have when he was five or six.

He looked left to his mother and recognized the expression on her face as the one he wore now: tranquil. He realized then that she had learned this technique long ago. She must have experienced this feeling daily, just sitting here, looking out at the beyond. Maybe he finally understood how she managed to smile each day, even while living in a place where no one respected her, where she

worked sixty hours a week serving them, and where she'd had to raise a kid by herself since someone abandoned her. He thought about what he'd said to Kala, that this house was the worst part of their lives. Perhaps that hadn't been fair.

A loud wave crashed in the sand and John remembered that Kala was underground. He hadn't had the chance to see or hear the ocean in over three decades. John quickly pulled the watch's knob out one click and whispered, "Sorry," quietly into the face.

"I--" Kala started to stutter before silencing. The doctor, John, and his mother sat together and looked into the rolling ocean without anyone choosing to speak for over half an hour. Eventually, John's mother was the one to break the silence.

"So, you've done it. You got out of here," she said. "I'm happy for you. I know it's what you've always wanted."

"Not like this," John said.

"We don't always get to choose how things happen," she replied.

"I know."

"Still, I'm proud of you. It seems like you've grown up three years worth almost overnight."

"Maybe."

"And that's all you needed, to get out there and see the world. Anything other than what I could give you here. Go figure."

"Thanks for believing me. I know it's a crazy story. And thanks for not being angry that I didn't come back sooner."

"I got your note," his mother replied. "But, I really had no idea what to make of it at the time."

John looked up at the fast-moving clouds above them and remembered scrawling the shortly worded note on a tissue with his mother's eyeliner. It seemed like ages ago.

"Will you come back here now?" his mother asked. "Now that I know everything, and now that the police aren't hopping around after you?"

"Sure," he said. "But what about Ronika? We've sort of been running things from her place. I know she's been by herself for a few years already, but now that we've been spending time together, I don't want to leave her alone again."

"She can come, too!" his mother exclaimed. "Tell her to pack a bag and come stay with us until this whole thing blows over."

"Really?" John said. "Okay! I'll tell her."

"Good," his mother said.

"So, hey, Mom?"

"Yes?"

"I know I always talk about getting off the island. And I'm not going to pretend like that's not important to me, but it's never been to get away from *you*, or anything. You know that, right? We have a pretty good life here, I think."

"Yeah, we do."

"Even if we are in the middle of *Geriatric Park*," he said. "Where dinosaurs still roam the Earth." His mother laughed alongside him at the comment.

John looked down at his watch. They still had a lot of time. His eyes weighed down and he fell unconscious, calmly asleep in the lawn chair behind his house.

It was another few minutes before John's mother realized her son was sleeping, and she didn't bother trying to wake him once she did. Instead, she quietly stood and walked back into her bedroom. Taking the red blanket from the foot of her bed, she walked back to her son and laid it carefully across him.

She look down at her sleeping child, and suddenly wondered if she'd lost him. Whether to girls, to the watch, or to age, their relationship had changed. Losing him was

something she'd feared since his father had left them almost seventeen years ago, and that fear had done nothing but grown as John had.

She wondered if her decision to stay on the island had been selfish. She wondered if homeschooling John until high school had been more for her own benefit than for his. She wondered if she had stunted him, and not encouraged him strongly enough to build relationships with people other than her.

At the peak of her doubts she released them. Looking at John now, she knew that for better or worse, she'd done her best. It was time to share him with the rest of the world, because it was happening with or without her permission.

For the first time in sixteen years, John's mother remembered that she had her own goals and aspirations. It was time for both her and her son to move on; not apart, but together in a way different than what both of them were used to. She thought of the possibilities that awaited her: a new apartment, a new job, maybe even a date. Maybe.

She peered out to the waves on the ocean, now glinting against the sun's morning rays. They'd always seemed the same each morning, rising from the sea and crashing in the sand, but the water that made them was never the same

water, and the shells and life that they carried were perpetually different, always changing unseen beneath their crest.

Helene, she thought, it's time. What was I always so scared of? Everything is out there waiting. It's out there already, just beyond the ocean.

John awoke hours later beneath a carefully laid red blanket. He looked to his mother, whom he found asleep on the chair beside him.

"I'll be back again," he said.

When the hands of his watch touched 3:14 P.M., Helene was still sleeping, smiling in dreams, and never even noticed the bright blue flash of light that surrounded her son's disappearance.

XVII.

John crashed into the side of a tall, sandy dune. For the first time since he'd put the watch on his wrist, he'd not landed peacefully on top of a toilet seat. Instead, he found himself prostrate, turned sideways, and implanted in a mound of sand.

Grains of that sand, swirling in the wind off the mound, entered his nose and mouth as he shallowly inhaled. He painfully craned his neck to the side and fought one of his eyes open. Rolling desert filled his vision as howling winds filled his ears. John heard a muffled voice calling his name against the swirling air.

"John! John!" Mouse called.

John regained more strength in his body and moved his left arm out to steady himself. The movement had an opposite effect than intended; he quickly lost his lodging and twisted down the dune with a small cavalcade of sand following just behind. He ended on the ground two feet below with a rush of sand piling down upon his back.

He forced a pushup and rose to his feet. As he opened his other eye, the shine of crystalline grains blinded his already bleared vision. Squinting heavily, he fished into his messenger bag and pulled out the pair of aviator

sunglasses his mother had bought him a year before. He found them with the frame severely bent and tried to shape them back into a semblance of their former form with his hands.

Must have happened in the Port-a-Potty, he thought.

With the frame almost back to normal, John donned the glasses and looked out across the sands. The landscape was prosaic, looking as if a lifeless programmer had copy-and-pasted the image of a generic sand dune over and over again in some lazy attempt at creating a desert panorama.

"John!" Mouse called again against the wind.

John lifted his bag all the way to his face and maneuvered its flap over his head to protect his mouth and eyes from the wind as he spoke to Mouse.

"Hi," he said.

"What's going on?" Mouse exclaimed, crawling from the pocket. The robot turned its head to the left and right before quickly ducking back inside. "I can't come out or Mouse will get sand in its joints. What is this? Some sort of sand storm?"

"It's not a sand storm," Kala replied. "Sand storms are much more intense than this. This is just a windy day in the desert. If it was a sand storm, you'd know it."

"Where's the toilet?" John asked.

"It doesn't seem like anyone is around," Kala replied. "I'm sure you can just go anywhere you'd like. Just please remember to turn the watch in an opposite direction."

"You know what I mean," John said.

"You must have jumped into an area with no nearby bathrooms," the doctor answered. "Honestly, I don't know. We hadn't done any tests in remote areas. Interesting results, though."

"Or maybe someone had been using that dune as a bathroom," Mouse added.

"Thanks for that charming thought," John replied, dusting as much of the sand as possible from his face.

"You need to move," Kala said. "The temperature is going to cause you serious problems before long."

"Actually," John shouted above the wind, "the heat feels great. It's counteracting the chill, you know?"

"I'm not talking about the heat," Kala said. "In many parts of Africa, sunset occurs around 5:00 P.M. this time of year. It won't freeze, but in your condition, the cold will be debilitating."

"Africa? Why not the Middle East or Australia?" John asked.

"Have you noticed that Cerastes Vipera over there?" Kala asked.

"What?"

"The horned viper," Kala clarified.

John lifted the flap on his bag and looked around. Soon, he saw a coiled snake watching him from just a few feet away.

"Ahh!" he exclaimed. "What do I do?"

"You see," Kala continued, "there are three primary varieties of the sand viper, but this one is specifically native to the African regions. Did you happen to notice those demonic-looking horns above its eyes?"

John had, indeed, noticed the demonic-looking horns.

"That's why I concluded *Cerastes Vipera*," Kala finished.

"Kala," John said, "seriously, what do I do? I'm freaking out here, man."

"I don't know, Mr. Popielarski," Kala said. "I'm not an outdoorsman. Just stand still and keep speaking loudly. Don't worry; it probably won't bite you. The sand viper isn't as aggressive as it looks, and their bite isn't generally fatal, even if it does bite you, which it probably won't."

"Great, I'm totally not worried anymore."

"We're most likely in the Sudan or Egypt," Mouse said, changing the subject back to geography.

"Very good!" Kala exclaimed. "Because?"

"Well, we're supposed to be going further with each jump, right? So, it would stand to reason that we've travelled somewhere east of France," Mouse explained. "If we combining that fact with Dr. Kala's assessment, it puts us in one of those two locations."

"Very good," Kala said. "There's hope for you yet!"

"I don't see how any of this helps," John said.

"It might help you more than you think," Mouse retorted. "If we're right then you barely jumped farther than France, relatively speaking. And if that's the case, then maybe you bought yourself another jump. Kala?"

"In the interest of honesty and disclosure," Kala said begrudgingly, "yes, this lowers the death risk of a sixth jump, though, only slightly."

"That's great!" John said.

"I suppose," Kala replied, "though regardless of if you were only to jump five feet left from here on out, a seventh uncontrolled jump would kill you regardless. You've only gained more time, or as I would describe it, more risk. Anyway, let's move on. Time is passing."

John peered toward the spot in the sand where he'd seen the snake minutes before, finding nothing but sand

there now. The viper's disappearance made him more apprehensive than its presence.

"Which way?" John asked.

"Robot?" the hologram asked.

"East," the robot replied quickly.

"Very good," Kala said. "And why?"

"I don't know," Mouse admitted. "I was just guessing."

"East, Mr. Popielarski," Kala said through a tired sigh.

John began to move with his back against the sun. An hour and a half passed with almost no discussion between the companions. The whipping wind blowing against the small microphones located in both the hologram and the robot made hearing anything that John could have said while walking impossible.

He looked behind him and saw the sun lowering. The air was cooling, and the effect of its chill on him was amplified tenfold. He turned his messenger bag to the front of his body and placed both of his arms inside it for warmth.

As the sun completed its dive beneath the horizon, John saw another desert life form in front of him. This time, however, though horned, it failed to inspire feelings of dread and panic. It was some sort of antelope,

completely white, save a pitch-black beard hanging beneath its neck. Two bell earrings dangled from its left ear. John cautiously approached it.

"Anuket, what have you found?" an old man called from behind the animal. "That's not water, you silly thing."

The elderly man stood six feet tall and was so thin that the uncovered patches of his skin showed John the precise shape of his bones underneath. He wore brown cloth around his neck, face, and head, and white cloth strips around his arms between his elbows and wrists. The rest of his garb seemed cut from a single piece of thick light-blue cloth held onto his body by three thin ropes: one around his waist, two around his shoulders under his arms.

"Do you have a name, traveler?" the man said.

"John," John choked out, not realizing how dry his throat had become in such a short time.

"Here," the man said, pulling a handmade canteen from the rope around his waist. The container was nothing more than two pieces of leather sewn together with an opening fashioned from a reed at its top. John accepted the man's offer and drank. The water was hot and tasted odd, but John continued to drink until the man spoke again.

"How long have you been out here?" the man asked.

"Not long. An hour, maybe two."

"Impossible," the man replied. "We are deep in the sands. Where did you come from?"

"I don't remember," John lied.

"Ra has tricked you," the man said. "This happens." He looked over John's strange clothes once more and looked up at the sky for some cosmic data invisible to John. "Okay," the man said. "Put your hand on Anuket's horn. You come with me."

John followed the man's instructions and held onto one of the antelope's tall, spiraling horns. It shook its head to his touch, and the bells on its ear rang loudly. John was startled by the beast's stir, but before he could let go of it, the thin man put a large, dry hand around John's and held it tightly to Anuket's horn.

"It means she likes you. Come. It is not far from here." The man removed his hand from John's and began to walk.

"Anuket is highly skilled at finding water, though she drinks little to none herself. Once, she waited over a year before drinking," he told John.

"Is that possible?"

"Of course!" the man exclaimed. "Anything is possible if the Gods will it so. And Anuket is special chosen of the Gods. She is theirs, and also is them."

"What's your name?" John asked.

"Thutmose," the man answered.

"Where are we going?"

"There," Thutmose said, pointing a long finger beyond a dune. Behind the sand and wind was a small hut built as one might expect a hut to be built if it were upon solid ground. Its walls were made of wood and clay and its roof was weaved with dried fronds and branches. It wasn't long before they arrived at its entrance.

"How is this here?" John asked. "How can something like this be built on the sand?"

"I have a secret," Thutmose said. "You can let go of Anuket now." John released the antelope's horn. The animal gave him a long lick across his arm. John wiped off the slobber and looked to Thutmose who was leaning down to the ground near his pet's feet.

Thutmose brushed the sand away from under him and revealed short, green and yellow grass just beneath it. Anuket leaned down and munched on the plants.

"I am built on solid ground. It only looks like the sand because you had not seen deep enough," the man said, winking his left eye. "Let us go inside."

John followed him through the entrance to his hut, ducking underneath a faded red cloth flap. The inside of

Thutmose's home seemed oddly larger from the inside than it had from the outside. At its center was a small circle of rocks approximately two feet in diameter. John approached and looked into it. Water rose to its brim.

"Anuket brought me here two years ago," Thutmose explained. "This is extremely rare to find. I have built my entire home around it."

John looked around him at the surrounding hut. Small slats of wood adorned the walls horizontally, supporting small idols, various plant leaves and cloudy jars. At least two sections of the walls seemed to be fashioned as altars.

"What do you do?" John asked.

"I walk the sands. Sometimes I find strange young men with strange clothes and give them water," Thutmose replied.

"I mean for money," John said.

"Are you trying to tell me that you are not paying me for this service?" Thutmose asked.

"Well, um--" John stumbled.

"A joke. Please." Thutmose gestured at a small woven rug next to his well. John sat and Thutmose did the same.

"I do not make money," the man said.

"How do you eat?"

"Sometimes I do not. When I do, I trade water for it with some of the roaming tribesmen."

"So you search the desert for water?"

"I am a priest," Thutmose said. "That is what I do."

"Oh," John remarked. "Your English is very good."

"Yes, thank you. It is actually almost my first language. I grew up in a city where it is very common," he explained.

"You left the city for the desert?" John asked.

"Well, yes," the priest said, allowing himself a small laugh at John's comment, "but not by choice." He paused and looked to the faded red cloth at the entrance. "Someone approaches."

"I don't hear anything," John said.

"You do not have ears for the sand. The wind is broken; the ground is stepped upon. You must sit quietly now. Do as I say," Thutmose ordered.

"You don't understand," John said quietly, standing to his feet. "I know who that is outside. We need to leave."

Thutmose grabbed him by the pant leg and pulled him back to the ground. "Sit," he said. "One does not run from one's home."

"But," John protested.

"Have faith," Thutmose said. The man stood briefly and sat back down cross-legged on top of the well at the center of his tent.

"John, go. Now!" Kala yelled from the watch.

Before John could move, the hut's flap was pulled open, revealing a man with a thick strap of cloth around his mouth and neck. His hair was the color of the sand and parted diagonally across his scalp due to a large scar where it could no longer grow. On his body, the man dressed in tattered clothes of varying sizes, some too small for him, others too large. In his right hand, the man held a large curved knife. His other held a large leather sack that rested over his shoulder and across his back. This man was not an Advocate. John sat still and watched him.

The man with the knife yelled something to Thutmose in a language John didn't recognize. Thutmose replied calmly in the same tongue. The scarred man stepped closer to the priest and waved his knife in front of Thutmose's eyes as if he had not yet noticed it. Thutmose remained seated, quietly listening as the man with the knife continued to yell. Thutmose said something more, and the scarred man lunged at him. His blade slashed Thutmose's abdomen, turning his robe red with blood.

John rose immediately. Thutmose, not moving from his posture or position, raised his hand at John in a gesture to stop. John slowly seated himself at the signal, unsure of what he could do to help anyway.

The man with the knife looked back and forth between John and the priest, confused by Thutmose's reaction to his cut. He fixed his sights back onto the well.

An uncomfortable feeling of helplessness washed over John. This man who'd given him water, listened to his lies, and brought him to his home was now injured, maybe dying, and John had done nothing to stop it. He looked again to the scarred man. He seemed crazed ... or was that fear?

Arms at his side, Thutmose stood as if his body wasn't spilling blood and walked to the side of his hut and lifted a small tree branch from one of the many thin shelves on the wall. John wondered for a moment if he meant to wield it as a weapon against the knife. Instead, he brought it to the man who'd cut him and began to speak.

Suddenly, he snapped the branch mid-sentence. The scarred man shook when it broke, and slowly moved backed toward the entrance of the hut. Thutmose carefully walked to his well, filled his canteen, and offered it to the man. He nervously accepted it and quickly dashed back to desert only a moment after.

Thutmose walked back toward the well and collapsed to the ground. John bolted to him and untied the thin rope from his robes. Beneath them, he could see the extent of the still-bleeding wound. The cut was long, but not deep. He unwrapped the cloth from Thutmose's left arm and dunked it into his well.

"Stop. Please," Thutmose groaned. "Wring the water back into the well. Do not waste it on this wound. There is only so much water." John didn't move. "Please! Do not waste it!"

John brought the cloth back above the well and wrung it out laying it carefully on Thutmose's wound.

The desert priest rose slowly, and wrapped the rest of it around his stomach. "Thank you," he said. "I shall be fine now."

"What happened?" John asked, still bewildered by the events he'd just witnessed.

"Before we were interrupted," Thutmose explained, "I was telling you that I did not leave the city by choice. My beliefs were not welcome there. First they mocked me, but soon that mockery, as mockery often does when not met with anger, turned itself into anger. Men threatened my life and desecrated my home.

"I fled into the desert, never returning, where I walked the sands for months, barely alive, trying to survive as an animal might. That is when I found Anuket, and when Anuket found the well. The Gods had spoken, and I vowed to never abandon their gift."

"But who was that man with the knife?" John asked.

"Just a thief, thirsty and scared," he answered. "I have never met him before today. He must have seen Anuket eating outside and guessed the reason for my hut.

"He told me that he would kill me if I did not give him my home and this well that it protects. I told him I would not leave, and that this well was a gift from Anuket. He raged, and as you saw, sliced my belly with his knife."

"What did you do with the branch? Was that some sort of curse?" John asked.

"Curse? No. A lesson," Thutmose said. "I asked if he was a strong man. He nodded yes and bared his knife. It was then that I broke the branch in front of him. I offered it to him and asked him to repair it. He did not understand, so I explained to him that any man can destroy, but only the strongest among us can heal and fix that which a weak man breaks. I then asked him to heal my wound. He knew he could not do so either."

"So, why did you give him the water?" John asked.

"Because that is why he came and why he carries that knife. I wanted him to understand that he could have had the water, had he asked, and that he could still have it, even after wronging me. I also did not want him to die. The man looked close to death, and being weighed in such condition would not bode well for his immortal being. All weapons weigh heavier than the feather on the final scales that balance us." Thutmose rose and rubbed his stomach where the knife had cut him. "Thank you for the bandage."

"Don't thank me; it's your bandage," John replied.

"Yes, but you applied it. Thank you," he said again.

"It's a miracle you're alive. Any deeper, and that knife could have killed you."

"There are no miracles, John," Thutmose said, sitting back on his mat.

"How can you not believe in miracles? You're a priest."

"The many Gods have shaped the world. The miracle, if there must be one, is the system that they have created. Ra is the sun that shines on *Geb's* grass. *Geb's* grass is fed upon by *Bastet's* cat. *Bastet's* cat is eaten by *Amun's* jackal. *Amun's* jackal passes the cat into *Hapi's* Nile, which feeds *Geb's* grass. It is a simple way to explain a complex system. One should not look at the world and see a

thousand miracles. Again, there is but one miracle, and that is the Gods themselves who have created a world where creatures, plants, rocks, and air can grow and develop to work together and for each other."

"You mean like evolution," John said.

"Yes, though I fear your definition may hold too narrow an understanding," Thutmose replied.

"Science doesn't bother you?"

"Why should it?" Thutmose asked. "Science enlightens people to the ways of the Gods. Priests study tirelessly for those truths in texts, so why should they not also study what they see before their own eyes? Is that not more so the gift of the Gods? Is that not worthy of our understanding? I am not well-versed in the sciences, but I do not damn their practice."

"Then let me show you something," John said, pulling Mouse from his bag.

"Hello," it said, waving its arm.

"*Ammit!*" Thutmose exclaimed, stumbling backward from the robot. "What is this?"

"A robot," Mouse said, walking toward him across the woven mat.

"I do not know this word," Thutmose said.

"It's like a telephone that can walk around. My friend is on the other end of it. It's just a machine," John explained.

Thutmose crawled toward it and held out his finger. Mouse latched onto it lightly and shook it up and down.

"Oh my," Thutmose said, laughing. "This is truly amazing. I thought I had heard a voice before that man came into my hut. It must have been you."

"That was me, actually," Kala said, appearing on the watch's face.

Thutmose's eyes widened at the blue hologram. "This is a man's soul," he said, staring at Kala.

"I hope it's not mine," John said.

"Very funny," Kala replied.

"This is the same idea as the robot," John explained, "but made of light instead of metal."

"This I will never understand," Thutmose whispered, leaning close to Kala.

"Boo!" Kala yelled, raising his arms like a Halloween ghost. Thutmose stumbled back quickly.

"John, if you do not mind the question, why are you here?" Thutmose asked.

"It might be difficult for you to understand."

"Perhaps," Thutmose said, "but speak truth, and I will know it."

John did his best to explain. "This watch on my wrist won't come off."

"Stuck?" Thutmose asked.

"Yes, and permanently as long as I don't have the right tool," he answered. Thutmose nodded.

"Every day, there is a time that it takes my body somewhere in the world, different each time. I can't control it. That's how I ended up here without a water bottle."

"How do you move? Do you fly?"

"No, I just disappear. Then I appear again somewhere else."

"Truly, this is a God's work."

"There is no magic deity at work here," Kala interjected. "It's just science, albeit complicated science for the likes of a hyper-religious rustic."

"As I have said before," Thutmose said, moving his finger through Kala's visage, "I do not believe those two ideas are separate."

"There are two men chasing me," John said. "They're trying to kill me. Usually they would have shown up by now. Maybe they couldn't track me through the desert."

"Unlikely," Kala said. "Don't ask me how to track someone in the sand, but if it's possible, they know how to do it. And that's not even accounting for the fact that this hut is probably the only structure for miles. It makes for an astoundingly obvious hideout."

"So, everyday this happens at the same time?" Thutmose asked. "A cycle of appearing and disappearing between different places in the world?"

"Yes," John said. "I told you it would be difficult to understand."

"I understand perfectly," Thutmose said. "You are on a journey of *maat*."

"*Maat*?"

"Yes. It is difficult to explain in English, or any language made of spoken words. It is reality. It is truth. It is the stability upon which we are able to exist."

"Enough of this ridiculous waste of time," Kala interrupted. "We need to move on. Who knows where the Advocates are."

"You're right, who knows?" John replied. "They may be right outside waiting for me. We're staying."

"*Maat* is balanced by time and cycles," Thutmose continued. "Your clock also operates like this. You pass from one place to another and back as *Ra* passes over *Geb*

and back through *Duat*, only to pass over *Geb* again the next cycle."

"I'm sorry," John said. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

Thutmose smiled. "Ra is God of the sun. He rises and he falls. There was a time when this was not so, and Ra stood across the sky always.

"There was a magical creature, Apophis, the serpent of chaos, who became angry with *Ra the Almighty* and sought to destroy him. Because he could not hide from the sun's light, he fled to *Duat* for his plotting, a place deep beneath the Earth where the spirits of those who died must always travel. Ra had become Pharaoh, let himself be contained by a mortal body, and Apophis knew that, as all men, Ra could not avoid traveling through *Duat* once his mortal body had perished.

"Eventually, the day came when *Ra the Pharaoh* was out of time. He could do nothing to stop the aging of his mortal form. His spirit descended into *Duat*, where Apophis lay waiting, expecting a weak, worried spirit, easily snared and destroyed. But Ra was not weak; he was accompanied by two companions whom Apophis had not expected. The companions were strong and wise. Apophis attacked the group, but, aided by his companions, Ra

triumphed. He ascended back into the sky, lighting it with his glory until the time came again to descend to *Duat*, where Apophis lay waiting still, magically healed from old wounds. It is the cycle that happens each day and the triumph of Ra is the light that surrounds us.

"John, I believe what you are doing is important. Do not let these agents of discord find you. Have faith that you do the Gods' work. They will watch over you and provide for you, as we watch over and provide for them. They will protect you as you descend and ascend." Thutmose stood slowly and collected the two pieces of broken branch from his shelf. He brought them back to John and placed them in his hands.

"Never rely on violence, John," he said. "But also, do not run." John opened his bag and put the pieces inside.

"Running is all he can do," Kala argued. "The men chasing him have guns."

"Losing yourself is a fate worse than death," Thutmose answered.

"And yet if one dies," Kala retorted, "one has no chance to find one's self again if lost."

"Guys," Mouse interjected, "this argument is pointless. We can't run. We can't go anywhere. Look."

Thutmose turned and looked at John's body. It lay unconscious on the ground.

"Does he travel now?" Thutmose asked.

"No, not yet. But this happens sometimes before he does," Mouse explained. "Kala, we can't leave, even if he does wake up. The cold will kill him and, if he passes out again in the sand, he'll drown in it. We have to stay."

"I won't argue your logic. We stay," Kala said, as if it were his decision.

Thutmose stood, then sat next to John's body. He remained there for the entirety of the night, guarding over John as he had with his well, watching vigilantly for the agents the boy had mentioned to arrive at his hut. They never did.

XVIII.

"Do you believe in God, Ronika?" John asked, clinging to her waist from the back of his scooter. They were on their way back to her apartment to pack some clothes and equipment before leaving for Longboard Key. John had told Ronika of his mother's offer for her to stay with them until the ordeal was over, and the news had made her overwhelmingly pleased.

Ronika was piloting the scooter again for their ride home. John didn't want to mention it, but lately he'd been feeling less resolute against the watch. Jumps had been taxing before, but the last two in particular had taken a real and visceral toll on him.

"God?" Ronika called back to John over the rushing wind. "Thinking about taking up an ancient Egyptian belief system?"

John laughed. "No, no, I was just curious. We've never talked about it before."

Ronika thought for a few moments before answering. "Einstein once said to imagine a child walking into a big library filled with books written in different languages. The kid can't read or understand anything she sees there, but she knows that somebody wrote them. She also doesn't

understand how the books got there, but knows that somebody brought them there, and that somebody ordered them on the shelves.

"Einstein said that's how humans are with the concept of God. Yes, the library is there--you're standing in it--but no matter how long you sit there looking at it, you'll never have the brainpower to understand anything. I guess that's how I look at it, too."

"I would have also taken a simple yes or no," John said. They both laughed.

"Even science nerds don't like yes or no questions," she replied.

"Why are people always quoting Einstein anyway?" Kala asked.

"Something about $E=mc^2$, I think," Ronika said.

"Which, incidentally, is wrong," Kala grumbled.

Ronika pulled the scooter up to her apartment. As she dismounted, John slipped from its back, knocking the scooter to the ground on top of him. Ronika ran to him and offered her hand to help him up. Once safely back on his feet, she carefully lifted the scooter back onto its wheels.

"Are you okay?" she asked.

"Yeah, sorry," John replied. "Just lost my footing for a second. I'm fine."

John brushed the dirt from his jeans and walked toward Ronika's door. She unlocked it for him and watched him move straight past the entrance to her couch where he flopped his body lifelessly upon its cushions.

"Tired?" she asked.

John leaned his head back and closed his eyes. "Just worn out."

"I'll just be a second, okay?" she said. "Let me grab some things and unhook my equipment. I can hook it up to your machine once we get to your place, right?"

John muttered something into the pillow beneath his head as Ronika disappeared back into her room.

"John," Kala said.

"I know what you're going to say," John replied, his eyes drooped closed. "I know, I know."

"I understand your frustration at what's happening, but this is like a shot at the doctor. You can sit there and squirm as much as you like, but you can't leave the office until you deal with the prick."

"And you're that prick, huh?"

"Actually no, my lab is the prick. Nobody wants it, but it has to happen. And it's the only way to save both of us."

"I thought we agreed not to talk about this anymore."

"Your body is degrading, damn it!" Kala yelled. "The next jump may kill you."

"Yeah? And why do you care? Are you trying to protect me or your own escape plan?"

"Both! Listen to me, even if you survive, you're in no condition to run from the Advocates. Think about how hard it was back at full strength! Now you're banged up, bruised and broken, passing out three times a day uncontrollably."

"I can manage."

"Do you not think it odd that they never showed up for you in the desert? Something is happening, John. It's getting dangerous ... and it was dangerous before."

"Maybe they gave up."

"Highly unlikely," Kala said. "Not giving up is commandment one for them. This game is over. It's time to end this. You need to leave denial!"

"We just left *de Nile*," John said airily.

"Great, now you're getting punchy," Kala grumbled. "Listen to me while you have the wits about you to understand me. This is a time for decisions. I don't think

it wise to risk a final jump. There's too much at stake for you to senselessly try to enjoy a final twelve hours of freedom. Do you want to see your mother and Ronika again? Waiting a few years is better than never."

John lifted his head and lightly slapped at his cheeks with his hands. He shook his head side to side and opened his eyes. "I'm feeling better," he said.

"If you aren't lying, it's temporary," Kala replied.

John took a deep breath. "Okay," he said. "You're right."

"That was never in question," Kala stated. "The question is whether or not you'll finally take my advice."

"What if you're lying to me?"

"Lying about what?"

"About me dying," John replied. "What if on the last jump, the watch would just teleport without me attached to it, or something? Someone before me had to have gotten it off somehow, and *they* didn't have your special little tool."

"True," Kala said, "but assuming the person before you was who I think it was, then that person is highly intelligent and probably figured out an alternate solution. No offence."

"That still doesn't address whether or not you're lying."

"This is true," Kala admitted. "All I can say is that I've lied about nothing thus far, and other than an admittedly strong motive, you have no reason to think that I'm telling you anything but the truth. I'm not a 'bad guy,' John; I'm just one more casualty of this awful situation. All I want is my freedom. You don't even have a concept of what thirty years is yet at your age. I think I've been fair with you thus far."

"You have," John admitted. He dropped his head to the cushion behind him. He dreaded what he knew he was about to say. He'd been dreading it since pulling out the watch's knob for the first time. "Alright. I'll do it."

"Good. Finally," Kala said. "Do you remember the numbers to position the hands or do you need me to give you them again?"

"I'll need them again, but not yet. I want to explain my choice and what's going to happen to my mom and Ronika at the same time. We're heading over to my mom's place now. I'll tell them, then I'll get the numbers from you, and then I'll set the watch before the next jump. Alright?"

"Fair," Kala said quietly. "I hope you can see that this is a wise decision that you've made."

Ronika came back into the room a moment later and slid onto the couch next to John.

"I'm ready," she said.

"So am I," John replied.

John and Ronika pulled up to his short, blue house by the sea half an hour later. Because Ronika had to drive, John had been recruited to wear her large pink backpack, stuffed to its seams with clothing and gadgetry. The backpack was taller than John was, rising above his head at least fifteen inches. Its extra height made the straps strain against his shoulders as the wind pushed against it. He'd told Ronika that he felt like a poor version of the Beverly Hillbillies. She hadn't understood the reference.

John dismounted the scooter and groaned as he lifted the bag from his back to hand to Ronika.

She took the pack from him and easily whipped it around onto her back. "Wimp," she joked past a quick smile.

They made their way quietly across the dew-dampened lawn to the front of his house. They were surprised to find its door half open.

John looked back at the driveway and saw his mother's small sedan still parked there. "That's weird," he said quietly to himself. "But I guess she's still here."

"Mom?" he said loudly, dropping a foot into the house. There was no answer. "Hello?" he called again.

Ronika slid past him and was the first to notice the living room. She stood still in the doorway as she scanned the scene, her motionless body blocking the entryway.

"What is it?" John asked. He looked to Ronika and followed her eyes to the room in front of them. He ran past her.

Signs of struggle were obvious. The small wooden coffee table in the center of the room had been knocked onto its side and the *TV Guide* magazines that had been stacked on top of it were now strewn across the floor, looking as though they'd been stepped upon. The large couch behind the table was standing firmly in place, but a large, damp, brown stain, probably tea, was splattered across its left cushion next to where John's mother usually sat. The television across the room was unbroken, but turned to the side and moved to the edge of its stand as if someone had hastily slammed into it. Three small blots of blood were settling into the carpet beneath it.

"Mom?" John yelled, growing more panicked than before. Ronika's eyes welled with tears as she looked around the room, hearing the fear in John's cry.

"They took her!" he yelled, turning back to Ronika, his chest huffing in and out. "Those assholes must have taken her. Why would they do that? How did they find her? She has nothing to do with this!"

"Kala!" he yelled at the watch. "Where is she? Where is this company you were telling us about? We have to go after her. They can't have gotten far." He began to pace back and forth, taking only one step each way before turning again. He repeated the motion over and over, fuming anger and fear from his body with each heavy step. The sudden, jerky movements made him dizzy and the quick, sharp breaths churning in and out of his lungs made it worse.

"I don't know, John," Kala said in quiet shock. "I don't know why they would take her anywhere, let alone *where* they would take her. I could understand them questioning her about you, maybe--if they could even find this place--but kidnapping her? I just wouldn't know what the point was."

"To get to me, to find *me*. To make me come to *them*," John said sharply.

"If they knew you were coming, then why wouldn't they just wait for you here? Why try something so theatrical and risky?" Kala replied.

"I don't know!" John yelled. "Stop being so damn *logical!*"

"John," Ronika said softly and slowly, "I don't think they took her anywhere."

"Of course they--" It was then that he saw one part of one side of a foot resting by a chair in his mother's bedroom down the hall. The rest was hidden from his view behind the corner of the doorway.

John stopped pacing and closed his mouth. He leaned slowly to his side toward the hallway, revealing a wider view of the foot he'd seen and the leg to which it was attached. He saw the glint of what seemed to be a thin metal wire around the leg's ankle, binding it to the chair leg. Everything in his narrow view was painted in blood, and nothing was moving. The foot, he knew, belonged to his mother.

John closed his eyes and brought his hand up to his mouth. Ronika and Kala remained ghostly quiet as John slowly inhaled. He released the first breath quickly, making room for another.

At first, the air he breathed quivered him, as if a cold snap had rushed suddenly through the front door behind them. He could hear nothing but the rhythmic sound of air entering and exiting his body; it was the noise of raking

leaves. With each breath he took, John's breathing shook him less and less until finally not shaking him at all. With the quaking ended, he opened his eyes and dropped his hand back down near his waist and walked slowly toward the bedroom.

Ronika watched the scene from behind John's couch, adhered in place, frightened to move. As John advanced toward his mother down the hallway, time slowed. The room melted and changed, morphing and reforming into scenes from her memory.

She was suddenly sitting alone on a small metal chair in a hospital waiting room. She was in her apartment's galley kitchen, halving her favorite recipe to cook for one. She was lying in bed, watching the digital clock on her nightstand for hours as the seconds and minutes changed.

She never saw her father's death, only those moments after when she'd first noticed the solitude it had brought her. She witnessed only those moments that had haunted her, and haunted her still, reminding her of the gaping hole that tore across her days.

John reached his mother's bedroom and closed the door behind him. The sound of the door against its frame

shattered Ronika's visions and brought the space back to John's living room.

Ronika washed over the back of the couch like putty and ended prone across its cushions, her head in her arms and crying. She cried for her own loss, but mostly for John's, and those moments of remembrance that were sure to follow him after today.

She wept for ten minutes more until John came back to the room, wet-faced and quiet. She did her best to wipe the fluid from her eyes, sit straight, and be strong for her friend. The charade was transparent, even to Ronika, but she knew someone had to try.

"She ... " Ronika began.

"She's gone," John replied solemnly.

"How ... " Ronika mustered, "How bad was--"

"Bad," John answered. "She was clothed--they were torn--but she was clothed. So that means, you know, at least."

"Yeah," Ronika said.

"But," John said, "it does look like, well, her fingers were--"

"Someone was asking her some questions," Kala worded for him. "And, it appears that she wasn't interested in answering them."

Ronika bit down on her arm, understanding what he'd implied. She looked at John's dead expression, then spied a tissue, carefully folded, in his right hand.

She dropped her forearm from her bite, leaving small indentations in the skin behind it. "What is that?" she asked, gesturing at the tissue.

"I don't know," John said. "She was holding it."

"She left you a note," Ronika said optimistically. "What does it say? Wait, sorry; you don't have to read it now, or at all, or to me. You know. It's yours."

"It's okay," John said. "I'd like to know. It's just the last thing she'll say to me, and I didn't want to be looking at what happened to her when I read it."

John opened the tissue and bit down on his lip. Ronika watched his breathing weigh heavier as his eyes panned across the note, shaking and convulsing again. His eyes must have run across the words five, ten, a hundred times. A small stream of blood ran down from his mouth from where his tooth pressed against his lip.

"It's not from her," he finally said. "It's from them."

Ronika sprung from her seat and slunk up behind John. Slowly embracing him from behind, she looked over his

shoulder at the note. It had been written with his mother's eyeliner.

SEE YOU SOON. ☺

John crumpled the tissue and threw it to the ground. He lightly removed Ronika's hands from around him and left the house by its front door. She waited a few minutes in the living room before following him.

She found John sitting against the wall of his small, bricked front porch, arms crossed around his knees and staring out ahead of him to the darkness of the road past the lawn. She sat across from him in the same fashion, keeping silent.

She wanted to help him, to find some magical combination of words that would ease his pain. She wished she knew anything about making this easier for him. She didn't know what people were supposed to say and do now, as there'd been no one to have said or done anything for her when her own parent died.

Except for John, she remembered. He was the only one. What did he say? I don't even remember. That's horrible.

John finally spoke. "It's not the time for grief. I can't shut down now."

Ronika sat quietly, worried that responding might lead his next decision. *He needs to decide what to do now by himself.*

"I want to bury her, but it's just not realistic. The neighbors will snoop soon, I'm sure. Then the police will come and take care of the body. Ronika, you can take the house. There's only one thing for me to do now."

John stood, but only for a moment before his knees wobbled heavily, and he collapsed to the ground, breathing shallowly and suddenly unconscious.

"John!" Ronika exclaimed. She moved over to him quickly and lifted his head from the welcome mat where it had fallen. She placed it in her lap and ran her fingers through his hair.

"No!" Kala yelled, "Not now! You! Ronika, you have to put in the numbers while he's out!"

"This isn't the time for your scheming!" she yelled back. "He just lost his mother! He's unconscious!"

"That's the 'thing,' though. The numbers are the thing," Kala tried to explain. "The one thing he said he had to do now. That was it!"

"Forget it," Ronika said. "I can't believe you'd ask me to just screw him over. Especially now!"

"Ronika, listen to me. Why do you think he said you could have the house? Does that make sense? And what else could he have been talking about when he said there was one thing to do?"

"If that's what he wanted then he would have told me," she said.

"But he just decided! Inside, right before he found his parent! He told me!" Kala protested.

Ronika's voice was cold and grim. "How convenient."

"You have to believe me," Kala said, panicking. "Look at him! He can't even control his consciousness anymore! He's going to die. Even if you don't believe me, you're capable of coming to the same conclusion of inevitability. Put in the numbers, you must!"

"No," Ronika said quietly, looking down at John. "The only way I'm sure I'll lose him is if I send him to you."

"You don't--" Kala started frantically. Ronika took John's hand and depressed the knob on the watch's side, dispatching the hologram immediately.

She stared down at John in the new quiet and began to cry again, raining her tears down onto his face like a storm.

She moved her hand to his cheek and smoothed the water from his face. "I don't want to leave you here," Ronika

said to him. "But if I don't set up, I can't give you Mouse on the next jump. I'd set up here, but ... " She looked back toward the house. "I just can't be here, John. Not alone. I can't. I'm sorry. I need to leave so I can be with you."

Ronika stood and hooked her arms beneath John's. She carefully pulled his body into the small foyer and leaned him against the wall there. Then she thought about the note he'd found in his dead mother's hand. *See you soon*, it had read. *What did that mean?* she wondered. She realized that she couldn't leave him alone here either.

"Fine. We'll stay, but we're going back outside," she told John. She lifted him again and brought him back outside to the porch. After propping him up in a seated position, she walked back inside.

Ronika traveled to the kitchen and saw a box of teabags labeled Samurai Chai on the counter. There was a mug in the open cabinet above the sink. She reached up and took it, noticing an over-used *Hang in There!* below a picture of a dangling cat on its surface. She filled the mug with water, then poured it back out into the small instant boiler next to the refrigerator.

While the water reached boiling point, Ronika reached for the box of tea bags. It was almost empty. She moved the

last bag of Samurai Chai from the box into the mug and waited for the boiler to finish. Thirty seconds later, she emptied the bubbling water over the bag. While it steeped, she searched through the drawers beneath the countertops. Soon, she found what she was looking for, a large serrated knife.

Four minutes later the tea was done, and she brought the mug and the knife back out to the front porch. She sat next to John, knife in one hand, mug in the other, and waited for 3:14.

April 1st, 1974:

Felix sat stunned in the black, wheeled office chair at his desk, unable to so much as consider sleeping. He hadn't yet worked out every detail, but was extremely confident in at least one of his hypotheses: the company was sealing its laboratories shut and leaving their operators inside when they did it. It had made so much sense once Felix had figured it out that he'd become angry with himself for not noticing it prior. Why would a company so secretive that they built a facility far beneath the Earth's surface trust a twenty-something with knowledge of their existence or the ability to recreate what discoveries they'd made while in the labs?

Of course they don't let the scientists free, he thought.

His head swam with the indicators he'd missed: the gross amount of food and water stores, the special sun-lights and oxygen processing; even Calendar was a breed of tortoise known to live upward of a hundred years. The worst of it was that Felix sat with the knowledge that he'd delivered himself willingly to the cell meant to entomb him.

And for what? Money? A six followed by a string of hypothetical zeros on a piece of paper? Who knew that so many nothings would actually add up to nothing?

An hour after realizing the truth, Felix let himself calm. He sat crouched on his knees with his back against the wall, oblivious to when he'd left the chair and crossed the room.

Having exhausted panic, Felix calmly decided to force his frantic emotions into practicality, trading his guilty self-loathing for proactive reasoning. He looked to his side and saw the painting of the man at the airport. There was no one waiting for him on the surface, but that didn't mean he wanted to spend the rest of his life in a concrete prison. The time for looking to past mistakes was done; he needed a plan to get out of here.

The watch had been an obvious first thought for escape, though after mere moments of consideration, Felix judged the option unrealistic. With the amount of information he knew about the company, and even more so now that he'd seen the doors, he was sure that they'd come after him if he tried to leave.

A company that goes to the trouble of kidnapping and imprisoning its scientists would certainly have contingencies for escapees. After all, they were dealing

with those whom they believed to be the smartest people on the planet--smarter, even, than they. Furthermore, all of the device's real-time locational data streamed from a tiny emitter buried deep within its circuitry. If he were to use the watch to get away, the company would immediately know to where he'd traveled. Even if he dropped the watch upon arrival, anyone hunting him would have a solid idea of where to start looking for him while Felix would have no money, direction, nor knowledge of the area.

No, they have to think they've won. There are no cameras in this lab; if they think they've got me, they'll never know to hunt me.

The safest possibility, he concluded, would be to leave the laboratory after they'd sealed it.

It wasn't long before Felix had calculated the only escape option viable. He would need to clandestinely create a second watch alongside the first and use it once his own door disappeared. The main difficulty, of course, would be requisitioning the necessary components from Karen without arousing suspicion.

Felix stood from the floor and rushed to his workstation, throwing open the drawers of his inventory, looking for anything already in his possession that could be used to clone the Diaspora. His best chance at going

unnoticed would be to ask the company for as few components as possible and ask for none that couldn't be explained by claiming constituent testing or repairs.

The first thing he found was the full watch casing that had been given to him for comparative spatial logistics. He'd originally used it for judging size and spacing when choosing new components. It was perfect. Felix looked down to his wrist, removed the leather watchband from his wrist, and laid it next to the watch face on the table. He had the vessel.

Felix continued to search through his inventory, finding only a few assorted pieces that could be used, or that could be made to be used. In the final red drawer of storage, he found a small plastic bag filled with circled wires sitting on top of an assortment of bolts and cords. He lifted the small, translucent bag out of the drawer by its top and sighed.

The wires in his hand were the first he'd ordered from the company eight months ago. Each was approximately as thick as human hair, and Felix had initially spec'd them as such when first commissioning their creation. They were the only component that had been specifically manufactured for his project and had also been the cause of the only chiding Felix had received since his work had begun. When he'd told

Karen that the wires he'd asked them to produce weren't going to work, she'd done little to hide the annoyance the company felt at having taken over thirty days to specially manufacture useless product.

Per his original idea, Felix had first installed and activated the hair-thick wires before requesting the new ones, but initial testing had showed that increasing the number of wires and reducing their thickness by half would reduce the energy required by its user by forty percent.

Without using new wires, as he'd tried to explain to Karen, the device could potentially cause bodily harm or death if overused. She had grumbled, but eventually relented and told the company to produce a new, thinner set. The Diaspora currently in Karen's possession held the new wires, while the old ones had been left for Felix's overage inventory.

I'd only be using it for one jump, Felix told himself. The risk should be minimal.

He placed the oversized wires down next to the empty watch face, band, and other components he'd scavenged. Using the thin black marker from his coat pocket, Felix began to compile a list of everything else he would need to make the Diaspora's twin. The list ended long, and after its completion, Felix assigned dates and a note to each

item for when and how he'd ask Karen to bring them to his lab.

For a moment, he stopped writing and considered the idea of simply telling Karen that he'd figured it out. Perhaps he could make twin devices and they could escape together.

Too risky for her, he thought. Who knows how she'll react? She needs to make her own decision about leaving this place. But maybe I can do something else in the meantime.

Felix opened the red drawers of his excess inventory and began to remove a new set of items: a thin, metal optical cavity, assorted colors of circuitry wires, a breadboard, two thick metal disks, two large circular mirrors, a small jar of gallium arsenide, a handful of small steel clamps, a power cable, a soldering iron and sponge, and finally another small plastic bag filled with tulip seeds. He lifted the bag in front of his desk lamp, allowing light to shine between the contents. He smiled.

Felix loved working with seeds. His first major breakthrough as a scientist had been made through DNA tests performed on the same type of tulip seeds he now held before him. Ever since, he'd never undertaken a project without making sure to have some on hand, just in case.

They were more than a good luck charm to him; often, they were actually practical. He'd asked for the seeds from Karen on the second day of his stay in the facility. He was hoping she didn't remember.

April 2nd, 1975

It was almost 8:00 A.M. the following morning and Felix still hadn't allowed himself to sleep. Instead, he'd occupied his time with a small project, something to keep him awake and busy while his mind cycled through the endless possibilities and contingencies of his escape plan.

Felix had thought again and again about trying to tell Karen his plans at many times throughout the night.

Just enjoy the time that you have with her, he imagined a fictitious friend would advise him. He'd never found any comfort in the ephemeral and saw nothing beautiful about never seeing Karen again after two years. But as much as he didn't want to leave her, he knew that it was much too risky to tell her the truth.

It could cost me everything, he'd reminded himself throughout the night. *Her as well.*

Felix had finally come to the conclusion around 4:00 that morning that if Karen was to be involved in any way

with coming events, she'd have to be the one to approach him, not the other way around. It would be the only way that he could be sure of both her resolve and the ultimate safety of his escape.

Felix snuck a finger beneath his protective eyewear and pulled a hardened piece of sleep from the corner of his eye. The substance had been creeping into his tear ducts all night, tugging on his eyelids and reminding him of how tired he was.

Tomorrow night I can sleep, he told the small green fleck on the tip of his finger. *And I don't need the discharge of some vestigial second eyelid to interfere with my vision before then.*

Felix flicked the mote across the room and returned to his project. In front of him stood a metal cylinder, nine inches in height. Two sides of it were open, revealing a spacious view through its inside. Two mirrors had been placed at the top and bottom of the machine, and between them was a thin plastic tube containing a shiny, powdered metal. A few circuit boards hid beneath the bottom mirror, serving as a point of connection for the two cords running into the cylinder: one a typical power cord, the other a blue and white multi-pin male input.

The door across the room whirred open. Karen approached him from the entrance, her eyes refusing to make contact with Felix's.

"Good morning," she said as she reached his workstation. "Here is the device." Karen placed the metal box containing the watch onto the tabletop.

"What is this?" she asked coldly, noticing the small machine Felix had built since last she'd been there.

"Karen, I--" Felix began.

"I don't want to talk about last night, Dr. Kala," she interrupted, looking toward the ceiling. "I would appreciate it if you would refrain."

"I wasn't going to," Felix replied honestly. "I was going to ask you to sit so that I could show you something." He gestured to the small black stool on the other side of the table where Karen normally sat during Felix's exhibitions.

"Oh," she said. "Good." She sat at the table and examined the small device with her eyes. "I'll ask again, what is this?"

"I'll show you," he answered quietly, a thin smile on his lips. He opened the metal box that Karen had brought with her and removed the watch from its inside.

"Watch," Felix said. "No pun intended." Karen's expected giggle was decidedly absent.

With the quick turn of four tiny screws, Felix opened the back of the Diaspora, and carefully removed a coiled blue and white cable from amidst the circuitry. He connected it easily to the cable coming from the cylinder he'd built the night before. Nothing happened.

"Well?" Karen asked.

"It will probably take a few minutes to warm up. And this might help." Felix found the end of the cylinder's power cord and plugged it into the plated socket in the floor. The cylinder emitted a slight buzz while a faint blue light appeared between its mirrors. Karen raised her eyebrows at Felix, unimpressed.

"Patience," he assured her.

"While we're waiting for that to do whatever it is that you think it's going to do, why don't we go over your requisitions," she said, pulling a large, thick folder from under her arm and dropping it to the surface between them. She looked up from her paperwork and made eye contact with Felix for the first time since the night before. The buzzing from the cylinder became louder.

"Well? What do you need me to bring you tomorrow?" she asked, uncapping the pen she'd pulled from her pocket.

Felix sighed, annoyed with her composure. He'd known that this morning wasn't going to go smoothly, but hadn't expected sheer frozen denial.

He pulled his list of the components he needed from the notebook located in the shallow table drawer beside him and listed each one to her. Karen nodded and wrote them down on the form in her folder, failing to notice the one suspicious component that he'd slipped into the middle of his list.

"Is that everything?" she asked.

"Look," Felix replied, shifting her attention to the buzzing cylinder. The dim light from before had become intensely bright, filling the machine completely as if it were water in a jar. The buzzing halted abruptly and the machine began to run eerily silent.

"That's what we were waiting for," he said. Karen looked into the small core of bright light. It was beautiful, and there was something within it, shadows behind it that seemed to dance against the glow. She looked through the light to Felix and, for a moment, saw him much older than he was now, speaking to someone, but muted past the machine.

"Don't," Felix said, breaking her trance. "In my experience, it's easy for people to be drawn toward quantum

fields, but what you see through them is often inaccurate. They can give the impression of foretelling the future, but there are no secret truths or answers there. You can sometimes see things on the other side as older or younger, infantile or dead. None of it is relevant, but the brain dictates a person's reality, and the brain trusts the eye."

"I know," she said defensively, averting her eyes from the field. "At first, I just wasn't sure what I was looking at."

"Then you probably also know," Felix continued, "that the effect occurs because everything and everyone exists in different states simultaneously. And that, of course, is the theory behind this watch." He raised the Diaspora into his hands, careful not to disconnect the cable. "The device doesn't actually make you teleport; it simply changes your state. Do you want to use it to travel to China? Well, you're already in China. You're simultaneously at every location you could be. All this device does," he said, placing it carefully back down onto the table, "is force you between those states. And because an entity can't perceivably co-exist in two states, the user appears to disappear from where they started."

"Yes, you've said the same in your reports," Karen replied. "But I still don't understand what this thing is that you've built. A quantum field generator? Why?"

"While looking through the field can cause odd visual apparitions, physically touching or entering it can cause an actual change in state. If you can understand that you exist everywhere at once, then you can also understand that you exist every *when* at once as well. At this exact moment you are an infant, a teen, and an aging senior, all at the same time. We only perceive the young, beautiful version of you because that's where our perceived realities intersect with each other. That's the constraint and function of time."

Felix looked past the light to Karen and saw her as she'd been at sixteen: short and pimpled. He chuckled quietly to himself and continued.

"Quantum fields such as these have no interaction with linear time, so entering them will cause each state to exist simultaneously, even in our reality. But because we can only perceive one state at a time, as I stated before, we can actually take something and give it the appearance of aging or regressing. When we remove it from the field, that illusion becomes what we then perceive as reality. Are you still with me?"

"I believe so," she said quietly. "But isn't this dangerous? Can't we cause some form of paradox that risks the entire fabric of space and time?"

"Rubbish," Felix said. "Hollywood stuff. It's the same as time travel. You can't actually create a paradox even if you were to affect something. Everything we do, even outside of an open quantum field, is causing major implications everywhere in the universe. Think of your life as an infinitely complex spider web. Each strand in that web represents a different path. One strand might have you elected President; the one beside it has you wearing red shoes on a Tuesday.

"Your life, as you know it, is a dewdrop sliding down the web. Time is gravity, pulling it across the strands. Which strands will it travel across as it falls? Everything from which country wins a world war to how much butter you put on your toast yesterday effects the drop's direction.

"Now, imagine the same web for everyone and everything in the universe. And to make things more complicated still, imagine them all intersecting with each other at different points. There's exactly one point where every other web intersects with your own, and that's the reality that you're able to perceive at any given time. If consequences follow our use of this small quantum field in front of us,

then the change would be as unperceivable to us as the consequences caused by someone sneezing in the U.S.S.R. Are we changing things by opening this field and playing with it? Of course. Are there world ending repercussions? No.

"Now, the reason for all of this." Felix took the small bag of tulip seeds from his pocket. He carefully spilled a few onto the table and lifted one from the group with a long pair of steel pincers.

Slowly, he moved the seed from the table into the blue light of the cylinder. Karen watched as he released it and saw the seed remain supported within the light, floating buoyant within it, slightly bobbing and warbling against its energy. Felix removed the pincers, and Karen looked in amazement to the tips of the tool, now rusted and bent. As Felix set the pincers down, its powdery tips crumbled from the handle.

"The seed, not the tool," Felix said quietly. Karen quickly returned her attention to the glowing cylinder. The seed's movement had intensified since she'd looked away.

She moved her face closer to the light as the seed coat shook and split open at its center. What appeared to be a small white tentacle emerged from the newly created opening in its shell. The tentacle, now more obviously a root, twisted and turned, soon joined by other smaller

roots both beside it and on its sides. Then: bright green, shooting out tall from a white base, curving around itself like soft, curled paper. The thin spiral leaves grew taller and taller, unfurling and expanding outward to the height of the machine.

Felix sat back in his chair and watched the scene unfold with an equal intensity as Karen, but focused his attention on the beautiful woman sitting across from him and her reaction to the flower instead of the machine. He'd already seen his own parlor trick many times in the past, and watching her face light up, as his own had many years ago, was much more rewarding. Then, he saw her smile.

I knew you were hiding that somewhere, he thought, victorious.

The leaves and stalk had finished growing and a small yellow bulb was now showing from the top of the leaves, as a child peering above the edge of its blanket. The petals expanded outward in a burst before settling into a rounded cup shape.

Felix detached the power cord with his foot and placed his hand beside the machine. As the blue light faded from the cylinder, a newly formed tulip dropped lightly into his open hand. He spun it once quickly between his fingers and offered it to Karen, still in shock from the accelerated

growth. She looked apprehensively at the tulip before her and moved her eyes above it to Felix. He nodded reassuringly.

Carefully, she took the flower by its stem and lifted its petals to her face. She breathed in heavily through her nose.

"It smells real," she said under her breath.

"It *is* real," he said, pleased with himself.

She lightly placed the flower across her open folder on the table in front of her.

"Why did you do this?" she asked, looking down at the tulip.

"For you," he answered. "You said you missed the plants."

"It's not for the device? You built this whole machine just for this flower?"

"Yes."

Karen sat across from him, motionless, staring down to the beautiful yellow petals in front of her. She closed her eyes. Felix watched intently as her brow began to furrow and her lips began to pucker. He'd seen this face before. It was the face she'd made before crying on his couch last night. She was going to cry again, and this time he would comfort her. This time he would hold her and speak to her.

He'd tell her that everything would work out in the end, and that she didn't have to be scared of the feelings they shared. This time, he was ready.

Karen slammed her folder closed, crushing and flattening the tulip between its pages. The noise jarred Felix to attention.

"Listen to me, Felix," she said, her eyes dry and fixed upon him. "I cannot do this. You have to stop. We can't be friends, and we can't be more. There are things at work that you cannot understand. This is the last time you'll see me. I'm transferring labs. Good luck with the device." She stood and slipped the folder underneath her arm.

"Wait," Felix exclaimed, slamming his legs into the table as he raced to stand. "What do you mean, another lab? Are you leaving the facility?"

"No," she answered, walking to the exit and refusing to look back as she spoke. "I'm just working with a different scientist and project. It's better this way. If you see me in *the hub*, don't say hello."

"Karen," Felix called to her against his better judgment.

She paused briefly, standing still, looking forward, allowing him a final sentence.

"Maybe someday," he said, "when we both get out of here, we'll meet on the surface and things can be different."

"I doubt it," she said quietly. And then, she was gone.

XIX.

John was running through a flowing field beneath the sun. Tall varieties of grass lightly rubbed against the skin on his legs left uncovered by the shorts he wore. He didn't remember waking or why he was running. The only thing John understood was that he was on his way toward something. He shielded his eyes from the sun and peered out in front of him. A hazy figure jumped in the distance, waving him onward.

John removed his hand from his eyes, revealing a purple sky halfway through sunset. He looked to his right and saw Ronika there, running alongside him. She was wearing a white dress, feminine in its lacey trim and collar.

He looked ahead for the figure in the distance, and saw his mother. She was sitting on their couch with its back turned from him. He tried to call out to her, but his voice held no volume.

The sun had dropped from the sky now, and the stars had appeared in force above him. The moon shone on his mother like a spotlight through the darkness.

A sudden chill overtook him as he looked down at hills of sand that had appeared beneath him. The sound of a snake

hissed from behind. He turned over his shoulder and saw the Advocates running after him, their joints stiff like machines. He panicked and ran on toward the couch in the distance, never getting closer to it or his mother.

The Advocates were now just behind, moments from catching him. The sky had turned blue, the faux blue of a blueprint diagram made of paper. White lines intersected in geometric patterns across its surface. The sky began floating down toward the Earth on top of him. One of the Advocates' hands reached John's shoulder.

Suddenly, he was lifted by something black and metallic. It was Mouse, larger than the size of a person and sprinting. He climbed on its shoulder and saw the Advocates losing speed behind them. There was a voice calling his name. He couldn't tell where it was coming from. The world around him began to fade.

"John! John, I can't see anything," Mouse said. The voice was out of breath. "I got back home as soon as I could. I'm sorry; I know I'm forty-five minutes late. I didn't know what else to do. John! John?"

There was no response. Mouse craned its head around like an owl, trying to see anything other than the darkness filling Ronika's monitor at home. Mouse could feel the

messenger bag beneath it, as well as John's body if it leaned forward and reached, but still saw nothing. Ronika hurriedly slammed some numbers and letters into her keyboard.

"I'm going to force open the optical sensors so I can see. John? John, why aren't you talking to me?" Mouse cried.

A minute later, Ronika's few lines of patchwork code were complete, and she rebooted Mouse's software with the new commands in place. The small light sensors in its eyes widened immediately as she'd planned. The final effect was minimal, but at least Mouse could now see what was close, even if it came through pixilated.

Mouse left the messenger bag and began to scale the mountain of John's body, using its clamps and legs to power closer and closer to his face. Soon, it arrived on the boy's shoulder and tugged on his ear. There was no response.

Mouse leaned to its side as far out as it could, clamping to John's collar for support. His eyes were closed and his head was tilted down against his shoulder. No part of his body was moving. Ronika thought she could hear his breath through Mouse's microphones, but the noise almost

seemed to be coming from elsewhere in the room like an echo.

Becoming more fearful with each second, Mouse slid down John's shirt and made its way to his watch, conveying the sound of Ronika's tears through its small, tinny speakers. It looked down at the device; its glowing blue wires easily visible, even in the darkness.

Mouse clamped onto the watch's knob and pulled. The small size of the knob made it difficult for the robot's clamps in the dark. Mouse lost its grip and fell onto its back, barely avoiding tumbling from John to the ground.

It maneuvered onto its feet again and focused on the watch's knob. It pulled quickly, and the knob quietly clicked into position. Dr. Kala's hologram buzzed to life.

"I can't see anything," were his first words.

"I know," Mouse replied. "It's dark."

"I have infrared and heat-based vision capabilities," he explained. "The darkness doesn't matter. The watch is pointed at the ceiling."

Mouse wedged itself underneath John's arm and lifted his hand toward his face so that Kala could better assess the situation.

"Is he--" Mouse began.

"Dead?" Kala replied. "No, but you're damn lucky he isn't. I told you this was dangerous. Why can't I make you people listen to me?"

"What's wrong with him?" she asked. "Is he just sleeping again?"

"Yes. When did you come online?"

"Just a minute ago."

"I see. And he didn't wake up again last night after you turned me off?"

"No."

"Then it seems likely that he's still not woken from yesterday."

"You mean he jumped like this?"

"My statement would seem to imply that."

"Can we wake him up?"

"Do you know how dangerous it is for someone to jump unconsciously?"

Mouse dropped John's arm and began to pull on his fingers with its clamps. "We need to wake him up. John!"

"This is why I said to take him to my lab. This wouldn't have happened," Kala continued.

Mouse was still pulling. "John, John! I need you to wake up. John!"

"Stop blathering. He'll be awake soon."

"How do you know?"

"Simple mathematics. There's a window of error not knowing how far we currently are, but taking the average jump distance and the time he's been unconscious, I'd say--"

"You've been keeping record of that?"

"The watch keeps record. It sends a data-signal of certain values to a computer here. I'll turn the resting power usage down as well. Give him another few minutes. If he's ever going to wake up from this, it will be then."

Mouse dropped John's finger. "Where are we?" it asked.

"I don't know," Kala replied.

"Do you hear breathing?"

"John's?"

"No. Something else."

The hologram and the robot remained quiet for a moment, listening for sound.

"I do hear something," Kala said quietly. "You need to investigate."

"Me?" Mouse asked incredulously.

"Well, I can't very well do it, now can I?" Kala replied.

Mouse latched onto the strap of John's messenger bag and used it to repel down his body to the polished concrete

floor below. It lay down onto the wheels on its back and slowly drove around the space, looking for any signs of where they'd jumped or what else was sharing the room with them. It wasn't long before Mouse hit a wall and followed it to another. The space was obviously small and confined.

Once at the other end of the room, Mouse saw the shape of a man's body standing and slouching against a corner, only five feet from John. The robot froze and quickly considered how easily this mysterious man could've heard its conversation with Kala. If he had, he'd chosen to remain silent throughout.

"Hey," John's voice groaned from across the room. "Ronika, you there?" He was awake and alive.

"There is no 'Ronika' here," called a voice smothered in a thick Russian accent. The sound had come from the corner. John heard Mouse speeding across the floor from about the same location and felt it crash into his foot a moment later.

"John!" Mouse called from below. "You're awake. Thank God. Lift me up." The robot frantically tugged on his pant leg. Slowly and foggily, John reached down to the small robot and brought it back into his lap.

"My mother," he said groggily. "She's--"

"I know, John."

"Oh, God, how could she be--"

"I know, John; I'm so sorry."

"Where are we? Who spoke before?" John called frantically into the darkness, fresh tears sliding into his open mouth as he spoke. A deep Russian-sounding chuckle was all that replied. John filled his lungs to capacity with a long breath and exhaled it slowly. He was doing his best to calm down; there were too many unknowns to fall apart now, and others were still counting on him to survive.

"Where are we?" he asked Mouse quietly. "Kala?"

"I'm here, Mr. Popielarski," he answered.

"Is this your lab? I can't see anything," John said.

"No, this is not my lab," Kala said. "I'm still just a small blue hologram. The girl one refused to input the coordinates when you passed out."

"So it's true?" Mouse gasped. "You were going there? You were going to let him win?"

"Well, give me the numbers now," John said to Kala.

"I'll put them in."

"Sorry, Mr. Popielarski," Kala replied dryly. "It has to be an outward jump. You'll need to wait another twenty-three hours and eight minutes."

"John, you don't have to do that. There's still time. I can still figure something out," Mouse protested.

John lifted Mouse in his hands and brought it close to his face. He looked into the small open eyes beneath its visor. "I believe you," he said. "But if we don't have something before tomorrow, I have to go. It's better than dying, Ronika, and I've been the cause of too many deaths already. I'm not adding my own or yours to the list if I can help it." He lowered the robot back down to his lap.

"Those weren't your fault," Mouse squeaked.

"Now, let's figure out where we are," John said. "We just have to get home this one last time. Kala, ideas?"

"Only based on the obvious clue of the man's voice, but we could be anywhere, really. The U.S.S.R.? One of the Slavic countries perhaps? Maybe you should ask that gentleman in the corner."

"Hello?" John called out to the room.

"Hello," the man replied.

"Who are you?" John asked.

"That is an odd question coming from you," he answered back.

"Why is that?"

"Because you're the one who's entered my cage without a key. This is solitary," the man said, laughing viciously. "You're not allowed in here."

"Solitary?" John asked quietly. "Does he mean--"

"Jail. Prison. Yes," Kala answered.

"I would ask where you come from," the man continued, "but I already know you aren't human. Spirits, voices, here to judge."

"I don't want to judge you," John said.

"But you will," the man said quietly. "I heard them, the voices arguing around you. The woman and the man. An angel and a demon. One in heaven, one in hell. Both on the shoulder, arguing about who takes me. And who are you, then? I know who you are; purgatory, the middle man. So what will you choose?"

"I'm real," John said. "Come here, touch my arm to prove it."

The man in the corner began a harsh laugh that turned into a cough. Next, John heard the sound of what he thought was the man sipping water loudly, followed by what he knew to be the loud, alarming sound of a metal cup being thrown strongly against the wall just next to his head. As he eyed the ground where the cup had fallen he noticed that he was sitting on a small metal prison toilet. He stood from it

quickly and repositioned himself on the ground a few feet away.

"Tricks," the man said. "They will not work. I know the stories. I touch you and I leave this place. I do not want to go where you want to take me."

"Can you at least tell me where we are?" John asked.

"Earth. Realm of men. What, you lost?"

"Answer the question, pitiful human!" Kala boomed.

"Kala," John whispered to the watch.

"It was worth a try," Kala defended.

John took a deep breath through his nose. The room's odor was putrescent. He moved his hand to the front of his nostrils, hoping to defend them from the stench. He hadn't noticed the smell until now and briefly wondered how that had been possible. Now that he was focused on it, the stink seemed to strengthen by the minute, becoming more and more noisome the longer he sat there breathing it.

"Does it bother you, being locked in the dark like this?" Ronika asked.

"I am half-blind, so, no, darkness does not bother me," the man said. "Even before I lost my sight twenty-eight years ago, I was its friend. I have been seeing and hearing only darkness since I can remember. It speaks to me."

"What did you do exactly?" John asked cautiously. "To end up in here, I mean."

"You don't already know?"

"Tell me in your words," John replied.

The man began to take short steps toward John as he spoke. "I was jealous of my neighbor, a Turk," he said. "He had taken a beautiful bride, while I could find no one for my own. When he was away, I snuck into his home and had my way with her between his own red silken sheets. Later, she told him, though I had threatened her life not to."

The man was now standing over John, his face only a foot away. John was getting nervous. "He came to my house," the man continued plainly, "and overpowered me. He is a bigger man. He took a poker, my own poker, and slashed it across my face, blackening my sight because I had seen his woman naked."

The man gestured to his eyes, and at his close distance, John could see the thick, two-pronged scar running through one of the man's eyes, over the bridge of his nose, and across the other.

"The *militsiya* arrested me soon after. They brought me here without trial, and here I have sat. Now, all that my eyes can see are light and dark. No shapes." The man turned and backed away.

"Are you sorry?" Ronika said quietly.

The man laughed heartily. "Sorry?" he yelled loudly. "Sorry they found me before I could tear the genitalia from that Turk with my teeth! Sorry they have kept me here where I can't take another ten wives of another ten men! That is why I am *sorry!*" Mouse shrunk back into John's messenger bag.

John felt something bug-like crawl across his left ankle. He jerked his foot back at the touch. Knocked from its perch on his leg, a large cockroach scurried away across the floor to some secret exit from the jail cell.

"Why are you telling me this?" John asked, "I thought you were being judged."

"Because I know the truth," the man said. "It doesn't matter what a man does when he is greeted by decisions to be made. You can live your life as a good man or as a monster, but in the end, fate will deliver you into the arms of its choosing. That's hell usually, in this world or the next."

"That's a bit defeatist, don't you think?" Kala replied.

"It is not 'defeatist' to go where you are taken, when you can go in no other direction," he growled. "And if none

of it matters, then why not cave to the flesh and listen to the darkness, when the darkness is all that speaks."

Suddenly, there was a banging at the door, a controlled three knocks, the sound of a hammer on iron. Then, the door across the room from John opened, allowing a strong wedge of light to enter the space and illuminate the half-blind man in the corner. As the light fell across him, he lifted his arms against it and shrieked. With his body now bathed in light, John could finally see what this frightening man truly was, old, frail, and tattered.

John looked back to the door and saw six men with berets and assault rifles orderly crowding behind a short, bald man in a fifty-dollar suit. "Hello, John Popielarski," he said.

XX.

"You, with us," the bald man commanded, pointing at John with a fat and dirty finger. His thick Russian accent heavily muddled the English that he spoke. The six imposing guards behind him filled the cell's sole doorway with their diagonally-held guns and trunk-like bodies.

"How do you know my name?" John asked loudly, backing himself against the wall farthest from the bald man.

"It was told to me," the man responded bluntly. "I know what you are doing here, and you are caught doing it."

"Spirits, they can hear you!" the blinded prisoner exclaimed. The Slavic-sounding man turned and nodded at one of the six guards standing vigilantly behind him. One stepped forward and approached the raving man in the corner. Without so much as a blink, he broke the man's nose with the butt plate of his assault rifle. The prisoner silently collapsed to the floor, bleeding from his face where the gun had struck him. The guard returned coldly to the door alongside the other five, his expression unchanged.

The bald man smiled widely, his teeth showing yellow and rot. "Are you coming or am I retrieving you?" he asked, spitting in spray as he spoke.

John looked down at the half-blind man, face-down and bleeding on the filthy prison floor. The warden held out his hand. John looked at him, confused, until the man moved his eyes sharply to John's messenger bag. John sighed and handed his messenger bag to him.

Like a serpent, the six armed guards moved in a line around John, circling to enclose him from behind, blockading against any misplaced thought of retreat. One of them lightly nudged the small of John's back with the butt of his rifle, urging him forward. John complied and left the cell, following the lead of the short, bald man now waddling in front of him with John's bag held firmly under his heavy arm.

"Who are you people?" John asked. None replied. As they walked down the corridor, he spied entrances to other cells. Each was made from thick rusted steel and supported by hinges the size of bread loaves. He wondered if the men held behind them were monsters or innocents. Either seemed equally possible.

"You need to tell me how you know my name," John said. The guards stopped in tandem with the bald man at their lead. The man turned and walked at John, the edge of his large gut pressing against him, bouncing him into the cold, stone wall of the hallway. John's back slammed against it.

"I am the warden here, the god," the man said. "I need to do *nothing*."

John watched fearfully as the warden drew a worn revolver from a military holster strapped to his side. He raised the gun to John's throat, laying the cold iron barrel flat against his windpipe. He pushed it hard into John, allowing its hammer to jut into the soft skin of his neck. The pressure was beginning to choke him.

"I don't like people sneaking into my prison for information from my prisoners," the warden growled.

"I, what? No," John sputtered.

The warden jerked his sidearm from John's neck and holstered it. "I am delivering you back to your government. They have come for you. They've paid me just enough to forgive this intrusion. *Just enough!*" he yelled, the thick phlegm in the back of his throat rattling against his windpipe.

"My government?" John asked. "They're here?" *They must have picked up the signal from the watch*, he thought.

The warden turned from the wall and continued his walk down the prison hall. His six guards continued in a semi-circle behind, their march bumping John's body forward before them.

The party stopped a few minutes later at a shiny door, much newer-looking than the rest they'd passed along the wall. A small rectangular keypad was mounted where a handle might be. John was surprised to see such technology present in the damp, degrading facility to which he'd just been introduced. Somehow, he'd expected a rounded keyhole and long-stemmed brass key dangling from a large ring on the warden's belt to match it.

The warden stepped forward to the door and punched a six-digit combination into its face. The red light at the top of the keypad turned green, and a mechanism buried inside of the door clicked. The warden shoved it open with his belly and walked inside the room.

John followed him closely through the door and was walked by the six guards at his back to a metal folding-chair at the room's center. He sat, and the men retreated to an area behind him, unseen. The door closed. A hard-shining light draped in a circle around the chair while the rest of the room remained shrouded in a deep, concerning blackness. John heard the sound of a cocking gun behind him.

"Move and he shoots," came the sound of the warden's familiar gruff voice. "It's that or cuffs."

"I think I'd prefer the cuffs," John said. He could see nothing in the room but himself and the chair he sat upon. The light encasing him was so harsh and direct that John opted to close his eyes rather than continue his ineffective squinting a moment longer. Another gun cocked behind him. "Got it, no moving," he said.

"He's yours, gentlemen," John heard the warden say from the other side of the room.

"We'll be fine, Warden. Thank you for your help," a voice replied.

"Do you need the guards?"

"No. We'll be fine."

"He had this on him."

"Thank you."

The warden's voice said something in a language John didn't understand. Footsteps filled the darkened room again. John opened his eyes briefly and was barely able to make out the figures of the warden and his guards just before they left the room.

"Hello, John," the voice said from somewhere ahead of him.

"Who are you?" John asked.

"I'd like to talk to you about that watch on your arm."

"What do you know about it?"

"Only a little. I'd like you to tell me how you got it."

"I found it."

"How did you learn to use it?"

"I didn't."

A loud cough broke the silence behind John. The voice ahead of him continued to speak. "What were you planning? Canada, France, Africa? Where are you going, John? What are you hoping to accomplish?"

"Who did you say you were?"

John heard the sound of more footsteps followed by a light plastic click. The light above him dimmed into darkness. John opened his eyes. Another click, and a different, more mellow and even light illuminated the room. A man with dark hair in a light grey suit stood before him. John turned his head frantically toward the exit. A blond-haired man stood blocking it, holding a large brown leather circle the size of a bike tire with a round black bead pinching its center.

"Advocates," John whispered reactively. The dark-haired man furrowed his brow quizzically at the word. He shook the thought and nodded to the man past John.

The blond-haired man approached and wrestled the leather circle over John's head and around his throat. He slid the black bead past its center and up to the back of John's neck, tightening the leather into a collar.

"The ring slides one way," the dark-haired man explained. "You pull too much and it chokes you." The blond-haired man took the other end of the circle and dragged John by the neck from his chair to the room's exit.

"Wait," the dark-haired man commanded. His partner halted. The dark-haired man walked to John and looked him over. He opened one of the sides of his worn, grey jacket and revealed a small switchblade knife hanging from the breast pocket. "Let's be thorough."

The blade triggered with the flick of a button on its handle. John closed his eyes and winced, struggling against the band tightening around his neck. Not feeling the cut he expected, John opened his eyes. The dark-haired man was using the newly exposed blade to slice open the back of John's messenger bag.

"What are you doing?" John exclaimed.

The man shook out John's bag, spilling its contents to the ground: sunglasses, a book, the small blanket and extra shirt that John had packed the last time he'd seen his mother, a flashlight, some notebooks, a pen, and two halves

of a broken branch. The Advocate patted down the limp bag and found nothing else of interest. He discarded it to the ground. "Alright, let's go."

The blond-haired man kicked at the back of John's knee, breaking his stance and forcing him forward. The leather band around his neck was tight, and despite his efforts, John was neither able to remove it nor fight where it moved him. Collared, shoved, and pulled, John accompanied the Advocates out of the room and into the dark, stone hallway outside of it.

"Guys, stop, wait," John said. "I didn't steal it, okay? It's stuck. I want to give it back, I do." There was no response.

They continued to move down the corridor, unimpeded by any of the guards stationed throughout the facility. A few times, John called out to them, insulting their morality and humanity when they ignored him. His mind continued to race for an idea, anything that could get him out of his current predicament. He looked around at his surroundings: walls, doors, stone, uncaring guards who probably didn't speak English. There was nothing to help him, nothing and no one.

This is it, John thought. After everything I survived, this is where I die. I should have gone to the lab days ago

when I first heard about it. Kala would have seen the sun. Mom would still be alive and, after today, I might have been, too.

The blond-haired man pulled sharply on the leather circle around John's neck. John stumbled for a moment, but deftly regained his footing as they turned past a door into another room of the prison.

John thought about Ronika and those silly fox ears she wore on her head. He thought about how much he'd enjoyed his time with her in person and chided himself for not doing it sooner.

At least she got out of this okay, he thought. She's the only one who did. That's fair. She had the least to do with this anyway. I wish I could see her again, though, just one last time before the end.

John and the Advocates soon arrived at what appeared to be the prison's galley, a large and filthy room stuffed wall to wall with shoddily made metal shelving, now rusted red and brown. Most were filled with various pots and tureens while the others were stacked with unlabeled metal food cans. The sinks below them were crammed with dirty dishes and silverware and, judging by the amount of mold and flies surrounding them, it seemed to John as if they'd likely been there for months.

A tall man in a crooked white paper cap stood in one corner by the counter slicing a fat, oddly shaped root with a large butcher knife. He wore a dirty, once-white apron and turned toward John and the Advocates as they entered his kitchen.

"Out," the dark-haired man yelled at the cook, pointing at the door they'd just entered. The cook looked at John, clawing at a thick leather collar and trying to force his fingers between it and his throat. The cook stuck his knife point-down into his cutting board and ran through the galley's exit.

"That is no way to treat a knife," the dark-haired man said as he walked to the counter and lifted the cook's butcher knife from the board. He examined its edge. "Dull as a fork's," he said.

The blond-haired man dragged John to an island cooking range at the center of the kitchen and pointed to one of the four metal barstools positioned around it. John sat, as instructed, and the blond-haired man sat across from him, his hand still firmly on the leather circle. Its end was now swiveled to John's front.

The dark-haired man walked to John, knife in hand, and sat on the stool beside him. He pulled a small, red, vinyl bag from his chest pack and placed it on the island's

counter in front of them. He set the butcher knife next to it.

"You called us Advocates before," the dark-haired man said. He grabbed onto John's face by the jaw and forced it toward him. He looked past John's eyes. "Where did you hear that word?"

John sat silent, staring back at the man with an equal, unflinching intensity. His captor's green eyes were lifeless. They conveyed no emotion and betrayed no thought behind them. They simply stared, unmoving and fixed upon nothing.

"It doesn't much matter," the man said a few moments later. "You don't have to tell me." He opened his red bag, revealing three rods, four thin stones, and a small bottle of a yellow, oily substance. He dripped some of the oil onto the butcher knife's edge and began to work it between one of the rods and stones. The blond-haired man began to drum the fingernails of his free hand against the inside of a massive black iron skillet positioned in front of him on the range.

"You killed my mom," John said.

"I know," the dark-haired man replied.

"Why? She had nothing to do with anything."

"Sure she did," the Advocate answered. "She knows you, right?" The man paused a moment before adding flippantly, "Well, she *did*, anyway."

"You son of a bitch!" John yelled, jumping from his seat. With amazing speed, the blond-haired man jerked on the leather band, slamming John's head down into the countertop.

"We didn't go there for her," the man explained. "We went there for you, John."

"How did you find her and the house?"

"The same way we were able to follow you to all of those other awful places we met. I'm not a science nerd, but bear with me and I'll try to explain it to you." The man swapped out the stone he was using on the knife with another. His partner continued to drum his fingers, slowly quickening pace. "That watch on your arm spits out a signal when you teleport. We've had access to that since you stole the device."

"I didn't steal it," John interjected.

"There's a different piece of data that contains where you go back to, I guess." The man continued to work the stone and rod up and down the length of the butcher knife's edge. "Until recently, we didn't have it."

"Then how did you get it?" John asked sharply.

"Actually," the man said, "and I'll be honest with you here, John; I have no idea. We were just given the data from our boss. If you want to know where *he* got it, you'd have to ask him. Though, that's impossible, of course. That data led us to a warehouse. A small bit of snooping led us to a police report on an incident that took place there recently. That led us to their suspect list, and *that* led us to your address. We met your mother there and asked her politely to tell us about you and where you might be. She wasn't very cooperative." John noticed the blond-haired man smile at that. The dark-haired man continued his story.

"We were going to head back toward the warehouse when we got another call. It seems that knowing the location of your starting position allowed the science boys to determine exactly where you'd appear next. And what a convenient 'next' it was." The man switched out the stone and rod for a third set before squeezing a few more drops of oil onto the butcher knife's blade.

"You're both cowards catching me like this. What about honor or the thrill of the hunt or something?" John tried.

The dark-haired man laughed. "Who do you think we are, John? Our job was to catch you. There's nothing beyond that. Did you think that just because I can run fast, I like to?"

"Why are we even having this conversation?" John asked, exasperated.

"Why am I telling you all of this? Because I can, and because we may as well talk about something while I sharpen this knife. It's the same reason I'll tell you my name. It's Cornelius. Currently, you're the second person alive who knows that. The other is my partner here. Yes, you're the second person alive, but interestingly enough, I've told hundreds of people before you. Imagine that."

"Your name is Cornelius?" John asked. "That's a dumb name."

"Cornelius Black," the man replied.

"If you're just going to kill me, then why the theatrics?" John said, snapping at his assailant. "Just do it already."

Black grabbed John's shirtsleeve and used it to wipe the oil from his blade before placing the butcher knife down on the countertop in front of him. John's eyes followed the knife's handle as Black dropped it just a few feet away from him on the range.

Black stood from his stool and brought his nose an inch away from John's. "We can always speed things up if you're getting impatient," he said. The blond-haired man began to cough violently. Black continued speaking over his

partner's hacking. "But the reason we're even sitting here now is because you've *inexplicably* evaded us for the last three days. It makes us look bad, like my partner and I aren't able to finish the job. You've now had two days more than you should have, and those days aren't free." Without removing his eyes from John's he reached into the pack strapped to his chest and removed a grey cylinder.

"Hold this," Black said, placing the cylinder into John's hand.

"It's heavy."

"Yes," Black replied. "It should be. It's a weight." Black took back the cylinder and lifted a small latch on its side. The weight folded open in half lengthwise. He picked up the butcher knife and clamped the cylinder onto its back, opposite its edge. With the thin grey weight now clamped to the knife, Black swung it up and down.

"It's sort of like holding a roll of pennies when you punch someone," Black explained. He placed the knife back down, one foot closer to John than before.

"I never stole anything," John said, keeping his eyes on the knife's position. "Okay? I just found it. I put it on my wrist and it won't come off. I never wanted any of this. If I could give it to you, I would. Come on! Please!"

"At first, the idea was for my partner to give you *his* watch, then I would take you back to HQ. Now, the company's a bit skeptical about risking it. They mentioned something about your health," Black said. "But you know what, John? I don't care much for your health. They told me they wanted the watch still attached to your body, so I'm coming up with a compromise. I don't want to lug your corpse back there, so I think I'll just take the hand."

"What? No! My health is fine; just give me the other watch. I'll jump back with you," John protested.

"I think not," Black answered.

With the noise of conversation above, Mouse stood from the floor and latched to the fabric of John's pant leg. None of them, not even John, had noticed the small black robot following them as they'd left the interrogation room, rolling on its back across the ground silently as they'd moved down the corridor.

Mouse started to climb John's leg, still unsure of what to do or how to help. It hadn't been able to see much from its vantage near John's foot, but had heard everything, including the chilling fear in John's cries. Mouse reached only John's lap before it happened.

In a final act of desperation, John moved quickly for the butcher knife, shooting his right hand outward from the table's edge across the cooking range. With his fingertips just inches from the weapon's handle, he watched the blond-haired man lift the iron skillet he'd been drumming on in a blur of motion. With astounding reflex, he slammed it back down forcibly onto John's outstretched hand, crushing the bones as it connected.

John screamed in pain at such an ear-piercing frequency that Black used his free arm to cover John's mouth. The shake of John's body knocked Mouse to its side across his thighs.

"It's what I love and hate about you, kid," Black said, "that God damn never-quit attitude. Alright, enough games. Let's get this done."

The blond-haired man placed the skillet down and lifted the butcher knife into his hand. "Right through the carpals," Black told him. "You're going to have to shoot a bit lower than you normally might; we don't want to risk damaging the device. This job has had enough problems and Castler's already going to be up our ass about bringing it back this way." The blond-haired man nodded.

John continued to scream into Black's arm, inhaling through his nose to power his voice. The arm of the

Advocate's jacket smelled like ash and blood. Black pulled John's left arm to the table as John recoiled his damaged right underneath him against his chest.

"Maybe try diagonally," Black suggested to his partner, making a diagonal chopping gesture with his hand. "I know it'll be harder to put the knife through his ulna and radius in one shot, so you might have to take a few whacks at it. Don't worry if the cut's not clean." The blond-haired man lifted the knife.

John closed his eyes, almost unconscious from pain. *I'm sorry, everyone.*

As the weighted knife fell, a small black robot leapt from John's shoulder between the knife's sharpened edge and John's arm. The blade struck down, catching the inside of Mouse's back instead of John's wrist.

"I'm here John, hang on!" the robot yelled, its metallic voice breaking apart from the damage.

"Ronika, is that you?" John said.

Kala's hologram appeared suddenly, its image broken and skewed by the presence of Mouse's body. "I'm remotely increasing the watch's energy output! Ronika, do it now!"

Mouse opened its metal clamps and forced them between the watch's face and John's skin, causing a loud *pop* to sound from the device. Black's partner looked down in shock

as a faint blue glow enveloped both his knife and the robot it was stuck in. The glow brightened, its energy clinging to the blade's edge, holding and securing the knife just centimeters above John's skin inside of Mouse's halving body.

The blond-haired man started coughing uncontrollably as he pushed down on the hilt of the butcher knife, standing tall and forcing his weight on top of it, unwilling to withdraw the cut. As he increased pressure, the blade of his knife began to ring out, louder and shriller with each passing second. Blackened burnt scars crawled from the blade's edge toward its spine.

"John," Mouse called out, its voice cracking in static, "I--"

Mouse's body shattered apart like a grenade as the edge of the butcher knife dropped through it to the watch's face.

"Stop it! Just let it go!" Black yelled over the ringing metal.

As his partner looked to him, the burn marks across the blade began to smoke. Cornelius Black ducked. A moment later, the knife was apart, shattered and firing pieces of its blade across the galley. The sound of metal striking metal clanged loudly throughout the kitchen.

Without lifting his head, John opened his eyes again. A few feet away, what was left of the butcher knife was lying next to him on the countertop. Its handle was fully intact, but only a small jagged shard of the metal from its former blade remained still attached.

Suddenly, the blond-haired man's head thumped down suddenly onto the counter between John and the knife. John noticed a large section of fissured butcher knife shrapnel lodged deeply in the Advocate's neck before he slid from the island and collapsed to the ground, dead.

Black looked at John's left arm as he stood. The watch was glowing pale blue, spewing small arcs of jumping electricity that leapt out across his skin. Soon, the arm began to spasm and flail wildly until its raucous movement knocked John's entire body to the ground. Black backed away from his captive slowly, his eyes glued fixed to the seizure.

John raised his arm into the air, coiling his fingers into a tight, seditious fist. A primal scream escaped his lungs at the pain as the space around him filled with the same blue light as the watch. Cornelius Black fell unconscious beside the kitchen's exit.

John looked into the watch's face and saw the small wires that ran beneath the glass begin to quake

uncontrollably. One snapped apart. He read the hands: 5:00
P.M. John disappeared.

XXI.

John woke abruptly on a flat, uncomfortable bed. Beneath his head, John felt a flat, uncomfortable pillow. He opened his eyes and noticed a thin clear tube ferrying liquid to and through a needle stuck by tape to the inside of his forearm. He looked left and saw a white CRT monitor graphically displaying his vitality. He looked down and saw his right hand, red and black, taped and splinted. It rested inside a blue cloth sling strapped around his neck. He couldn't move it.

His bed was enclosed by four, light blue curtains that hung from horizontal poles, each helping to privatize his small space in what was presumably a hospital ward. He turned onto his side and searched for anything marked with lettering, trying to place a language that might help reveal his location. Finding nothing, he laid back flat onto the bed. He coughed as his head dropped.

"John?" Kala's voice buzzed from his watch.

"Kala?" John asked groggily, slowly lifting his left arm up to his chest.

"I can't believe it," Kala said, enthused. "Still alive."

"Yeah," John replied. "One hand down, though. And one mom. And many, many others."

"But we won, John!" Kala replied. "We won! It's over now."

"It's not over," John said. "I have no idea where I am. And that thing with the knife?"

"I increased the Diaspora's power collection," Kala explained. "Think about what happened to Virgil, but with more energy and a secondary conductor."

"Diaspora?" John asked.

"Yes," Kala replied more quietly. "That's the true name of it."

John looked at the hands beneath Kala's hologram. It was 8:45 P.M. "Why did I jump when I wasn't supposed to?"

"Too much energy? Something about Mouse's internal circuitry?" Kala sighed. "I don't honestly know. Man always learns to harness something before understanding the true nature of it. It's no different for quantum biology. That's something the company never grasped."

"But ... "

Kala's hologram shrugged in reply.

"Well, you're a lot of help today," John said.

"Even a man such as I has his limitations," Kala answered.

"We need to figure out where we are."

"Oh, don't worry about that, I know--"

A melodic voice interrupted him from behind the curtain. "John?" the voice called. Kala fizzled his hologram instantaneously.

The curtain in front of John's bed pulled open from the left and a familiar looking older woman stood on the other side. Her hair was bobbed and her clothes seemed to be from the 1950s. John wondered for a moment if he'd travelled through time and if this woman was going to ask him about his Calvin Cline underwear.

"Thank goodness you're awake! I was so worried," the woman said, walking briskly to the side of his bed. "I brought you here the moment I found you. That hand ... " She looked down at his arm, resting in the sling.

"Thank you," John said. "I'm sorry, do we know each other?"

The lady smiled. "Dorothy," she said. "We never officially met; I can understand why you might not remember. I just have a thing for faces. Mary is always saying, 'Dorothy, you have a thing for faces!'" She laughed.

"Where do you know me from?" John asked.

"America Offline. I use the switchboard in the search department," she answered sweetly.

"Right," John said, remembering. "Wait! Does that mean we're on Longboard?"

"Of course, silly! Where else would we be? I found you in the bathroom at the office passed out and," she looked to her left and right before whispering "bleeding" like a dirty word. "This is one of the *four*. It was the closest hospital to the warehouse, so when I panicked, I just brought you here."

There were six hospitals on the small island of Longboard Key, and four of them were exclusive to veterans.

"They weren't very happy letting you in, but since it seemed like such an emergency ... " Dorothy explained.

"That's fine, I mean, great, actually. I'm just happy to be here," John said, slowly sitting up.

"Honey," Dorothy said, sitting on the side of his bed, "what happened to you? Was it that awful motorbike that Virgil had you on? I heard he had you on an awful motorbike."

"Yes," John said immediately, jumping on the lie. "It was a bad accident with a car. A hit and run. I'm sure they were from the mainland."

"I'm sure," Dorothy repeated, nodding in agreement. "Where's Mom?" she asked. "Can I call her?"

John almost said "no," lying to cover his situation, but then remembered that telling her "no" would actually be truth. John lost his excitement for being home.

"No," he said. "Don't worry about it, I'll be fine now. Thank you so much. I have to go." John leaned forward to dismount the bed.

"You can't go now, sweetie," she said, placing a halting hand on his shoulder. "They're going to need to get your information, insurance, etcetera. They've also told me that you're going need emergency reconstructive surgery. Without it, you'd likely never be able to use that hand again. You're lucky I found you when I did. Surgery is scheduled for a few hours from now; that's the fastest they can fly in a specialist. The doctor also told me that an officer would be needed once you woke to take your statement. I guess they get a little worried when someone finds an unconscious minor with such ... damage." She smiled. "Now, you just sit back and I'll get the doctor."

"Perfect," John said, smiling sweetly. "I'll wait here."

As soon as Dorothy disappeared behind the curtain, John eased himself up from the bed and stood to his feet.

"Not to be the one constantly highlighting bad news, but you do realize you can't remain here for this surgery, correct?" Kala asked softly.

"I know."

John looked to the IV leading into his arm, attaching him to a nearby drip-bag. Since the needle was sticking into his left arm, he had no hand with which to remove it. He leaned his face close to the inside of his forearm and clamped onto the IV's tubing with his teeth. Slowly, and not without a little pain, John dislodged the needle from his vein.

He ducked beneath one of the blue curtains surrounding him and found himself in a large room with multiple beds. Some were covered with curtains but most were open, their patients exposed to the room and each other. As John made his way toward the exit, one of them yelled out to him.

"Nurse! Nurse!" the patient called.

A second patient that John couldn't see yelled back at the first man's cry.

"I've been waiting longer!" he yelled. "Nurse! I'm first!"

"I'm not a nurse," John argued back hopelessly.

"Nurse! Nurse!" they both yelled. The repetitive calls of the two men soon prompted two more to the chant. Whether

the cacophony grew from old-fashioned competitive spirit or simply the need to register petty complaints and requests, John couldn't be sure, but soon the entire ward became flooded by the sound of fifty old men shouting for his attention.

"Nurse!" they all cried over one another. "Nurse! Here! I'm first!"

The volume of this kafuffle soon caused a small army of actual nurses to hustle in through the large double doors at the north end of the room, ready to address the wide-spread and ambiguous calls of the ward's patients. John spied Dorothy and a short police officer holding a clipboard amongst them, attempting to make their way through the mayhem to find the small blue-curtained box that they assumed still held a helpless teen with only one working hand.

John quietly continued his trek to the room's back exit and slipped through. The rest of John's escape, two empty hallways and a lobby, was much easier than he'd anticipated. As he exited through the main doors of the hospital, he smiled.

"I'm so used to the Advocates chasing me that I forgot how easy it is to get away from normal people," he said down to his watch.

"Especially when those people are a doting old lady and an apathetic policeman," Kala replied.

"So what now?" John asked.

"I assume you want to see the girl one and inform her that you're still breathing?" Kala said.

"Yeah, but how do I get there?"

"You're the master of escape John, not me," Kala said wryly. "As evidenced by each of our current situations."

"We both know how this day ends," John answered back. "We'll see if you're still saying that to me tomorrow morning."

"Point taken," Kala replied.

Kala's visage reappeared on top of the watch and met John's eyes. "It's the right decision, John," he said.

"I know."

"But I am sorry, all the same."

John thought for a moment, then asked a question he hadn't thought to ask before. "What's your first name?"

"It's Felix," the doctor answered.

"Can I call you that?" John asked.

"If you like."

"We're walking," John said. "It might take awhile, but I'm not going home for my mom's car, don't have money for a cab, and have no idea how to steal a car."

"It's up to you," Felix said. "We have time."

John started walking down the hospital sidewalk in the direction of the bridge that would take him back to the mainland. The way to Ronika's apartment was simple, but long by foot.

He was feeling strange, evenly split between despair for his mother and the elation of his narrow escape from the prison. *Just a bit longer*, he thought. *Just let the happy stay a bit longer. You'll have years to grieve, and soon, the privacy.* He forced a smile.

"Felix," John said, kicking his left foot against the rough concrete of the sidewalk's top.

"Yes?"

"Nothing. I was just saying the name out loud. I always wanted to know Dr. Claw's first name." John laughed.

"I don't understand."

"Inspector Gadget," he answered. "I brought it up to you when we first met."

"I have no idea who that is," Felix answered.

"Just a cartoon show from after your time," John said, seeing if he could avoid the next five cracks in the sidewalk while he walked.

"Well, that's a depressing way to say it."

"So, what's your story, really?"

"I don't want to go into it."

"Who's Karen?"

"None of your business."

"Is she your girlfriend?"

"No."

"Are you going to see her when you get out?"

"I don't know."

"What are you going to do when you get out?"

Felix paused before answering. "I'm going to find the men responsible for all of this, and I am going to ruin them in every way that men *can* be ruined."

"How are you going to do that?" John asked.

Felix remained silent. John waited for a boxy blue car to snail past before crossing the road to the other side of the street. While he walked, he could see past the tops of two short houses all the way to the dim lights of the mainland behind them. John wondered if one of those lights was Ronika's apartment.

Thinking of her reminded him of the way she must be feeling at home while he was happily ambling down the pavement. He imagined the situation reversed, and how he would feel if he was the one thinking she was dead or captured. He felt the pain of losing her in his gut, *her* pain from losing him. She was alone in that apartment, and

oddly, he suddenly wished he could teleport somewhere. He raised his pace to a brisk jog and continued toward her with newfound purpose.

John pounded his fist across Ronika's front door, banging and yelling for her, anxious to tell her that everything was alright, at least, that it would be for the next few hours. There was no answer. He pressed his ear against the wood of the door and listened for sound. Nothing. He'd seen the scooter in the lot not a minute prior. She had to be home.

Why isn't she answering?

Worried, John ran around to the backside of Ronika's apartment, catching his jeans in a square-trimmed bush along the way. Clumsily shaking his pant leg free of the bramble, he ran up to a low-mounted window in the wall and cupped his eyes against its glass, looking past it into her bedroom. The heavy exhalations from his nose caused two quick circles of fog to spread across the glass, obscuring his vision. He quickly wiped them away with the bandages on his damaged arm and peered around the inside of the room. He saw no one inside.

John looked left, right, and forward again in a panic. Without much thought, he lifted his left arm, turned the

Diaspora's face toward the glass, and struck through, breaking the window open. Thin shards of glass cascaded beyond its frame. A sudden scream came from the inside, just below the window.

A moment later, John watched a girl's face appear where the window's glass had been. Her eyes were wide and fearful. Her cheeks were wet and as red as the hair circling her face. It was Ronika, in shock, and wearing no ears but her own. She stared stiffly at John.

"You scared me," she whimpered without blinking.

"I'm sorry; you weren't coming to the door, and I didn't see you past the window," he answered.

"I'm not talking about the window," she said, shooting her arms through the sharp-edged hole toward John. She curled her fingers around the back of his neck and pulled his head to her shoulder. She rested the side of her head on top of his and squeezed him close against her body. John lifted his undamaged arm and rested it across her back between her shoulders. She cried.

"It's alright," he said calmly. "Everything is fine now." He rubbed his hand lightly across her back.

"I thought you were--"

"I'm not," he answered.

"Come inside," she sniffled.

Ronika released him, and John circled back to the front door of the apartment. Ronika was already standing there on her welcome mat by the time he arrived, somehow having found the time to don her fox ears before meeting him. She spied his damaged arm immediately and swallowed a gasp.

"I know. It looks worse than--" John said, approaching her.

"Does it hurt?" she asked.

"No," John lied.

Ronika slowly lifted his arm and inspected it. "Does it work?"

"Not anymore."

"I could make you something for this," she said.

"Like what?"

"I don't know," she said absently, measuring his hand with her eyes, "some sort of apparatus, maybe a robotic glove to put over it."

John laughed. "You just want to control my hand like Mouse."

She couldn't stop the laugh that came. "I promise I'll be good," she promised in an innocent tone. She wiped the last tears from her cheeks before turning from him and

stepping inside. "It's going to take a couple of days at least," she said.

John lifted his left hand to her arm and stopped her. She turned back around to him. "I just have tonight," he said. "Maybe three or four hours. I have to go."

"I know you do," she said, breaking his grasp and walking back into the apartment.

June 3rd, 1976:

Felix opened his eyes and stared at the polished concrete ceiling above him without moving his body. He lay there silently in his bed, much as he had just minutes prior while still sleeping. There was no alarm by his bedside ringing him awake, nor was there any type of clock to be found in his lab at all, but Felix knew exactly what time it was: 7:45 A.M. It was the exact time he'd woken for the past eighteen months. He knew what day it was, too: Thursday, the day of his escape.

Five minutes later, he allowed himself to move. He slid his hand from his stiff white sheets to the small table by the bed where his fingers found his glasses. He turned his legs from the mattress and sluggishly allowed himself to fall from the bed to his right. His feet made contact with the floor, met by the familiar chill of its touch. He walked across the room to his dresser and silently put on his pants, shirt, and lab coat.

The last two years of Felix's time with the company had passed more slowly than the first. Life in the lab without Karen had been abysmal, and the lack of sleep caused by his extracurricular work on a secondary device had made him depressive and edgy.

As he'd expected, he'd seen Karen once or twice a month, moving in and out of her new lab or buzzing about in *the hub*. Per her instructions, he hadn't spoken to her since that night two years ago when she'd left him. Resisting the urge to speak with her in person was difficult, so he'd instead resigned himself to watching her on the security footage when he was feeling desperate for some form of connection with her, no matter how minimal. Following her on the terminal was never as fulfilling as he'd hoped.

The assignment of a new Badge to his lab had failed to cure his loneliness either. Her name was Amy, a woman whom Felix often referred to as an "all-business fatso" when speaking of her to Calendar.

The tortoise had now grown to full size for his species' average in a tenth of the time he should have, and the accelerated development had continued to cause Felix worry. After finishing his after-hours work, he'd often spent his nights on the floor, his back against the side wall with his tortoise happily seated beside him like a loyal hound. Felix would sit there, half asleep, half awake, and repeatedly count the tallies he'd drawn on Calendar's shell while wishing he'd been able to spend more

of his time discovering what terrible things had been done to his pet in the other labs before they'd met.

It stood to reason, Felix had considered, that with faster aging came faster death. While he had come to appreciate Calendar's particular set of quirks, he couldn't help but feel that robbing a creature of its lifespan was sinister, especially one who he now considered his friend.

Felix took the black marker from his lab coat and bent down over the sleeping tortoise by the foot of his bed. He added a small black tally to the group.

"Last one," Felix said, waking Calendar for the morning.

Felix stood and thought about the day ahead. Later, *the hub* would be cleared of all non-essential personnel, and the Diaspora would be used to transport a test subject from the lab to a set of coordinates in Darwin, Australia and back.

If the test were successful, Felix would be congratulated and sent back to his lab for what they would tell him would be one final night before his payment and trip back to the surface. Then, after the lab corridor doors closed later that evening, the company would do whatever it was that they did to seal in their scientists. At that point, Felix would use the secondary device he'd

built to escape, and the company would have no idea that he was gone. That was the plan, anyway. If the device failed to work on its first test subject, then his contract would be extended until it did, and Felix's escape would have to wait.

This day would mark the first, and hopefully, last live test of the device. He hadn't been allowed to do any major testing during his four years of development. They had told him it was due to safety protocols, but Felix knew that it was because they didn't want him flittering about on the surface with their property, possibly choosing not to return willingly to the sunless cave underneath.

Without complete knowledge of the work done on the Diaspora by his predecessor before him, and without the time to gain it, Felix had been forced to replicate the watch's inner workings component by component. That meant that, much to Felix's chagrin, the new device he'd built would be subject to the same protocols and programming of its brother.

Even the signals it sent couldn't be stopped, though he'd at least been able to route them to his own computer terminal. It was the only other IP address he knew, and was sure to be safe when sealed away in the laboratory after

tonight. Even if the company did dig it up someday, Felix would already be far away from the watch he'd built.

The door in the main lab slid open. Amy, a rotund woman with a perpetually scrunched up nose, entered his living space.

"Dr. Kala?" she asked loudly. "It's 8:00."

"I know what time it is," he answered, leaving the bedroom and joining her in the lab. "And I told you, 'Mister' is just fine."

"We're waiting for you, Dr. Kala. It's an important day today," she said.

"Just a moment," he answered, walking to the food storage. Felix opened one of the many foiled packages and put its contents into a small red bowl.

"And how's your day been thus far, Amy?" he asked nicely, bringing the bowl back to the bedroom for Calendar.

"What do you mean?"

"Never mind," Felix said after a quiet sigh. "Let's just go and get this over with."

"My thoughts exactly," she concurred.

Felix followed Amy through the long, dark, cavernous hallway that connected his lab to *the hub*. Their walk passed without conversation. Amy wasn't much of a talker.

Finally, the pair reached *the hub*, and Felix had never seen the facility so empty. He wondered where the company was storing all of the Badges normally seen milling about there. Dr. Castler, whom Felix hadn't seen since their initial introduction four years ago, was standing in the center of the room. Two young men he didn't recognize were standing silent with clipboards in their hands to the overseer's right. Karen was to his left.

Felix looked to her as he approached the group behind his new supervisor and was surprised to see her make immediate eye contact with him. It was the first time they'd looked at each other in two years. Her green eyes were wide and still, betraying a quiet sadness behind them. If there had ever been any doubt that Karen knew exactly what went on in the facility, this silent desperation belied it.

"Felix Kala," Dr. Castler said excitedly, shaking Felix's hand furiously, "I've been following your daily reports since you began. I'm extremely excited to see what you've made for us."

Felix nodded.

"Amy? Do you have the device?" Castler asked.

"Yes sir!" she shouted, her loud, abrupt response jarring even Castler.

"Good," the man replied, forcing a smile at her.

Amy lifted the small metal box and opened it. She removed the watch and offered it to Castler, who gestured to Felix instead of accepting it. Felix took the watch and looked to Castler for direction.

"Karen here has volunteered to be our guinea pig today," the man said. "Normally we would use someone a bit more ... expendable ... but since this device actually takes you outside of the facility, we need someone we can trust to bring it back!" He laughed.

"Felix," he continued, "if you would do the honors, please." Castler lightly pushed Karen toward Felix by her back and lifted her right arm with his other hand. Karen continued her unwavering stare into Felix's eyes as he approached her.

Felix took her hand and gingerly placed the watch over her wrist. He turned her arm and latched the band beneath. The skin was as soft as he had oft imagined it to be. He wondered if this would be the last time he would touch it.

"Too tight?" he asked her quietly.

"No," she said.

I need to focus, he thought. This needs to work.

Felix removed his gaze from Karen's and cleared his throat. "Yesterday I set the device to transport the

subject to the coordinates I was provided with. Among the improvements I've made to the Diaspora is the ability to easily set the destination with the watch's hands. No more plugging in a complicated algorithm into a computer terminal. This will allow the operator to choose locations as needed, instead of phoning back to HQ to input more numbers remotely."

"Very good," Castler said, "but is there truly enough control over locational data with just three hands to set?"

"This is a good point, and leads me to my next improvement," Felix replied. "I've reprogrammed the watch to bring its user into bathrooms. Yes, you lose a small amount of precision by handling things in this manner, but it also allows for finite locations to be programmed via the hands by the user."

"Bathrooms?" Amy said skeptically.

"Quiet," Castler barked at her. She shrank. "Please Felix, continue."

"Bathrooms make more sense than you may think. As the intention of the device's use is not public transportation, you must remember that the sight of a quantum replacement, or teleport as they'll perceive it, would be quite surprising. This will also hamper any efforts of its user to remain incognito. Hence, it places them in the closest

bathroom. The device observes locations based upon commonplace components of bathrooms, plumbing, sinks, toilets, pipes, etcetera. The bathroom is a place that exists almost everywhere on Earth and has the added benefit of also generally being the most private place within any location."

"Very astute," Castler said.

"I mention it now because the test subject will not arrive at your precise coordinates. She will arrive directly nearby, inside the closest bathroom," Felix explained. "The subject appearing there, as opposed to the directed coordinates, will dictate the actual success of this test."

"Understood," Castler remarked. "But what if the bathroom should be occupied?"

"I could ask the same question about specific coordinate use as well. It isn't as though you'll be able to always know precisely who is nearby without a supplemental device when you choose to travel. I will, however, say this at the risk of sounding cold-hearted. This contingency actually makes the bathroom even more beneficial. What better than a private place to handle any ... unwanted witnesses."

"My kind of thinking!" Castler exclaimed. "So, Felix, any other changes I should know about before we begin?"

"Nothing major," Felix replied nonchalantly. "I've added a holographic communicator, a calibration protocol for training the device to a first time user, and a few other minor improvements. As my mission was to simply power the device using natural energies, I didn't spend exorbitant time on additional improvements."

"Understandable. This calibration protocol, though," Castler replied, "will we need to run through it now before the test?"

"The protocol will consist of the device taking its user farther and farther from its point of origin, recording energy usage and returning them between each displacement. Each body will produce and allocate differently, so this process is suggested prior to any consistent use by a new user. That being said, one displacement won't be problematic. We can continue without it."

"Then shall we?" Castler asked.

"Yes," Felix answered. He looked back to Karen. She was still looking at him. He had the sudden urge to embrace her, but instead, took two steps backward.

"Placing your thumb across the face's glass for five seconds will force the displacement. On this model, the top includes a print scanner which will check your thumb against a remote database as failsafe before you--"

"Jump?" Castler finished for him.

"Sure, jump," Felix said.

"Did you say 'this model' Felix?" Castler smiled.

"Getting a little ahead of ourselves, aren't we?"

"Oh," Felix replied. "Yes, of course. I just assumed that this would be more of a prototype. I'm sure when you produce others they will include some different functionality and protocols."

"I'm sure," Castler agreed.

We need to get started, Felix thought. I can't afford another slip.

"The watch currently recognizes this facility as its point of origin. If at any time you wish to return from whence you came, simply set the hands clockwise to 12:00 and zero seconds. You'll need to do so to come back to the facility after this test. So, without further ado; whenever you're ready," Felix said, crossing his hands in front of him. "Please place your thumb across the watch's face and hold it there. The process is quite painless, I assure you. You may, however, be a bit chilly upon your arrival in

Australia due to a temporary alteration of your thermic energy.”

Karen finally shifted her attention from Felix and looked to Dr. Castler.

“One moment,” Castler said. “Gentlemen, if you’ll please put these on.” Castler leaned down to a black duffle bag by his feet and removed four masks. Each covered the eyes and ears of its wearer.

Castler answered Felix’s question before he could ask it. “Something I failed to mention about the build of the device we gave you. Upon its use, the watch will emit a frequency that incapacitates nearby observers. These will neutralize its effect on us.”

Thanks for the head’s up, Felix thought. I was wondering why there had even more energy required than there should have been.

Castler was the last to don the mask and nodded to Karen once it was in place around his head. Nervously, she placed her thumb flat against the watch’s glass. Five seconds later, a bright light shot from the face of the device. Karen looked briefly to Felix. He smirked and raised his hand shortly upward as a goodbye. It was difficult to see past the dark black tint of his mask and

bright blue light surrounding her, but Felix thought he saw Karen smile. She disappeared.

It was now 8:00 P.M., and Felix knew that the video feed in *the hub* had been cut fifteen minutes prior.

This is it, he thought. *This is when it happens.*

Amy had left just moments ago, and Felix busy was saying his goodbyes to Calendar.

"Be good," he said. "They're probably going to stick you with some other scientist fresh from the surface." He looked at the different black tally marks he'd scrawled across the shell. "Then again, perhaps not. You do look a bit like a prison brick now," he said, laughing.

The laugh had started at his comment, but continued on and on, amplifying and varying as it continued. Felix crouched and rolled onto his back amidst the fit. Calendar began to lick his face, which only made Felix's laugh louder and stronger. It was the moment it had finally hit him, at any time now he would be free.

Sure, it wouldn't be the happiest of endings. He didn't get the girl, his pet would have to stay, he didn't get the money he'd signed up for, and there was no one up there waiting for him, but after everything he'd been through, four long terrible years in a bunker beneath the

Earth, perhaps just one minute under the sun would be enough.

"No, I didn't get the girl," he said to Calendar, his laughter finally abating. "But at least I found her." He drummed lightly on Calendar's shell. "Okay, pal, let's get ready."

Felix stood and walked to the food storage where he'd hidden the device amidst the thousands of foiled food packages.

Third shelf, four rows back, Felix recited to himself as he reached back for the bag that contained the rogue device. He found it immediately, as he had every night for the past two years. He lifted it to his face and kissed it.

He walked back to his living area and plopped himself down in the large green chair. Calendar walked in front of him and lay down, allowing himself to be used as a footstool. Felix eagerly complied and stretched out his long legs atop the tortoise's shell.

"Yes, there will be small things I miss. But not many," Felix said. He closed his eyes. A minute later, his footstool suddenly moved, causing the back of Felix's feet to crash down to the concrete below. Calendar was running toward the door.

"What?" Felix asked, following closely. "Is it happening?" He dashed to the large metal door at the lab's entrance and bent down to peer through the port glass. Someone in the distance was running toward his lab. Felix squinted and strained to make out the figure, but the dim light of the hallway was making it difficult.

As the figure got closer, Felix could see one of its arms waving. The other was holding something. He thought he heard noise penetrating the glass. Was the person yelling? Felix turned his head and placed his ear flat against the door's window. At first the sound was muddled, but moments later, as the person drew near, he was able to hear the voice. It was faint, but he could make out every word.

"Felix! Felix!" a woman's voice yelled. "We have to get out of here! They're coming, Felix! They're coming! We have to get out!"

Felix recognized the voice immediately. He quickly turned his eyes back to the glass. He could see her easily now. It was Karen, running frantically toward his lab.

No, no, no, he thought. Why now? Not now!

Felix waved his hands in front of the port glass in an X and yelled, "No, Karen. Go back! Get out of here!"

Either not hearing him or simply ignoring his warnings, Karen continued her run for the door. Behind her,

Felix saw the distant silhouettes of two men at the other end of the tunnel.

"No! No!" he yelled, pounding his fists upon the metal. He looked quickly down at Calendar, now spinning around on the floor, frantically barking at the unfamiliar noise and commotion.

Suddenly, the deep rumble of an explosion shook the doorway. It wasn't long before the entire room was shaking. Felix lost his footing and landed awkwardly on Calendar's dome-shaped back. Quickly, he stood back to his feet and looked through the port glass for Karen. His face shook in horror as he watched the cavern collapsing behind her. Gigantic rocks avalanched through the pathway, crushing down around her with the weight of miles of Earth above them.

As Karen approached the door, its mechanism engaged. But before it could slide open completely, a massive grey stone crashed down in front of it, scaring Felix back from the glass and knocking him off balance. He regained his footing and stumbled back to the door. It had opened a few inches from the floor before becoming broken by the stone's impact.

He dropped to the ground and hurriedly peered out from underneath the bent metal into the collapsing cavern beyond

it. There he saw Karen, just a few feet away, both of her feet caught beneath fallen rock.

"Karen!" he yelled. "What were you thinking?"

"Felix," she said, "I'm sorry."

"You have to get out of there. This whole cave is coming down!" he yelled.

Another rock crashed on top of the rocks pinning Karen's feet. She winced from the pain.

"I know," she said. "That's why I came to warn you."

"You didn't have to," Felix said. "I knew. I had a plan!"

Karen looked up at the cracked ceiling above her. The stone was breaking and splitting apart quickly.

"You knew?" She paused. "It doesn't matter. I don't have long now. The ceiling is about to fall," she said calmly. "I'm sorry for everything. All of this is my fault. The only thing I did was run away from it. I never did anything to stop it. I'm so sorry I couldn't save you. I couldn't save anyone."

Felix looked in horror to Karen's eyes, drenched with fear, encased in the knowledge that death stood before her. He remembered the time they'd first met in the desert, how she'd dealt with his sarcasm and laughed at his jokes. In that one moment, he remembered every word she'd spoken,

each smile she'd worn, each cold shoulder she'd given, and each warm remark she'd made. He looked behind him to the painting of the airport and back again to her. He couldn't watch her die.

"It's not your fault," Felix called to her. "You never had the chance to save anyone. But I do."

Without thinking, he slid the watch he'd spent two years building through the thin opening beneath the door. It sailed easily to her grasp. "Put it on!" he yelled. She quickly latched the band to her wrist and looked up at the crumbling ceiling, its full collapse imminent. She trembled.

"Maybe someday," she cried, "when we both get out of here, we'll meet on the surface and things can be different. You said that to me once."

"Put your thumb on the glass!" Felix yelled.

Hands shaking, she lifted her thumb and placed it on the watch.

"You're almost out!" Felix yelled. "Hang in there. Just five seconds more!"

One, two, she counted. Karen looked up at the ceiling and watched it finally break apart. Large sections of stone began tearing down to the ground below. She was shaking

with fear, but did her best to keep her mind calm. *Three, four ...*

Suddenly, a huge piece of stone crashed down between her and Felix. He rolled back from the impact and away from the door. The force of the collapse shot the file that had been under Karen's arm open, and a flurry of papers floated beneath the lab's door. Another rock crashed against the entry immediately after, causing its mechanism to break and the door to fall permanently closed.

Felix rushed to his feet and looked through the window of the door. He saw nothing but stone piled against the glass. It was impossible to know if she'd made it out.

Felix turned and faced the empty laboratory. The shaking had stopped and the rocks had finally settled in the hallway. The room had become eerily silent. He looked down at the scattered papers on the floor. They'd come from Karen's file. She had to have brought them with her for a reason.

As he leaned down to collect the papers, he noticed an odd transparent plastic sheet between them. He pulled it from the stack to reveal a carefully preserved, pressed yellow tulip contained within.

He walked back to his workstation and set the stack of papers on its top. He slid the pressed flower safely into the top drawer.

Felix thumbed through the papers that had made it through the door. Most were parts of incomplete files, and all were out of order. While perusing them, he noticed a few key words that caught his attention: something called *the cycle*, a program labeled "Advocate training," a detailed description of something called the "indentured scientist program," and a name: Paul Gourd.

Felix dropped the papers onto his desk before he started to read them in depth, as he knew he was likely to do. He understood that he had time for that later, all the time he could ever need to go through them, gleaning whatever pointless knowledge he could from their contents. He walked to the wall behind him and leaned against its side as he crumpled slowly to the floor. With his head rested against open hands, he began to cry.

He thought about the final words Karen had said to him and repeated them over and over in his mind. It was over thirty years before he was spoken to again.

XXII.

Ronika eased open the door to her bedroom and peered through the crack at John, asleep upside-down with his head at the foot of her bed. It had been painful for both of them, but they'd agreed that allowing him a few hours of sleep before his departure would reduce the risk of John jumping while unconscious a second time.

The trip to Kala's laboratory was risky enough under the best of conditions, and even the doctor himself had seemed worried about John's ability to jump again after the "misfire" that had happened that afternoon. Though the sudden teleport had allowed for his escape, no one felt comfortable with the Diaspora acting even more erratically than normal.

Ronika looked on as her friend slept on top of her bed, his body spread out wide atop her sheets as if attempting a snow angel in the bedding. His breathing had calmed since she'd seen him sleep last, and the soothing pattern of his chest's expansion and deflation mollified her, though only slightly.

How can he be so calm? she asked herself.

The fight's left him, she thought angrily.

Ronika tilted her head to one side and looked at his face. She took note of each contour and freckle, trying to register a fully defined image of him to her memory. She knew that this moment they shared would be one of their last.

Ronika deftly slid through the crack in the door and entered the bedroom. The soft blue strands of carpeting that blanketed the floor crept up between her toes and quieted her steps. She continued left to the oak panel dresser standing on the side of her room and softly opened its top drawer. She removed a thin, plastic photo album and opened it under the dim light of the pink and purple butterfly lamp on the dresser.

The first page of the cheaply made album held two photographs locked in place by a glue stick, protected solely by a thin cover of translucent plastic sheeting. The first photo was a picture of Ronika as a child, smiling widely and looking straight up at the center of the camera's lens. The photograph held below it was the only picture she had of her father, taken at the worst of angles when he wasn't expecting the shot. She'd always hated that there'd been no one to take a picture of the two of them together, and for that reason had kept the two photos sharing a page, together always.

Ronika turned the first page over and flipped through the tens of empty album pages behind it. There was room for 148 more pictures, a number Ronika knew by heart. The day her father died she'd promised herself to fill the album to its end with pictures of friends and loves. She'd told herself that she'd go to school, meet all sorts of weird and interesting people and document their adventures in photograph, joining her father and her eternally in the small grey album she kept in a drawer.

Nothing had worked out, she allowed herself to realize. She'd accomplished nothing that she'd assured her late father that she would. She closed the album shut and squeezed the plastic book against her chest as she looked back to her bed and the boy on top of it.

He's the closest I've come, she thought. *And now he's leaving me too.*

Her eyes tearing, Ronika put the album back into the drawer and slid it closed. She leaned down onto the dresser and put her head into her arms on its top.

Why can't I think of something? Why can't I save him? This is all that I'm good at, and I can't even stop it.

"You should tell him how you feel," Kala's voice said quietly from across the still room. Ronika turned and saw

the small blue hologram standing calmly on top of the watch that had caused everything.

"What, that I failed him?" she asked, approaching the bed.

"Failed him?" Kala replied. "You saved him more than once by my count."

"Not when it mattered," she said coldly. "Not from the death of his mother, not from losing his hand, and worst of all, not from *you*."

"You don't need to save him from me," Kala protested. "I'm not the one who's done this."

"You could still save him, but you won't," she said angrily, keeping her voice quiet for John.

"At the expense of myself!" Kala argued. "I don't know either of you! Even if I did, that's quite a bit to ask from someone. Look, when I get out, there's a chance I can save him later, perhaps in a few years. If I let him go now, I'll never see the sun again. Never. You can't ask me to do that."

"Yes I can," Ronika said. "You're the one who built this thing. You're the one who put yourself in that lab. No one had a gun to your head. These are your consequences, not his!"

"You aren't thinking about this practically," he replied. "You're letting your emotions overrun the scientist within you. This is a decision made for the greater good. It has the highest probability for successful resolution for all parties. I know you're smart enough to see that."

"This isn't about science and logic," Ronika said. "This is about my friend, and I think he's been through enough on account of you already."

"What would you do in my situation?" Kala asked. "And don't just say you'd help John. Imagine if my girlfriend and I, two people you'd never met, appeared on the other end of a walkie-talkie one day and asked you to give up your entire life for them. Could you?"

"My answer to that question is irrelevant. Your actions and decisions are independent of my personal opinions and scruples," she said, spitting the words at him.

"That's exactly right," Kala rebutted. "They are. I chose my own freedom over a stranger's, and I'm not going to feel guilty about it! This is happening whether or not you can deal with it. Instead of fighting the inevitable, why don't you wake him up and enjoy your last minutes together."

"I don't even have Mouse anymore," Ronika cried. "He's going to be completely alone."

"And it will be difficult for him," Kala said as soothingly as he could. "But remember, unlike me, he'll have hope. I'll go back for him. I just can't guarantee when that will be possible."

"What do you even eat down there?" Ronika asked.

"MREs mostly," Kala replied. "Bottled water, multi-vitamins. There's an astounding supply here. He won't even have to worry much about rationing himself."

Ronika sat on the bed's edge and lifted her legs on top of the mattress. She inched her body toward John's and whispered to Kala's hologram.

"I'm turning you off," she said.

"Don't," Kala replied.

"Don't worry, he'll go. He already switched the hands of the watch to your numbers," Ronika told him, putting her fingers around the small knob on the side of John's watch.

"Ronika, forgive me," Kala said as his hologram fizzled.

Ronika moved her body in close against John's. Her touch woke him.

"Is it time?" he asked groggily.

"Not quite yet," she answered.

John stretched his limbs even farther than they'd been lying and retracted them back in toward his body.

"It's freezing in here," he said, eyes still closed.

"Lift your legs," Ronika said.

John curled his body into a ball as she leaned forward and lifted the edge of her white comforter. She brought it over their bodies and let it fall around them, pillowed by the air.

John slid his legs through the sheets below the comforter and rolled onto his side as Ronika pushed her body close against his. She took his hand. His fingers wrapped lightly around her palm as she touched it. She led his arm around her body. Secure beneath the weight of his arm, she hugged onto his hand while he embraced her from behind.

"Can we just lie here, just like this?" she asked.

"Yes," he said, rubbing her hand lightly with his own.

"I don't want you to go," she told him.

"I don't want to go either," he said. "You're all I have now."

"You're all I have, too," she said.

"I'm sorry I never came here and saw you again after that first time a few years ago," John said. "I don't know what it was. The mainland felt so far away, and you felt so

different than everything on Longboard. I always said I wanted to leave, but it's harder to change things than it is to talk about changing them."

"You don't have to explain anything to me, John," she said.

The current in the room blew a few loose strands of Ronika's bright orange hair to John's face, tickling his cheeks. He inhaled through his nose and smelled the girlish scent of red berries rise from her long, soft hair. The aroma relaxed him, and soon he thought he'd finally found what he'd been looking for outside of Longboard Key. The idea arrived bittersweet, as the iniquity of their parting now veiled and tinted each word and movement between him and the girl lying against him.

"What will you do while I'm gone?" he asked.

"I don't know," Ronika said. "I'd like to say that your adventures have inspired me to finally leave my apartment and go outside into the world, but honestly they've made me even more scared than I was before." She giggled, and John laughed alongside of her.

"We're going to figure out a way to talk to one another," John said. "When I meet him, I'll ask Felix if he can make you some sort of hologram display like the one on

the watch. All that technology should already be waiting there on my end in the lab, right?"

"Felix?" Ronika asked. "Is that his first name?"

"Yeah," John replied. "Funny, huh?"

"I always wanted to know Dr. Claw's first name," she said.

John laughed. "That's what I said!" he exclaimed.

Ronika spun her body so its front met John's. She looked into his eyes, now open and separated from hers by just inches. She peered at him with a recognizable sadness that burned through John like an arrow.

Though he'd hoped his departure simple and unburdened by thick emotion, he couldn't begrudge Ronika what he knew she was feeling. No matter how much he tried to calmly accept the events that awaited him, he couldn't deny experiencing that identical sadness within himself. He wondered if his eyes were reading the same as Ronika gazed back into them.

"I want to come with you," Ronika said quietly, breaking the silence.

"Mouse is broken," John answered.

"I don't mean Mouse," she replied. "You can hold onto a bag and bring it with you, so what's the difference in holding me?"

"I think if that was possible, then Kala would simply hold my hand and let both of us escape the lab when I go down there," he said.

"Unless he's been lying," Ronika pointed out, "and he doesn't want you to escape. Maybe he wants you trapped down there where you can't tell anyone about him or what you've learned."

"I don't see why he--" John began.

"John, we have to try!"

"Even if that would work, I don't like the idea of trapping anyone else down there with me," John said.

"Just ... damn it, John!" Ronika turned away from him and put her face down into the pooling blankets beneath her. "It's all unfair," she said, her voice muffled by the cotton. "We need to fight it, solve it."

John turned onto his back and stared up at the ceiling. "That's what we have been doing," he said. "You and me both; we've been fighting. And it may not look like a victory, but it is one. Things could have been worse in a hundred different ways. I'm just trying to be thankful that they didn't."

Ronika opened her eyes and saw nothing but the darkness of the blanket's folds around her. She realized

then that, as hard as this was on her, it was infinitely harder for John.

Like usual, she thought, John's the one actually going through it. All I can do is sit to the side and be sad. He's lying there trying not to feel bad about it, and all I can do is make it worse.

Ronika felt the urge to cry again, but held her breath and fought it. She lifted her head from the blanket.

"When my father died, there wasn't anything I could do. I sat in a chair by a blinded window and waited for someone to tell me that I'd never see him again," she said. "I don't want you to leave, John, but at least we're here together now, talking with each other, and at least there's a good chance you'll be back some day. And you're right. That's much better than the alternative."

John turned his neck and looked at Ronika.

"Do you really think that's true? That I have a good chance at getting back?" he asked.

Ronika smiled and nodded enthusiastically. John rested his head back down on the bed.

"How much longer before you go?" she asked.

"I don't know. I've been scared to look," he answered.

"Me, too," she said.

"But I think it's getting close. I feel a buzzing in my arm."

"It's not shaking or anything," Ronika replied, looking at it.

"Kala said that, since we actually programmed in its next destination, it won't have to overcompensate by pulling in as much energy as possible, which, I guess, causes the spasms and such," John explained.

"That makes sense."

"So, I don't know what to expect this time, other than it'll be a bit smoother. That's what he said, anyway."

Ronika rolled back toward John. "I'm going to really miss you," she said.

"I'll miss you, too."

"And there's something I want to do before you go," she said shyly.

"Yeah?" John asked.

"It's something I've never done with anyone, actually."

"What is it?"

Ronika closed her eyes and leaned forward toward John's face. She pursed her lips slightly outward, as she'd seen girls do in so many movies. As she drew her lips closer to his, she felt an energy surround her. *Fireworks,*

she thought. *These are the fireworks I've heard about.* Her lips began to tingle in sensation, and her mind became slow with a tired but contented haze. Her eyes were closed, but she could almost see an electric light beyond their veil. *Chemistry,* she heard herself think.

As she continued to lean down toward his lips, Ronika never noticed missing them completely, as she passed straight through where his body had been and onto the soft bed below, fast asleep.

XXIII.

It was late September, and Felix was trying to throw an acorn as high as he could before catching it. A powerful, chilled breeze running through the woods behind his new home made the task difficult, blowing the small acorn far left or right of him with each throw. Felix giggled merrily as he chased it from underneath, often missing the catch and finding another acorn from the ground to throw in its place. The sun had begun to set behind the tree; it was the time he was supposed to go home. He didn't want to.

Felix threw another acorn high into the air and watched its small form disappear against the backdrop of orange and brown branches and leaves. He watched it as best as he could and started to run to where he thought the wind would sail it. Not watching his feet, Felix slipped on the loose leaves beneath him. Like the acorns he'd thrown, his small body turned in the wind before falling down into the soft bed of leaves below him with a *crunch*. He laughed heartily at his tumble and rolled round in the pile, just happy to be outdoors.

The sun, the breeze, and the colorful flora were so different from the big, funny-looking houses he'd felt

trapped inside of for most of his life. Felix remembered each of them the same way, dimly lit buildings with bad wallpaper patterned across their walls and large rooms with twenty beds stacked upon one another like building bricks. It had been difficult for him and the other children who also stayed there to comprehend why exactly they were in those houses, but most understood enough to know what to expect.

He refused to make friends with other children he shared the bunks with, but also with the people who were periodically allowed to take him to different houses where he'd find himself alone in a room with only one bed. Sometimes the other kids he met at the big houses were fun to play with, but he knew it was only a matter of time before he'd never see them again. It's why he stayed distant. Within weeks of meeting anyone, either they or Felix would be taken away. The people who took him loved to call themselves Mom and Dad, but were always replaced months later by another pair claiming the same, meaningless titles.

"Felix," a woman's voice called. It carried on the wind from the line of trees closer to the house. Felix buried himself in the leaves he'd fallen into. The woman approached the clearing where Felix lay hidden and

pretended not to notice the small lump beneath the leaves, whose large glasses glinted brightly in the sun.

She walked around behind the lump and slowly leaned down.

"Boo!" she called, reaching her hands into the pile and tickling the sides of his belly.

Felix sat up immediately and moved away from her. "Stop it," he said.

She walked up behind him and noticed the small acorn grasped tightly in his left hand.

"What do you have there?" she asked.

"Nothing," he answered, closing his grip.

"It takes a very strong boy to carry a tree in his hand," she said.

"Don't be stupid," Felix replied. "It's not a tree."

"Yes it is," she said. "Look."

The woman pointed upward at a tall oak towering above them. Curious, Felix walked tentatively to her side and peered up the trunk of the tower, looking for what she was seeing that he wasn't.

"It's a big acorn," she said. Felix didn't look convinced. "Here, I'll show you."

The woman leaned down into the damp leaves and twigs by the base of the tree. She chose a small stick and used

it to dig into the dirt. Soon, she found a buried acorn and pulled it from the ground.

"See?" she said. The woman opened her palm and offered the evidence to Felix. He approached her apprehensively and plucked the acorn from her hand to examine it. A small white root was twisting out from beneath its cap.

"What is it?" he asked.

"It's a root," the woman answered. "That acorn is a seed. With enough time, nutrients, and sunlight, this acorn will grow more than sixty feet. Sometimes, depending on the variety, they can reach over a hundred."

Felix looked down at the acorn in his hand.

"And so, as I was saying, you must be very strong to hold a tree in the palm of your hand."

"Actually, now I have two," Felix said, smiling and showing her the acorn he'd been holding in his other hand.

"Yes, I can see that," she said, kneeling down to him. "Quite impressive."

"But it's not a tree now," Felix said. "It's just a little acorn."

"Those acorns will always be trees. And see that oak? It will always be an acorn. It just depends on when you decide to look at it."

Felix looked up at the tree again, then back down at the rooting acorn in his palm.

"And you," she continued, "you'll always be a child. But I also see a very special grown-up, an adult who has accomplished so much for this world with that big, curious brain of his." She smiled at him warmly. "You have a wife and kids of your own, a whole family of people who love you. You'll always be that man I see, and you'll always be this boy, standing in front of me, holding two trees in his hands. It's just a matter of perspective."

The woman winked at him and took her acorn back from his open hand. She dropped it back into the dirt where she'd found it. "And like the acorn," she said, "you need certain things to grow."

"Like sunlight?" Felix interrupted.

She smiled. "Yes, like sunlight. And other things that no one's given you yet. But we're going to change that, okay?"

Felix raised an eyebrow at her from beneath the large lens of his glasses. The woman giggled at his expression.

"Come on, let's go home now."

"Okay."

A loud *thud* sounded from the bathroom. Felix opened his eyes.

He's here, he thought.

Felix stood from his workstation and walked cautiously toward the bathroom. Slowly, he opened the door.

And there he was, just as Felix had so often seen through the small camera in the watch, unconscious and slumped down on a toilet seat.

Felix looked at the large device on John's wrist, a device that he'd built as a way out. Now it was back to deliver on the promise he'd designed it to fulfill over thirty years ago.

He leaned over John's body and lifted the boy's head by the chin. He turned it slightly, side-to-side, and peered at his sleeping face. It wasn't so different than his own had been when he'd entered the lab for the first time so long ago. He'd been so young then, with a world of possibilities laid before him. It was back when the sun's touch had still shown on his face.

Felix lifted John's body from the toilet and carried it out into the lab.

John opened his eyes to the sight of a tall man in a white coat with his back turned. He felt a cold surface seated uncomfortably between his legs around his ankles. A pole that connected the floor to the ceiling was between

his knees. He tried to move his legs back toward him, but immediately found them stuck around the column. As his strength returned, he pulled on them harder and harder until accidentally making enough commotion to attract the attention of the man in the lab coat. Felix turned and faced John for the first time.

He looked older than he had in the hologram. The slight wrinkles and stress lines common to a man in his early fifties were infinitely more prominent in person than they had been on the small, often blurred, blue hologram John was used to. Felix approached and knelt before him.

"Am I tied up?" John asked incredulously.

"For the moment," Felix answered.

"Why?" John asked.

"Because I couldn't be sure of your actual willingness to remain here. I needed to be sure that I wasn't going to be fist-fighting a teenager. My body *has* slightly atrophied, you know."

"Let me go."

"Don't worry. The bond holding the straps around your ankles is a simple block of ice. It will melt on its own in about an hour, long after I'm gone."

"You have ice down here?"

"Not as such. But I do still have a few toys that can make it."

Felix stood and looked down at John, still tugging on the makeshift cuffs binding him to the rooted column.

"Well, they're your toys now, aren't they."

"It's going to make it difficult to get the watch off with me stuck on the ground," John said.

"You mean this?" Felix answered, revealing the device in the palm of his hand.

John stared at the watch Felix held. Part of him had thought that he would never have the opportunity to see it off his arm. It looked so small and dead, lying innocently in the doctor's palm. It was as if it were any other watch, lifeless and safe. Though tied and facing captivity, John felt a wave of relief rush over him. He stopped struggling against the bonds at his feet.

"How did you get it off?" John asked calmly. "I'd like to see."

"Sure," Felix said. He walked over to the side of the table next to him and lifted a tiny tool from its surface. He held it down in front of John. It was approximately the size and shape of a child's lollypop, a thin metal cylinder leading to a larger, flat and round circle on one end.

"Doesn't look like much," John said.

"And honestly," Felix answered, "it's not much. Basically, the two sides of the plate are of equal polarity. Imagine two magnets held against one another with their north poles touching. They push against one another, sure, but that's why these are cased together with titanium. It also needed to be tuned to your specific biometric signature, of course." Felix placed the tool into his pocket. "Well, never mind all that," he said, halting an obviously lengthy explanation. "Basically it just slides between the back of the watch and your wrist."

"So, like, two kitchen magnets could have gotten it off my arm," John said.

"Your grasp of the applied sciences is truly inspirational, Mr. Popielarski," Felix replied. "Now, if you'll excuse me for a moment."

Felix held his breath and slowly lowered the watch onto his arm and secured its old, leather band around his wrist. He lifted his arm to his face, looked at the device, smiled, and exhaled. "And now, John, I must be leaving. No need to draw things out." Felix pulled the watch's knob out fully and began to adjust the hands of its clock.

"It's not too late," John said. "You can still let me leave."

Felix looked up from the Diaspora at John. He took a quick step closer and leaned down over him.

"I wish you would drop this constant delusion that I'm 'doing something' to you, because I'm not. I'm not imprisoning you here. I'm simply choosing between two people to free. No one can call me evil for choosing myself. I've sacrificed enough of my life by choosing this lab, and I'll not do so again."

"You've never sacrificed for anyone else in your life," John said.

Felix grabbed a small tool from a drawer in his workstation and walked quickly to John's feet. John felt a light, residual heat against his legs as the straps binding him loosened, and his ankles were soon made free.

"There you go, John," Felix said. "Do you want to fight me? Do you want me to make this fair? Shall we decide this like the cavemen might have? Go on, if you think you're more deserving."

John stood and looked at Felix, easily twice his size, fists lifted and clenched. He read the turmoil in the man's eyes, and for the first time felt comfortable with the idea that Felix hadn't made this decision easily. This man in front of him wasn't just a computer program or hologram. He was a human, something John could see more clearly now

standing before him without a small button to press that could make him disappear. Maybe Felix was right after all. Maybe there was no bad guy standing in the room; just a bad situation caused by someone John would never meet.

"I'm sorry," John said, finally. "And no, I don't want to fight you."

Felix calmed immediately and allowed himself a faint smile. "That's good, because I would have just jumped out of here anyway."

An inaudible chuckle shook John's chest. "Of course you would have."

"I really am sorry, about this. If there's one person on Earth who understands what you'll be going through, it's me," Felix told him.

"I know."

"How about a quick tour before I leave?" Felix asked.

"I don't mind exploring on my own later," John said. "I'll have lots of time, after all."

"Of course," Felix answered quietly.

"I have one question," John asked. "How did you keep yourself from going crazy down here?"

"I don't know," Felix answered. "Maybe I did go crazy. At this point, I've spent more of my life down in this lab than I have outside of it."

John nodded.

"If you've any questions, or just need someone to talk to, you can reach me on the watch," Felix offered.

"That's right, I forgot. I'll have access to the hologram thing."

"Yes. The 'hologram thing' is right over here, by the way." Felix pointed John to a small camera on the workstation.

"Can you make something for Ronika? So that I can speak with her?"

"I can."

"How does it work?"

"Just press here, and here when you want to transmit. It will only work when the knob is in the correct position, as you discovered, so don't be surprised if you can't always reach me."

John sat in the chair and followed Felix's instructions. A small hologram of John appeared on Felix's wrist.

"Cool," John said, looking at himself. "That's what you looked like."

"Yes," Felix said, rolling his eyes. "I can't promise I'll have the Diaspora active all of the time."

"I understand."

Felix nodded and exhaled a deep breath. "Well, it's time for me to go."

"So go."

Felix extended a lengthy arm toward John. He took his hand and shook it.

"You did well to get down here," Felix said. "You certainly outperformed my expectations. I hope you outperformed your own as well. When it gets lonely down here, and you're staring into the paintings on the wall, dreaming of another place and time, just remember, there's always hope. For better or worse, I won't forget about you. You did me a great service finding me here."

As John released Felix's hand, a large object leaning against the back wall caught his eye.

"One more thing," John said, walking toward a large, hollow, tally-marked shell in the corner. "What's this?"

Felix pressed his thumb to the surface of the Diaspora and looked to his least favorite painting on the wall. He smiled at it sadly. "Just one more casualty of this mess," he said. "Just one less person meeting me at the airport. Goodbye, John."

A brilliant blue light enveloped the room, and John was surprised to find himself still standing awake, immune to its effect. He watched as Felix raised his hand in a

short, still wave. The man's smile widened as his body slowly faded into the blue, disappearing completely a moment later. The light shrunk to the size of a golf ball, then blinked out of existence.

John looked around his new cell and walked toward the large painting of an airport that Felix had looked at before leaving. He saw a mother and child running to a man holding a suitcase and wondered what it meant. He shrugged and ambled back to the chair by the workstation where he sat and stared at the ceiling above him.

XXIV.

ONE YEAR LATER:

A man in a tall brown trench coat walked through the rain, a wide-brimmed fedora tilted atop his head, shielding his glasses from the moisture that would blur their lenses. The inclement weather didn't bother him. In fact, he preferred it. The raindrops weren't enough to make him feel whole again, but at least they reminded him of something he knew long ago, even if he had yet to find it once more.

With each left step, the man absently dragged the bottom of his foot across the rough concrete of the sidewalk as he made his way toward the next hostel on his list. The coarse surface of the pavement grated against his well-worn boot. It shook the whole of his leg. It made him feel partially alive again.

The man stopped and looked up at the small, windowed building with a gray roof in front of him. He read the address on its side: *Seepferdchen Str.5*. He pulled a small crumbled paper from the breast pocket of his coat and held it in front of his face. Drips from the lip of his hat splashed against the parchment's surface, bleeding the ink

of the black permanent marker that had scrawled it. The addresses matched.

He reached for the tarnished, silver handle on the door and pulled on it. It wouldn't open. He lifted his right hand, clad in a tight fitting black leather glove, and knocked heavily on the door. Eventually, there was an answer.

A four-foot elderly woman opened the door wearing a black, silken sleeping blindfold pushed above her eyebrows on her forehead. She reached a finger into one of her eyes and rubbed as she looked at the thin tree of a man standing before her. Slowly, she arched her neck upward to his old, shaggy, desperate face.

"Ich suche eine Frau." the man said, *"Groß, Braunes Haar, Amerikanisch. Ihr Name ist Karen,"*

"Es ist zwei Uhr!" she replied.

"Die Frau, bitte," he answered.

"Es gibt keine Karen hier," she said, closing the door.

The man placed a soggy boot between the door and its frame, preventing it from shutting. He removed his hat and placed it underneath his arm.

"Tulip? Tulpe? Braunes Haar, Amerikanisch," he tried.

"Tulpe," the woman repeated. *"Zwei-B,"* she said.

"*Herzlichen Dank,*" the man said, giving the woman a slight, respectful nod. He pushed the door slowly open and made his way inside.

The small older woman turned toward the stairs in the back and pointed her finger upward. The man nodded and headed toward them. She stopped him with a touch to his side and moved an upward-pointing finger to her lips. "*Shhh,*" she said.

The man nodded again and made his way up the small, creaking wooden stairs. The ceiling above the stairway was low, and the man was forced to duck down to pass beneath it. He found room *Zwei-B* immediately, the second door from the top of the stairs.

Quietly, he tried the knob. It was unlocked. He twisted it slowly and pushed the door open, craning his neck around its edge. He looked to the inside of the dormitory. It appeared vacant.

The man finished opening the door, ignoring the loud creaks of its hinges, and slowly stepped into the room, his boots insufferably sloshing with each step he made. A bed beneath a window was in front of him, unmade and empty. He leaned toward it before feeling a hard metal cylinder press against his spine between his shoulders.

"Stop," a woman's voice whispered. "Tell your partner to head back into the hallway, and close the door."

"I don't have a partner," the man answered.

"No use lying," she said. "I know you always work in twos. Do it now, before I *end* you."

The man turned his head back to face his assailant. Their eyes met, and a loaded gun dropped harmlessly to the floor between them.

He knew that she must have aged in their time apart, just as he had. He knew that she must be wrinkled and showing ample grey amidst the chestnut. His brain told him that her skin must have loosened, that her veins must be showing. Thirty years had passed since they'd seen one another, yet he could see nothing but the way she'd looked back then, giggling at his jokes and watching his work with amazement and curiosity glimmering in her eyes. All he could see was the girl he'd met by the silo that day years ago, as beautiful and as radiant as he remembered her to be.

"Felix," the woman whispered in shock.

"Hello, Karen," he answered, turning his body to face her.

"How did you find me?" she asked.

"It took a long time," he answered, closing the door behind him. "I--"

Her lips closed on his, immediately interrupting the words he'd been forming. They kissed and spun round toward the bed behind them. Her passion was furious, and Felix did nothing to fight it. Behind them, the rain thundered past the window above the bed, drumming loudly against the hostel's walls.

Felix shed his long, wet coat to the floor and found Karen's soft hands lightly lifting the shirt underneath it from his body soon after. She fell with him to the bed, kicking off the jeans she wore and impatiently fighting the boots from Felix's feet. She kissed him again, forcing her tongue against his. He cautiously moved his hands down her waist, finding her fingers on top of his soon after, lowering them to below her hips.

She deftly removed the rest of her clothing while kissing him, trying not to laugh as Felix fumbled with his own. Soon they were naked, and Karen laid on top of him, still pushing her lips against his, her hands sliding up and down the sides of his face.

Felix turned her onto her back and moved his face up her body to her lips. He let his hands explore her and felt his way past each contour of her body. He kissed her mouth,

tasting an empty orchard at sunrise. Her tongue rolled past his; it was a morning tide, washing back and forth against the shore. He poured past the atlas of her body, his touch finding peak and dale, verdant and vital. Her body was the entire world before him, his freedom, the sun. One year after leaving, he was finally out of the lab.

As they joined, the room around them changed and shifted. They were in the leaves beneath the cover of a forest, on the sidewalk behind an auditorium; they were on Linus' desk, and in a well-furnished elevator dropping downward at two meters per second. And then they were there, in that moment, in that tiny room in Germany. He lifted his lips from her and looked at her face. She looked then as she should have, older, as she was. She was still the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen. For the first time in over thirty years, he could live again.

Hours passed as minutes, then they were still, lying together in each other's arms, watching the moon glow past the raindrops through the small window beside them in the wall.

"You found me," she said.

"I had to," he answered.

"How did you escape?" she asked, taking his arm and embracing it across her chest.

"I have the Diaspora. The rogue one I gave you," he answered. "It's there in my coat pocket."

Karen sat up and looked at him with scientist eyes. "How did you get it? I thought ... "

"There was a boy. He found it in the sand on a little island in Florida," he answered. "Speaking of which; how did it get there?"

"Florida?" she repeated. "I don't know. I was living in Corsica when I finally got the watch off. It took me some time before I dared do anything with it. When I first got out of the facility that night, it took me to a small burned house in Massachusetts."

"So it's still there?" he asked, turning onto his side and propping his head up on his arm. "I would have thought they'd rebuild it or knock it down, or do something with it by now. That was the house I grew up in. Well, sort of grew up in."

"Where were your parents?" she asked.

"Which ones?" he answered. "My birth parents were gone before my memory starts and my last ones died in that fire you saw the ashes of in Massachusetts when I was ten. That's why I had the watch set to go there that night. It was the only place I could think of to escape to."

"I'm sorry," she said.

"Don't. I'm not going to mourn the past. Not after today."

Karen lay back down on the bed's uncomfortable mattress. "When I got there, I panicked. I didn't know if the company would be after me. I never learned how to set coordinates in the watch, so I just changed the time randomly and let myself jump again on a lark. That's how I ended up in Corsica. I wish I had known the numbers to your lab."

He smiled. "I set that code as a special combination. Six o'clock, four minutes, twelve seconds, setting the hands counterclockwise," he said.

She thought for a moment. "Six, four, twelve ... no, I get it. Six, three, seventy-two. June 3rd, 1972. The day we met."

Felix nodded.

"Fifteen years ago, there was a knock at my door," she explained. "I saw two men in suits through the peephole. I don't know who they were, if they were actually Advocates or not, but I leapt through my back window that day. That's when I dedicated myself to finding a way to remove the watch from my arm, and six months later, found success."

"How did you finally do it?"

She giggled. "I electrocuted myself with a 1973 Volkswagen car battery while initiating the jump sequence," she said. "It wasn't the most elegant solution."

"No," Felix said with a laugh. "But genius in its own right."

"Thank you," she said smiling, bowing her head. "But it had an accidental consequence. I was able to get the watch off my arm, but it jumped anyway. Without me."

"When did you say this was?" Felix asked.

"About fifteen years ago," Karen said, pulling the sheet over her body and curling into it. "You said a boy found it?" she asked.

"Yes, but ... " Felix looked confused and trailed off.

"Felix?"

"Yes," he said, snapping out of it, "but he found it just a year ago. That leaves fourteen years unaccounted for."

"Oh, well," she said, "at least it made its way to you eventually. How did the boy who found the watch find out about you anyway?"

"There's a communicator in the device, originally installed for receiving field commands. If you pull the knob one click, it activates the function. I had a holographic imager attached to the computer in my lab."

Karen placed a hand over her mouth. "Oh, my God, if I had known!"

"For awhile I thought you were dead," he told her. "I thought that's why I hadn't heard from you."

"I was terrified of the device," she said, lowering her hand. "I played around with it as little as possible. I was worried that I might accidentally trigger something that would let the company know I was alive, and worse, where to find me."

"I understand," Felix said. "In your situation, I would have done the same."

Felix lowered himself onto his back and crossed his arms behind his neck. Karen lifted her head and rested it on his chest.

"So who is this boy?" she asked.

"His name is John," Felix said. He couldn't contain the sigh that followed.

"Something wrong?"

"It's not something I'm proud of."

"What isn't?"

"The boy, John, we had to change places for me to leave. The device can't transport more than one bio-signature. It's just not possible."

"So he's ... "

"Yes."

"Oh, my God, Felix. Did he know that was going to happen when he went down there?"

"He didn't have a choice. The Diaspora was stuck in some sort of untested introductory user protocol. The taxation on his body was killing him. He had to get it off his wrist, and my lab held the tool."

"Surely you could have come up with something," she said.

"Maybe I still can. I haven't forgotten about him."

"How long has it been?"

"About a year now," Felix said. "That's how long I've been searching for you. I haven't tried to build another device, not that I'm even sure I could. I've just been looking everywhere for you instead. I had to find you, Karen. This is how it had to be to make that happen."

"But that's terrible," she said, lifting her head from his body and looking at him with two familiarly sad eyes.

"What was I supposed to do? It was he or I being stuck down there. Surely you can understand."

"I do," she said softly. "But now that you've found me, you'll devote your time to freeing him?"

"Soon," he said, lifting her hand and kissing it.

"First, there's one more item on the list."

"What's that?" Karen asked.

"Revenge, to put it bluntly," he answered. "I have to make the company pay for what they've done to you, to me, even to John. We have to stop everything, stop the predator from luring any additional minds to its lair. Stop it from ruining anyone else's life."

"I'm sure it was a difficult decision," she said, trailing off. "You've left a kid down there."

"You're not angry, are you? I thought you'd understand."

"You were right, I actually do understand," she said. "I understand completely."

"We've got to consider the greater good," he told her.

"That's what they told me, too," she said quietly.

Felix couldn't hear it. "What?" he asked, turning his face toward hers.

"Nothing." She took his face with both hands and drew it in close to her own. She kissed him, leaving her lips pressed against his for a long time. Eventually she moved back and looked into his eyes.

"This is a terrible love story," she said to him. "If you think about it, we barely even know each other."

"And yet, you're all I've thought about for more than half of my life," he answered.

"You're all I've thought about, too, and by some miracle, now you're here," she said.

"What do we do now?"

"Let's talk about it in the morning."

Karen wrapped his arm around her body and pushed in close to him. She closed her eyes. Felix lay behind her, staying awake for an hour more, looking at the back of her head and listening to her breathe.

He thought about her words and about that dumb kid he stranded in his laboratory. Each time he'd thought about contacting him through the watch or visiting, he'd decided to wait just a little while longer, feeling too guilty to see the boy's face or hear his voice. Felix had been sure that the guilt would fade with time; he'd been sure, and waiting, for a year now.

None of that matters, he thought, looking down at Karen as she slept. *I've found her. That's all I ever wanted.* Slowly, Felix drifted off to sleep.

The next morning he woke to find a pillow beneath his arm where Karen had been. He jolted up from the mattress. He ran across the small room to the door and looked both ways down the hallway. She was gone.

He returned to the room and thought. It wasn't long before he reached a hypothesis. His arms shot down to the ground, lifting his soggy trench coat from a puddle on the floorboards. He shot his hand into the front left pocket. The watch was gone. So was the tool used to remove it.

Felix looked to the table by the bed. There was a note with his name written across its top in cursive. He walked to the paper and unfolded it slowly before reading its contents aloud.

Felix: Thank you for saving me all those years ago. I can't believe I forgot to say those words to you last night. I thought about you and what happened on that night for years, and always wondered what I could do to make it up to you if we ever had the chance to see each other again. Now, given that chance, I find myself stealing your property and abandoning you in Germany with likely no easy way for you to get back. Admittedly, it's an odd thank you, I know. But I'm leaving now to make it up to you. I saw your face

when you talked about the boy. That's why I've gone. I have the chance to atone for both of us. Thirty years ago you saved me. Now, it's my turn to save someone. You've done so much for me, and I know in my heart that I haven't deserved any of it. Still, I have one last favor to request: Find me again. I've no right to ask, but I'll be waiting just the same. You know where to find me. Maybe someday, things actually can be different for us. Until then, know that you have my love and eternal gratitude. Karen.

Felix folded the note carefully and clasped the paper tightly in his hand. He looked out past the window above the bed he'd shared with Karen the night before. It was still raining outside. He dressed himself in the same wet clothes and hat he'd entered with, left the room, and travelled down the stairs.

Outside the hostel, Felix looked left and right down the street in front of him. Both directions were empty of people, probably due to the storm. Felix turned left and started walking. It was as good a direction as any.

XXV.

John sat quietly at the lab's workstation and drew a thick black line down the side of the flat white page, closing his eyes as he slid the pencil's tip against the curvature he saw in his mind. He brought the line up the other side of the sheet, finishing the contour of her face and closing the shape at its top.

He drew the hair next, carefully arcing the graphite a few inches above the scalp, lifting the lines high before crashing them down past the sides of her cheeks to the unseen shoulders beneath the page. He brought the still-sharp tip in past the edge and outlined an eye. He finished the other the same, letting the pencil naturally dip down from its inside corner to form the bridge of her nose. A smile came after, an easy task, which he drew as thick and as wide as he'd seen it so many times before, during those welcome breaks between his voyages.

He dropped the pencil and looked down at Ronika's face, unfinished but present. The portrait was similar to the others he'd drawn, now stuck orderly to the back wall with a thick, blue gummy substance he'd found in a drawer. There were twenty-five in total, and John counted for the eighteenth--it was the one with the shading he'd been proud

of, drawn lightly against her left cheekbone, pitting the smooth landscape of her face against the invisible light source he'd created. He found it and mimicked the technique onto the page laid across the table. *This one will be perfect.*

Art had been a hobby of John's while growing up on the island. The activity was perfect for him, inexpensive and solo. He'd shown talent, but had never taken the time to develop it, never truly focusing on the work as a craft. Now, in the lab alone without distraction, he had the time to do so.

He'd first begun with lettering, learning to write again with his left, non-dominant hand. From there he'd graduated to shapes, advanced from shapes to figures, and from figures to portraiture. His ability as an artist had blossomed exponentially, due solely to the fact that he could now devote most, if not all, of his hours and days to perfecting it. In only a year's time, John had improved his skills by a decade's worth, and he used them frequently to capture his memories before they faded with time, a consistent fear always shadowing his thoughts.

Next to his gallery of Ronika, John had hung drawings of others, the lot of them who'd been involved with his adventures. All were there but Amandine, whom he thought

would have preferred it that way. Even Adam had his place among the art, seated in an imaginary scene, reading a book about dragons to his daughter. It was John's way of offering the man an apology and his forgiveness both.

The portraiture of the others had come first, as John had originally not been interested in drawing Ronika's face. He would see her again, he'd told himself often; she doesn't belong with the others.

Eventually despair had overtaken him. It had been a year since becoming stuck in the lab, and not even Felix had come back to see him. Six months passed before John decided to draw his redheaded friend, the thought of forgetting her face causing fear above all else.

John blew the graphite dust away from her cheek and lifted his pencil. Its tip was growing dull again. He lifted the scalpel that sat next to his paper on the table and used it to sharpen the point as he often did.

Having no obligations had made him careful and meticulous about every action he performed. Often, he found it nice to do things that way. Sometimes he would spend forty-five minutes just sitting in his chair, carefully sharpening his pencil into just the right tip.

As he worked on the pencil, he noticed his reflection in the metal table below him. He no longer recognized the

person he saw there. The John in the table had shoulder-length hair. His face showed early signs of stubble. A white lab coat two feet too tall was draped across his back.

Even the pencil he held was different. It was down to only a fourth of its original length, and there were only four more pencils left in the drawer after this one disappeared completely. The pencil had now lasted a year, but its lifespan didn't bode well for the future of an art career.

Only four more years before I have to find a new hobby, he thought. And what will that man I see in the table do then?

A loud *thud* sounded from the bathroom across the room, frightening John backward from his chair to the floor. It was the first noise he'd heard in a year's time that he'd not caused himself.

"Felix?" he called. His voice cracked as he spoke the word. It was also the first he'd spoken in a year. He'd refused to speak, even to himself, during his time in the lab. He feared it would be the first step in going mad. Many of John's decisions in the lab were made with that fear considered.

"Is that you?" he called again. There was no answer. Slowly, he rose from the floor and walked toward the bathroom.

"It's been long enough. You haven't even turned on the watch's communicator! Did you forget about me?" he asked angrily.

John opened the door and was surprised to see a woman on top of his toilet. She was wearing the watch. He leaned in cautiously and examined her face more closely. Suddenly, she opened her eyes.

"Ahh!" John yelped, falling backward to the floor again.

"Hello," the woman said sweetly. "John?"

"Who are you?" he said, backing up farther until hitting the wall behind him.

She walked over to him and leaned down. "Don't be scared."

"Stay away from me," he said, raising to his feet and dashing back toward the workstation. He lifted the scalpel he'd dropped on the table and waved it at her.

"Okay, I'm sorry," she said, stepping back.

John noticed the picture he'd drawn of Thutmose behind her, then looked back at the knife in his hand. He set it down on the table, ashamed of himself.

"Who are you?" he asked, his voice returning to what it once had been.

"My name is Karen," she answered.

"Karen?" John repeated. "Why does that sound so familiar?" He sat in the chair by the workstation and stared across the table at her. "You're the woman Kala was looking for, aren't you?" he realized suddenly.

"Yes," she said, taking one step closer to John. "He found me, actually."

"Good for him," John replied sternly. "You know, he's never spoken with me since he left me here. Not once. And he can; oh, I know that he can."

"May I?" she asked, gesturing at the round black stool by the table. John nodded his approval and she sat down.

"You know, there was a time when I'd sit in this chair twice a day and watch Felix do his magic."

"Why were you down here?" John asked suspiciously. "I thought he said he was alone."

"Not at first," she answered. "There was a time when he worked here willingly, albeit under a false pretext. I was his supervisor."

"Then are you the one who trapped him here?" John asked.

"No," she answered. "Didn't he tell you anything?"

"Almost nothing," he said. "But that's just like him. Selfish over even his own back-story."

"Don't judge him too harshly, John," Karen said softly. "He's led a complicated life."

"My sympathy for him ran out on the day I realized that he hadn't come back to visit me, and that he wasn't going to. That's also the day I lost hope of him figuring me a way out of here."

"I imagined he'd come to see you," she said quietly.

"Well, he didn't," John replied quickly. "He said he would and he didn't."

"He should have. I don't expect you to forgive him, but please understand that Felix has been faced with one impossible decision after another since coming down to the labs. He sacrificed himself to save me from here. Did you know that?"

"No," John muttered.

"He had a choice. Only one of us could leave. He chose me over himself. That's how he came to be trapped here, like you are now," she said.

"If he's such a great guy then why hasn't he come back? Why hasn't he spoken with me over the watch? He even showed me how to work his dumb hologram thing. Why would he do that if he wasn't planning on talking to me with it?"

"If I had to guess? He feels guilty, John. Leaving you here was probably harder on him than you can imagine," she said.

"Why hasn't he built another watch?" John yelled, slamming his fist into the table in front of him. "Why hasn't he gotten me out of this place?" He panted three heavy breaths before allowing himself to calm. "I'm sorry."

"It's alright," Karen said. "But if you want an answer to that, then you have to try to understand the way he thinks. Think about the choices he's been faced with, saving me or himself, trapping you here or gaining his own freedom, even seeking some kind of revenge on the company before working on another device to free you."

"Is that what he's doing?" John asked. "Out there looking for some pointless revenge instead of saving me?"

"It wouldn't be pointless if he actually succeeded. They're still out there, John, just half a mile past those stones at your doorstep. Every year they're bringing new people to this exact same fate. If he can stop them, then it saves countless lives moving forward. What's the freedom of one person when compared to hundreds? That's the way he sees it, anyway. And I'll be honest with you; I can't argue the logic. In an odd way, each of his decisions has made sense. He isn't evil; he's just a scientist."

"Aren't you also a 'scientist?'" John asked.

"Yes, and I've turned my back on my conscience more times than I'd care to admit. But I've come to realize that there has to be a point where we stop just thinking with frozen logical. Scientists like to believe the world is only a product of physics and math, just vectors and numbers dictating everything."

Karen stood from the stool and walked around the table to John's side. "But there are things in the universe like love and compassion, and humans feel them naturally in their gut just as easily as neurons fire in their brains. There's got to be a reason, even a scientific one, that we react this way. We cannot ignore the way we feel anymore than we can ignore the way we think. We have to find a balance there or we are just numbers and vectors."

She knelt down by John and placed a hand on his thigh. "And I can't accept a universe defined like that. Not anymore. And that's why I'm here, to give you this."

She stood, pulled the rounded tool from her pocket, and slid it between the watch and her wrist. She unlatched the band, and John watched the Diaspora slide easily from her arm. She offered it to him. "Take it," she said.

"But I can't," John argued. "You give me this speech about love and compassion, then you ask me to take that

thing from you and leave you down here to rot? No." John swiveled his stool away from her.

"Someone has got to, John," she said, "and it sure as hell doesn't deserve to be you."

"And what have you done that's so terrible?" John asked.

Karen looked down toward the ground beneath her feet. "I imprisoned a lover," she said. "I've never told anyone that before."

"I don't understand."

"These caves ... " Karen began, looking behind her to the stone-filled port glass in the door behind her. "The company collapses them to trap scientists for the off-chance that they may need them again. They have the money for it, so they just figure that it's safer and more strategic than executing them."

"That's horrible," John said, turning back to her.

"Yes, it is. And I worked for them. I met a young scientist here years before Felix came. He was the one initially brought in to make the device. I had no idea what the company was doing at the time. When his contract was up, they explained everything to me, justifying and simplifying it down to where it was almost unrecognizable as the heinous act that it was. I was the one to push the

button sparking the explosion in the cave leading to his lab. He's probably still in there. I'm only glad that he never knew I was the one who did it. That's why I deserve to be down here. I deserve the same fate I gave him."

"That's crazy," John said. "Go to him; save him if he's still there. How long has he been down here now? Why did you come to *me*?"

"Because I don't know how the hands work. Only Felix and the company know that. Even if I did, I doubt there would be a code to take me somewhere so precise. There are almost two hundred bathrooms down here within a one-mile radius. It's just not going to happen. This lab is the only exception to that. Felix programmed a special code just for here. I'll write it down for you."

Karen took a sheet of paper from a stack in the corner and jotted down the numbers with John's dying pencil. She slid it to him.

"Go," she said. "It's why I came here."

"I don't care what you did," John argued. "You're obviously sorry about it. I can't let you give the watch back to me."

"Please," she said, "don't carry this decision on your shoulders. I'm not doing it for you."

John looked at the device in her hand, lying defeated by the small tool next to it. He looked at Karen's face and realized that he understood none of it, not who she was, what had happened, who was guilty, and who wasn't. He had some of the facts, but not all of them, and the decisions being made outside of his control were complex beyond measure. It was pointless to argue further.

"Alright," John said, accepting the watch. "If you're sure this is what you want."

"I am."

"Will you help me?" he asked. "It's a little difficult for me." John nodded at his right hand, dark and stiff.

"Of course," she said, latching the band to his left wrist. "What happened to you anyway?"

"Advocates," John replied. "One named Cornelius Black."

Karen shuddered at the thought. "One told you his name?"

"It's a long story," John said.

"Maybe you'll tell me next time you visit."

John smiled at the comment and looked down at the watch, back on his arm after so much time. He saw Karen's saddened eyes in the reflection of its glass.

"Do you love him?" he asked.

"Felix?"

"Yes. Do you love him?"

Karen looked away from him. "Honestly? I don't know. But he's earned it from me, if that's what he wants. I owe him everything."

"That's not how it's supposed to work," John answered. "Not that I'm some expert. My longest relationship with someone was three weeks. Then I got dumped."

Karen smiled and turned back. "Maybe you're right nonetheless."

John eyed the Diaspora. "I never thought I'd be happy to see this thing again," he said.

"Here," Karen said, "take off this silly coat." She lifted it from him and placed the removal tool in the front pocket of his jeans. "Don't lose that," she said.

"Oh, I won't," he answered, smiling. "If there is one thing I will never let out of my sight, it's that thing." He laughed. "By the way, the 3:14 thing is fixed, right? I assume Felix fixed it, but I just want to be sure."

"The what?" she asked.

"Every day at 3:14 A.M. and P.M., the watch teleported me on its own. I didn't have any control over it."

"I'm sure that he fixed it. Anyway, I doubt he would let himself bounce around like that every day."

"And the biometric signature thing on the tool to take the watch off? He said it had to be calibrated."

Karen laughed. "It does. Just hold it in your hand for a few minutes before using it, and never have anyone else do it for you."

"That's it?"

She laughed. "Not everything is complicated."

"So how do I make this work then?"

"Just put your thumb ... " She stopped and looked at his right hand again. "It might be a bit of a problem for you actually. I'll do it this time."

"Where will it take me?" he asked.

"Like I said before," Karen replied, "I don't know how the coordinates work. You could wind up anywhere. I'm sorry about that."

She pulled the knob on the watch's side outward and spun it. The hands of the watch circled rapidly and stopped as she did, landing in a random position.

"Are you going to be okay?" she asked.

"It's alright," John said. "I've done it before. It's just one more adventure. One more chance to get home."

Karen nodded. "Are you ready?"

"Last chance to keep it," John said.

Karen shook her head no.

"I'm ready," John said.

Karen placed her thumb down on the glass and held it there.

"Don't forget to turn on the hologram thing. It's the two buttons on the camera over there."

"Okay," she said.

"I'll be back. You know, to visit. Until we find a way to get you out of here."

"I know you will."

The room began to fill with bright blue light. Karen stood, watching him leave, unaffected by it.

"I hate this part," John said as he disappeared.

"Me too," she replied.

The bright blue light rolled into a small sphere before leaving the room completely. John was gone.

XXVI.

FIVE MONTHS LATER:

John sat on the shore amidst the seashells, watching the waves lift and lower, form, and break against his feet. The moon above him shone brightly in the sky, reflecting the sunlight from a distant side of the world. There was a time when he may have wondered its origin, but no longer. He was happy to be home.

"You're going to get sand in the joints," Ronika complained into his left ear, resting her head on his shoulder. The fur from her orange ears blew against the sea's breeze and tickled the side of his face.

"Didn't you make it sand-proof?" he replied. John smiled, raised his right hand from the sand behind him, and brought it to his front. He shook the small grains out from the robotic joints augmenting the glove that covered his hand and flexed his fingers.

"Hey, man, don't come crying to me when the thing borks out on you," she said.

John raised his other hand and put it around Ronika's body, resting it around her side.

"I'm so glad you're back," she said.

"Me, too."

"Though, you never told me how you made it back here from Japan with no money," she said.

"I will," he answered. "Another time, though."

A faint blue light sparkled across a wave in front of them.

"Did you see that?" Ronika asked.

"Amazing," John said.

"It's just luciferin," Karen interjected, appearing on the watch between them. "All you're looking at is a little photoprotein and an overcharged ion. Nothing to write home about."

"Um, Karen?"

"Sorry."

John leaned back into the sand behind him and stretched his arms out to his sides. Ronika followed him down, keeping her head against his shoulder.

"Oh, I almost forgot," she said suddenly.

"What?" John asked.

Ronika reached into her front pocket and removed a small disposable camera. She lifted it above them and snapped a photograph.

THE END

John will return in MISSING SIGNALS, book two of
The Diaspora Trilogy

I.

Felix snapped himself awake as he felt his left hand begin to slip from the roof rack. It had been five hours now; they had to be getting closer. Losing his grip now would mean losing the van and probably worse, his life.

Another bump in the road and his hands tightened. Felix pulled himself forward against the sixty miles per hour wind and leaned his ear against the metal below him. The voice he heard was muffled, but he could hear some of the words it used: dead, teeth, don't panic.

It wasn't supposed to have been like this. That's why he'd brought the ratchet straps and carabineers. He was supposed to be safely hooked in place right now, not clutching the roof rack's hot metal with bare, quickly tiring hands. But, of course, the straps he'd bought had torn almost the moment the van first accelerated, only minutes after that poor sixteen-year-old had been blindfolded and led inside.

The van drove over a large hole in the road and Felix's body raised into the air before thumping back down against the roof. He stabilized himself and put his ear once more against the metal beneath him, hoping the noise he'd made had passed without suspicion. He heard the voices stop, and soon felt the van do the same.

Passenger or driver, Felix thought quickly. Right or left?

Felix began to roll left just before he heard the creak of the driver's side door. Shifting quickly, he spun his body to the right edge of the roof and hung it there, as far off the side as he could. Then, he heard the driver step out of the car.

Just tug at the rack, Felix thought, holding his breath. That's what made the noise. Take a quick look, and get back in the car.

He didn't need the driver not to look at the roof, just to not look very hard. If he could stay perfectly still, there'd be a good chance of going unnoticed. Worried and a bit paranoid, he looked to the sleeve of his suit, the only part of him visible from his silent and frozen position. His arm looked like the dirt-spotted van beneath it. *Good.*

He'd found the chameleon suit hanging in Harvard's Engineering and Applied Sciences lab when he'd broken in a month prior. He'd been searching for anything to help him with today's plans, and finding such a convenient invention had been even more than he'd hoped.

Unlike any other invisibility concept of which he'd heard, this suit didn't rely on cellular mutation or a composite metamaterial to negatively refract photons from the body. This suit was simply a network of pinpoint cameras displaying the world behind him in front of him and vice versa; a simple concept perhaps, but an astounding feat of precision craftsmanship and engineering nonetheless.

The end effect was impressive, even to Felix who'd seen all nature of things, but not perfect. The edges of his body's form showed a slight curvature, and the material could bunch if its wearer wasn't careful.

It'd been a difficult decision to take it from Harvard--Felix knew these things were generally the product of countless years of research by poorly paid scientists--but once past the guilt, the act of removing it had been easy. The lab's security code generators still operated from the same algorithm they had when he'd been a student,

and the man caught on their security tapes was already dead, sure to provide no match against a police database.

Felix heard footsteps pace in the dirt alongside the van. He imagined the person who owned them looking up at the roof, wondering what had so noisily bumped against it. Hopefully, the truth was much too farfetched for he or she to suspect. Much to Felix's relief, the person reentered the vehicle a few moments later satisfied, perhaps, that nothing was amiss.

The van jerked forward suddenly, almost knocking Felix to the ground. His fingers were sore and tired against the center bar of the rack, but still managed to silently pull him back above the vehicle where he tried to remain stiff and still.

Forty-six minutes passed, and the van finally slowed to a halt, kicking a cloud of brown dirt around its tires as it stopped. Felix raised his head and peered out at the barren, arid landscape they'd parked in, similar in climate and flora to where he'd been brought at the beginning of his own time with the Company.

He scanned the horizon for the large silo he'd entered in the 70s, but failed to find it. There was, however, an old farmhouse nearby, and a slight, blonde-haired woman with a white lab coat standing dutifully in front of it.

The side door of the van pushed open and Felix moved quickly to the center of the roof. Footsteps landed against the ground below him. He raised his head an inch and craned it forward, just enough to see a blindfolded teen being led out of the van by a shorthaired man in a bright red t-shirt.

"Dean," the man said, removing the wide, black blindfold from the boy's face, "I'm going to leave you with Jennifer now. You're in good hands."

"Hello, Dean!" the blonde-haired woman exclaimed in an overly chipper voice. "We're so excited to have you with us. I'm sure you must be just bursting with questions, and that's what I'm here for, to help you out with anything you need!"

"I could use some sunglasses," the boy said, shielding his eyes from the burning afternoon light.

"Here," said the man in the red shirt. "You can take mine." After handing his glasses to the boy, he shot him a loose, playful salute and climbed back into the van.

Felix slowly crawled to the opposite side of the roof and lowered his body halfway down its side, waiting for the last possible moment to drop. If this woman, Jennifer, was still facing the van by the time it left, he'd be easily

noticed and all of this would be for nothing. For now, his fate rested with fortune.

The van accelerated. Felix held his breath and dropped his body. His long toes narrowly avoided the van's back left tire as it rolled past his feet. Standing inhumanly still, he saw Jennifer and Dean already moving toward the farmhouse, their backs turned flatly at Felix and the road. They hadn't noticed him. The plan could continue, for now.

He took a careful step forward and began to walk quietly behind the pair as they moved to the farmhouse, matching his footsteps to theirs and listening to their conversation unnoticed.

"So, Dean, I read in your file that you specialize in hyper-efficient fuel and propulsion," Jennifer said. "How exciting! I'm glad my friend noticed your work at the state science fair before you made the mistake of wasting your talents at a college."

"I'm still not sure what you think is worth the kind of money you guys pay," Dean said. "And was all this spy stuff really necessary to get me here?"

"Have you thought about what you're going to spend your money on yet, Dean?" Jennifer asked happily.

Felix struggled to keep himself quiet. *Oh, this is just sickening.*

"I think I'm going to fund my own research," Dean answered. "I want to be able to work without grant money. Public, private, it doesn't matter; it all comes with a price. That's what my dad says, anyway. I also want to make sure my work gets to people, to change the way we travel and power our homes without someone telling me where or how to use it, you know?"

"Oh, I think that's wonderful!" Jennifer said. "Maybe you'll let us help you with that dream after your time at the facility is up. Don't be afraid to tell us about new projects and ideas you have, okay? We'd really like to know all about them."

I'd imagine you would, Felix thought.

Jennifer stepped onto the house's front porch and pulled a small key from her pocket. She slid it into the deadbolt lock above the front door and edged it open.

"Is this the facility?" Dean asked.

"Oh, no dear. Where we're going is much nicer."

Just a little further, Felix thought. He kept his eyes locked onto the back of Jennifer's head as he approached her. *Don't turn around; you've done so well thus far. Just a little further ...*

As Felix stepped through the doorway, he halted and gaped at the large metal cylinder at the house's center. He'd forgotten how impressive Company elevators were.

Jennifer stepped toward it and held her hands up to the metal. A sweeping line of green light ran over her eyes and palms. The cylinder split apart to a spacious room, decorated modernly with stark black and white furniture: a leather couch, a shining plastic table, two swiveling egg chairs.

Welcome, a soothing, prerecorded voice played from an inside speaker. *Please take your seat. Descent will begin shortly.*

Jennifer smiled and gestured the awestruck teen in her care to enter. As Dean took a step forward, Felix made his move. Quickly opening the front of his chameleon suit, he removed a black plastic pistol grip with a disposable camera mounted to its top from the breast pocket.

"Excuse me, can you look here for just a moment?" Felix asked loudly.

As Jennifer turned to see who'd spoken, Felix squeezed the plastic grip. Two thin darts connected to red and black wires shot at her chest from beneath the camera, piercing her coat and skin. The disposable camera on top of Felix's

device flashed and fifty milliamps of electricity passed into her chest through the wires.

"Thank you," Felix said nicely. Jennifer collapsed to the floor.

Dean ran into the elevator and yelled at it frantically, "Close! Close, damn it! Close!"

Felix hooked his hands beneath the arms of Jennifer's body and dragged it between the elevator doors to the small room past them. He dropped her there and stood straight, eyeballing Dean before continuing. "You. Kid. Out," he said.

"What ... what are you?" Dean asked in a quivering voice, backing his body against the far wall of the room.

"Just a man," Felix sighed, remembering the bizarre appearance the chameleon suit must have given him. He lifted the trim flap down his sides, unzipped the suit, and stepped out from it. Beneath, he was wearing the same clothes he'd worn on his first trip to the labs over thirty years ago, a white, short sleeve button down shirt and gray dress slacks. A thin black backpack strapped to his shoulders was the only addition.

"What did you do to her?" Dean yelled. "What do you want?"

The elevator's speakers played loudly. *Please step fully inside of the elevator so descent can begin. Thank you.*

"What do I want? I want you to get out," Felix answered him. "Leave and forget this place. Go back to school and take employ as an underpaid research assistant like a normal kid."

"No," Dean replied nervously. "You have no idea what's at stake. I have to--I have a job to do here. You have no idea how much they're paying me for my work!"

"Let me guess," Felix said, rolling his eyes, "three million dollars."

"No, they offered me ten."

Please step fully inside of the elevator so descent can begin. Thank you.

"Of course they account for inflation," Felix mumbled.

"What?"

Felix kicked one of Jennifer's feet fully past the elevator doors. "Three million is equivalent to ten million when the dollars don't exist," he said quickly. "Now get out!" Felix grabbed the teen by his shirt and circled him toward the door. Lifting his foot, he kicked Dean's back, sending the boy tumbling out from the elevator onto his face.

"You'll thank me for that kick later," Felix said as the elevator doors closed with a thud. He backed from them and sat down on the couch, immediately resting his head into his hands. For the next few minutes he sat in still silence, looking into the darkness his hands held cupped around his eyes.

He'd tried to avoid being rash in coming here; he'd taken the required time to think his actions out properly, extrapolating possibilities and charting contingencies. But preparation, he knew, could only take one so far. The hypothetical would always be radically different than the reality, and one thing he'd not accounted for was the dread that had taken hold of him as soon as he'd walked into the elevator. It had been the moment he'd realized he was once more delivering himself into their lair, once more by his own volition.

Even Dante wasn't stupid enough to go back, Felix thought.

Ten minutes later, Felix shook, or at the very least, suppressed the last of his reservations. With little time left, he stood from the couch and leaned down over Jennifer's motionless body. Lifting carefully, he removed the darts from her chest. Their tips slid easily from the shallow wounds they'd caused in her skin. Felix placed two

fingers against the side of her neck and pressed firmly to check for a pulse.

Good, he thought. She's alive. Time for phase two.

Felix lifted his chameleon suit from the floor, balled it, and slid it into his backpack. Next, he unzipped the pack's side pocket and removed the vial he'd packed there. The container was made of thin but sturdy plastic, an imitation glass more resistant to stress. He held it up to one of the bright LEDs on the elevator wall and peered through its translucent blue contents.

"I'm glad you didn't break like the ratchet straps," he told it. "Otherwise, this would've been quite the brief adventure."

Removing its cork with care, Felix stuck his finger inside the vial and scooped out a large dollop of the gel within. Slowly, he lowered his hand beneath the couch and rubbed the substance into a thin layer along its bottom fabric. "You just wait there until I'm ready for you," he told it.

Prepare for arrival, the elevator played.

Felix stood and wiped the remaining residue from his finger between the couch's two leather cushions. Satisfied that he'd cleaned his finger as best he could, he corked the vial and pushed it down inside his pocket. Jennifer's

body twitched as the elevator stopped. Felix moved himself above her as the doors slid open.

The room beyond was near identical to *the hub* he remembered from his old lab, and the familiarity near shook his composure. Employees with differently colored badges shuffled through the room in front of him, walking hurriedly past the same bare furniture, holding the same clipboards, wearing the same lab coats and ignoring the same oddly spaced anonymous doors lining the outer wall. Only their faces were new.

Felix moved his right hand behind him and wrapped his fingers around the cold handle of the gun he'd placed in the waist of his trousers.

"Oh my God!" Felix yelled as loudly as he could. "I think she's had a heart attack!"