

VIRTUAL HEAVEN

by,

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CHAPTER ONE

Alex Cutler spent most of his days stooped over the latest monitor, his black hair swaying against his smooth jaw line as he rocked in sync with the rhythmic clicks of the keyboard.

His co-worker, Sean, knocked on the open door. With long thinning hair and an inflated belly, he reminded Alex of an alcoholic skater from the early two thousands who told radically different stories about the wipeout that ended his career. Even now, he clung one decision from stardom. Like the thing where you doubled a penny everyday for a month, him posting a daily shot of his eclectic T-shirts would compound millions of followers in no time. Today's shirt, black with dominant white letters, read: 99.9% CHIMPANZEE.

If Alex received the riches his new employer promised, he would consider hiring Sean as a wardrobe consultant, or at least bribe him for his method of procurement. Until then, he dressed similar to today: slim, not skinny jeans, a snug V-neck under a loose fitting flannel, and shoes with fat laces.

"Today's the big day?"

Sean's grin relaxed Alex. "I guess we'll see. Come in." Over the past few days, he worried his decision to leave Vision Tech had irked his buddy. Despite never meeting outside of the office, Alex considered Sean his only friend.

"Knock that off," Sean said. "You don't work here anymore."

"One...second..." Alex's lightning fast typing increased as he neared his intended breaking point. Sean plopped in the chair across from him, set a few stapled pages on the desk, and grabbed the lone knick-knack—two metallic stick figures on a seesaw—before leaning back.

"...Aanndd there," Alex said. A few clicks, followed by a series of musical notes, and he shut down his computer for the final time as a Vision Tech employee. Remembering deserting his coworker claimed a spot on the day's itinerary; his eyes darted from Sean's as he gathered the random flash drives left in his desk, and placed them in a box on the floor.

"You can keep that," Alex nodded to the object Sean toyed with. Once given a tap, the seesaw rocked for an exorbitant length. Every time someone activated it, he thought of his childhood—of happy times gone forever. "Something to remember me by if I'm never seen again." He spoke in jest, but as the words slipped out, he accepted his subconscious might have summoned them as a warning to the alert self. Beyond "somewhere in the northwestern United States," the exact geographical location for the Broumgard Group remained a mystery. His grasp of the company's purpose could be

surmised in one line: Broumgard provides solace for the suffering and leisure for the affluent.

“Thanks, Bro.” Sean inspected the knick-knack. “Now, if you save the world or something, I’ll auction this off on eBay for a couple thou.” Apparently satisfied, he placed it on the desk and set it in motion. “I’ve done some digging on the Broumgard Group.” His voice grew somber as he nodded to the stapled pages. The gesture ignited fire under Alex’s skin, until he noticed Sean’s mouth twitch as he struggled to suppress a smile. “You’re not going to like what I discovered.”

Even with the knowledge of some impending gag, Sean’s words gave Alex pause. He scoured the Internet, yet still knew nothing about his future employer. *What company avoided search engines?*

Sean placed his fingers on the stapled pages and rotated them for Alex’s viewing. “Satan, my man. You’re going to be working for the devil. Like you always have.”

Alex chuckled, relieving tension.

His friend nodded for him to peruse the documents. “I’m serious. It’s total mind-fellatio. Obviously, you’re going to be working on a computer.” He pointed at the printout. “Computers are here to usher in the Antichrist.”

Alex focused on the apparent farewell joke. A simple bar graph constructed the black header accentuated with orange flames, *Youplaywiththedevil.com*. He appreciated the gesture, but...

“It starts breaking down Revelations.” Sean scooted to the edge of his chair. “How the first communication between artificial life is a sign of End Times, known as abomination, accomplished in 1969 when computers from CAL and UCLA spoke to one another. And how their mascots, the bear and the tiger, match the Bible’s prophecy. I mean, did you know the first Macintosh personal computer, the Apple One, retailed for six hundred and sixty-six dollars?”

Alex located that notation and frowned. He wasn’t ready to bathe in holy water, but six hundred sixty-six dollars seemed an odd price point, and he would have thought a terrible marketing strategy, but Apple thrived. Alex read a recent article claiming Apple teetered on the brink of becoming the first trillion-dollar company.

Noticing his consternation, Sean hummed a satisfied, “Mmm-Hmm.”

Despite the strange subject matter, Alex warmed with nostalgia. Part of him wanted to stay at Vision Tech. Keep life simple. He knew this world and would miss Sean’s antics, but something else pulled him forward, toward a grander fate.

Broumgard’s impressive salary held little sway. He had been headhunted before, especially after the success of his program, *Plow Straight*, universally adapted software for writers of code. The secrecy meant less. The NSA extended him an offer to apply during his freshman year in college. He tossed their information packet in the trash. Nothing could induce him to disregard the masses in favor of politicians. No, he chose medium pay in the private sector at a firm close to his vexing mother. But the Broumgard Group offered riches, secrecy, and a project of benevolence—who could resist that?

“That’s not all,” Sean leaned forward and flattened the stapled edge before tapping halfway down the paper. “If you take the word computer, and assign each letter a numerical value based on its alphabetical positioning, like A equals one, B equals two, C equals three, etcetera, add up the letters, then times that by six, the word computer equals six hundred sixty-six.” He paused for effect. “He’s rubbing it in our faces, my man.”

Concluding in the era of the internet a person could find data to support any argument, Alex exhaled, “Pretty compelling stuff.” He then resumed his packing, knowing, despite the absurdity of computers as the chariot for Satan’s son, he would check the math at a later time.

Grabbing the cardboard top to his box, he paused at the sight of a plastic-protected copy of *Computer World* magazine sitting atop the items. A younger version of him adorned its cover—an eighteen-year-old misfit wanting nothing but to escape the madness of Roger’s Park, his lower-class neighborhood.

The photographer had given him a Vision Tech sweatshirt for the photo op. Recalling the ratty condition of the gray, coffee stained V-neck underneath, he grinned.

In the six years since that photograph, Alex’s ability to visually encompass an idea, aggregate its many possibilities, and transform them into lines of codes, sequences, and commands, had grown by leaps and bounds. His hair hung farther down, too. Behind the eyes of that smiling young man lay an inner confusion, an uncertainty to the point of it all. His increasingly frequent bouts of anxiety focused on the possibility he was regressing; that he used each day to avoid thinking about the final one. Perhaps that represented the main reason he accepted Broumgard’s offer? To discover if a change of environment could help him identify his purpose. Maybe, if their definition of benevolence aligned with his, he would find salvation.

Sean stretched his neck to see what held Alex’s attention. “I kept a copy of that too.” His tone adopted a seriousness that caught Alex off-guard. When their eyes met, Sean bobbed his head. “Always knew you were special, Bro. For real.”

Alex shimmied the box lid on tight, leaned over, and stopped the rocking men.

“So, what’s next?” Sean lifted the knick-knack as he rose.

Good question. “Well, I’m all packed and my stuff has been picked up. I’m gonna stop by the condo for a final inspection and then that’s it for me and Chi-town.”

“Wow.”

Wow said it all. Alex breathed deeply. The banter had soothed his nerves, but, as he approached the point of no return, the trill crept back. Hefting the box, he rounded the desk, where Sean stood stiff, chewing on his bottom lip, his face furrowed in concentration.

Unfamiliar with seeing his friend ill at ease, Alex said, “I’ll stay in touch.”

“That’s fine,” Sean said with the wave of his hand, “But I want to ask a favor.” He locked eyes with Alex. “No, a pledge.”

“Sure, man, whatever.”

“It might be unethical or whatnot, but you have to promise me: if you find out you’re working on some Noah’s-Ark-type deal, you’ll let me know.”

Alex thought about that for a second. He had considered bionic prostitutes; text messaging God (or aliens); and, programming robotic dolphins that could spin at tremendous velocities allowing them to sink multiple enemy vessels. He hadn’t considered any doomsday scenarios.

Finding Sean’s expectant face watching his, Alex nodded.

Sean’s gaze lingered, possibly gauging Alex’s sincerity. Once accepted, he cracked a sly smile, they bumped fists, and Sean trotted away.

Alex's boss, and founder of Vision Tech, Robert Stetson, waited halfway down the center aisle that split the cubicles. He was the only person on the floor who dressed formal. The sight of the dapper man saddened Alex.

With a queasiness that mounted with each step, Alex reached him, balanced the box on his hip, and they shook hands.

"We're going to miss you something fierce here at VT," Robert said.

A few employees gathered around to share in the farewell speech.

"We all wish you the best of luck wherever..."

As Robert spoke about him having a job here if his new employment failed, and them being family, things Alex appreciated and agreed with, he retreated internally. Before completely cocooning himself, he caught sight of a screensaver behind Robert. The green mask from Jim Carrey's movie *The Mask*, floated across a black monitor: dominating eyes, over-sized teeth, a demonic bone structure. The periodic animation of the green face bursting into a cackle recalled his earlier conversation about computers being tools of the devil.

A thought chilled Alex. If he somehow discovered computers were harbingers of end times, would that knowledge be enough for him, or anyone in society, to forsake the beloved device?

CHAPTER TWO

“Am I coming through, sir?” Victor, Alex’s electronic assistant asked.

“Loud and clear,” Alex said.

Two-and-a-half days later, Alex continued adjusting to the helpful voice emanating from speakers in his home, and from an earpiece when venturing into Eridu, Broumgard’s compact city nestled in the mountains of Montana.

His weekend passed in a hum of shock and amazement. Debarking a private jet at a private airport in a private city and experiencing ultimate luxury: touring a towering glass hotel packed with amenities, riding a magnetic rail, visiting recreational parks and trails, moving into one of many stone residential buildings more appropriate to Park Avenue, was like stepping into a futuristic backdrop for the chosen.

Alex’s two-story, six-thousand-square-foot condo dwarfed all expectations. Starting with a glass-encased leather trench coat from the movie, *The Matrix*, displayed in the foyer. His lone neighbor on the top floor worked as a biomedical engineer. Enough said. Learning Brad FINDER helped found Broumgard and design their hidden oasis, amplified Alex’s feelings of grandeur.

Exiting building A, the eastern-most structure, he scanned the high-tech compound stretching roughly two miles from end to end. The morning sun chased shadows from the long empty road as it rose behind him. His breath plumed from the early frost, making him thankful he had worn a green flannel over his maroon dragon T-shirt. Before he approached, he waited for a couple to enter the nearest cylindrical tram tower, a shimmering chrome edifice that resembled a recently buffed spacecraft set to launch.

Feeling strangled by his building angst, he ignored the elevator, chose the set of zigzagging stairs, and attacked them two at a time.

Near the top, he heard voices and slowed, not wanting to be the guy who runs to his first day of work, despite its truth.

A tightness gripped his stomach as he stepped onto the concourse. Was he the last to arrive? Clusters of employees waited in the partially opened boarding area. A group with white shirts and black pants, like waiters; a mismatched crop of slackers he assumed were the programmers; two men and a woman in business attire; a dash of lab coats; a sprinkle of hospital scrubs. Stiffening, he honed in on a woman in baby-blue scrubs.

She waited with crossed arms in between the programmers and medical professionals. Slowly, the world around her lost focus.

Her shoulder-length black hair was tied behind her. Her loose fitting scrubs accentuated shapely hips and a healthy chest. Her casual morning countenance sparked to life, as if a profound thought surfaced. She turned in Alex's direction and met his stare.

Caught peeping, he pressed his lips together, brought his hand flush to his chest, and waved.

A small raise of the hand and she looked away, but Alex had an inclination he piqued her curiosity.

Shortly after, employees boarded the tram. She added evidence to his suspicions by looking at him a final time before entering a car three ahead of his. He considered racing to join her, but found himself alone on the platform, so he darted into the rear car.

Well-spaced sanguine-colored booths lined the interior. A television in between the windows displayed the morning news, which recounted yet another strain of avian bird flu, one that scientists feared would soon mutate and decimate the human race. He wanted to turn it off, but an acrylic screen protector denied access to the controls.

He avoided the news as if *it* carried the contagion. If ever a day arrived when he found himself one of the throngs of people salivating for the national news, he would fill a bath and pull the television in with him, ending the madness.

Before he queried Victor about at least changing the channel, a stainless steel cart grabbed his attention. Trays were filled with fruits, yogurts, protein bars. Alex selected an Evian from the ice. Was he the only person who found it interesting that one of the first major water companies chose to invert the word naïve, and market a previously free product to consumers?

Finally, and only in the land of Oz, a quaint condiment section offered bins of pills representing every color, size, and shape.

Alex peered closer. Cognitex/cognitive function, Glucosamine Sulfate/joint health, GlycolCam/improved artery efficacy.

"What's up with the pills, Victor?" He asked as he traced his fingers over a pile of fish oil tablets.

"Vitamins and minerals, sir."

Alex grabbed two for brain function and heart health and one for intestinal integrity, then said, "When in Rome," before washing down his handful with a gulp from the bottle of water whose name mocked its customers.

The tram rode exceptionally smooth—not a screech sounded as it glided to its first stop near the security section. A half-dozen men in gray and black uniforms entered the cars ahead of his. None joined his cabin, adding disappointment. This was his big day. He wanted to chat with someone about it. He wanted to acclimate. He wanted to get the communication ball rolling, but it was like his maroon dragon T-shirt displayed a scarlet "A".

Next stop, the hotel La Berce, where the vast majority of the passengers exited and a few boarded. Alex's mystery woman waved goodbye to someone staying on the tram and sought out the back car (which caused his heart to flutter), before she followed the group inside.

As the doors started to shut, an obese man with greasy hair barged past Alex. Almost as round as he was tall, the man wore a white lab coat over a dangerously tight TCU football jersey. The baffling contrast stole Alex's desire to initiate conversation.

The man carried his briefcase with two meaty hands as he shuffled to the booth, sat, and situated the suitcase on his lap. He unclasped the locks, retrieved *Doctor Sleep* by Stephen King, opened it to his bookmarked page, and, while keeping his eyes in his book, said, "You're one of the new guys?"

Alex considered sitting across from him, but only stepped closer. "I am. My name's Alex."

"I'm Jason." He flipped a page. "You're the one taking over the CSD?"

Comprehensive Software Design. People who worked with computers were always altering their titles, as if the glamour of what they did increased with each new moniker. Programmers referred to themselves as software engineers, networkers were interface specialists, and animators were graphic designers. Presumably, Alex would be heavily involved in programming and overseeing the other. Maybe he should ask to be called a technological maestro?

Instead, he asked, "Are you a programmer?"

"Software engineer."

Of course.

Jason's hand crept in the side pocket of his lab coat and delicately removed a king-size Snickers. With two fingers, a thumb, and deft precision, he exposed a portion of the chocolate bar and bit into it.

Alex wondered if this guy knew how tight his faded jersey fit. It clung like a girdle and had to be obstructing circulation, definitely respiration. Packing even one extra bite into his form might cause the jersey to spontaneously Hulk Hogan.

Flashing colors drew him to the muted television. Breaking news. Some guy shot some people. He turned away, disgusted. Evidence existed to support airing these stories perpetuated them, yet in America, ratings trumped morality.

Beyond the screen, the mountain scenery captivated him. A beauty behind man's beast. Snow still coated their tops. Alex wondered about the temperature at those elevations? Sunny and comfortable? Could he wear shorts as he forged through snow? He wasn't sure. He had never been near a mountain, but if the opportunity presented itself, he intended to find out.

Inertia gently pitched him forward as the tram slowed. They passed over a deserted parking lot in front of the glass building residents called the Atrium.

Alex waited by the door as the tram crawled to a stop. Taking a deep breath, he adjusted his hair and tapped his foot. Today he learned the big secret. A technology unrivaled by anything on the planet.

He wasn't much of a reader, but bookshelves lined his home office, and surprisingly, he had finished the majority of a novel the previous night. Some sci-fi bender that dealt with wormhole travel. The possibility he would be gating off to other worlds kept him awake past midnight.

"Need my help getting anywhere?" Jason asked from behind him.

Alex could use the guidance, but it was day one at ground zero and he wanted to take it in.

"No, thanks. I've got Victor with me." He tapped his ear as he exited.

"Who? Oh, yeah. Alright, man. See you down there." When the doors opened, Jason stepped past him and joined the crowd.

Like an oversize hamster tunnel, the tram tower connected to the Atrium by a three-hundred-and-sixty-degree glass skywalk. He waited for the employees to pass through the two sets of double-doors and then, once alone, asked, "Okay, Victor, which way?"

"Your destination is work area one. Once you enter the Atrium, you will have the option of taking the elevators to your left or the stairs directly in front of you."

Alex searched the ceiling for a set of cameras, assuming Victor must be linked with them to know his location. Finding none, he concluded the earpiece used GPS tracking.

"When you arrive at the main floor, speak with one of the front desk clerks."

Alex pushed through the double-doors and paused. A glass rail encompassed the third floor. He eased to its edge and peered over the main lobby.

Morning sunlight slanted through the glass front and reflected off of the emerald-colored floor tiles, illuminating the open entrance. Chrome letters, as dominant as banners, tiled vertically down the west wall: 'B G'. Two arching reception desks waited beneath them with generous halls to either side. A half-dozen security officers busied themselves behind the desks; some watching monitors; a few jotting notations; others in conversation.

Spotting Broumgard's director of personnel, Tara Capaldi, brought back images of their first meeting at the airport. Tan business skirt hugging athletic thighs and hips; designer watch and pumps; blond hair high-lighted with brown streaks and pulled back in a ponytail. She had been the prettiest woman Alex ever touched. Though in her late twenties, something in her hazel eyes seemed aged, cold, and repelled any notion of attraction. She was a professional destined for bigger things. Alex respected her knowledge and organizational skills. Beyond that, he simply appreciated her ability to reduce his tension with a few words.

She worked behind the closest counter, bent at the waist, observing a monitor with one of the security officers (Victor's idea of front desk clerks). The elevator chimed its arrival behind him. Turning, he saw the final stragglers from the tram boarding, and he hurried over to join them.

As the glass elevator descended, he stared at the only familiar face in the crowd. Tara laughed at something a security officer said. Everyone near her turned to catch a glimpse of the act.

Making eye contact with Alex, she beamed; waved him over.

Removing his earpiece as he exited, he placed it in his flannel pocket.

Taking in the bustle, it seemed most of the security officers at Eridu resembled NFL linebackers in their prime. The others, weight-pit champions from Riker's Island.

"Good morning, Mr. Cutler," Tara said as they shook hands. "Is everything going well so far?"

"Morning, and I can't imagine things going any better."

A coy smile. "Don't be so sure about that," she said as she passed and motioned for him to follow her down one of the two main hallways.

A mammoth security guard watched Alex as he trailed her. The gaze stayed firm, but non-threatening. "Good morning, Mr. Cutler."

"Morning," Alex replied as he scratched his neck, unsettled that a man of those dimensions knew his name prior to introduction.

“I’ll take you to meet your team,” Tara said. “There are twenty-six full-time programmers here. Without guidance, they lack the type of synergy you instilled at Vision Tech.”

He wasn’t sure if he instilled anything more than *Plow Straight*. Camaraderie might have been a by-product of the superiority complex it initially provided.

She stopped in front of a door marked, “Work Area One,” and grabbed the knob. “You ready?”

Hearing excited chatter coming from the room, he looked at Tara to reply, but she opened the door. The noise inside drowned out his intended words.

Desks of average size filled the room. Most occupied by talkative people dressed in casual attire. High ceilings; walls decorated with pin-up posters of comic books and sci-fi movies; and an elevated platform, with a dominant desk, that faced the rest of the area.

A few women dotted the room of predominantly male, middle-aged, computer-geek types. Two men wore VR headsets. By the way their fingers strummed the air, they interacted with private worlds. A foursome of Asians had their desks pushed together near the far wall. They focused on a small man with bright orange hair who stood atop a chair, engaged in an animated tale in a foreign dialect.

Alex spotted his rotund tram companion, Jason, in the rear, feet propped on a desk. His back faced the rest of the room as he read his novel and mined Whoppers from a spilled pile.

“The annual hiring day is a big one for us,” Tara said. “A day where we open our lives and allow special individuals, like yourself, to become part of the family.

“Here at Broumgard, we offer a multitude of entertaining events for our clients. I’m sure you’ve heard about many amenities offered at hotel La Berce, but I want to introduce you to our real attraction: the Lobby.”

Alex turned back toward the lobby, curious if he had missed something, and back to Tara, who watched him with a conspicuous smile.

“Do you like football, Alex? We play a game each year: security personnel versus programmers.”

The basic rules of football eluded Alex. He wasn’t sure if a touchdown meant six, seven, or eight points; but as her words settled, he surveyed the room. Most of the men and women were either small, overweight, or brittle.

He recalled the security officers mulling behind the service counters behind Tara, glanced around at his teammates again, and then relaxed, followed by the bite of disappointment. If football was involved along with programmers, this whole hyped event revolved around a super video game. Secretly, he had been hoping for the alien technology or maybe the Noah’s Ark thing—God knew the world needed another cleansing.

Video gaming bummed him out. He didn’t play video games as much as his peers, and despite having a knack for them, enjoyed them less. He could spend an afternoon behind a controller, but once finished and looking back, he wondered where the time had gone, and regretted the waste. One hour into his first day and he was thinking he might buck Tara’s claim and become the first person to quit the Broumgard Group.

Tara raised her voice, “Everyone quiet please.”

The orange-haired man stopped abruptly, hopped down, and sat.

Tara's voice so effectively silenced the rowdy room and brought order, Alex doubted if a choreographer, given a month to rehearse, could have done it faster.

"This is Alex Cutler. He will be leading you nomads once he completes orientation. If anyone has any questions before we head over, now is the time."

Alex raised his hand and noticed another man—a thin albino with white hair, reddish eyes and large freckles--doing the same.

Tara sighed. "Does anyone who has worked here more than a few days have any questions?" She stared playfully at Alex until he lowered his arm. "As you two can see, everyone here is wearing name tags, for today only, so learn them while you can."

The other newb's nametag read, Carl W. The ghost-like man didn't seem old enough to drink alcohol. His full lips and wide nose gave him African features. Were there African albinos? Either way, Carl's bewildered look comforted Alex, for it exceeded his own.

"Okay, everyone, let's head over to the elevators," Tara announced.

As if a school bell had sounded, the chatter resumed and everyone stood. A few employees gathered around Alex, inspecting him.

"What position are you looking to play?" Kole asked. His dimensions matched Alex's. However, in a society that demanded perfection, Kole's quarter of an inch off the forehead, eyes two millimeters larger, and slightly longer nose took Alex's seven to Kole's nine.

Alex shrugged. He would play whatever, once he figured out the controls.

"How about this," Kole said, "are you a hot shot or a team player?"

Alex answered honestly. "Team player."

"That's good. We have too many hot shots on this team," Denise, a black, five-foot-one, bulldozer of a woman, said. The plastic beads on the ends of her hair rattled against her shoulders as she moved. The "e" at the end of her name trailed off and dragged around the tag providing a border, complete with thorns and leaves.

"If you need anything," she placed her hand seductively on Alex's forearm, "anything at all, you come see me." She glided her fingers across his arm as she turned to leave. Once near the door, she high-fived another female on their way out.

Kole patted Alex's shoulder. "What's it gonna be then, bud, offense or defense?"

"I haven't played football since I was eight," he said groggily as he recovered from the come-on. "But I can hold my own at Madden."

The orange-haired Asian jumped on a chair and formed his arms into various flexes. "I hoe down the Dee!"

His display earned numerous chuckles, applause, and cheers of support from the exiting programmers.

"The thing is," Kole said, drawing Alex's attention, "this is no video game. It's full-contact, take-no-prisoners football."

"Well, I hope the guards play touch," Alex said with a dry laugh.

"I play left tackle," a wiry woman in her early twenties said as she passed, "so don't try and snake it."

A female left tackle that weighed a hundred and thirty pounds?

If no video game, maybe they wore robotic suits and this would be some future ball where gravity didn't matter and propulsion amplified their movements. High-velocity contacts would create jarring sounds as loud as head-on collisions. If so, the

technology might be safe enough for everyone present, but Alex would pass. Well, more likely, he would want to pass, but suit up and play, the entire time spent in a state of uncomfortability, wishing he'd had the balls to say no thank you..

The two newbies, Alex and Carl, were the last to enter the rowdy hallway. A congestion of more than two-dozen security officers and programmers shuffled as one, all hooting and trash-talking.

“Carl, Alex, you guys stay with the group,” Tara said. “They’ll get you where you need to go.” She made sure they heard her and then knifed toward the front of the crowd.

Most of the security officers wore gray police-like uniforms, while a few wore college jerseys. The two-way heckling frothed—a bass versus tenor showdown.

The confident demeanor of the programmers did little to soothe Carl, who kept a bewildered half-snarl as they moved down the hall, but Alex knew they were going to a massive X-Box showdown or something like in that movie, *Surrogates*, where you controlled an avatar.

Now that would be awesome.

Alex trailed a six-foot six-inch tall black man whose XXXXL University of Michigan jersey might as well have been made of spandex, whose biceps were so thick, they could have stored Alex’s thighs. As if sensing Alex’s inspection, he turned to face him. His smile appeared normal enough.

The giant pointed at his own nametag to communicate above the ruckus: Dalton.

Alex checked himself for his nametag, intending to point, but Dalton waved away his effort, non-verbally saying he knew all about Alex Cutler. He imparted a dual thumbs up and faced forward.

Employees gathered around a set of ivory-accented chrome elevators. The more time he spent loitering around the excited combatants, the more his tension abated. Regardless of their destination, people were eager to arrive.

The elevator opened for the third time, and he boarded at the end of the load.

A mix of security jocks and programming nerds filled the car. Alex’s anticipation climbed with each centimeter rise in elevation. He found himself wishing months had already passed and he was integrated into the amiable atmosphere. The conversations inside carried an air of diplomacy. A pinch of jest. “Who are you guys starting at quarterback?”

“This year *we* win.”

“I’M A BEAST!”

“Seriously, how are you going to stop Jason?”

Jason? Thought Alex. If they referenced the one he knew in the super tight lab coat, they only needed to toss a Baby Ruth on the ground. Boom, problem solved.

The elevator opened into a spacious white room. Rows of chairs, delineated with heavy green curtains stretched back as far as he could see. A few were pulled shut.

Staff members in lab coats interacted with holographic charts floating two feet before them, a pea-size lens clipped to their shoulders. He marveled at the simplistic efficiency of the design. The nurses shouted names. Individuals stepped forward, received terse directions, then merged into the rows of chairs. He watched a man enter the fifth row and walk down five stations where an attendant waited for him. As the man sat, the nurse guided the army green privacy curtain around them.

“Alex.” Tara clutched his arm. Her eyes coursed with excitement. “Are you ready for the greatest experience on the planet?”

“What is it? Are we playing football on a VR screen or something?”

“Alex Cutler!” A worker shouted.

“Something like that. Words can’t describe it. Just remember that you will be totally safe.” Tara pulled him toward the woman, who inspected him.

“Alex Cutler?”

He nodded.

“Two-eighteen.”

Alex allowed himself to be led deep into the second row. His mind processed the possibilities; virtual reality, a virtual screen, deep hypnosis, sensory deprivation, toxic induced hallucinations. All of these had an appeal to him, some more than others. He simply wished for a little back-story.

On his approach, he spotted Carl nestling into a chair. Two security officers stood businesslike to either side of him. Carl’s face displayed his anxiety. Before he noticed Alex—who waited to give him a comforting nod—an officer shucked the durable curtain closed.

“Here we are,” Tara said as she motioned to a chair. “Take a seat, please.” The area was eight feet square. A control panel that resembled an electronic lectern rested in the corner. Alex eased into the comfortable, black leather seat. Underneath him, a block-shaped apparatus flickered with lights. Once settled, he detected the slight vibrations of hardware. With hardware present, he could eliminate toxic induced hallucinations, but not too much else.

“Sit back, Alex. Relax,” Tara coaxed as she gently assisted him.

The chair reminded him of a top-of-the-line dental seat. Flat and strong at the shoulders, curved to hug his lower back. Alex tingled with his first bite of excitement. The chair inflated near his ankle, the space behind his knees, near his armpits, effectively reducing the feel of contact.

Two uniformed guards entered, and stood sentry, replacing Alex’s excitement with angst.

“It’s okay,” Tara said. “The officers are here for first time jitters.” She removed a compact plastic case from her pocket and withdrew a small metallic pistol with glass vial, it’s fluid splashing about.

Toxic induced hallucinations were back on.

One look at the pair of beefcakes helped to evaluate his current options.

“I’m going to give you a mild sedative.” She stood there holding the device, waiting for his redundant approval. “Trust me.”

“I guess I’m going to have to, huh?” he said with a half-smile and a bit of spite. This was life in a nutshell. Limitless possibilities around you, but only one actual choice, usually decided by another person.

“It’s a very small needle,” she said as she extended her arm.

He closed his eyes and braced for the puncture, but it never came.

Tara described it correctly, a ssmmaall...

His world went black.

CHAPTER THREE

Alex detected muffled voices in the distance. They continued to clarify until he recognized them as the playful banter of the security officers and programmers. The grogginess swarming his facilities abated more abruptly than a full night's sleep.

He sat on a woven cloth love seat in an all white room. White as if the entire world had been removed, leaving the backdrop of God's reality. Carl shared the sofa with him, staring into the distance, his back stiff, his white hair camouflaged, his hands clasped between his legs as if awaiting a bus.

A man with a cross-fit body and shaved head occupied another love seat to their left. His physique indicated security officer. Shock intruded his senses; they all wore Broumgard shirts, blue jeans, and low-top sneakers. Had they been stripped and redressed since the injection?

Next to him, the officer's right knee bounced; he smeared his palms across the tops of his thighs; his head swiveled as if he expected an ambush.

The rest of the employees gathered in the center of whiteness. Lacking objects to compare and contrast—trees, cars, desks—the distance became difficult to judge. They could be twenty yards, or two hundred yards from him?

Tara stood in front of the three men with her hands behind her back. She wore a snug skirt, a light pink business blazer with black piping. Her shirt, unbuttoned to mid-breast, exposed more cleavage than he would have thought her capable of gathering.

"Welcome, gentlemen." She spread her arms as if about to start an open house, and then paused, peered at Carl. "Are you okay, Mr. Wright?"

Carl lifted his head. His red eyes glossy, as if medicated.

"Are you with us?" Tara stepped toward him.

"Umm..." Carl cleared his throat. "Err... I think so."

"What kind of shit is this?" The man with the shaved head barked and stood. "Where the hell did you take me? And what kind of freaky drugs were in that needle?"

"Calm down, Mr. Robertson. You are in the Lobby, our main attraction here at Eridu. If you would please take your seat, I will lay out a brief explanation and then answer any questions you may have."

"I ain't sittin' shit, lady." He horse-kicked the love seat, knocking it a few inches across the indefinable white.

Alex inhaled sharply and looked to Carl, who stared ahead, perhaps oblivious to the mood change.

"I didn't sign up for no freaky shit. Wherever the hell you took me, it was against my will and I want to leave. Now." He stepped closer to her.

The volume of the crowd decreased; heads turned in their direction.

Alex stared at the employees. Would no one come to Tara's aid? If this muscular man got physical, would Carl just sit there? Which left Alex, and similar options. Perhaps Alex could ask the guy to take it easy before being grabbed in an expert judo move and feeling his arm break?

"Mr. Robertson, you need to calm down and let me explain."

"Explain my ass." He stepped within a yard of her and pointed. "I fought for this country. Did shit for you you'll never know—"

In the midst of his rant, Tara casually said, "Employee command, Tara Capaldi, halt Mr. Robertson, lower volume thirty percent."

The man's voice dimmed.

Noticing it, he hesitated before he continued, "Halt? I don't think so. In fact, I'm outta here." He pivoted to go, but as his foot extended, it met with an invisible barrier and went back to the ground. He shoved his arms out in a pushing motion. They connected with a wall of some sort.

Tara paced around the angry man as he kicked and tried all directions, finding himself encased. Meanwhile, she scooted the love seat back to its original position.

"Look lady, if you—"

"No. You look," Tara snapped. Then to the air, she said, "Manual move, Mr. Robertson." She placed her hand on the outside of the invisible cage and effortlessly guided the box containing the livid man until it butted against the love seat.

"You can either sit down and take some deep breaths or you can stand here for the next four hours and yell yourself hoarse. Those are your options."

Mr. Robertson tested his new surroundings, and, discovering his mobility limited, swallowed, swiped his palms across his face. With a clearer demeanor, he said, "I mean, I just feel I'm entitled to know where I am." He kicked at the invisible barrier one more time, much of his venom dissipated. That last one appeared more of a verification kick. "How is this happening?"

"All I need is your word you will relax, have a seat, and give me a chance to explain."

Nodding, Mr. Robertson licked his lips.

"Remove halt of Mr. Robertson." Tara motioned for him to sit.

The man nodded, bent, and slid his hands across his wide thighs as he eased onto the cushion's edge.

Tara allowed a few seconds to pass, the chatter of the crowd returned, and then she spoke, "Monitor, orientation video." On her right side, a rectangle, the size of a playing card, appeared. With one swift movement, it expanded to a seventy-inch monitor and displayed the company logo.

"Adisah Boomul assembled the Broumgard Group," Tara began. "A Rwandan born American considered by many to be the first true hacker. Roughly twenty-five years ago, he wrote a program for ghost bots, commonly known as botnets, inadvertently spawning a class of cyber rebels."

Alex had heard rumors of a godfather to hacking, but he didn't involve himself in hacking. That was a destructive tool, black hatter stuff. Alex liked to build, expand, create. Nevertheless, he knew botnets were the most popular method for crashing the servers that allowed websites to function. A hacker would send out a wave of e-mails or

instant messages to normal, unsuspecting citizens. When the recipient opened the e-mail or replied to the instant message, the ghost haunted their system.

To be an effective Internet troll, a hacker must be able to take websites offline. They need thousands of botnets, often tens of thousands of different IP addresses bombarding the URL simultaneously. This requires the cooperation and coordination of multiple trolls, each assaulting the target domain with their army of minions.

There were a few infamous hackers who claimed to have hundreds of thousands of botnets at their disposal, and whispers of an internet megladon who controlled millions.

Alex had written his own software to detect botnet activity and learned hackers tried to capture his IP address five to twenty times per year. When friends asked for copies of his program, they would call minutes after installation confirming they had unwillingly been a hacker's slave.

To Alex, they were modern day Robin Hoods. Anonymous represented the people and targeted the power hungry. They were Davids fighting the ever dominant Goliaths. That was why his botnet program not only collected dust, but had been wiped from his personal computer—*viva la revolucion!*

Tara continued, "After a six year stint helping the Federal Bureau of Investigation secure their sensitive data, Mr. Boomul moved to his beautiful Lake Tahoe estate, where he began working on his dream child," Tara waved her arms around, "The Lobby.

"Using his notoriety, Mr. Boomul pooled specialists from varying fields and different parts of the globe. With the funding of Roy Guillen, Broumgard's controlling partner, a coalition was created with one purpose: to create a virtual reality simulator capable of transporting a person's conscious to the limits of the human imagination." She paused and then continued in a more confident tone. "And today, nearly twenty years later, you will experience our newest world." The screen next to Tara changed to a football field. Players emptied out of a locker room tunnel onto a field of green stripped with white.

Behind the monitor, off in the distance, the crowd of employees grew restless. The occasional, "Let's go," and even a, "Hurry up bitches," was overheard.

"In this particular world, Big Hitters' Ball, players are assigned positions and given improved physical attributes equal to their counterparts: concentration, execution, and teamwork decide victory." She let a beat pass. "Full contact, heavy hitting football is played here, ladies and gentlemen. So be ready for it."

The screen showed a football player in full accoutrements. The guy ran to the linebacker position and went through a series of drills. In one, the linebackers charged at a runner and smashed into him with enough force to dislodge the runner's helmet.

Virtual reality or not, Alex could not be involved in a hit like that—giving or receiving. His head would fly off; his spine would snap; he'd crumple into a pile of mush.

"Not to worry," Tara added as the player on the ground got up and trotted off in the opposite direction. "In this world, nothing can cause actual injury. The Lobby removes your ailments. It imbues you with confidence; it connects you, on equal terms, with people of all ages and geographies. With each new world, it brings you closer to the dreams we all share."

Mr. Robertson's attitude seemed to have improved. He teetered on the edge of his seat, looking eager. Finally, he stood, hands raised in surrender. "So right now, I'm in a

machine? The only one like it in the world?” He motioned to Alex, Carl, and himself. “And if we go down there with them, we will enter a football stadium?”

Tara waited a beat. “Yes.”

“And my knee?” Mr. Robertson lifted his knee and clasped it with both hands. “My injury from college will be totally healed?”

“Yes, all physical ailments are removed as soon as you enter the Lobby. In Big Hitters’ Ball, your entire physical makeup will be altered.”

Mr. Robertson stepped closer to Tara, still holding his hands up in the gesture of submission. “Well,” he clapped them together, “that’s all I need to hear, Ms. Capaldi.” He cautiously crept toward the group of people. As he neared Tara, he asked, “That’s okay, right? I can be done here?”

“Yes, that’s fine,” she said nodding past her, “Go ahead.”

He jogged down the corridor toward the rest of the employees, hopping on one leg as he went, testing its durability.

At Mr. Robertson’s approach, the crowd erupted into applause and catcalls.

Tara turned her attention back to Alex and Carl, “Any questions?” The screen net to her flashed a purple question mark.

Carl raised his hand slowly, as if assisted with helium. “Where are we, physically, right now?”

“Physically, you are sitting in your access station on the upper level of the Atrium.”

“What about, has anyone ever died or gone crazy after entering? Are there other worlds? And how are we connected?”

“Great set of questions, Mr. Wright. The answer to the first is, no. No one has ever died. I am happy to tell you we have not had so much as a headache reported. Second, creating worlds is a debilitating task. All of your work as programmers will be to that end. Currently, we offer three worlds: Big Hitters’ Ball, which we will visit today. Pleasure House 101, and our most interactive world, San Francisco 1968, where clients can spend eight hours each day enjoying the sunshine and atmosphere of the Bay area as it was in 1968.”

Alex considered the implications. The particulars aside, the software to operate complex machines, like an F-22 Raptor fighter jet, required millions of lines of code. What exactly would it take to populate a world? The five senses? Even something as trivial as the physics and texture of a blade of grass could devour terabytes of RAM.

“And as to your question of how we connect,” Tara said to Carl, then to the air, she added, “Monitor, run AD-11 intro.”

The screen flipped through classroom images: employees in lab coats; posters of the brain; anatomical replicas on countertops.

“Initially, the entire staff of the Broumgard Group focused on connectivity. Since our inception, a team of biologists, physiologists, and many others, headed by Dr. Bradley Finder, worked around the clock, postulating and testing a multitude of theories. After forty-two months, the team designed the AD-11, which is commonly referred to as, ‘The Marker.’”

The shape of the object on the screen reminded Alex of an anvil. He edged forward. His face creased in concentration.

“The Marker is two millimeters in diameter and near paper thin. Once a client is anesthetized, the Marker is attached to the back of the scalp.”

The screen showed a 3-D model of a human head. A transparent hand placed the Marker onto a shaved section on the back of the model’s cranium. It rocked a little from side to side, coming to life. Once activated, it stood on six legs and then a robotic arm extended from its body, cut and lifted flesh, then burrowed its way into the exposed wound.

When sufficiently enamored, a slight puff of smoke billowed out, as if it had sutured itself inside.

“Once situated, the Marker’s feelers deploy and lodge themselves throughout the brain, allowing it to interact with the electrical impulses and chemicals in the mind.”

The screen angled the transparent model’s head to a profile view. All at once, a dozen mechanical arms extended from the Marker, some drilling all the way to the frontal lobe.

“Do not let this alarm you,” Tara said, waving a hand in front of her. “These probes are microscopic,” she displayed her finger and thumb and squeezed them together in emphasis, “and can be instantly liquefied.”

“So we have these in us now?” Alex asked as he searched the back of his scalp, finding nothing out of the ordinary.

“Yes, you do. Again, it is a very simple, pain-free, needle-free experience to have the Markers removed.”

Alex pondered everything she said. It wouldn’t matter to him if this was a toxic induced hallucination or if some robotic implant lived in his brain. He felt great. Clean. A lightness occupied his chest that after minutes of analyzing, he realized, represented the absence of worry: him enjoying the moment.

Looking over to Carl, who scratched the back of his head, Alex weighed the advantages of visiting a bona fide virtual reality world as a new man versus a device being forced into his head. He wanted to be offended and upset, but to him, the tradeoff equaled a no-brainer.

A calming acceptance passed through him as his grin stretched into a smile. “Are there any more surprises?”

“None you’ll disapprove of.”

“Well,” Alex said, “I’d say I’m ready to go too.”

Tara stared a second, then shrugged. “Sounds good to me.”

After another beat, he stood and made his way toward the other employees.

“Hurry up down there, would ya?” Someone yelled as Alex passed Tara. He kept eye contact with her in case she wanted to add something. Seeing she did not, he increased his pace.

The cheers down the hall amplified with his approach.

Behind him, he heard Carl ask if he could still do the kickoff.

“Sure can,” Tara assured him. “Unless you want to wait out here?”

Alex looked back and saw them standing together. “I’ll sit with you. We can talk politics. I can explain the Defend Trade Secrets Act to you?”

Carl smiled and said, “No thanks.” He then jogged next to Alex.

The crowd jeered for them to hurry.

When Tara joined the group, everyone huddled close. Anticipation arced through the air as people flashed smiles and exchanged eager nods. She moved to the front and the chatter stopped outright. Facing away from them, Tara said, “Big Hitters’ Ball, group entry, updated player modifications.”

An ephemeral wave shimmered fifteen feet to her right. It continued to delineate until a visible object appeared. A tunnel, ten-feet wide, fifteen high, that resembled the dark concrete corridor at Soldier Field Stadium. The doorway looked solid, but wavered, like a hi-def television viewed from beneath still water. Peering around its side, its depth ended two feet back.

One of the security officers yelled, “Hook ‘em Horns!” and ran at the tunnel. His large frame hit the portal, froze in motion, and faded to nothing.

This set off a chain reaction. Everyone tumbled into the tunnel, most yelling and clapping.

“Go Trojans!”

“Raider Nation!”

Another hummed the Florida State Seminoles fight song.

Alex waited near the back. Each cheer amplified his charge. The shouts from all around him continued to jolt his excitement to the point where he finally chimed in with terse encouragement, “Let’s go team!” He then jumped in place and ran at the tunnel.

Meeting the entrance seemed to pause time. A tugging sensation, reminiscent of a panic attack, emanated from his core. A clenching in his stomach, a wrenching of his intestines, as if two hands had torn through the flesh and were squeezing his organs to the point of bursting. He tried to move his arms to fight away the pain, but found himself paralyzed.

He opened his mouth to scream, yet at that exact moment, he rocketed forward at the speed of light.

The pulverizing of his body, followed by the grinding of his entire essence, lasted three to four seconds; it left him panting and sweating. Clamping his eyes shut, he assessed himself to make sure he came through unscathed.

His second deep breath alarmed him to serious malfunctions. A healthy density, that boosted his confidence, weighted him from head to heel. More encompassed his field of vision, as if he were inches taller. He stood in a professional locker room. Rows of doorless mahogany lockers with golden name plates and hooks, stained benches, carpeted floors, and various offices along the outer walls.

His heart thumped in knocks powerful enough to bilge water from a sinking ship. Alterations reappropriated every component of him. His neck remained proportionate to his body, but a roll of his head revealed added girth. Without glancing, he sensed the enlarged circumference of his thighs, the growth in his calves.

His teammates stood around him, wearing orange and navy blue football uniforms, augmented by the full pads underneath, and matching cleats and gloves. A few players wore helmets, others held them in their hands. Athletes bobbed in rhythmic jigs. A palpable energy filled the room, melted into his skin, coalesced in his chest.

A broad man with orange hair hanging down to his shoulder noticed Alex looking at him, and nodded. Alex recognized him as Song, the Asian who orated from chairs. Except, this version of Song had gained a hundred and twenty-five pounds and fifteen

inches in height. His face and his bright orange hair were the only two clues that the same guy from twenty minutes ago stood before him.

The players focused on a coach who yelled about pride and concentration; about never giving up; about keeping a level head.

The soft roar of a stadium crowd resonated through the concrete exterior of the locker room: The collective voices a susurrant of energy, willing him with their cadence to perform in a game he had never before considered playing.

Like a boxer before a bout, Alex swayed his shoulders back and forth to the hum of the crowd. A powerful hand clasped his shoulder and turned him. The hand belonged to Jason Johnson, who wore the number twenty—a number assigned to running backs. This Jason stood the same height with pretty much the same countenance as the previously rotund one; nothing else remained. Black dreadlocks hung to his shoulders. His face had transformed from a round, greasy pie-eater, to that of a square-jawed Marine.

“So, what do you think?” Jason asked, then spread a wide smile revealing a mouthful of diamond encrusted teeth. “You’re gonna be fine, my dude,” Jason laughed. “You should see the dumb smile on your face.”

Was I smiling? Had I arrived that way? After a test of his facial muscles, Alex lowered his perma-grin.

The coach yelled and waved his arms,, directing everyone out of the locker room. “Let’s go! Come on, men! Let’s go, let’s go!”

“Dude, let’s go have some fun,” Jason said as he affixed his helmet, banged on Alex’s shoulder pads, and joined the mass exodus.

Alex had difficulty fitting his head into his helmet, but once completed, he fell in line with the group.

“One play at a time!”

“Don’t let Stevens get hot!”

“Aaaagggghhhh!!!!”

Alex’s first movement unveiled the totality of the virtual reality tune-up. His legs were as thick as corded lumber, yet light as air, almost pulling themselves forward. He held his hands in front of his helmet as he jogged. What he saw through the opening of his mask were two gloved crushers attached to arms etched with veins and subterranean muscle.

A couple of people asked if he had ever played wide receiver before or did he even know what that meant. The words sounded distant and irrelevant. He was too busy withholding the urge to sprint, leap, lunge, dive, grab, tumble. Had any human ever been as powerful as he was right then?

The set of steel double-doors crashed open, drawing in thunderous vibrations that rattled every bone and strummed every artery in Alex.

Once through the door, he hooted with all his might and loved that the frenzy snuffed out his voice. The open, outdoor stadium allowed the sun’s rays to blanket the eighty-thousand screaming fans with warmth. A steady breeze from his right carried the smell of freshly cut grass.

The realism of the attendants amazed Alex. He considered the possibility these people were really here, logged in somewhere, but there were simply too many for that to be true. As he took in the tumult of excitement, he spotted a section of fans wearing

jerseys with the number eighty-seven, waving signs with his name on them. He double-checked himself, and sure enough, he wore number eighty-seven. Jogging to the sideline, he wondered: had anyone ever died from elation overdose?

“Everyone take your spot on the bench,” a voice said through his helmet. Alex watched all of his transformed co-workers obey the coach and he followed suit. Industrial water-spritzing fans oscillated behind the benches, tables of Gatorade in between, chanting cheerleaders beyond.

Three players from his team trotted onto the middle of the field and met three of the security players, whose uniforms were similar to the Dallas Cowboys: navy blue and white.

Jason, Song, and Denise (who now wore a flat top and resembled an Olympic sprinter), represented their captains.

The security officers won the coin toss. After a booming kickoff by Carl, the defense took the field.

Fans bellowed their approval at every snap. The spirit of camaraderie between teams never deviated as opponents helped each other up and congratulated one another on well-deserved plays. The crowd, along with Alex, loved every minute of it.

The security team drove the ball from the twenty, past the fifty, punted, and then the coach’s voice returned inside his helmet. “Okay, offense. Let’s get out there.”

Alex watched the offensive half of his team run onto the field. He had never been so eager to see a game played.

“Alex, that’s you bud,” Denise’s voice came through his helmet.

Yeah, I guess that is, he thought as he rose and jogged to join them. The thunderous bawl of the crowd refreshed his anticipation. He stepped into the team’s huddle.

“Alex?”

“Can you hear me?” Alex asked.

“Sure can,” Denise replied. “We want to open with a sneak play? The last thing they’ll expect is us getting your sweet buns involved right away. You run straight. Keep your eyes on the distance marker to your right. At twenty-five yards down the field, angle toward the center and look for the ball. If things go as planned, I’ll put it right in your hands.”

He’d played catch, but had he ever run a route and been targeted for a reception... No.

Starting in elementary, he stayed in the bottom three chosen for contact sports. Kids tended to think his silent nature meant stupid—it actually represented intense consideration and deep interest.

Clenching his fist, he watched as the muscles in his forearm bulged and reshaped the flesh. Lifting himself onto his toes, a power and dexterity he had only fantasized about coursed through him.

“Yeah, I’m ready.”

“That’s my boy,” Kole encouraged.

“Give ‘em hell,” chimed another.

The huddle broke with a ritualistic, “Break!” and a simultaneous clap.

A green circle of light waited in the grass, telling Alex when to line up. He jogged to it, checked his fan section, and finding them glued to him, imparted a salute. They reacted by jumping about hysterically, waving their signs of support left and right.

The green circle disappeared as he stood inside of it. He focused his mind and assumed what he hoped resembled a proper stance: elbows clutched to his sides, hands at right angles, knees bent, body tilted forward, supported by the balls of his feet.

His defender lined up five yards in front of him. The man talked trash, but Alex blotted out the words. He focused on the yard markers and visualized his route.

“Set. Hut, hut!”

Alex exploded out of his stance.

Utilizing his new body’s strength, he blew past his defender. The G-force of his strides quaked his cheeks. Wind whistled past the helmet’s ear holes. He heard the muffled contact of his cleats on the ground, felt the propulsion of his modified form.

Only one man remained in front of him as he slanted. Two more steps and he would turn and search for the ball.

It seemed his defensive counterpart had an intuition for what approached; he broke toward Alex at the perfect time needed to intercept.

Worry wormed into his focus. What if this plan had been a setup to hurt the new guy? A conspiratorial haze where they would snap his legs or shatter his ribs, and then heckle him about it not being real?

He pushed the speculation aside, focused on what he knew: his teammates had placed trust in him. Looking over his shoulder, he found the ball in flight.

Alex’s calculations came back inconclusive as to what would connect first, the ball to his hand or the defender’s launched body to one of his kneecaps. He held his breath.

The rotating pigskin glided within reach and he extended his arms. Every man, woman, and child in the stadium stood. The volume muffled. Time slowed. Only him and that chunk of spinning leather remained. It connected against his hands with an audible thump. His strong fingers secured it like a fly on a sticky-strip.

Instead of the roar he expected, the stadium fell silent.

Remembering the diving defender, the fans presumably held their breaths in anticipation of an impending collision.

On a subconscious level, Alex pictured his opponent in flight, aimed at his knees. Using that blueprint, he hurdled the air. The toes of his drag foot scraped over the diving defender’s helmet. His opponent’s hand connected with his thigh and tried to wrestle him down, but Alex’s inertia powered through.

Alex sensed the attention of eighty-thousand fans.

His arms went out, found balance. He hopped twice on one foot, regained his form, and ran like Usain Bolt.

The crowd erupted.

A moment after Alex crossed the goal line, half of his teammates met him in the end zone to celebrate the perfectly executed play.

His eyes bloated as if pumped with air; his stretching smile accentuated the taste of the rubber mouth guard. He hadn’t been this full of wonder since he ran his first software program. A skiing game where two letter slalomed parallel down the screen

forming a course. Using the letter S to represent a skier, the user attempted to navigate the course without touching the sides. That had been a great trick.

This equated to magic, pure and simple.

Jogging off the field, he pointed to his fans, causing some to stomp their feet and dance as if acknowledged by Elvis; others chanted his name, “Alex, Alex, Alex.” Looking away, he jerked his attention back—had a woman just lifted her shirt?

Every player on his team gave him a smack on the shoulder pads as he returned to his side of the field, and one solid one on the ass, courtesy of the masculine version of Denise.

In the spirit of the game, some of the members from the other team came over to compliment his play. Mr. Robertson, whose build had actually slimmed to fit his position, stopped him, and with all smiles, demanded a high-five before he returned across the field.

Alex threw down his helmet, snatched a cup of Gatorade, and gulped it down as he tried to slow his breathing.

No stationary letter today, he was uber Alex.

The rest of the game proceeded with similar vigor. The programmers won for the second year in a row. The final on the scoreboard: 27-21. The moves and vision of Jason Johnson, Denise’s play calling, and the defensive tenacity and leadership provided by Song were the dominant factors. Those, and the miraculous hurdle on the first play gave their team the initial six points.

After the contest, broadcasters made announcements, fans exited the stadium, and players from both teams met casually in the center of the field and socialized. The brutish, Amazonian version of Denise plopped next to Alex.

His head turned, “Am I dreaming?”

She smiled, “Nah, this is way better than any dream—it’s a touch better than real life.”

Alex inhaled deeply, *more than a touch better*, Virtual Reality showed progress for decades, but most in the field discarded full submersion as a fantasy. He couldn’t help but feel unworthy to work for a company that offered...this.

Denise squeezed his knee, “We’re on a three-and-a-half-hour cycle,” she pointed to the high-definition scoreboard.

Alex saw the normal markers: home, visitor, timeouts, etcetera. In the bottom right corner, a timer counted down: 3:09, 3:08, 3:07.

“Great catch out there today.”

Alex flushed, “Thanks.”

“I was surprised when you didn’t get creamed.” She play-punched his arm as he chuckled.

That makes two of us. He spotted Jason Johnson jogging over to a couple in their late fifties amongst the crowd. He hugged each of them, handed the man a football. They all smiled. The woman kept her hand on Jason’s back as he chatted with the male.

“Once you complete your training,” Denise said, “you will be able to check out—”

“What’s he doing over there?” Alex asked as he nodded toward Jason. “I’ve been waiting to tell him what a good game he played. He helped make football fun for me.”

Denise shaded her eyes, lowered her voice, and in a tone sprinkled with revulsion, said, “Weird stuff. That’s what he’s doing. Those are replicas of his parents. He snuck them into the code.” She tsked, shook her head, scoffed. “White people are crazy.”

Jason’s replicate father smiled, slapped his son’s shoulder pad.

“They both died when he was sixteen. Car accident,” Denise said. “Apparently, he was a star running back in high school. Top recruit in Texas. You can see that when he plays.” She nodded to the field, leaned in close, and lowered her volume even further. “To be honest with you, I think what he’s doing is sick.”

Alex stared into her butch face and frowned, knowing she had yet to taste the bile of losing a loved one. Alex swallowed. He had ingested bowls of pain, full servings of mourning and despair, weeks before, during, and after his freshman year in high school. His older brother, Simon, a fit, handsome and kind twenty year old had been diagnosed with breast cancer. Prior to that, Alex hadn’t even known it effected men—or that it killed. Simon’s death, less than a year later, taught Alex the Grim Reaper kicked in doors indiscriminately. No rhyme to life. No reason for it all. No plans for each and every one of us.

Looking back to Jason, who moved an arm around the older woman’s waist, Alex swallowed. He would give anything to hug his brother again.

The mirth on Jason’s face shone honest, so unmistakable, it compared to the love of a woman holding her newborn moments after giving birth. If Denise thought that sick, he worried she lacked a fundamental understanding of happiness.

“One minute,” a booming voice announced over the stadium speakers.

Denise placed her hand on Alex’s forearm, drawing his attention. “Brace yourself for that horrible pain.” She shrugged. “A few seconds later, you’ll wake up in the Atrium.” She released him and laid on her back. “Just grit your teeth.”

Alex opened his mouth to reply, but had gone drier then the inside of an urn. Then came the tearing of his lungs, the scorching of his vital organs, the grinding of his bones, followed by being crushed to ash and sucked through a straw.

CHAPTER FOUR

The elation of Alex's Lobby visit imbued such intensity, it jarred him awake the following morning. The moment he opened his eyes, his body trilled like he'd downed two cups of coffee and knocked out a hundred push-ups.

Today's agenda involved orientation; Alex rushed to meet Carl at the tram, and, together, they reported to an office at the north end of the Atrium. Cardboard boxes along the wall made it appear a rarely used room.

An olive-skinned man in his sixties with a mane of gray hair relaxed behind a desk, reading the Wall Street Journal. A thick string connected the ends of spectacles that teetered on the tip of his nose. The room smelled of fresh tobacco. Alex spotted a smoldering briar pipe on the desk.

"Welcome, gentlemen, my name is Rigo Espinosa," he said as he folded the paper and placed it on the desk. A mild Spanish accent clung to his English. "Please sit." He motioned in front of him where two tables with collapsible chairs and closed laptops waited.

Alex and Carl did as instructed.

During his hours of pacing the previous night, Alex wrote questions to ask at orientation, each carried additional sub-questions. But after combing over the list on the tram ride, he cut them down to two: When could he return to the Lobby? And, when could he review the code responsible for such amazement?

In programming, each line of code served a basic purpose. When combined, they created a function. In this case, accepting and storing the electrical impulses that composed human beings and interposing that data with a dot matrix environment. The programming commands that held together the lobby section of the Lobby had to be in the tens of millions. He imagined that section of code acted as a foundation where other worlds docked.

"Today," Rigo said, "we are going to get you an understanding of Eridu before I let you loose on your computers." He paused as if struck by a thought. "But really, I don't get the computer thing. You type, type, type, and stare at a screen, yet somehow, you get excited about that. Can you tell me why this is?"

For Alex, the reason was simple. In code, when you instructed a command to go to line forty-seven, it obeyed. If it didn't, you searched the code, located the error, and returned it to a sensible order. The real world lacked edit commands. It gave you a new friend with a hidden agenda, a mate with a closed heart, a job that rewarded being subversive.

Real life took a young man as strong as oak, gave him breast cancer, and whittled him away until you're sitting by your brother's side during his post-chemo nap, wailing.

Code represented order, and allowed Alex to create limitless possibilities. Reality involved pain and chaos with death as the only possible end.

“No?” Rigo checked each of them. “You don’t know, huh? Well, anyway, over the next week or so you’ll learn the history of this company, our security procedures, basic information about the facility, and the Lobby itself.

Just hearing the name caused a physical reaction in Alex—he raised his hand.

“Yes, Mr. Cutler.”

“When do we get to go back inside the Lobby?”

“Well,” Mr. Espinosa said with a slow exhale as he removed his glasses and let them rest on his chest, “believe it or not, I knew you were going to ask that. The answer, unfortunately, is a bit complicated. Being management, you will earn your credits faster than Mr. Wright. Broumgard also allows cleared employees to purchase Lobby time at a discounted rate, and the majority of us spend every available dollar on vacations.”

Carl eked his hand up to his shoulder.

Rigo nodded at him.

“What happens if someone is in there and the power goes out?”

“Great question, Mr. Wright. It’s never been empirically tested, mind you, but in all likelihood, you would rush back into your body at the penultimate moment.

Broumgard decided the best way to deal with the electricity issue, was to never allow the power to go out. The Atrium has a backup system with eleven levels of protection. I’ve heard Ms. Capaldi says it best, ‘We could be hit dead-on by a nuclear warhead followed by multiple EMP devices, and we’d still have four levels of power protections.’”

Remembering the godfather of hacking, Alex said, “Does Mr. Boomul spend much time with the programmers? Does he live here?”

“He does live on site,” Rigo leaned back and studied Alex. “He’s a great man, don’t get me wrong; a genius. No doubt,” he waved his hand. “But he’s not business-minded. Somehow word is spreading around the planet, even with our secrecy. People know, if they live with a disability or chronic pain, and get face time with Adisah, he’ll comp free vacations.”

Alex briefly wondered if sore buns from sitting with a laptop on his lap counted.

“Philanthropy is great,” Rigo said. “I’m all for it. Just not for a start-up company. Without a profit, we die. Many people have poured vast fortunes—everything they have—to see Eridu succeed.”

“If we aren’t asking for a hand-out,” Alex said, “If we have programming questions, can we meet with him?”

“No.” Rigo rocked his head side to side. “Consider him ‘perpetually unavailable’.”

The next hour slugged by as Rigo explained many of the amenities for their clients, usually old-money types.

Finally, the time arrived for them to fire up their laptops. Rigo assigned them passwords, congratulated them on their hire, and ended with a speech about confidentiality, the severity of punishment for security breaches, and how fortunate they were. He then selected his pipe, folded his newspaper, and once at the door added, “Take notes, do what you do. If you have any questions, email them to the design department or bring your concerns to the group when you start work. Maybe Adisah will see them.” He searched their faces.

What could Alex say; he still reeled from the buzz of it all.

Rigo huffed as if satisfied. "Have fun. Work hard. You men create our worlds and WE NEED MORE!"

As the heavy door closed, it dawned on Alex that he now had the greatest job on Earth. As head of the department, would he choose what worlds they created? The Lobby offered the thrill-seeking awe of Big Hitters' Ball, a realm of tranquil community with San Francisco 1968, and the base desires with Pleasure House 101. He'd like to create something intense: reenact the D-day invasion, a tournament with knights and squires, and some meta-physical war-zone, like X-Men gone wild. Just thinking about the possibilities flooded him with euphoria.

Astounded, he accepted research would play a major role. Outlining the storyline another chunk; both preceding writing the software. A code larger than hundreds of novels might take weeks to familiarize, and years to complete.

His greatest strength lay in diagnostics. Yet, he feared with a project this sophisticated, the start-up bugs would be long vanquished. The possibility that some might linger caused him to activate his computer, eager to dissect code.

The characters filling the screen looked like all of the others he'd ever seen, but knowing the digits before him constructed the Lobby freed a jar of butterflies in his stomach.

Within minutes, he fell into his groove: interpret lines of code as executions; process the executions as coherent commands; formulate the intended structure.

He'd never get over how something as mundane as characters on a keyboard could be the ingredients to magic.

Carl whispered something to himself and scooted closer to his screen.

Alex penned his first notation.

Lunchtime came and went.

Neither man moved from their seat for longer than a two-minute breather or a restroom break.

Around one in the afternoon, the earpiece in Alex's pocket vibrated. Resting his pen on yellow pages filled with intrigue, he inserted the device into his ear. "Hello?"

"Pardon the intrusion, sir," Victor said. "It has been six hours since your last meal. Would you like me to have food delivered for you and Mr. Wright?"

Unlike the majority of the world who used their stomachs to judge hunger, Alex allowed his mind to rule. The brain needed fructose to function, and when his thoughts wavered, he ate. He had sensed a decline, but with no idea as to the break room's whereabouts, or how they served food in the Atrium, he'd ignored the foggy reminders.

"Are you talking to me?" Carl asked.

Alex pointed to his ear. "Got Victor here. You hungry?"

Clearly unsure who he meant, Carl frowned.

"That sounds good, Victor. What are our choices?"

"Countless options, sir. All four restaurants deliver. Anything from the food court can be brought to you, or, if an emergency, there is an employee break room with open access vending machines on your floor."

Glancing at the code, Alex frowned when considering leaving to find a vending machine. He asked Carl, "You want to split a pizza?"

"Cheese only."

Alex had been hoping for a deluxe, but compromise ruled the civilized world, so he said, “A medium cheese pizza, a two liter of Coke, and onion rings. Can you do that?”

“Certainly, sir.”

“Thanks. And Victor, please don’t call me sir.”

“Of course.”

Alex removed the earpiece, stretched, used the lavatory and found the break room. Free snacks propelled him to drop two Mars bars from the vending machine for a light dessert. The real food arrived as he returned.

As Carl filled their paper cups with soda, he gestured toward the monitors and asked, “Are you understanding that?”

“Mostly,” Alex answered truthfully. “A few things more than others, but I have a growing list of questions.”

They ate casually for the next fifteen minutes, talking about games, programs, Carl’s love of *Plow Straight*.

Carl left for the restroom, returned, and surprised Alex by asking, “Do you mind if I call it a day?”

Alex hadn’t expected to assume the reins of management this quickly. Being the job, he answered as he always would, “Not at all.”

As Carl reached the door, Alex remembered something and said, “Hey, before you go, come look at this spot here. Tell me what you think.” He scrolled up to a questionable section of code.

Carl stood behind Alex.

“Just this part from here,” Alex clicked down a few pages and then tapped at the bottom of the screen, “to here.” He then scrolled back up and allowed Carl to operate the computer.

A few moments later, Carl relented with a shake of his head. “I’m not the type to grasp new code immediately. I like to take it in and think on it. When I come back, I’m able to understand better than most.”

Alex nodded.

“I just need a little more time, Mr. Cutler.”

“Let’s stick with Alex.”

Carl nodded.

“And it’s okay,” Alex said. “This part feels buggy, but it’s probably just me. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

His future programming team toiled a few doors down. At what exactly? Four pm rolled around. The commotion of exiting programmers in the hallway alerted Alex to their quitting time. Eager to blend in with the group, he inspected his area.

He had compiled two pages of notations pertaining to the program itself and typed out a mock alteration for the portion of transfer code that he interpreted as buggy. To come in on day one and rewrite an important section of code might be brash, but he liked shoptalk. So at worst, he’d be wrong and learn why. At best, they’d make a tweak improvement that no one would notice, and he’d feel that familiar satisfaction of inching toward perfection.

After emailing his outline to the design department, he shut down his machine and exited double-time to catch his future team.

He wasn't a social butterfly; didn't need to be the center of anything. But, being human, he preferred to fit in, be liked, and communicate. Yesterday's experience in the Lobby shattered his previous notions of splendor, and he wanted to express that. He now belonged to an esoteric sect, a brotherhood, and felt confident they would want to share in his experience as much as he longed to discuss it.

Catching the tail end of the exiting programmers, he managed to ride the elevator up with three others, receiving congratulations for his hire and yesterday's game. He blushed, passed along the credit. Every spoken word granted more comfort. When Alex arrived at the top floor, the tram waited. Employees chatted as they entered their usual cars. Unsure which car to board, Alex sighed with relief when Kole leaned out of the second door and waved him in. Denise razzed his late arrival.

As the tram cruised along, Alex smiled, laughed, and accepted more positive comments pertaining to the most amazing day of his life, one where he played football of all things.

Staring at a group of programmers in a booth, Alex recognized their faces, but his mind retained and intertwined the football versions with what he saw. The affect so dumbfounding and surreal, his head shook every couple seconds.

"Well, we all want to know," Kole said. "How much Lobby time do you earn as management?"

Answering truthfully, Alex said, "I'm not sure. Guess I'll learn all of that on Thursday."

"Well, whatever," Kole said. "Just so you know, we all wanted your job."

Alex's temperature climbed as Denise elbowed Kole. He hadn't considered himself a scab hire. He wanted to stimulate and inspire these people, not suffer their resentment. Kole's friendly eyes, and the pleasant demeanor of those around him, killed most of that worry.

"At first, we were bummed they planned to bring in an outsider." Kole said, "not now. Truth is, we're excited to have you. No one wants to admit structure will do us clowns good. And our egos wouldn't accept just anybody. Toss us Alex Cutler, however, and we're good." He smirked at Alex's confusion. "Hey, man, we all use *Plow Straight*, brilliant stuff."

The tram slowed as they approached La Berce.

"Thanks," Alex said. "I want so much to help and have..." His voice trailed off as he saw her waiting in front of La Berce. Her light blue scrubs looked the same as the ones from yesterday. Her hair draped across a shoulder and her eyes were downcast in contemplation. Her beauty, coupled with the addition of a handheld purse, made her appear like a Duchess of York, out doing volunteer work among the common folk. Virtuous, strong, independent. Could he really read those attributes in a woman waiting for public transportation?

"Oh yeah," Kole said from next to him, following his attention. "Rosa Newberg. She lives in B-16. Talk about the complete package."

"You know her?" Alex asked without averting his eyes from Rosa as she strode into the car next to them and dropped out of view.

"Yeah, we talk. I've had lunch with her. Tried to make it more, but I'm a wizard, ab-wheel, and vodka kind of guy. She's novels, yoga, and way too sober to fall for my bullshit."

Alex surged with pride at the strength of her conviction. A lot of women wouldn't care if a guy who looked like Kole bullshitted them.

"I'll hook you up though," Kole added as the tram resumed travel.

Alex jerked his head toward Kole, and then relaxed. A nice gesture, but Alex possessed average looks at best, with below average spending habits, and no clue who the latest celebrity break-up involved. In other words, the opposite of lady-slaying material.

"Thanks, but..."

"No, it's no problem," Kole said. "I'm doing it for myself anyway. I wanna checkout your place. I've been here two years and you're the only guy I've met who lives in one of those crazy penthouses. I'll invite her, the other new guy, and a few others, including the hostess from Mountaintop Steakhouse," he rubbed his hands together in excitement, "and use your place to wow my target."

Alex winced. He wasn't sure about people he didn't know being in his home. He had been instructed to limit time around anyone lacking level three security clearance—a suggestion he took serious. However, Rosa Newberg warranted the risk.

He daydreamed: him in a tuxedo, the Duchess of York in a flowing gown, dancing a waltz together in a grand ballroom full of dignitaries. Of course, he had never waltzed before, didn't know a politician, and the Atrium equaled the nicest building he'd ever been in. That didn't stop the dreamed up him from hitting every step in stride and whispering something in Rosa's ear that caused her to tip her head back and tinkle laughter.

"I can cook, mix drinks, deal cards, whatever," Kole said, breaking the spell.

The tram slowed to a stop and Alex's heart raced at the thought of glimpsing her one more time. Exiting first, he paused and waited for Kole, intending to agree. Instead, Kole pushed past him.

"Hey, Rosa!" he shouted.

She turned around and stopped as Kole ran to her.

Alex coasted behind him.

"How's it going?" Kole asked her.

"Good. I'm good." The intonation of her voice cautious, it tingled every nerve along Alex's spine.

"Hi," she said to Alex as he approached.

"H-hey."

After a few seconds of silence, Kole said, "This is Alex Cutler. He wanted to meet you."

Alex's heart dropped. Heat dimpled his skin. Why would Kole say that? Make him look like some crazy stalker? Why not tell her he liked what she wore to bed the previous night? That he invented better methods for organizing her sock drawer.

"He's new," Kole continued, as if he hadn't already blown it. "He lives in one of those penthouses. We're hoping to have people over for drinks and dinner. Kind of welcome him to our fair city, but he won't open his doors unless you come."

Alex's palms dripped sweat. He should have let Kole do this by himself, or, better yet, not at all. It had been mere seconds, but the suspense of her reply agonized. He had to refrain from running in the opposite direction and diving off the tram tracks.

She glanced to Alex and smiled. "I don't drink very often or much," a brief pause, "but dinner sounds good."

Alex exhaled with relief.

“Great. He’s in building A, penthouse two. Come by say... six o’clock? Invite a friend if you want, but only if your friend is female.”

“I’ll be there,” she said. She extended her hand to Alex. “Nice to meet you by the way. I’m Rosa.”

Finding her hand as clammy as his own surprised him. Unless his was such a sweat factory, it wetted the flesh of her hand and, now exposed as a nut job who secretes fluids from his palms like some Russians bath house stigmata, she would decline their invitation.

Instead, she smiled and trotted off.

“That’s a pretty sight,” Kole said once she descended the stairs.

“She is,” Alex replied absently, and then, realizing Kole meant her backside, he flashed with irritation, which quickly passed. Kole was the reason he’d be eating with Rosa in a few hours; super cool. “Thanks, man.”

“No problem. Let’s stop by my place. I’ll drop off my bag, grab these cheddar bratwursts I special ordered last month, and we’ll do the rest at yours.”

“Sounds good,” Alex welcomed the company. He hadn’t been this nervous since... well, since yesterday.

CHAPTER FIVE

“Keep staring out that peep hole and there’ll be a ring around your eye when they get inside,” Kole said from behind Alex. The cathedral ceilings and smooth design lines of Alex’s condominium granted a clean pitch to Kole’s voice.

Alex bit his bottom lip. Prior to the ding of the arriving elevator, he’d paced the entryway. Holding his breath, he spied on the load of people who poured forth: a young lady he’d never seen carried a covered dish; nervous Carl, Big Jason. Denise whistled as she stepped out and yelled, “We’re movin’ on up, Weezy!” Rosa exited last. Alex exhaled.

As expected, the group gathered before the nine-foot tall, nine-foot wide piece of moving art, *Patterned Creation*. A massive globe the size of an elephant that continually rotated. The vast oceans, crafted in dimpled crystal stained a light blue, allowed glimpses of the hollow center and opposite side. Each country’s national stone delineated their borders; a green and textured, high-polished granite for America. A plate-sized section of cubic zirconium cast a rainbow of sparkle each time South Africa met the light. The red of Myanmar’s ruby outline shined enough to reflect Alex’s image, when close. Even with artificial gemstones, he imagined *Patterned Creation*’s worth floated in the mid-to-high six figures and accepted he might be short by a zero or two.

“Did you watch me like that when I checked out your globe?” Kole said.

“Yes,” Alex replied, *just not for this long*.

Rosa stood in the rear of the pack; a pink envelope in her hand. She wore a violet blouse and tight jeans. Her shapely hips increased his heart rate. She turned to the door. Alex jumped back and bumped into Kole, who gripped his shoulders and moved him to the side.

Kole peeked out of the lens, jerked as the knock arrived.

“Go back there, out of sight,” Kole whispered. “Act like you’re coming from the deck.”

The entrance in Alex’s condominium ended with two sets of six steps, splitting right and left around a seven-foot tall glass case. The illuminated trench coat from the movie, *The Matrix*, acted as his home’s welcoming mat.

Out of sight at the bottom of the steps, voices clashed in greeting. Alex resisted his urge to meet them at the door. Heeding Kole’s advice, he raced to the open slider but stopped short of exiting to the evening sun. The strong winds of his fifth floor balcony would drown out his guests’ voices.

The smell of seasoned meats cooking on low flames distracted him.

“Ohhs,” perked Alex’s hearing.

Kole proudly explained the trench coat's authenticity. He told one of the women, "I'll have you take a picture of me wearing that, and nothing else."

Shoes padded down the hard tiled steps, bringing Rosa into view. Alex forced out a breath and moved toward her.

She stopped at the edge of his open floor plan. Dining, living, and sunroom shared a generous space of modern design. Framed sci-fi movie posters, starting with *Metropolis*, centered with his favorite, *Hackers*, lined the far south wall. Beneath them, an aquarium that stretched twenty feet. At five ten, Rosa stood an inch below Alex. Her dark brown eyes swirled like hot coffee finished with crème.

"Hi, Alex." She extended the envelope. "I brought you a card."

"That's really thoughtful." A small bow decorated the front. The card, an A-frame home with a small garden and bent gardener raised on a green front. Printed inside, "So glad you're finally here. Welcome home." Written below, "Welcome to our sacred city. You're going to love it! Rosa."

"It was the only card in the gift shop that fit." Rosa said.

"It's awesome." He stepped to the nearest table: white with a single drawer, a bowl of white faux fruit on top. He pushed the bowl to the side and propped the card up. It felt like a female to male example of a bouquet of roses. He blushed so hard he feared facing her.

"It smells good, what's cooking?" she asked.

Between them? No, she means the food. He swallowed. "I don't even know."

"Didn't you just come from the grill?"

Looking at the door, he tried to remember what Kole had been thawing in the sink. Coming up empty, he winced bashfully, "I'm pretty sure it's meat."

She smirked, "That's a safe bet."

Feeling overwhelmed with attraction, he extended his hand to initiate contact, "Nice to see you again."

They shook once up, once down. He smiled so wide he feared he looked goofy, but didn't care.

"There's the man of the house right there." Kole guided a woman by her shoulders. "This is Melissa. You'll soon learn she's the best hostess at Mountaintop Steakhouse."

She blushed. "I seat customers. It's a pretty simple job."

"I've seen those seating charts, com-pli-ca-ted," Kole said. "Have a seat around this kingly table. I'll check the grill."

Jason wore a gray Star Wars T-shirt. In silence, he took the table's head position. Denise continued on, inspecting the place, opening doors, mumbling (compliments?) under her breath.

Alex considered holding a chair out for Rosa, decided it was too cordial, thought about where to sit—one spot from her, directly next to, across from? He bit the end of his thumb.

"Where are you going to sit?" Rosa asked.

"Right here," he grabbed the back of the nearest chair.

"Then I'll sit here." She grabbed the one next to him.

"Thirty minutes until we eat," Kole said as he returned carrying a fifth of Captain Morgan's and a two-liter of Coke. "Who wants to play Presidents and assholes?"

Remembering the Asian man, Alex asked, "Is Song coming?"
 "No, man." Kole said, "I like the dude, but you can't understand him unless we're in—"

He and Alex locked eyes.

Carl busied himself opening one of three decks of cards, as if oblivious to Kole's near slip.

Rosa and Melissa lacked proper security clearance. They had never heard of the Lobby, had no idea what clients experienced at the Atrium, or why they arrived at Eridu in such good spirits.

The ladies focused their inquisitive looks at Kole.

Alex understood what Kole had planned to say, "You can't understand Song unless we're in the Lobby." All languages translated to the clients' original language to make communication fluid. The Lobby erased age gaps and stature and looks and dialects, making it a place where friendships formed solely on compatibility.

"Can't understand him unless what?" Melissa asked.

Rosa glanced at Alex and squinted as if trying to read something in his features.

"Unless his girl's hanging on his arm to translate," Denise said as she pulled out a chair and glared at Alex. "You must be damned important for all this bling."

"How many cards do I deal?" Jason asked, the cards poised in his outstretched hand. Perhaps he heard the slip and now ran cover.

"Deal out the deck," Kole sat, ending the mishap. "The rules are simple. Jason leads off by playing his lowest card. Going to his right, you must play a card higher. If you can't, pairs trump singles, triples and quads go on pairs, two's clear the pile and you lead out. First person to play all their cards is the President during the next game. Second person out is the Vice President, third the Governor, etc. The last guy is the asshole. They have to shuffle and deal, and everyone must do what anyone above them says."

"So if I win," Melissa said, "You have to do what I tell you?"

"*When* I win, you'll have to do what *I* tell *you*," Kole said.

Intended as a drinking game, Kole bummed at the realization only he, Melissa, and Denise were drinking. The group substituted commands to drink for silly acts: Carl was made to quack like a duck each time someone played a card for a full turn. Denise ordered Kole to do a chicken dance while the table sung the beat. Alex failed miserably when Rosa (their VP) ordered him (the lowly mayor) to do a Kamarinskaya, the traditional Russian dance. With arms crossed, he went low as the men clapped in time.

The ladies yelled, "Lower, go lower, lower," until he plopped back on his bum. Instead of red-hot embarrassment, Alex laughed with the room; cut short by Rosa bending to help him up.

Her palms on his forearm and back arm added to his bliss.

Table cleared, food on the way, Rosa said, "We'll get the side dish," and tapped Alex's arm.

Melissa passed them on the way to the kitchen, carrying the casserole they intended to grab, but Rosa continued on. "I want to see what you have to drink besides soda."

His forty-nine cubic foot of storage, Turbo Air refrigerator opened outward from the middle. They each grabbed a handle, pulled, leaned in to inspect. The immediate result placed their heads inches apart. He stared at the Tropicana label. She stared at him.

The cool air of the opened refrigerator helped chill his soaring body temperature. “I have OJ, bottled water, a V-8.”

She watched him. If he turned, he’d practically be kissing her. That seemed way too forward, despite the idea’s appeal.

Perhaps she wanted to kiss? Just pecking her lips in front of an open refrigerator seemed juvenile.

Intending to find out why she still faced him, he rotated. She turned to pursue the beverages.

“I’ll take a bottle of water,” Rosa reached inside. “You want something?” She asked as they both rose and closed the doors.

He knew staring into her eyes showed his hand: that he found her breathtakingly beautiful; that he wanted to lean forward and kiss her; that he’d never detected an energy similar to what pulsed between them.

Turning, she cracked open the bottled water, sipped, and said, “I’m starving,” before moving toward the other room.

“Do you want to eat here again tomorrow,” Alex blurted.

Stopping at the steps, she inspected him, her eyes squinted, her lips pursed, “That depends on how good the food is.” She pattered to the other room.

Smiling, Alex interpreted that as a yes: they had cheddar-filled bratwurst.

CHAPTER SIX

Rosa accepted Alex's invitation and they dined the following day, on leftovers. The generous load of meats drew Kole and Carl as well. Alex spent day three alone. Carl included himself when Alex invited Rosa for "movie night" on day four. Two miserable days with only phone chats followed; another Rosa date that included Carl, where, despite the sting, Alex pulled him aside and asked for a day of privacy with Rosa.

As he showered and groomed, Alex committed himself to trying for a kiss tonight.

Having completed his week of orientation today marked his first as head of programming. He fantasized about giving an introduction speech to his team. Speech might be too strong a term for sharing a vision. Over the past week, he'd learned how Broumgard divided project responsibilities. He intended to revamp their system, assign tasks to individuals according to their strengths and likes; those steps alone should streamline the work.

The option of late stays appealed to him, as well. Not as a routine, or a way to brown-nose, but at Vision Tech, he often stayed past normal work hours, and soon found other programmers joining him. When modeled correctly, an after-hours environment toed the line between labor and recreation. Music cranked. Pizza arrived. Debates about the eventualities of the technology on the SYFY channel took precedent.

The programmers at Broumgard used *Plow Straight*, but not to its full potential. The first few days would include a crash course taught by its designer. That should increase output and ten to fifteen percent.

He checked the clock, 6:20—the tram departed at ten after seven—and though Rosa and him never discussed it, they had been meeting earlier to acquire face time before work.

Having completed his morning routine, he selected an olive-colored T-shirt and a gray flannel, thinking the color combination complimented his brown eyes.

Racing down the steps, he grabbed two snack bars in the kitchen, popped Victor in his ear, and headed out.

Even in June, Montana provided a frigid morning.

Jogging to the tram tower, he climbed the steps two at a time, hoping he'd early-bird Rosa, spread a Cheshire grin when she arrived, give teasing answer when she queried to the Atrium's draw.

Her strongest inclination believed they offered some kind of harem, which he guessed held credibility, but the Lobby represented much more than a place to satisfy sexual fantasies.

Reaching the top, Rosa waited in he scrubs; her crossed arms a staked flag of victory.

Carl waited too. Alex grinned. The albino programmer exuded a gentle aura. Alex liked his company and sympathized with his interest in hanging with Alex and Rosa. Just not tonight. Alex planned a full-course meal. He'd rounded up an assortment of candles; had John Mayer loaded in the player.

Rosa smiled at his approach, which started his day more efficiently than dunking his head in a bucket of ice water.

"Morning," Alex said.

Instead of a reply, Rosa pulled him by the pinky finger, kissed him on the lip. "Good morning to you."

The unexpected affection acted as a concussion grenade. Deciding their first kiss needed improvement, he stepped in front of her, waited for eye contact, and leaned in. As his lips touched hers, he cupped the back of her head and lost himself in the moment. The slightest tongue contact, yet the kiss's passion superseded his handful of others.

Pulling away, they had sealed a pact. Their compounding feelings had integrated into one system that would work together to enhance the other.

Carl's voice broke the mood, "This is uncomfortable, guys."

Their grins widened to the precipice of laughter.

"Sorry, Carl," Rosa said, separating from Alex. They resumed their normal morning chat, only this time, Alex held Rosa's hand.

The tram rode on air. Alex floated toward the work room, trying unsuccessfully to bring his mind around to his work day; to making a good impression.

"Mr. Cutler, one moment, sir," a bass-filled voice said, drawing him out of his haze.

Alex turned to find the incredible hulk, Dalton, hustling toward him.

"Good morning, Mr. Cutler."

"Morning." Alex noticed the two silver bars on the big man's uniform. Three spear tips for a sergeant, one silver bar for lieutenant, and two silver bars for a captain. Apparently, Dalton being a big man had a double meaning.

"I won't take much of your time. I know today's a big one for you. I just wanted to personally welcome you aboard and congratulate you on a good game last week."

"Thank you, but we both know I should be thanking you. This is a wonderful place."

"Adisah is the man to thank. He's a magnificent person." He glanced over his shoulder at the door to Alex's work room.

A pair of men wearing suits entered. From the brief glimpse Alex got inside, the room appeared full, which as far as he knew, ran contrary to the norm.

When Alex returned his attention to Dalton, he sensed the man had stalled him to allow those men to enter.

"Anyway," Dalton said, "great game. If our new guy didn't try to go low on you, the outcome may have gone different."

"Win or lose, it was the most fun I've ever had."

Dalton nodded and backed up. "It always is, Mr. Cutler. We're all excited and anxious to see what you're going to add." He clapped his paws, smiled. "You have a great day."

“Thank you.”

Alex stopped at the door and breathed deep, hoping tardiness wouldn't be a factor on his Lobby credits.

Double the expected occupants filled his work room. All the normal programmers. A dozen professionally dressed men and women speckled the outer wall. Alex's heart fluttered. Was this an ambush?

Dr. Brad Finder stood near the front with Rigo Espinosa. Four guys in lab coats, who looked as if they had taken time out of their day to be here, huddled over a tablet. And the man himself, Adisah Boomul, waited with Tara near the main desk.

Adisah had plumped up since the orientation video and gone gray in spots. Age softened his features, making the gentle looking man seem like he belonged in a temple, humming his daily devotions to life.

Energy sparked in the room. Despite its positive feel, Alex chewed his bottom lip, while remaining in the doorway.

As if sensing his presence, Adisah and Tara turned in unison.

“Ah, Mr. Cutler,” Alex beamed, “so wonderful to meet you. Please,” he beckoned him closer.

Everyone turned in his direction. Alex swallowed and navigated through the occupied desks.

Recalling himself bouncing on his toes, being a six-foot-four, organic machine, and realizing this man had been responsible for that experience struck him like a gong, muddled his thoughts.

“You possess a real gift, you know that,” Adisah said with a shake of his head. “To think where we'd be if I would have had someone like you twenty years ago.”

Alex couldn't reply. The comment was like Stephen King telling you you had a great imagination or Christian Bale marveling at your acting talent. Finally, he managed, “Well, you have me now, sir.”

He waved off the sir, addressed the room.

“Would anyone care to tell Alex what makes him and this day so special for us?”

The sharp crack-hum of an electronic device drew Alex's attention. An elderly man he immediately recognized as the majority shareholder, Roy Guillen, scooted his Smart Drive wheelchair closer. He nodded with appreciation at Alex while a colleague of his in a corduroy suit stood behind his chair.

Alex had been Googling the man all week. Beyond a hotel mogul, Roy Guillen had climbed mount Kilimanjaro (where they lost a man to exposure) dove the colorful reefs off the coast of Thailand.; spent a year assisting in Tohoku Japan after the tsunami that killed fifteen thousand. Having experienced so much, something about the fiery gleam in the man's eyes looked out of place in a decrepit body, seated in a wheelchair.

“Very glad you're here, son,” Roy said. “Very glad, indeed.”

“Thank you, Mr. Guillen.” As long as this summons wasn't a prelude to Alex's termination, he would attempt to schedule some face time with the man. It wasn't everyday you met a real-life action figure, or one of America's roughly five hundred and twelve billionaires.

Adisah removed a memory stick from the side of a nearby laptop and displayed it to the packed room as he addressed Alex. “Do you know what you've done, Mr. Cutler?”

No, he thought. He hadn't done anything, yet. He scratched behind his ear as he surveyed the room.

Song gave him a surreptitious thumbs up.

Denise pursed her lips in a kiss.

"When entering or exiting a chosen and accessible world from inside the Lobby," Adisah began, "clients and employees alike have suffered from a discomfort stemming from an unidentified flaw in our software. We all accepted this discomfort as inevitable. A case of taking the good with the bad. A tugging sensation that some have compared to being eviscerated, or spending a day with my financial advisors."

Forced chuckles circulated the room.

"And thanks to you, Mr. Cutler, that lone detriment has been plucked from our software, making the Lobby the wholly euphoric experience it was designed to be."

Before Alex could reply, or even progress with words, Tara brought her hands together in applause, others followed. It compounded until the room danced with the sound, replete with desk slaps and shouts.

Alex thought about the message he emailed the design department. A hand clasped his and shook, someone patted his back; Roy Guillen thanked him over and over for his gift.

Eridu and the Lobby were Alex's gift; ones that surpassed his wildest dreams.

At this moment, in his new home, surrounded by his new peers, he couldn't imagine anything ever going wrong.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Alex whistled a tuneless stream as he exited the elevator onto the penthouse level. Even after more than a year at Eridu, *Patterned Creation* continued to amaze him. The flash of inspiration brought on by the massive globe's beauty improved each of the worlds he'd worked on over the past fourteen months. Since assuming the reins of Broumgard's programming department, his team completed two worlds. The first, Golf Retreat, offered two hundred and sixteen of the industry's best courses, forty-two of their own design, and four played on a gravity-impooverished moon.

The second world combined bright colors with a daring concept: Triassic Park. The completed, non-lethal version of Dr. Ian Hammond, the scientists from Michael Crichton's novel, Jurassic Park's dream. The twenty-two square mile island offered eighty of the most exotically extinct plants purported to have existed, forty-seven modified insects, and twelve absolutely docile varieties of dinosaurs.

The extensive research wore down the entire team. Even with twenty-seven dedicated, highly-competent workers, and four new hires, they spent half their time on authenticity. Thanks to their prideful determination, a client could now interact with a timid anspeodite, a fictional, cat-like reptile with the characteristics of a monkey. Their mischievous creation would hustle up a tree and then swing loosely from branch to branch, dangling from a scaled tail as it inspected the humans below.

The previous five months, they toiled over what would be a horrifically accurate recreation of the Battle of Gettysburg. Clients would be able to choose whether they fought for the Union or the Confederacy in as yet undetermined battle for the infamous town.

Keeping with the historic nature, the program involved its own, user-specific memory that spanned four days, same as the battle. This allowed clients to endure twelve eight-hour shifts that paused as their group exited, and resumed when they returned. In addition, clients could modify their pain, allowing the user to feel nothing if mortally wounded, or discover what a cannonball tearing off a leg, allowing life to pump out of their femoral artery, felt like. In-world death kicked a client into the Lobby, with the choice to rejoin the fight, or select another world.

Gettysburg started as a great idea, but Alex learned too late that the carnage of war should never be recreated. As much as it frightened him, as much as mortal screams and the smell of blood, bowels, and gun smoke sickened him, he would visit Gettysburg. He also suspected he'd do so with some degree of pain intact. He just couldn't explain why.

Gripping the familiar iron handle to his condo signified another completed workday; a sense of purpose fulfilled. Inside, the smell of seasoned chicken permeated the air. The sounds of Adele played throughout the house system. Neo's jacket still

represented the centerpiece when a guest entered, but a series of paintings themed around the open fields and urban alleyways of Rome, replaced movie posters.

A candlelit feast for two decorated the table, centered by an open bottle of Merlot and two wine glasses. Alex smirked away his surprise and replaced it with adoration.

Rosa waited in one of the dining chairs, wearing a little black dress with the gold crucifix of her necklace resting on the outside. Her luminous hair spiraled onto her shoulders. Dim lighting and a quartet of three-wicked candles enhanced the ambiance, all accentuated by Rosa's flowery perfume.

"What's all this?" he asked, approaching her and imparting a kiss.

"Well, we have a lot to celebrate," she said, motioning for him to sit next to her.

They did have much to celebrate, he thought, but how could she know that? Confused, and concerned she'd somehow learned his surprise, he decided to stay quiet—discover her agenda.

"This looks and smells delicious. Is this a happy Friday meal?" he asked as he filled the two glasses a quarter of the way.

"Nope. Today is a special day. I'm sure you know, but to keep me in a good mood, I'll just remind you: it's our one-year living together anniversary."

"I knew that. I've even brought a gift to prove it."

She sipped her wine, inspected his empty hands. "Is that so? By all means, enhance our reason to celebrate."

He didn't have the spine to tell her he celebrated every day since meeting her.

He separated the two stacked plates, sliced the roasted chicken, placed a slab of succulent meat on each. He added a freshly baked roll and inspected the sides, allowing her curiosity to ferment.

"All right, fun's over," she said. "Where's my surprise?"

A scoop of green bean casserole on each. A dash of cheesy-garlic mashed potatoes.

"I was called into Adisah's office today. Third time in a year." He proudly displayed three fingers.

"Lucky you," she said with a raise of her glass.

She meant the compliment. Adisah represented a mythical man, even to those who lacked proper clearance. "He gave me a raise that dips me into profit sharing." To kill a little more time, he placed her plate in front of her, slid his closer. Even though money didn't drive either of them, he wanted her to consider the idea that his increase in pay ended his big news. Once that possibility settled, he continued, "More importantly, I've been granted unlimited use of Eridu's amenities."

Rosa stayed silent. She attempted to hide her interest by cutting the chicken into bite-sized cubes. She'd abandoned questioning him about what went on in the Atriums, but her curiosity remained obvious, sometimes painfully.

"Being that I'm Mr. Boomul's favorite employee, protégé if you will, and a dear, close friend of Roy Guillen," Alex said playfully, thinking back on he and Roy's earlier Lobby visit, where Alex bested him by four strokes at Sawgrass. "Adisah, after calling me the future of this company, asked if there was anything he could do to make my time more comfortable."

She forked a piece of chicken into her mouth, chewed slowly, and watched him.

Picking up his roll, he bit a chunk, and talked with his mouth full. “Long story short, I got your security bumped. Are you ready to learn what all the fuss is about?”

She swallowed, almost replied, and instead grabbed the wine glass and drank. She then rose and placed a hand on her belly, drawing the silk dress tight against her well-conditioned body, swelling her appeal. “I’ve been here three years. I’m sure you can’t tell, but it drives me crazy not knowing what you do, what attracts all these powerful people to our city. The water cooler talk is about what type of orgy or Weird Science pleasure machine they have over there.” She tucked errant strands of hair behind her ear and looked him in the eyes. “The thinking being nothing else could make people so happy; so guarded over it’s identity. But, I know you. I know a sex house isn’t what gives you that perma glow every few weeks. You’re not some horn-dog out banging robots.” She grabbed her glass and drained the last splash of wine. “But, now you’re saying I get to be in the know?” She smiled, and then slumped her shoulders. “Do I even want to find out?”

He had daydreamed about this moment, perhaps for the past year. Her adorable uncertainty made his heart flutter. He strode closer, cupped both of her hands. “You definitely want to.”

“What if it’s like driving a nice car? Where once you do, all other cars lose their luster... I don’t want to lose my luster.”

She made a valid point. He sometimes wondered if the Lobby eroded some of his luster for normal life. Being that he didn’t have much to begin with, he’d say no, but he fantasized about being in the Lobby a dozen times throughout each day. Even the previous night, after making love to Rosa, he wondered what it would be like to bring her to San Francisco 1968, sneak off, and give sex a try.

Everything seemed a little better when inside. He’d never considered playing golf before the Lobby. Now, he couldn’t wait to get back to the tee and work on correcting his slice, staying ahead of Roy in their friendly rivalry. He needed to keep his club face slightly more clockwise and keep his eyes on-

Rosa pulsed his hands, returning him to the moment.

“Let’s move to the couch,” he said and then led her over. “It’s going to take a few minutes to explain.”

For the next two hours, his exuberant explanation of the thing he loved went the opposite of how he expected. She started off shocked. Then demanded an in-depth explanation of the transfer process. She stayed incessant about the horrors of her soul being siphoned out of her vessel. Once they overcame that issue, she wanted to know how her bodily functions reacted while in the Lobby, could she defend herself if assaulted. And when they reached the specifics of the Markers—all hell broke loose.

Thirty placating minutes into that, and Alex understood why Tara just sprung the Lobby and the Marker on people after knocking them out. Another ninety minutes, and he convinced her, reluctantly, to give the Lobby a test run.

Their argument drained him as effectively as going ten rounds with the champ. He picked at the cold food, left unattended. Her many points of opposition compounded his confusion. What was wrong with perfect living?

Per the norm, they showered in separate bathrooms and climbed into bed together. The space between them on that night: a voyage through the cosmos.

CHAPTER EIGHT

“We’re directing all our efforts into creating this Gettysburg world,” Alex said to Rosa as she slowly pirouetted inside the engulfing white of the Lobby. The undefined hallway expanded twenty square feet each time a person entered, and retracted when they exited or entered a world. The neutral color made it impossible to detect. Once in a while, a client arrived down the hall, creating a marker for the distance. Otherwise, Alex often felt like he inhabited a cloud. “We hope to be finished by Thanksgiving. People are saving their Lobby credits to use over the holiday.”

“You’ll be going to that world?” Rosa asked non-chalantly. He knew her well enough to sense her rebuke.

When caught between telling Rosa a lie or losing faith, Alex chose honesty, “I’m very curious to see how the environment affects me.”

She stared a beat, nodded, “What’s after that?”

“Gettysburg is ambitious, but much more intricate than we expected. It’s draining my team. Once done, we intend to knock out a handful of simpler projects. Possibly a scuba diving world where clients can learn about aquatic life. Maybe have an option for human gills or webbed hands. Maybe Big Game Hunting. An equestrian world: trails, obstacle courses. I’ve also been thinking about 1860 Japan. Samurais clashing with the Western world, but to make things fair, toss in a pinch of magic on the side of the Shogun.”

“Another type of war.” Rosa balled her hair in a wad and squeezed.

Waking that morning, he’d found her obstinacies had tempered. Still, she fell short of the exuberance he originally envisioned when he daydreamed of them enjoying this together. Currently, she seemed resigned to getting through it, as cordially as possible.

A trio of men popped in, one after the other, about sixty feet from where Alex and Rosa stood. Alex rarely saw clients inside the Atrium. Logging in with a destination in mind, he often announced his world without glancing left or right, and entered. Each new world increased traffic. Modified clothing identified these men as regulars. It usually took three or four trips to learn how to swap out the standard issue Broumgard attire.

One of the men said something above a conversational tone and a colossal portal materialized near them. Viewing it from a poor angle, yet judging by the red and gold hue, Alex knew they had opted for San Francisco 1968. The men merging into the image left Alex alone with his girlfriend, who looked amazing in tight jeans, a close fitting Broumgard T-shirt, and adorable little sneakers.

Another man appeared twenty feet away, announced a room, and darted in. The portal looked like any door you might find on a suburban home, meaning Pleasure House 101. Not only had Alex never visited that world, he never would. With some things in life, abstinence represented the best course. He assumed Broumgard's estimates of seventy percent of vacation minutes being spent there held accuracy. Playing out sexual fantasies would undoubtedly bring pleasure, and distortions. Cocaine and heroin probably poured out generous endorphins, too. Their drawbacks were well known. A person had to establish their own morality. Most of Alex's brought him comfort.

"How much do they charge for eight hours of this?" Rosa said as she paced a few steps across the white floor, her sneakers leaving little dimples.

As to her question, prices fluctuated. He earned enough credits to vacation before the urge overwhelmed him. With his promotion, he could visit for free from now on. Rumors abounded that when they first opened Pleasure House 101 and San Francisco 1968, a Russian general donated a prototype attack helicopter in exchange for a pair of ten year visitation rights. What's that worth? Eleven million dollars? Fifty? He answered, "More than we could afford."

She glared at him and then returned her attention to their surroundings, "Have you checked your bank statements recently?"

Touché, and nope. He established direct depositing shortly after being hired, donated ten percent of his income to St. Jude's and five to a place called Morgan's Wonderland in Texas—a significantly under-funded theme park for children with mental and physical handicaps. He sent his mother her original allotment plus thirty percent, spent as needed, and hadn't glanced at the balance since.

Some quick math led him to accept he warmed a healthy egg.

"Well, either way, it's free for us now." Closing the distance, he placed his hand on the small of her back. "What do you feel like doing? Football? A sunny day in San Francisco? Mass orgy?"

She placed her hand to her chin. The Thinker. "Hmmm. The last one is tempting," she mused, "but I'll pass." She wrapped her arms around his waist. "Can we get a sailboat in San Francisco?"

"Yea, there are dozens of boats. They can travel a quarter of a mile beyond Alcatraz."

"I've always wanted to learn to sail." She pondered a moment, then added, "What do you think?"

"I think we take the official tour in Triassic Park. There's flowers with pedals the size of tractor tires, colors bright enough to offend a hippie—"

"—and unnatural life forms, created by... people." She shook her head. "I don't think I'm ready for anything that drastic. Show me God's creatures."

Pursing his lips, Alex nodded.

She leaned in and rubbed her nose on his. "I know this is your baby and you're all excited, but it's also very strange, unnatural. I can't stop thinking that I'm sitting in a chair, being deceived."

"You're not being deceived." He gently shook the back of her arm. "This is you, and me."

She rocked her head left, then right. “It’s your thing, Alex. It’s great. It’s unreal. I’m having fun and it’s exciting, but... it’s just a bit much. You know? Like, maybe I’m just not used to it is all.”

Alex nodded. He somewhat understood. Not personally. He’d never heard of someone not loving the Lobby, but people were different. Rosa represented the first person with open religious beliefs he’d known to enter. Definitely the first to accuse the Lobby of siphoning her soul. Maybe she actually took all the Bible stories literally.

Leaving the topic alone, he said, “Sailing in San Francisco, with you, will be wonderful.”

Pivoting to the white and back to Alex, she said, “Is this legal? Tell me, for real.” Alex exhaled.

All the talk as to the Lobby’s legality arrived in the reverse. Like, ‘We’re not doing anything illegal,’ or ‘There’s no law against it,’ but he’d never heard a person confidently state the Lobby obeyed American law. Who cared?

They offered no Internet at Eridu, provided no cell towers (rumors claimed they jammed cellular and radio signals), and clients turned in all electronic devices upon arrival.

Was the Lobby legal? The short answer—pretty much.

“I’m sorry.” She kissed him, breaking his reverie. “This is great.”

“Well, happy anniversary,” he said with a slight frown.

She kissed him again, dissolving more of his worry. Another kiss leveled out his frown, the third brought a grin. When he met her eyes, she raised her eyebrows. “Can we, umm, do it in here? Without anyone watching?”

Alex considered Rosa’s suggestion. “Sailing the bay just became more enticing.”

“Only more enticing?”

“No, it actually sounds like the potential best day of my life.”

She laughed.

As to being watched... In this lobby section, Broumgard employees had limited controls on clients—halting movement, lowering voices, setting time lengths and such—like with Mr. Robertson. In a world, however, the settings of that reality ruled.

Broumgard employees become regular clients inside each world. “Once we transfer in, the chemical component to the interaction makes decoding a client’s actions activities.”

“In that case,” she gripped his hand, “I’m ready to step into one of your worlds.”

Elated, he announced, “San Francisco 1968.”

An image appeared fifteen feet to their left.

An aerial view of the bay lit by a bright sun; the Golden Gate bridge under a single cloud, a flock of gulls, white caps on the sea, all in motion.

Rosa squeezed his hand, signifying her readiness, and they stepped through.

No physical pain accompanied the passage, something he appreciated—and not only because it represented his addition.

Alex had visited San Francisco 1968 before. Mainly to track down Roy, who spent the majority of his waking life inside the replica of his home city. Stepping from the barren white Lobby into a sunny, breezy afternoon always stunned the senses.

Clients arrived on healthy grass in Golden Gate Park. Sandals, khaki shorts, a tie-dye shirt for men. Flip-flops and one of three knee-length summer dresses for ladies.

With the world running continually, alterations made by clients sustained through log in and outs. Clients repositioned and conjured picnic tables to form rows near the entrance, giving them a line of sight to inspect each arrival.

Eight of the roughly twenty tables held clients. Most glanced in their direction. A few of those present might have been NPC's (non-person characters) selected to play any of the offered board or card games. With this world's popularity focused on socializing, finding a real life player came easy.

"There's more people here than my last visit," Alex said.

Rosa stretched her dress out for inspection. Blue cotton top, a canvas bottom. "Do I have to wear this the whole time?"

"See that store over there," Alex pointed outside the park. "We can swap clothes in there. I'd prefer swim trunks myself."

A golden retriever ran past, chasing a tossed Frisbee. When Alex followed the arc back to the owner, the owner waved.

"They have dogs?" Rosa said.

"Dogs, birds, fish in the sea. No sharks though. Nor jellyfish, stingrays. An environment free of dangers. A place focused on pleasantries."

Rosa huffed, in a good way, and took his hand. "This could be nice, once we get somewhere private and I unwind."

"Alex," a man yelled.

The couple stopped as a handsome man near Alex's age jogged toward them.

"Alex, what're you doing here? I assumed you wouldn't have more credits for another eight days."

"Adisah's granted me unlimited credits." Alex wiggled his eyebrows. "Have you met Rosa before?"

"No," Rosa replied. "I would have remembered someone so..."

"Handsome," Alex finished.

"I would have said debonair," she said.

"I used to look like this too. Wavy black hair, a baby face, thin with muscles. My first wife always called me irresistible."

"Used to look?" Rosa said, and checked Alex's face. "I'm confused."

"You don't recognize him?" Alex asked.

Rosa inspected the man closer, "I don't."

"It's Roy. Roy Guillen."

"Most people don't recognize me without my wheelchair, but I prefer this version," Roy extended his hand. "It's so nice to meet you."

"Oh my word," Rosa said. Blushing, she gripped his hand with both of hers. "I've only seen you in pictures, but now I see it. The eyes." She glanced at Alex. He hoped her wide gaze and thin smile represented respect for Lobby enhancements, not an expression of mild horror.

"Come join us," Roy said. "Prince Bandar needs a partner for the Eucher tournament."

Alex checked Rosa for interest, saw none. "Nah, man. We're here to go sailing."

"That sounds like a good time," Roy said. "We could race around Alcatraz and back. Charles would join us."

Alex bobbed his head. He and Rosa could work together, giving them an upper hand. Unless-

“Alex and I have never sailed,” Rosa cut in. “We intend to putter around.”

“Nonsense,” Roy said. “We’ll make it a race. Me and Charles have experience. We’ll take out our own boats, allow you a better sloop, an instructor on board, maybe a little head start.”

How could Rosa not want to beat these guys at their own game? Alex looked to Rosa. She offered the same expression: wide eyes, lips pursed in a sour grin. No dice. He steeled himself, addressed Roy. “We kind of came here for private time. It’s Rosa’s first Lobby visit.”

Roy’s smile faltered as he inspected Rosa, saw her watching him with a blank look. “So that’s why we haven’t met before. Make sure Alex takes you to see the whales. They stay a little east of Alcatraz.”

“For sure,” Alex said. “We’ll race another time.”

“You’re on,” Roy said. A final survey of their expressions, where he lingered on Rosa. “I’ll leave you to enjoy your date. How long will you be here?”

“Four hours,” Alex said.

Roy checked his watch, “I’ll still be here, if you want to stop by before you go.”

“We’ll do what we can,” Alex extended his hand.

“Nice to meet you, Rosa,” Roy said. “I hear great things about you all the time. This one,” he pointed to Alex, “head over heels for you. Take care of him.”

Rosa relaxed, “I do my best.”

The clothing store in San Francisco 1968, established before national chains, product placement, and scripted greetings, delivered that warm and fuzzy feeling to his chest. Incense scented the air. Hangers dangled from ceiling wires and round metal racks. Each displayed an article of clothing. Once donned, an identical item restocked the old. Rosa selected a white and red paisley two-piece bathing suit, shorts and a loose fitting, yellow T-shirt: Jesus loves you, over top.

Alex wondered which of his programmers had the Christian leaning to insert that. More likely, they intended it as a joke. Who really believed Jesus loved them?

A teenage youth with short brown hair, thick and tapered in an era-appropriate style, watched them. An episode of Perry Mason played on a small television behind him—same as on every channel in the city, unless changed by a client.

“What’s the best way to get to the docks?” Alex asked.

“The trolley makes a groovy ride. It’s one block up,” the young man said. “We loan bicycles too.”

“How far is the Pacific?” Rosa asked.

The youth’s eyes lost focus for a moment as the NPC processed her question. “Three point two miles.”

Rosa beamed at Alex, “That sounds like a nice ride.”

Lacking real-world muscle fatigue, Alex agreed. “Can you teach us how to sail?” All NPCs in this world possessed full information of every option. Starting with Golf Retreat, Alex compartmentalized information, assigning it to those in the know. Caddy’s assisted with your golf game. Clubhouse employees knew mixed drinks and the menus.

“I can teach basic techniques in steering, knots, and ship safety.”

“We’ll take the bikes from you,” Alex said, “and find an instructor on the docks.”

“Far out.”

Wing-shaped handlebars with plastic grips decorated their matching Shwinn 3-speeds.

Rosa rang the ball as she mounted. The ancient sound drew grins from them both. Pedaling through sidewalks populated enough to avoid the feel of a ghost town, Alex and Rosa shared many smiles. Powerful winds near the docks amplified the healthy smell of the sea. An army of seagulls, speckled with pelicans—drawn to the docks by the discarded fishguts—added a cacophony of caws to the sound of sea motion. They continued past the wharf to the better-tended slips of Fog Bay marina.

Dismounted, Rosa approached Alex, her hand on her chest, a look of exuberance, possibly disgust on her face. “It’s so strange to do all that pedaling, up those big hills, and never get tired.” She slapped her thighs. “I felt the strain here, but…” She shrugged. “If I grew tired, maybe I’d forget I’m conked out in a chair.”

“That’s a great point,” Alex said, hiding his disappointment at her negative comment. “Fatigue plays a major role in Gettysburg, particularly if you get shot, or blown up.”

Rosa winced.

Alex made a mental note: avoid discussing Gettysburg with Rosa.

“We need a world for just us,” Rosa said. “For couples wanting privacy.”

Alex nodded, although how many people visited a fantasy world for quiet alone time. Most of the slips held boats. Smaller, one-man sloops and catboats started near the shore, building out to larger cutters and schooners. A forty foot Olympic class soling waited at the end.

Alex had never boarded a boat, in life or the Lobby. Standing under a bright sun on a temperate day, it sounded like the ideal activity.

“Can I help you?” A man in his thirties said. He possessed the small waist and broad shoulders of a swimmer. Sandy blond hair poked out from under a cap that read, U.S. Navy. “We keep sailing vessels down these two decks, motor boats over there.”

“It’s our first time,” Rosa said quietly. Looking from the NPC and back to Alex, as if unsure of the man’s authenticity. “Are you a computer program?”

“My name is John. I’m here to help.”

When she looked to Alex, he averted eye contact.

“Should we fish,” Alex asked Rosa, “go swimming.”

“A swim, yes. Perhaps some fishing,” Rosa surveyed the rolling waves.

“What about that boat there,” Alex pointed to the fourth slip.

“A twenty-two foot Lark, centerboard. Light weight, good speed.” John spoke without looking at the boat—another tweak Alex corrected with future worlds. “Single rudder and tiller for steering. Twelve foot sail, perfect for a smooth ride on a day like this.”

Climbing in, Rosa stepped gingerly into the cockpit and sat next to the long tiller. She worked it in and out. “This is adorable.”

John untied their moors and guided the boat back before he stepped onto the bow, rocking the small vessel. A motor pattered them onto the bay. John showed them how to set the main, tie off the sail, and observed Alex as he repeated the duties before declaring him, “fit for sea.”

With a nice breeze racing them across a crisp day, Alex sat next to Rosa, who steered, in the ninety degree, stair-step method.

“Guess we’ll save sex for another time,” Rosa whispered.

“What, oh, no, no, no.” Alex had become so enthralled by their activities, he’d forgotten about the promised end to their date, about his curiosity at coupling inside the Lobby. Mentioned anew, his interest spiked. “Because of John?”

Rosa nodded.

“He’s not even real.”

“I..I still couldn’t do it.”

“I don’t think I could either,” Alex chuckled. “Hey, John.”

“Yeah, Skipper.”

“Do you mind heading back to the docks?” Alex said.

A beat, “Would you like me to steer us home?”

“No, I’m hoping you’ll just dive over and swim back.”

“Alex,” Rosa admonished.

“No problem, Captain,” John said. He turned his Navy hat backwards, stepped to the rail, and jumped in, shoes and all.

“Man overboard,” Alex said with a laugh.

“That’s not funny,” Rosa said.

“He’ll go right back to his previous loop.” Seeing concern on her face, he dropped his grin. “I never mess with the NPCs, Rosa. Some clients harass them, but I don’t like it. I’ve always found it...ugly, but he’ll be fine.”

Watching John head to shore pitted a knot in Alex’s stomach. The man didn’t stroke. He simply pushed through the water, his shoulders and head visible, as if propelled by an underwater force. Alex made a mental note to adjust that, and said, “Him just hopping in was kind of cool, though.”

“And a little ugly,” Rosa said.

Alex dropped the sail, then the anchor. He never issued commands that demeaned, but he experienced a slight thrill at being obeyed without thought.

“Should we swim?” Rosa asked as she removed her shorts and Jesus shirt.

“Sure,” Alex said on his approach. Drawing her close, he kissed her neck, her cheek, her lips. “After.”

Fatigue might not work properly, but he recognized Rosa’s increased breathing, the tensing of her body. Her hands found his back. When she opened her mouth to him, a small moan escaped her.

Lovemaking in the Lobby exceeded his expectations in all sensual measurements. Perhaps the romantic setting played a role. Perhaps his anticipation helped. Perhaps the novelty of it amplified the feel. Whatever the reason, he couldn’t help thinking he had everything he wanted.

CHAPTER NINE

Despite having to exit the Lobby—something Alex dreaded every time—he enjoyed the mild disorientation of returning to the real world. He likened it to waking from a restful night dreaming of angels, love, and beachside bonfires.

Though he knew staff attached modified catheters once a client entered the Lobby, and removed them before they exited, he always had to pee upon coming to.

Remembering Rosa, he stretched in anticipation of greeting her as she returned. Unfortunately, her Lobby reservations never fully abated. Needling questions about the soul and morality—two things unrelated to the Lobby—clouded their afternoon. The swim brought further complications.

The water cooled to that perfect degree that made him feel like being born each time he dove under then broke the surface. Detectable salt content, a proper current, but once out, the water raced from the body. An improvement in Alex's opinion. Rosa's head of hair drying in under a minute without use of a towel should have pleased her. It didn't. It caused twenty minutes of consternation.

Overall, she enjoyed herself. He intended to focus on those times to avoid further debate about the Marker, convince her to go again—try a different world.

Before rising from the access chair, he discovered Claire, the first shift access room supervisor, hovering over him, wringing her hands. Knowing her as an excitable woman quelled some of his concern, yet he'd never seen her this worked-up. After a beat with her simply swallowing nervously and looking over her shoulder, Alex said, "Hello Claire."

"I don't want to alarm you, but well, some serious shit going on downstairs." Cursing increased his confusion. Claire was a polite introvert. "Something with the programmers?" He stretched his back and stood.

"Oh no, sir. They've been ordered back to their residences. Everyone has. You just missed the umpteenth announcement."

Announcement? Workers sent home? Alex conjured no plausible scenario for those. With a rotating schedule, programmers worked seven days a week. Everyone in the know encouraged the creation of worlds. Alex's weekend and after-hours crew touted minor celebrity status.

Traveling to Rosa, Claire stayed a step behind him.

At Rosa's station, he drew back her green divider. She sat with a leg on each side of the chair, massaging the back of her head with one hand. He exhaled, anticipating a night filled with Marker debate.

"Mr. Cutler," Claire urged, "you and Miss Newberg are to head to your residence, immediately. They have a car waiting for you downstairs."

“Who’s waiting?”

“Security perhaps? Please, hurry. I have others to evacuate.” She turned to leave, stopped, and faced him. “Dalton said we might pull clients out. We almost did that to you.” A frown. She marched down a row and disappeared behind a curtain.

Alex bit his bottom lip. Emergency load-outs meant physically dragging a client outside of the fifteen feet connectivity range of the Marker, or liquefying its receptor, instantly thrusting a client back into their body.

Since they lacked sufficient data as to the long-term effects, if any, those extreme measures stayed reserved for fires, bomb threats, a confirmed shooter on the loose.

As Alex’s worry took shape, he returned his attention to Rosa, who still straddled the chair, but had since leaned back, staring up at nothing in particular.

“Well?” he said.

“Give me a minute,” she said without moving.

Sometimes clients required a moment to adjust. Especially on their first trip. With this downstairs’ fiasco, however, he needed to talk to Victor. He’d left his earpiece in his desk, one floor down.

“They’re evacuating the Atrium.”

“Fire drill?” She furrowed her brow. The loudspeakers kicked on. They both flinched at the intense volume. “Attention guests and employees of Eridu, please return to your quarters. This is not a test. All guests and employees must proceed to their quarters, immediately. Please return to your quarters.”

The blaring volume left a ring in Alex’s ear; a pit of fear in his chest.

“What’s that about?” Rosa said as she climbed out of her chair and followed Alex toward the elevator.

His heart thumped loud enough to strum in his ears. It couldn’t be anything good. He tried to stay collected and said, “Maybe some new type of scheduled drill?”

The words fell flat. Rosa lived on site longer than him. And in his time, he’d never heard of a compound-wide emergency drill, nor any scenario serious enough to invoke a procedure like this. They ran fire drills department by department. Those represented plodding boredom. Claire wore fear on her face. Alex’s insides squirmed.

Earthquakes, tornados, tsunamis—none of those affected this landscape. The mountains of Montana negated most of Nature’s wrath.

Endless man-made dramas existed.

Many of Eridu’s clients were dignitaries, billionaires, or government officials from around the globe. Powerful people often carried powerful enemies.

In their everyday life, the average billionaire staffed around sixty, highly-trained security agents. Yet Broumgard insisted these important people arrive with no more than two. In essence, asking them to rely on the security teams of Eridu, who appreciated and prided themselves on that honor.

Broumgard serviced the world’s elite, and with high value targets, Alex imagined a flurry of scenarios where a universal lockdown of Eridu would be implemented, all frightened him.

The arriving elevator alerted him that he’d been repeatedly pressing the call button.

“You think it’s some kind of threat against a client?” Rosa said as they boarded. “Some insane terrorist?”

“Victor will know.”

The elevator opened to a tumult of activity. Bass-filled voices echoed in all directions. Security officers swarmed the lobby.

Despite his best efforts, Alex long forgotten pangs of panic settled in.

Rosa intertwined her arm in his and they crept toward the busy foyer.

Combat boots connecting with polished tiles created a rhythmic drumline.

Security officers, dressed in full gear, jogged down the halls carrying automatic rifles.

The sight of guns so out of place, Alex suppressed an urge to approach each man and ask him to put his away.

He knew security had weapons. In the mornings, he sometimes heard pops coming from the distant gun range. Also, many hunters populated Eridu, employees and guests alike, but he'd never seen an actual rifle. He had no clue Broumgard security had top of the line armaments with scopes, extended clips, and shoulder straps.

“I'm assuming this isn't a normal day at the office?” Rosa said.

He stayed silent.

Focused on the earpiece, he headed toward his office.

Moments before they arrived, the door to the work area opened and a big dark-skinned man exited.

“Mr. Cutler. Excellent,” Dalton said casually, as if madness wasn't all around them. He handed Alex the plastic case that held his earpiece. “Adisah tasked me with getting you safely to your condo.”

“What's going on?” Alex asked as he allowed himself to be guided toward the main entrance.

Dalton stared out the front glass wall as he spoke, “There's no concrete information beyond: a potential threat to Eridu. For maximum safety, we're returning everyone to their residence.”

“What is the actual threat?” Rosa asked.

“I won't speculate. The important thing is we have the situation well in hand. All that's left is getting you and Mr. Cutler in a vehicle and on the move. Victor can update you more accurately than I.”

Alex nodded, followed him to the reception area: an example of organized pandemonium. The intensity of the men and the amount of fire power present made it feel like a staging area for invasion, or the preparations to repel one.

Men gathered in groups, loaded weapons, strapped on body armor, attached further gun components: tripods, 12 gauge mounts for close combat, barrel grips.

Alex stopped in place; watched an armed group of men enter an awaiting Hum-vee and speed off.

Dalton led the couple to the main door and held it open as a second Hummer appeared. He opened the rear door as it slowed, ushered them inside.

Alex compacted himself. He scooted across the leather in three shuffles. He appreciated Dalton's guidance. Alex couldn't fathom making decisions under this type of pressure.

Give him a scheduled day and he could squeeze more out of it than the next guy. Toss in a problem and he'd treat it as a catastrophe until solved. But pile on another and things got sketchy. Add more, and he'd feel himself shutting down, his thoughts blurring as if inside a blender set to pulsate.

Dalton smacked the back quarter panel in rapid succession. Off they went.

From the rear passenger window, Alex spied security officers running pell-mell, piling sandbags outside of the Atrium, establishing fire positions.

Further down the parking lot, even more troops climbed atop the tram and the roof of the Atrium.

Alex placed a hand over his mouth.

“What could instigate this sort of reaction?” Rosa asked as she pushed her body closer, shared his view.

An alien invasion, a security officer coup, LSD experiment gone awry. “Odds are its precautionary.” His voice sounded confident, as if a second him controlled their shared speech.

Remembering the plastic case in his hand, he retrieved the earpiece, placed it in his canal. The Hummer sped past an increasingly fortified hotel La Berce.

A deafening thump-thump-thump passed overhead. He pressed his face against the window. A brown and mustard-colored helicopter flew toward the Atrium. The armored aircraft resembled a shrunken version of the Russian HIND, the attack copter made famous in the 1980’s mega hit, Rambo II.

“Victor, are you there?” Alex asked.

“Yes, Alex,” Victor replied.

Real world AI’s lacked the ability to interpret tone and expressions—the most important aspects of communication. Inside the Lobby, however, NPCs had algorithms that read tone, facial expressions, body language. NPCs occasionally mimicked emotions they observed, something he found both exhilarating and terrifying.

To his personal AI, he said, “What the hell’s going on?”

The driver of the Hummer—a fit youth with a mop of dark curly hair, wearing the gray and black uniform—leaned back. While keeping his eyes on the road, he said, “Whoever they are, they’re in for one hell of a surprise.”

“Whoever who is?” Alex asked.

The young soldier looked over his soldier at Alex, then Rosa. Instead of replying, he shrugged, returned his eyes to the road, increased their speed.

“Talk to me, Victor.”

“Eleven unidentified craft are converging on our location.” Alex repeated the words to Rosa. “Eight vehicles preceded by three helicopters. It could be FBI. Lack of radio contact decreases that likelihood. Security is treating the approaching vessels as hostile.”

Hostile? Possibly FBI, which meant what, possibly Iranian special forces? Alex thought about getting home, packing a bug-out bag and rushing to the mountains. He and Rosa could discover if two city dwellers could survive in the wild. He’d probably die. A possible preference to looking out his window and finding bodies spinning and dropping from bullets as an invading horde overran his home.

“What’s he saying?” Rosa asked.

Nothing.

The silence seemed to shout.

Assessing the strength in Rosa’s visage, Alex knew she represented their only hope of surviving a snowy mountaintop.

As to her question, he shook his head. Shrugged.

Instead of pressing Victor for further information, Alex thought about Federal agents versus teams of hitmen. Broumgard billed Eridu as a private resort; a retreat for the wealthy; a place with guarded secrets and protected information. Everyone except Tara occasionally voiced their concerns about withholding the Lobby from the world.

Adisah had to know they couldn't keep the United States in the dark forever. Having worked with them, he must know they infiltrated organizations simply for seeking privacy. Once they learned what Broumgard did, due to the secrecy, how could they not conclude nefarious activity?

When the FBI targeted companies, they took down bosses. Alex held a high-level position and never considered blowing a whistle. A chance for criminal culpability in an as yet undefined crime turned his stomach.

America excelled at finding ways to incarcerate its citizens. With only five-percent of the world's population, the United States confined twenty-five percent of the world's prisoners and boasted near the top in every crime imaginable, proving incarceration without rehabilitation exacerbated crime. Why should that matter when those in power lived above risk and never faced penalty.

On the other hand, if a team of assassins approached, blood, mayhem, and death would litter these peaceful streets. On the upside, that lessened the chances of Alex being targeted.

Alex closed his eyes, focused on breathing.

His eyes popped open as a horrifying notion surfaced. What if Broumgard security knew the government approached, and intended to repel them because of their authority?

Adisah encompassed peace, but he, and particularly Roy Guillen, had expounded the foibles of government intrusion on many occasions.

If Broumgard planned to fight the government, Alex's mountain living would become a necessity.

"Victor, give me immediate updates."

"Yes, Alex."

The vehicles braked forcefully in front of building A.

Alex and Rosa held hands as they rode the elevator up. Exiting, his view latched onto the mesmerizing globe. He imagined armed militants bursting out of the elevator, stunned by the beauty of *Patterned Creation*. Alex would be watching them through a slightly opened door; his suffocating fear boiling over into indignation at all the heathens had interrupted. At that point, he would rip the door open and race toward the invaders with a kitchen knife, determined to strike them from his land.

He shivered as he envisioned them sharing a confused frown, pointing their weapons at him in unison, and mowing him down with the ease of automatic gunfire.

Inside, Rosa slipped out of her shoes, into her slippers, and shuffled to the main floor bathroom.

To gain a view of the compound, maybe allay some of his fright, he headed to the patio. On the walk, Victor spoke, pausing him a step before the glass threshold.

"Alex, Ms. Capaldi is currently in communication with an Agent Andrews from the Federal Bureau of Investigation. He possesses court documents allowing them to secure these premises. Broumgard Group security forces are standing down."

Alex slid to the floor, his back against the glass, his hands on his head.

They would escape a violent showdown, in lieu of...what?

CHAPTER TEN

A week of house arrest passed comfortably when confined to a six thousand square foot condominium with over a dozen variety of marine life to observe, an elevated view of a futuristic retreat, and the person you loved most. Yet, because of the government's presence, the uncertainty of a stable tomorrow punctuated each of Alex's breaths. Had he committed any wrongdoing? Corporate fraud carried a maximum sentence of thirty years in prison.

Over the past few days, Rosa read, Alex worked offline. They watched the action from the balcony and played Rummy, Stratego, and Tic-Tac-Toe. Until an hour ago, when a military C-141 Starlifter cargo plane reinvigorated their interest by vibrating the entire condo as it passed overhead and then landed.

Having borrowed his lone neighbor, Brad Finder's, telescope, Alex kept watch of the compound. The mammoth aircraft—which looked big enough for four school buses to enter its belly—sat idle near a hangar. He expected the hatch to drop at any moment, as it had on previous landings. Marines would pour out first, maybe a pair of jeeps after. The FBI arrived on day one, but Alex feared the military had since wrested control away. Confined to his home and parceled information through Victor, he could only guess.

Turning the telescope to the Atrium's parking lot, he focused the lens and inspected each motor home, trailer, and satellite uplink. Military personnel busied themselves between their makeshift base and the Atrium's interior.

"What are they delivering this time, more troops?" Rosa's voice seemed to activate his other senses. With the slider door open, the music of Journey funneled out; he smelled bread crumbs atop a casserole, and licked his lips. "They haven't opened the back yet." On previous visits, the plane dumped its cargo within minutes.

Rosa huffed in surprise.

"Is dinner ready?"

"It needs another ten minutes to cool down." She stepped past him, peered into the telescope. "They're doing *something* around that plane."

Alex resisted his urge to push her aside and look.

As if sensing his desire, she retreated, "I'll let you know when the table is set."

Alex nodded as he found the telescope's eyehole. The plane's hatch yawned open. A pair of forklifts danced around the asphalt near its tail, retrieving wooden crates from inside the hangar. With dozens stacked in two rows near the open hotel, the forklift drivers debarked, joined together, lit cigarettes.

Get to it! Alex wanted to shout. *Show me what you're doing!*

Since these forces invaded, everything they did interested Alex; their actions carried intrinsic importance. If the Starlifter arrived empty—as seemed to be the case—what did it intend to pick-up?

His overwhelming fear: the unmarked crates held servers and access chairs; that the entire apparatus previously known as the Lobby, over the past week, had been dissected more thoroughly than a downed alien spacecraft.

He watched every inhale until the operators flicked their butts. He willed the cargo hold to remain hollow on the return flight, maybe retrieve some of the previously delivered Jeeps. And then resisted the urge to retch as the men returned to their Hi-Los, and loaded the Starlifter with the unmarked boxes he suspected held proprietary Broumgard technology. One thing was certain: the Starlifter's destination would be as accessible as a distant sub-sector of Area 51.

A startling truth overtook him: he would accept prison and the promise of the Lobby's continued existence over freedom and its demise.

Rosa's hand connected with his back, her touch acted like a vortex, pulling him out of his sea of despair.

"Time to eat."

After a terse nod, they settled at the table.

A succession of bites ended his hunger. Accepting the events out of his control, he disregarded the hijacking. His mind returned to the steps needed to finalize the Battle of Gettysburg's code. Perhaps completing that world would increase the Lobby's chances of survival.

1862 Pennsylvania encompassed a strange period in the history of the English language. Men took thirty seconds of dialogue to inquire as to your day. A conversation between aristocrats, or in this case, educated commanders, could take five times the necessary lengths and be as colorful as a peacock streaking through a paint booth. To maintain authenticity, and yet restrain the verbiage from steering the entire world to the farcical, they employed an Old English style of talk more suited for Shakespeare than Colonel Chamberlain.

"You should feed Cain after we eat," Rosa said.

He experienced a tremor of mirth at the prospect. A six thousand gallon tank that spanned fifty feet, stuffed with living coral, pretty much sustained itself. For continued stability, it needed the occasional PH modification, salt equalizer, rock rearrangement. For pleasure, it needed the introduction of feeder fish or blood worms. Particularly, their moray eel, Cain. Rosa named the long serpent after the famous biblical character because if their Cain wasn't sated, he ate his brothers.

Her strong Catholic beliefs initially threw Alex for a loop. Not because the teachings of Jesus conflicted with the virtuous and caring woman he had grown to love. It simply represented his first exposure to someone who integrated the Bible into their daily life. She read from it every morning, prayed every night, truly believed its tenets. Whereas, he placed every Biblical story he'd heard in the same category as all the others: good yarns with moral lessons.

He likened the uncomfortable moments—when she attempted to interest him in the Word—to humoring a child with an imaginary friend.

He didn't regard her faith as a character flaw. Same as the sincere child with the imaginary friend, it endeared her to Alex. He often marveled at her power to forgive any

of the multitudes of human monsters. Regardless of Divine authenticity, her levels of empathy, love, and acceptance provided a testament to living as a decent person.

He longed to believe in an afterlife, and by extension, a purpose to waking. Human suffering, corruption, and greed denied him a belief in an omnipotent Being who rooted-on His children.

He understood the counterargument: we were born into sin, possess free will, and must contend with the Devil's influence. He didn't buy it.

"We're going to be okay, Alex. God guides through the heart. Do what's right, repent when wrong, and you'll be rewarded."

He smirked, nodded.

They ate to the sounds of classic rock and utensils scraping on ceramic.

Afterward, they cleared the table and washed the dishes together. Alex a scrub nurse to Rosa's dunk and clean.

Cain's diet consisted of fish who wandered too close and frozen blood worms, which came in small cubes contained in a plastic tray with the back half protected by a thin layer of aluminum.

Three light taps on the aquarium brought Cain from his hiding spot near the bottom of the rocks. The slender, dragon-like mouth opening and closing fascinated Alex. Something about watching animals eat, captivated him. Maybe seeing the universal necessity created a connection between all species and acted as proof of our commonality. That, or Rosa's mystical preachings were having an effect.

Rosa watched from the couch, the latest Janet Evanovich novel poised for consumption. Halfway through the feeding, a trill, indicating a telephone call, sounded through their home speakers.

The sound re-routed the synapses in his brain, diverting its attention from the enchantment of feeding, to curiosity at the call.

Victor's voice followed, "Tara Capaldi is on the line."

Rosa retrieved the cordless phone from the end of the couch and proffered it to Alex, who rushed over and answered.

"Hello?"

Rosa accepted the blood worms and continued to the tank.

"Alex, how are you?" Tara asked.

"We're surviving." However, this phone call could tip him to an extreme—one way or the other. "We'll be a lot better if you have good news for us."

"That's why I'm calling, to give you good news. The best news actually."

Alex backed into the couch and plopped down.

"It's over, Alex. They're going to lift residential confinements in the morning."

The general statement deflated his nerves as efficiently as if he'd been a balloon held buoyant by a thumb and forefinger, and upon her conclusion, the grip released, allowing the tension to rush out of him.

Leaning back, he limboed between tears and laughter. "And the Lobby, the workers? Broumgard?"

"Everything is okay. And, you're much more than a worker, Alex. The past week has been one hyper session after the next between our representatives and officials from various departments of government." She huffed. "A madhouse. Brutal. But we reached

an agreement. I'll proudly state: we won. In emphasis of your importance, you're my first phone call."

Rosa stepped into his visual. Still unsure what Tara's phone call meant, he wiped a tear of joy from his eyes. Rosa headed into the kitchen, presumably to wash her hands.

"Can my team go back to work?" he asked.

"Soon. There's still mild flux. One of our concessions involves you interacting with an Agent Andrews, the FBI's software expert. I should warn you, that won't be fun. The man's...special."

"That's not going to be a problem." Alex would grant the entire O'Doyle family rule if it meant returning to Lobby code.

"I'm also calling at Adisah's request, to invite you and Rosa to dinner at his house tonight, seven o'clock. Once there, we will outline the many specifics."

Having just finished dinner, Alex thought about jamming his fingers down his throat to make room. Maybe force some out the other end. He'd seize on the opportunity to visit Adisah's pad. Once there, he'd keep things smooth and eat.

Pulling his phone away, he checked the time on the display: 5:07. Plenty of time to build an appetite.

"Sounds great. But to clarify, the Lobby will continue on at the Atrium?"

Tara hesitated, took a deep breath. Alex flushed. "In a manner of speaking, yes." Before he absorbed the vague response, she added, "it's not going to be what you're used to, Alex. That's all I can say right now. Adisah has such great respect for you, he wants to explain things to you personally, over dinner."

Perfect for softening a breakup, Alex thought.

"I understand," he said despondently. "What about the other workers, Rosa, those working at La Berce?"

"We'll talk tonight," Tara said. "Dress nice, be on time, and cheer up. We fought hard, and from where we started, and where things could have gone, you're going to be a happy, happy, man."

"Thanks for calling," he said. "We'll see you at seven."

Knowing the Lobby lived-on alleviated much of his stress.

Rosa sat next to him, lifting his spirits further.

Tara's words echoed. *It's not going to be what you're used to? You're going to be a happy, happy, man.*

Did the change mean less vacationers? Could the military weaponize the Lobby? Maybe convert it to a training simulator. Allow soldiers to train without fear of satellite recognizance.

The Lobby surviving met his most pressing wants, but he didn't know if he could spend his life helping soldiers predict outcomes against a people he didn't accept as villains.

Rosa held his hand, a nonverbal plea to be updated.

"We have a dinner date at Adisah's; tonight at seven."

"Tonight? At Adisah's?"

"Yeah, Tara said to dress nice."

"And you're going back to work?"

He shrugged.

"And me?"

Another shrug.

Rosa checked the time on her watch. “We’ve been invited to the secret lair, huh? Dress nice? A shower is in order.”

Hardly anyone visited Adisah’s home. Alex beamed. He was bound for a dinner date where the discussions would impact his and Rosa’s future. Come to think of it, tonight’s discussion might impact the entire world.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The previous week's stress had sapped Alex and Rosa's mood as effectively as if a psychic vampire haunted the condo, feeding off their comfort. And this, dressing up, going somewhere exclusive, preparing for important news, acted as a life-loofa, scrubbing away the past week's grime.

A BMW 745iL chauffeured the couple to the ground floor entrance of La Berce. Exiting, Alex wiped wrinkles from his collared shirt and microfiber pants; checked the sheen of his loafers. Embracing the privilege of being invited to the reclusive visionary's home overshadowed the fear of tonight's topic: his future.

He met Rosa's eyes over the roof of the car. In a rose-colored silk dress, her beauty stole his breath. She represented the first woman he had ever loved, the first he'd shared a home with. Using all the imaginative prowess that helped him aggregate data into a fantasy reality, he couldn't fathom their separation.

They linked hands behind the trunk and crossed under the tram toward the well-lit entrance of La Berce.

"I've worked in this building for years and only used the ground entrance one other time," she said.

A gust of wind swept her hair in his direction. He stared at the wavering ends, which seemed to be reaching out to him, as if they too shared in the couple's bond and yearned for contact with their life partner.

"I found Mary Aberdeen crying outside her apartment about two months before you arrived," Rosa said. "She learned her father had passed the night before, and for some reason, she planned to attend work that day, but as soon as she hit the hall, grief struck."

They stopped at the entrance. With his hand on the handle, Alex left the door closed, allowing her time to finish.

"I took her to my place. We cried, talked for an hour, and I convinced her to ask for a leave to attend the funeral." Rosa smiled. Her eyes softened, as if she was reliving the sympathy she experienced for her neighbor, perhaps for all of humanity. "Once she left, I called work to tell them I missed the tram. They sent a car for me, and I used this entrance." She smirked as if to say, well, that's my story.

He stayed quiet as he searched her eyes. A million compliments caromed off one another, leaving him biting his lower lip.

She leaned forward and kissed him, "Are you ready?"

La Berce displayed the opulence of a high-end shopping mall. Marble flooring; the pitter of a running fountain; a glass ceiling, three levels up, doubled as the floor on the tram level.

Shopping and dining options abounded on the tram, or “main” level. The bottom three floors offered more pragmatic venues: dry cleaners, dental office, an optometrist, a wide range of doctors, postal services; along with other necessities.

Rosa pointed at a shop on the second floor. “There’s where the orthodontal magic happens.”

Alex had met her there twice over the past year and bumped into her boss in San Francisco 1968.

A bellhop approached the couple. “Welcome, Mr. Cutler, Miss Newberg.” He motioned to a double-door elevator with a lone unmanned desk stationed next to it, “Adisah is expecting you.”

The bellhop inserted a key that opened the doors. Boarding, Alex felt like Charlie stepping into the chocolate factory. He and his programmers equaled the makers of magic, the dreamers of dreams.

Rosa squeezed his hand as the elevator climbed.

Adisah visited his Atrium office perhaps five times annually. Everyone knew he never vacationed inside the Lobby. Most assumed him a workaholic; that he secretly toiled away, designing a grand world. By the downward flick of the eyes when Alex invited him inside the Lobby, he concluded the avoidance stemmed from more personal reasons. Perhaps, like Rosa, the machine’s inventor disliked the enhancement of it all? Alex rooted for an Adisah created world, but feared Adisah knew troubling aspects of the Lobby, or envisioned some portentous evolution on the horizon.

The elevator stopped. They adjusted themselves in the reflection of the doors, shared eye contact. The doors opening uplifted his spirits to supernatural, like witnessing the parting of seas.

Adisah, with his ever pleasant smile, allowed the couple room to debark, then shook hands with Alex, with Rosa.

Alex worried he had underdressed. Adisah wore a designer suit, minus the tie, with the top button of his shirt sealed.

“Welcome,” Tara said with a handshake to Alex and a friendly hug for Rosa. She dressed in normal attire for her—as if in preparation to chair a meeting of the board. With her blond hair fashioned in a bun, he couldn’t imagine her relaxed in sweatpants, her feet on the couch, binge watching the hottest show, shifting her hips to release a blast of methane.

“Welcome to my eccentric home,” Adisah said.

The scope of the condo stunned. Muted lighting showed four floors of open space, designed as if constructed in zero gravity. Timber of all shades covered floor to ceiling, wall to wall. Stairs led to a floating island of a second floor; others to a closed door. Glass encompassed the far wall. Forty feet high, overlooking the airport, centered in Eridu.

He stood in a wacky Grand Central Station remodeled with an Eastern motif and designed by Tim Burton.

Adisah guided them over a six-foot wide stream, teeming with fish, by way of a quaint teak bridge. Alex spotted a workstation in the distance. A chalkboard scribed with code and drawings of odd-looking machinery taped to the wall. Before he built the courage to inquire as to their purpose, the group veered in the opposite direction.

Rice paper partitions demarcated the rooms of the main floor. Aromas and the sizzle of cooking meat passed through the material, scenting the penthouse. Employees carried dishes to a stately mahogany table.

“Looks as if the food is ready,” Adisah motioned to four awaiting places. He nestled into the head; Alex and Rosa to his left; Tara to his right.

The courses arrived in waves. For a while, Alex lost himself in a bonanza of flavors. He forgot about the Lobby, the FBI, all that nonsense. He and Rosa chatted often during the meal, about this or that dish.

Once everyone’s stomach filled to bursting, servants cleared the table with precision. Desserts were intensely begged off. The overhead lighting increased.

Tara accepted a glass of white wine and Rosa tried one of Adisah’s pomegranate-sweetened hot chocolates.

A servant also set two paper cups next to Adisah, with pills inside.

He thanked the man, washed them down, and smiled at Alex. “The food was good, yes?”

“Excellent,” Alex said.

“A treat I’ll remember for the rest of my life,” Rosa said.

With his belly bulging, and smiles around the table, Alex couldn’t help but think the Spaniards, Italians, and French had the right of life. It wasn’t predicated on looks or financial achievements. Flamboyant meals of exceptional taste with family and friends brought true happiness. With that secret life knowledge, no wonder they trailed America in areas it considered important: innovations, entertainment, athletics.

“Tonight is a special night, Alex,” Adisah said. “You must know how dear you’ve become to me. How you’ve pushed this company exceeded our expectations. And having a fan as stubborn as Roy Guillen only bolsters your position.”

“Thank you, but the pleasure has been all mine.” Rosa’s hand gently pulsed his thigh. “Roy is a fiery man.” He chuckled at the thought of Roy defending his worth in some private meeting. “He’s been helping with my golf game, and he’s like a kid on Christmas when we discuss the Battle of Gettysburg world.”

“Yes, yes. I’ve been meaning to join you three, but...” He breathed deeply, smiled half-heartedly.

Alex doubted he’d ever see Adisah in the Lobby. Judging from the man’s contemplative nature, joining Alex, Roy, and Roy’s longtime assistant, Charles Arnold, for a competitive day, would simply bore Adisah, perhaps skew his reasoning.

Running into Roy and Charles outside of the Lobby brought an immediate jolt. The frail man occupying the wheelchair and his hunched over assistant hardly resembled the fit, rambunctious men he intended to join the Confederacy with.

“My point,” Adisah continued, “is that without you or Ms. Capaldi, Broumgard would be a shadow of what we are today. I know the last few days have been difficult and I apologize for the inconveniences.” He breathed in through his nostrils, exhaled, and addressed Tara. “Ms. Capaldi, would you care to bring Alex and his lovely companion up to speed?”

A nod and then Tara clasped her hands in front of her and stiffened her back. “This afternoon concluded our negotiations with the government.”

Underneath the table, Alex grabbed Rosa’s hand. She guided them onto the top.

“The first thing to know is no one is going to jail or being fired, and the Lobby will continue to serve our clients.”

“That’s wonderful,” Alex said with a brief chuckle. His chest decompressed. He smiled at Rosa. She sipped her hot pomegranate cocoa without looking at him, set her mug down, and massaged the back of her head, near the Marker’s location. Noticing Alex’s frustration, she lowered her hand, forced a smile.

“I’m afraid some concessions had to be made,” Tara continued, drawing Alex away from dissecting Rosa’s reaction. Tara’s comment conjured the image of armed Marine guarding the entrance to his building. “Things will never be the same, for any of us.”

Alex glanced at Adisah, who directed Alex’s attention back to Tara.

“For starters, Broumgard will be giving the United States partial credit for inventing the technology that led to the Lobby.”

Alex almost choked. Adisah calmed him with a wave of his hand. The invention had nothing to do with Alex. However, assigning false credit seemed...wrong.

Tara inhaled, indicating a death blow. “As of this coming Friday, Eridu will be closed for the foreseeable future.”

Alex leaned back heavily.

“Close Eridu?” Rosa said.

“How do you close an entire city?” Alex said. “We have hundreds of employees.”

Shaking his head, Alex couldn’t help but think this fit the United States’ *modus operandi*. Take something amazing and beneficial to humankind and bottle it up for themselves.

Adisah rested his elbows on the table and patted Alex’s forearm. “You’ve yet to hear the good news, my friend.” His caring eyes doused Alex’s worry.

He returned his attention to Tara, who added, “The United States of America is going to stamp us with their seal of approval.”

With that statement, a light down some distant tunnel illuminated. Eridu closed? America’s seal of approval? “What does that mean, exactly?”

“It means we have designated plots for the immediate construction of Atriums in Los Angeles, New York, and Dallas; and our eyes on another twelve cities. I plan to initiate talks with Great Britain, Japan, and Australia to create a foreign presence.”

Globalization? Alex grew light at the idea.

“We imagine the price for vacations will drop for the first few years until they become affordable for the average Joe.”

Alex’s adrenaline surged as the implications formed conclusive outcomes: Atriums all over the world.

“With the increase in programming staff,” Tara said, “and your training techniques, we expect, in the near future, to add worlds every few weeks, not months. With enough programmers, we could insert different worlds into the Lobby every day.”

Alex heard her with the second part of his mind. The first rolled around the prospect of an army of software engineers. They could produce limitless worlds, of unimagined scope, with intense details.

“In essence, Alex. Broumgard is accepting applications. So, if you have anyone in mind, let us know. We will reopen the access room tomorrow and allow *all* employees at Eridu, along with various government personnel, to experience the Lobby.”

Alex thought about Sean back at Vision Tech. He wasn't sure the Lobby qualified as a Noah's Ark, but he looked forward to offering his old pal a position.

Rosa spoke, "So, all of the employees will get these implants in their heads?"

Alex frowned at the ill-timed remark. A million possibilities pinged around his mind. To Adisah, he said, "I don't know what to say, I mean, what's this going to do to the world?"

An eerie silence saturated the air.

A tink sounded as Rosa tapped her glass with the inside of a ring.

One of the staff members cleared his throat.

"It's going to change it," Tara exclaimed.

Another stretch of silence as each individual considered the magnitude of where they sat: at the epicenter of a seismic shift.

"I do have one more surprise," Adisah motioned to one of his assistants, who darted off.

Tara favored Adisah with a confounded look. She mouthed, "What surprise?"

The staff member returned and placed a half-inch stack of papers in front of Tara and another in front of Alex.

Alex leafed through the legal documents and contracts.

Rosa leaned over to get a better view.

It read like hieroglyphics to him. Tara turned the pages at a steady clip, giving each a cursory scan before moving to the next. "What is this, Adisah?" she said while keeping her eyes on the packet.

"Those are legal documents, my dear." A pause for effect. "Those particular documents make yourself and Mr. Alex Cutler equal partners with Mr. Roy Guillen and I." He scooted back, and, with the aid of a staff member, rose. "If you'll excuse me, my medication starts to take effect quite rapidly."

"Why?" Tara blurted, stopping the man. She gripped the packet in both of her hands as if it contained scandalous blackmail. "Why would you do this for us? We stand to earn tens of billions or *your* dollars."

Adisah shuffled over and placed a hand on her shoulder. "You are the future of this company, its very essence. Roy avoids the public, and I like it even less. Going forward, we expect both of you to be Broumgard's face."

Tara continued to shake her head.

"You know what I believe, dear. Every step a person takes places them on their own path, and each path leads humanity to a brighter future." He tapped near the bottom on Tara's paper. "Initial at the X's, sign where it's circled. Congratulations, but don't think this is a ticket to easy street. Much work lies before you." He gave Tara's shoulder a parting squeeze and trudged off.

Alex should have been on cloud nine, and buoyancy existed, but trepidation anchored him. He didn't want to be the face of a company, especially of a product that could reshape civilization. But how could he turn down a key to heaven? Or a gift from its creator?

"What do you think?" Alex asked Rosa.

"It's a big decision," Rosa said. "You might want to take some time, think on it."

Tara lifted her pen and started signing.

Reservation etched Rosa's features. To avoid their influence, he said, "I can't say no to this. Unless you hate the idea?"

"I'll support whatever you decide. However, you know what happened to the man who got everything he ever wanted." She then reached for her hot chocolate and drank.

Alex pondered a moment, *The man who got everything he wanted lived happily ever after, didn't he?*

GLOBALIZATION

CHAPTER TWELVE

The majority of Rosa's commute along Pacific Coast Highway One, from Los Angeles to her and Alex's beach house in Malibu, hugged the Coast. The blower inside her Land Rover forced cold air out at a gale, prickling goose-bumps along her arms, adding to the chill of driving alone. Turning off the air-conditioner, she lowered the driver's side window. Her black hair whipped in all directions before a steady stream of balmy California summer air funneled it back. She freed strands of dark hair from the joint of her sunglasses and leaned into the sun.

Close proximity to the cliff's edge made her feel like she glided on air. The rhythmic crash of the surf below and the odorous sea embraced her in a euphoria. Her smile praised the glory of God and of all the things He provided His children.

The past six years exposed her to the good life. She embraced the blessings. Her current purse, watch and sandals came from designers. However, humble roots nourished her personality more than the reach of her bank account. She continued to wear jade, topaz, and onyx. The idea of spending six, seven, or eight figures on a piece of jewelry bedecked with diamonds still bulged her eyes. Yet the world expected a certain decorum from the wife of Alex Cutler.

Especially when said wife occasionally hosted fundraisers attended by A-listers, politicians, and the affluent. These events unearthed her innate talent for smiles, coos, and the casual banter that opened checkbooks for noble causes.

Her goals extended beyond raising money. She aimed to instill a specific morality in her new peers. New money or not, she wed the infamous Alex Cutler. Her efforts sparked a benevolence race with pretentious wives and eager entrepreneurs that benefited thousands.

Slowing to turn into the driveway broke the controlled flow of her hair. Strands flicked into her slightly open mouth. The driveway sloped drastically down. The placement of their beautiful, stilted beach home kept it hidden from the roadway, but produced a marvel of architecture when viewed from the sea.

Seeing her mother's and sister's vehicles added happiness to the wonderful day. Aggregated with Alex's refusal to join her made it bittersweet. She knew with all her soul he needed to spend more time with her; at the beach house; in the real world in general.

His increased time in the Lobby came as a byproduct of Roy Guillen's diminishing health. For that reason, she never pressed the issue. Having a husband who spent the majority of his free time immersed in a supped-up video game hindered her ambition of starting a family.

On more nights than she cared to admit, she stalked past a room inside her own that housed what amounted to a living corpse.

Shortly after globalization, vacations in the Lobby offered two-week visitations. Alex once vowed to never utilize the full length. Shifting the SUV into park, she wondered if he remembered that? In the last year, it seemed to be the only length, he, Charles, and Roy every selected.

Roy would inhabit Heaven soon enough. As always, anticipation invaded her mind. Being eager for someone's death, for her own selfish reasons, always led her to prayer. She muttered a request for forgiveness, killed the engine, and glanced at her four overflowing beach bags in the back seat. Thankfully, she wouldn't have to haul them into the house herself—wealth had its advantages.

Gathering her purse, she climbed out and stopped.

Her breath hitched.

The bright sun dimmed behind a cloud.

Glen Daniels exited the multi-million dollar cottage with his head down. Alex hired Glen a year ago. Average height, wiry, a minor bout of acne, and the only person whose presence made her queasy.

Why would he be here? On this weekend?

Alex knew her opinion of the sullen teen.

Trudging past her without a word of greeting, he opened the rear door of the Land Rover.

Glen's father committed suicide a few months before his hire. Being that the man worked under Alex—meaning they exchanged words a few times a year—Alex somehow blamed himself for the self-inflicted affront to life, and hired Glen at an exorbitant salary.

She empathized with the young man. Particularly at the beginning when she'd attempted to counsel and guide and encourage. He replied to every attempt with dull eyes and single word, monotone replies. She believed the young man carried inner demons. She also felt asking Alex to keep him away, so she could be comfortable in her own house, marked a reasonable request.

Her sister's boisterous laugh poured from an open window, thawing some of her anxiety.

"Glen," she said. Her voice cracked, so she cleared her throat.

Pausing his maneuvering of the luggage, he poked his head around the side of the vehicle.

"Did Alex ask you to come out here?"

"Victor."

Speaking of uncomfortable things living in her house, she thought.

"Well, I appreciate your help, but when you're finished with the luggage, you can head back. We'll be fine." She forced a smile as genuine as a blue rose. "It's too nice out for someone your age to be cooped up with a bunch of old folks."

"You want me to trim the hedges first?" he asked as he pointed to a row of *Euonymus alatus*, better known as burning bush. "It was on Victor's to-do list." Examining the bushes, she frowned. The one to two inch branch spikes detracted from the uniformity. "Yeah. That will be fine, I suppose."

He ducked behind the SUV and tugged out a bag.

Her sister's laughter mixed with that of her brother-in-law and mother.

Rosa took a deep breath, forced a smile, and headed in.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The encompassing white around Alex filled him with appreciation.

Clients arrived in the Lobby with psyche-altered version of themselves. Few appeared older than thirty, showed obesity, scars or baldness. Five eleven seemed a uniformed height for men; five seven for women. All of those generalities boasted exceptions. Also, people retained their base characteristics: face, eyes and hair color.

This feature turned the lobby section of the Lobby into a conglomeration of humans in their prime. With hundreds of healthy people stretching for miles in all directions, locating Roy by walking could take hours, draw unwanted attention. Luckily, Alex entered a fair distance from anyone else.

Before he voiced the locate command, a window appeared in front of him. He sighed heavily. "D. Johnson requests override."

Broumgard employees policed the white section. All employees possessed limited controls over clients, like with Tara over Mr. Robertson. If a client disputed their punishment (all did), the grievance went to a superior, if one entered the Lobby.

Alex's position as head of the company granted him override authority over all employees. He back-doored additional code to ensure his supremacy reigned indefinitely.

Alex pressed the icon to read the complaint. D. Johnson received a one-hour immobility ticket for shouting obscenities. A small window showed D. Johnson, a "young man" standing in the white. Two pals, who seemed to have vowed to wait, sat in chairs, playing chess. Forty-two minutes remained.

Subordinates considered an override of their ruling disrespectful. Alex pushed it anyhow. He hated the concept of Broumgard policing customers.

Grinning, Alex pictured the man realizing he'd been freed; all three of them celebrating before calling forth their intended destination. "Client item list. Chicago Cubs baseball hat, Ray Ban Aviators." In a blink, a blue Cubs cap and a pair of Ray Bans adorned his face, helping him travel incognito. "Client locator, Roy Guillen." A moment lapsed while he waited for Roy to approve the revealing of his whereabouts. After a brief pause, a square door with a still likeness of his friend on its front materialized.

Alex stepped through the teleporter.

"There you are," a young, fit Roy said as closed a novel and rose from an obnoxiously bright orange chair. He wore the same outfit every time he accessed the white of the Lobby: red-checkered shorts, sandals, and a hemp t-shirt.

Roy blamed the attire on the years he'd spent in San Francisco 1968.

Alex chalked it up to poor fashion sense.

People speckled this area, raising Alex's temperature. Unlike Alex, Roy moved about freely. His face wasn't splattered all over the television in conjunction with the Lobby.

"Charles intends to rendezvous with us tomorrow at five," Roy said.

Alex swallowed. He had hoped for more time to prepare a line. Lacking the accommodation, he steeled himself and said, "I hate to do this to you, but I'm set to log-out later tonight." Roy frowned, tilted his head to the side, "I hope it's nothing serious."

Was being a better husband serious? Alex wondered "It's nothing specific. No one's sick or hurt."

"That's all that matters. Charles will appreciate your absence. I had hoped to parlay your support, pressure him to accompany us to the launch of that new alien world."

Crap! Alex slapped his forehead. He had been following Cosmic Conflict's progress for the past eighteen months. A collaboration project between the London and Madrid Atriums. Coincidentally, the two locations headed by his old co-workers, Jason Johnson from Eridu, and Sean Flaska from Vision Tech.

Four times more traversable area than the Milky Way. Two hundred fourteen alien species— sixteen playable races. Warp speed. Atomizer guns. Planetary invasions on the regular. Total galactic anarchy. And he forgot about its launch.

Briefly, nanosecond brief, he considered going back on his earlier decision. In the end, he lacked the cruelty needed to veto.

"It's just, I want to surprise Rosa," Alex said. "Her family is visiting our place in Malibu and I need to at least make an appearance."

"Say no more."

Reaching its time limit, the chair behind Roy popped out of existence. Behind it, Alex noticed a couple ogling in his direction.

"Still up for rock climbing?" Roy asked as he followed Alex's gaze over his shoulder.

"Yeah, that sounds good. Maybe something less challenging this time?"

He overheard the female of the couple say, "That's definitely him," confirming he'd been recognized.

"World select, Rock Climbing," Alex said.

A portal with a panoramic view of Devil's Tower, the rock formation made famous in Steven Spielberg's, *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* appeared six feet to their right, in the direction of the curious couple.

Alex hurried to enter.

With nothing more than a slight tug against his person, he stepped into another lobby of sorts, the modifier room—standard for most worlds created after the global launch. This one resembled an underground aquarium: blackness engulfed the perimeter, pebbles littered the floor. Instead of an environment for aquatic life, a section of full-length screens with images of various rock climbing destinations waited.

Roy materialized next to him.

Both men stayed on edge. When entering a world from the lobby, a multi-player portal remained open for twenty seconds after each person entered. Unless password protected, anyone could follow them in.

Though not a big deal, both men preferred to avoid being stalked by Alex's admirers.

The moment passed and they relaxed. Typically when someone noticed Alex in a world, they were so concerned with their vacation, they never shared more than a greeting or passing compliment. In the lobby section, they often bogged him down with suggestion requests, or in-depth information about Lobby-related things he had never considered.

Roy approached the screens, selected intermediate, and the six windows swapped to a set of new options. He shuffled through them by swiping his hand right to left, briefly examining each, until he paused. "How does this suit you?" He pointed to an image with a gray wall of stone towering over an evergreen forest split by a lone road.

Alex agreed, anything would do. Given a lifetime, no one could experience a thousandth of the options offered inside the Lobby.

Roy double-tapped the screen and the image expanded over the others: Poke-O-Moonshine. Here, Roy perused gear, pain threshold, and reality modifications such as "Feather Fall," for those who would rather drift to the ground should they slip.

Judging from the scenery, it looked to be in the Western United States. An area Alex should know, as he lived there, but he didn't get around much outside the Lobby.

Roy selected Feather Fall, normal climber attributes, and for an instructor to be present.

Selecting those cheats six months ago, even if both men internally desired them, would have earned Roy a bit of razzing, but that time coincided with Roy's first brush with mortality in the real world.

Alex hated recalling that phone call. During one of his post-Lobby naps, Roy experienced a seizure, and dangerous heart palpitations.

The vibrant, healthy Roy in front of him clicked "Accept" on the Poke-O-Moonshine image, making it appear translucent.

"Ready?" Alex asked as he stepped forward. "Allow me a brief word," Roy said and straightened his posture, "I'm sure you're aware, but I want to voice it anyhow. I'd love to visit with you and Rosa at the beach house."

Before Alex replied, Roy continued.

"I have a family of my own, as you know. The majority are Succubi, but there are exceptions. I often wish I could see them more. It's just...best case scenario, I have five, six years left, and damned if I'm not trying to spend them all free from fear and discomfort."

Alex understood. He found Roy's attempts at circumventing the bi-weekly, forty-eight hour required break from the lobby humorous. Alex understood both his friend's need to feel healthy and alive, and Broumgard's obligation to force people to live in the real world, at least partially.

Roy's constant submersion in the Lobby produced many debates in the Cutler home. Rosa insisted that as a friend, Alex should convince him to spend more time enjoying God's reality.

Alex would agree and let it drop, knowing her words were meant for him.

During his rare moments of introspection, he concluded he also used the Lobby as a way to avoid thoughts of mortality. The Lobby granted him surcease from his bouts of

pareidolia—a disorder where a person saw the faces of deceased loved ones in a crowd or heard their voices in nearby conversations.

His deceased brother, Simon, had been tailing him for over a decade. Simon walked past aisles in grocery stores; called him from other rooms; stalked his dreams.

Roy clamped a strong, youthful hand onto his shoulder. "I just want you to know how important you are to me. You and Charles are the greatest friends a man could hope for. And without this," he surveyed their surroundings, kicked a few pebbles, "our age gap would have kept us apart."

Alex often considered that. Unlike Roy, who had known Charles for a lifetime, the two men tallied his BFF list. He managed an uncomfortable, "Thank God for the Lobby, right?"

"You thank God?" Roy said with a raised eyebrow. "I thank Adisah Boomul, Brad Finder, and Alex Cutler. We'd still be on that mountain top if you hadn't debugged the system. Don't forget that." Releasing his grip, he nodded, and vaporized through the screen.

Alex toyed with the pebbles at his feet, sniffed the strong mountain air of the modifier room. He considered the Lobby a flawless existence; an ever-expanding paradise. Convincing the second half of the planet to that effect remained a top concern.

Remembering that goal always motivated him. Right then, he decided to allocate another fifty million dollars to those efforts. They needed it. Lobby opposition compounded by the minute, and the man at its center, Agent Andrews, was...special.

Forget him. Alex thought. He inhaled through his nostrils, and entered Poke-O-Moonshine for a day of perfected living.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Prior to remodeling, Special Agent Andrews Googled the average office size for executives in New York City: eighteen point two by twenty point four feet, and added one cubic foot to his schematics. He snuffed out distractions by installing sound-proofing to the wall; and a heavy oak door that closed with such proficiency he sometimes forgot dozens of his subordinate Federal employees worked on its opposite side.

Since the Lobby embodied the antithesis of God's will, Andrews signed on as head of the Lobby Oversight Committee to fight evil. He had pictured himself drowned with innumerable cases of psychological horrors brought on by the device. He fought for additional agents in preparation of the physical detriments caused by metallic arms corrupting tissue to lead men astray.

On those points, he'd overestimated.

The majority of his hours passed unceremoniously, which made his decision to have a secluded office a good one; it helped obscure the inner sanctuary's minimal workload.

He preferred his people picturing him swamped twelve hours a day, instead of daydreaming of the big break that would destroy Broumgard while playing computer games.

Booting a game of Freecell, he reflected on being the only LOC applicant who had boots on the ground in Eridu. He had landed the job without any real competition.

His family name might have propelled him into the FBI, but his cunning and dedication granted his many advancements. Sabotage played a role. A pinch of blackmail created an important vacancy. If you didn't want your wife and friends to know you liked viewing group sex pornography (focused on a half-dozen old men tagging the same young chick) for six hours every day of your life, you shouldn't visit the same sites from your office and home IP addresses, especially with a computer maven like Andrews sat in judgment.

The Lobby represented the most engaging paradigm shift since the internet, probably since the wheel, or fire. Agent Andrews coveted the prestige of having authority over it. He, of course, would never visit that electronic temptress. Oliver Wendell Holmes said, "Once a person's mind is expanded with an idea or concept, it can never be satisfied going back to where it was." Only the Devil employed tactics with that depth of deception, meant to foster man's ego, remove the tenant of worship.

Shaking his head as he uncovered an Ace of Diamonds, moving it to the top, he marveled at how the masses missed the big conspiracy. Everything currently given media favor went in direct opposition to the teaching of our Lord. How could that be possible if not by design? Pharmacology based its model on polluting our temples. Claiming LGBTs were people capable of decency allotted a free pardon of their continuing sins. Websites, advertised in every medium, said: having marital problems? use our services to commit adultery, divorce; some even shared tips for killing a spouse. Media was today's apple, offering everyone a bite.

Few beyond Andrews noticed that normalizing sin corroded American exceptionalism.

Seeing through the scam helped him abstain from all degeneracies. Even the true gateway drug: coffee. Spending thirty seconds reflecting on God's awesomeness supercharged Andrews for the day just fine. God existed. He rewarded the vigilant.

Agent Andrews considered his life an honor, himself a soldier, his sacrifices dubbed him a partial martyr. He could have headed an Atrium and made the big dollars, received the faux adoration of the public. He could have chosen to wear the brain shackle like so many. Instead, he decided to study the Word, serve God; to be a silent hero defending man from atop the lone agency responsible for policing the most villainous device ever conceived.

Alex Cutler's official title had him heading the Los Angeles Atrium, so Andrews established the LOC's international headquarters in L.A., near the beast.

Clearly, the Lobby eroded society. A portion of the public commuted from home to work and nothing more until they saved enough to escape. Who wanted to meet someone in real life, were you might have a zit, be bloated, or feel younger than you look.

Countless small nations lost their tourism. Who wanted to visit Jamaica when you could hop in the Lobby for a comparable price and be in Negril in minutes, guaranteed a vacation free of potential accidents, temperamental weather, or street beggars.

Why visit California in hopes of spotting a celebrity when, with the memory suppressing options, you could become a star for two weeks—attending exclusive events, shooting your latest action film, or seeing the country during your promotional tour—all without remembering that in the real world you were a no-talent car salesman from Vermont.

Fools all over the globe entered the Lobby and became variations of importance: biochemists who diagnosed a pandemic before it destroyed the population; drillers detonating a nuke on an incoming asteroid; Marines repelling hordes of alien invaders.

Gone were the days where one wanted to hit a million views on Youtube. Now they wanted to save the day, get the girl, or boy, or whatever and bask in the adoration of billions. When their vacations finished, they popped back into the real world and relished an ego-stroking powerful enough to warp a person's sense of self-worth.

Andrews knew, emphatically, he was witnessing the deconstruction of civilization.

He moved the King of Clubs to the recently opened slot on the screen.

Regular people thinking they deserved to be singled out for praise; idiots believing they were brilliant; it made him sick. People had to know their roles. Life was about giving thanks, not self-gratification.

According to scripture, and decades of empirical evidence, humanity flourished through servitude.

Despite this knowledge, a healthy budget, and a team of specialists, he had yet to conclusively identify any physiological or psychological health infringements imposed by entering the Lobby.

An ugly head would emerge, but when? With faith, he focused his resources into collecting data for that fateful day. Being the defender of mankind, the voice of the one true world, he would need facts when the final battle—played out in the court of public opinion—unfolded.

Everyone knew the LOC opposed the Lobby, yet each week hundreds of letters and emails arrived, praising its existence. Average people might not appreciate that he watched over them, but their children would.

He placed the Jack of Spades on the Queen of Hearts, freeing up the eight of clubs and winning him another game. Closing the program, he wondered if anyone else on the planet had a win percentage of eighty-six at Freecell.

A lone file rested on his desk. As a way of keeping his hand on the noose they weaved, he personally filed reports every few days. In this incident, a seventeen year-old male from Tokyo reported severe migraines ever since visiting the Lobby.

Each year brought hundreds of these migraines. Hundreds of cases for a litany of ailments: dementia, dizzy spells, insomnia, narcolepsy, paranoia...the list read like an encyclopedia of mental derangements.

The politicians didn't see the correlation when held up against tens of millions of vacations. Maybe because opposing the Lobby equaled political suicide. That didn't mean Andrews toiled alone. Some of the most powerful organizations on the planet supported him. The heads of the CIA, FBI, Homeland Security, and the NSA, all found the notion of an unmonitorable medium synonymous with Armageddon. He knew they silently worked as hard as himself.

Did that mean they played dozens of FreeCell games a day?

If so, would even one come close to a eighty-six percentage?

Doubtful.

When the day of exposure arrived, they would be his right hand, or he theirs—it mattered not.

For now, he bid his time. Patience wasn't his best virtue, but he had more than almost anyone else. He knew implicitly that the Lobby, and specifically, the phony golden boy Alex Cutler, embodied evil.

He just needed one domino to fall, bring the entire creation down.

Leaning back in his chair, he opened another round of FreeCell. With seventeen more wins in a row, his win percentage would bump to eighty-seven—an impressive feat in itself.

Until the time came, he'd sit behind his solid oak door, file his reports, and fantasize about pulling the plug on the Lobby, wiping that smug smile off of party-boy Alex Cutler's pretty face.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The Pacific Ocean lacked authenticity to Alex. Standing waist deep, facing out to sea, he thought the breaking waves sounded a little dulled, too many random objects—shells, seaweeds, disturbed sand—marked the bed. The smell of salt overpowered the air, as well. Wearing only shorts, holding the cord to a boogie board, Alex wanted to turn down the scent, remove the tug of current around his legs.

“One more time,” Steve, Rosa’s brother-in-law, said as he waded past Alex, dragging his own boogie board.

Was this the real world?

Alex turned to shore. The cottage proved he inhabited God’s reality. Rosa chased her three-year-old nephew. Two other children and six adults—Rosa’s family—populated the private beach.

Alex’s lungs burned from fatigue; his shoulders from the sun.

Steve reached a depth, hopped atop his board and kicked.

Alex wanted to do one more. He enjoyed boogie boarding enough to repeat the act all day, but his legs quaked with each step.

When he reached the deep end and placed his weight atop his board, his level of weariness instructed him to turn back, or just sleep.

Steve rode a wave past him, yelling his enthusiasm. That, and the smile on his face propelled Alex to continue.

Today’s waves crested at six to eight feet. The sky cloudless. The temperature a balmy eighty-two degrees—the same setting Alex would have chosen in the Lobby.

Reaching a launching point, he bobbed on the sea for ten minutes, resting. Paddling to catch a desired wave with arms like limp noodles amplified his fear he’d paddled out one too many times.

When the wave broke, he rode it north. Body boarding required relatively low energy, low impact (a reason the forty pound overweight Steve competed against him) but halfway to shore, Alex succumbed to his exhaustion, and biffed.

Three tumbles under the wave separated him from his floatation device, and disoriented. The water couldn’t be more than twelve feet deep, but he found no footing, felt miles from air. A few random flails stoked panic.

Remembering a surfing instructor from inside the Lobby’s technique, he expelled air. Bubbles rose toward safety. He followed them up.

Alex broke the surface with nothing left in the tank. His feeble yell for help carried inches. He’d already drifted a fair ways to the north, a bit further from shore.

Rolling to his back, he filled his lungs to help buoyancy, intending to kick toward shore. Movement reminded him of the board velcroed to his ankle.

He exhaled in relief, winced in frustration at the generous effort needed to reel in his safety net.

Using the board, and every drop of available energy, he kicked until his toes banged sand, in three feet of water.

Reaching shore, he lay in range of lapping waves for ten minutes before he heard approaching footsteps.

“Takin’ a little breather, are ya?” Steve was Italian and so hairy curls outlined his looming shadow. “Thought a shark might have got cha.”

Too tired to speak, Alex only shook his head. *Not a shark, but death by drowning had been a real possibility.*

Steve dragged Alex out of the water, plopped him on the sand, face down.

Alex rolled to his back.

“You gonna be okay?” Steve asked.

The shame of being dragged motivated Alex to rise, speak, walk on his own.

Instead, he laid there, nodded.

“Gonna hit another wave. I’ll scoop you up after you’ve caught your breath.”

Steve went out an additional two times before Alex enough of his strength returned for him to head back. In his excruciating kick to shore, he had traveled a hundred and fifty yards from their property.

Alex saw Rosa with her nephew and two other children. They had dug a trench six feet up the beach and worked on erecting a castle.

Alex trudged to the picnic table and sat. One glass of lemonade, a sandwich, and a dozen shrimp replenished him enough to think.

“You need to get some more block on that pasty skin.” Steve said to Alex.

Agreeing, Alex layered sun block on his shoulders and nose. Applying the white cream to his arms contrasted his lack of color. Had I ever been this pale growing up?

“You seem to be having fun,” Rosa said, stepping behind Alex to apply sunscreen to his back.

Excluding the near drowning, he had been enjoying himself. He addressed the eyes on him. “Family, friends, and a beautiful setting. What’s not to love.”

He felt Rosa’s smile.

“I could recreate this in the Lobby,” Alex said. “Lose the few negatives, turn down the breeze-”

Rosa pinched his side, stopping him. “You’re always joking.”

Checking the faces around the table and seeing confusion, surprise, and downward glances, Alex said, “Not for us. We have the real thing, but I’m sure people who can’t afford Malibu property would enjoy this setting.”

“You’re a madman, Alex,” Steve said. His baritone voice jiggled with mild laughter. “Name it, living like the Cutlers, and you’ll have a hit.”

Alex grinned.

“Aunt Rosa,” Anthony, Rosa’s (and apparently his?) nephew patted her leg. “Will you come help. The wall’s falling down.”

“Sure will, buddy.” Rosa followed the running child.

“You guys looking to have a kid?” Steve asked.

“They’re such a blessing,” Rosa’s sister added.

Watching the young boy run, care-free and full of enthusiasm, tugged at Alex’s heart. He wasn’t sure scheduling a child fit with his personality. “I’m not opposed to the idea.”

Rosa’s sister perked up, “That’s so nice to hear. Rosa will make a great mother.” Alex agreed.

They ate dinner outdoors, near the cottage.

The evening passed with a game of trivial pursuit, Entertainment Edition. Alex nailed many of the Lobby related questions. He and Rosa still came in third out of three teams.

He retired to his bed as the others gathered around the campfire. Sore, Alex listened to the murmur of voices and occasional laughter with mixed feelings. He felt closer to everyone there, more connected with everyday life, but he had brushed against death. By his aches, pain waited for him on the morrow, and he couldn’t help but think back on everyone’s reaction when he mentioned doing this inside the Lobby. Was it really such a wild idea? or was the whole world ass backwards?.

* * * *

Alex enjoyed driving along the eight lanes of I-605 in Los Angeles. The limousine tint allowed him to mingle among the people, look into faces, hear their voices at a stoplight, all without harassment.

“How are you feeling?” Rosa asked from the driver’s seat.

“My muscles ache,” he blushed. Four trips to a wave and back fell short of great exertion. “The funny thing is my stomach muscles hurt the most.”

“Gotta work on that core, hun. There’s a list of fun exercises we can do to help you there.”

“Yeah...” Alex needed to work on his fitness, but he couldn’t join Rosa. She employed a six day a week routine that left her covered in sweat.

Inhaling deeply, as if sensing his deflection, Rosa said, “Are you telling me being a little sore wasn’t worth that weekend?”

“No, it was. I am smiling thinking of how nice it was to be around you every minute for three whole days.”

“Everyone commented on how relaxed you seemed.”

“It was a nice weekend. What do you think about keeping it going, by joining me in the Lobby?”

“The Lobby?” The car swerved a tick as she exited the highway.

“Well, yeah. It could be as much fun and I’ve had this vacation with Roy planned.”

“Thirty minutes after a great time and you’re daydreaming of going in that machine.”

“I’m not daydreaming. It’s just on my schedule.”

“Oh...don’t,” Rosa stopped her thought by clenching her jaw. “I’m married to an addict.”

Alex huffed. The idea lacked the merit to comment.

“A junkie,” Rosa said with more frustration.

Mentioning the Lobby, at that moment, had been dumb. It seemed every time they had something good, he found a way to mess it up. A stretch of the drive passed in silence. Alex said, “You know I love you.”

She peeked at him and then back to the road.

“And I had such an amazing time with you and your family. I honestly can’t wait until we do it again.”

She kept her eyes ahead of her, but slowed their speed through the posh, well-shaded Bel Air neighborhood.

“It’s just, I made these plans with Roy when I left last week and if I don’t show, he’ll sit there all confused and worried.”

“Oh, don’t give me that baloney. Roy’s a big boy. He’d be just fine without you.”

True, but how do you speak the truth—that the idea of escaping his pain and unease thrilled him—when it could stop her heart?

“I just want a husband who’s present. Do you know what it’s like to walk past that room and picture you in there devoid of life, night after night?”

His face grew warm. He wiped his moist palms on his pants. “I hate myself for being gone so much. I do. And here’s my promise: If you let me visit him without any guilt this one time, I’ll give the Lobby a ninety day break.” His stomach clenched. *Why did I say that?*

Rosa stopped short of the guard shack outside their extensive driveway, faced him. “You’ll do that? Three months without going inside? Maybe visit one of those counselors who specialize in the powers of Lobby addiction?”

Doing the math, and being that three months covered July and August, her amendment extended his original pledge of ninety days, to ninety-two days—an underhanded maneuver. He decided to leave it alone. “I not only swear it, I think it’ll be great. I hate upsetting you this much. Sometimes...I feel worthless. Learning my health needs attention.” He shrugged, knowing his pale, emaciated look acted as a stampeding elephant in their lives. “Maybe if I clear my mind, I’ll be able to handle future Lobby breaks with more control.”

“If you’re serious, I agree to your terms, but I don’t want a battle, Alex. When you’re out, we get you some help.”

“I’m serious, babe. No fights, no nothing. You deserve this. You’re worth any sacrifice I can think of, and this break will prove it.” It sounded good. He meant the words, but what would he do for ninety-two days?

Thinking deeper, he wondered how him suffering for months represented a sign of affection? Perhaps, like an addict of opiates, once he escaped the fog of the high, clarity would follow, and he’d gain a new appreciation for each breath taken free of control. He somehow doubted it.

Rose leaned over and kissed his cheek. “Well, I hope you have a great time with your artificially recreated friend.” She then pulled past the gate house and drove up the five hundred foot horseshoe-shaped drive. “I’ll make you a turkey and cheese croissant. Extra cheese, heavy mayo. Maybe throw on those pink shorts you love, help you relax before you go in?”

He picked up on her double-entendre, and loved the way the fabric of those shorts slipped in between her fit backside, but the time on the dash told him he only had twenty-two minutes until Roy expected him. He’d planned on leaving the cottage hours earlier.

Rosa followed his gaze. Her shoulders sagged as she presumably read his thoughts. “Let me at least run in and get the sandwich ready. You need to eat something solid.”

The nurses who attended him during his trip might disagree, but he reached over and rubbed her arm. “I love you.”

She parked in front of the main doors, kissed him, and hurried in.

Stepping out of the SUV, he marveled at the home before him. He tried his best to shun the fame and limelight that came with being the face of the Broumgard Group, but if anonymity had been his true objective, he did himself a disservice when fabricating their Bel Air Estate.

The Cutler home had become the most known residence in the modern world. The media dubbed it, “Legion,” for its many faces. Needless to say, Rosa barred the moniker from their vocabulary. Like now, the name always made him grin.

Shortly after he signed on to be a partner of Broumgard, it became apparent money would never be a concern. Legion followed that reality. He purchased three lots in the exclusive Beverly Glen section of Bel Air where the land carried more value than the opulent estates built atop them. After leveling the mansions, pools, sheds—everything—construction began.

Roy had financed a twenty-eight-thousand square foot guest home where he and Charles lived. Rustic in design, their home easily impressed, but it paled when juxtaposed against the main attraction.

Twenty-four thousand square feet comprised Legion. Conservative when compared to the sixty-six-thousand square foot dwelling belonging to Bill Gates; and that square footage equaled a wing in many Middle Eastern palaces.

The private access chairs, located within their master suite represented his most treasured amenity. Only Adisah, who converted Eridu into his own private residence, could also boast of having private access terminals. A moot concept seeing as how Adisah continued to avoid the Lobby.

As expected for the man many believed designed and created the Lobby single-handedly, Alex-Cutler-designed software caused Legion to grace the cover of over four hundred magazines, and millions of webpages, worldwide. The inside, outside, top, and bottom were constructed of eighteen-inch-thick OLED Gorilla Glass, modified to display a crisp viewing surface. Every section of the home conformed, visually, to exquisite detail.

The first day he unveiled it to Rosa, he projected the property behind the house onto the front, essentially making the long awaited abode, and its interior, invisible. Then, as she stood perplexed, a stone castle from sixteenth century France materialized, causing Rosa to shed tears of amazement. Unlike the Lobby, she embraced this technology.

Alex spotted men in sport coats roaming the property. Though he hated needing them, Legion’s security emanated from the same ranks as the secret service. The head of his team, Patrick Dean, grew into a trusted confidant, a source of immeasurable knowledge, and a man able to solve any problem.

The snapping sound of the Land Rover’s hatch paused his rumination. He turned to find Glen retrieving the luggage. “Hey, man, how’s it going?” He asked loud enough to be heard.

Glen lifted two bags simultaneously. Without acknowledging he'd heard Alex, he trudged toward the house.

Alex didn't understand Rosa's issue with the kid. Yeah, he stayed quiet and to himself—same as Alex at that age. He also empathized with Glen. They'd both learned of death and loss at too young of an age.

"How do you like the door?" he asked as Glen approached.

Rosa enjoyed transforming Legion so much, she only allowed Alex to mold the double-doors. Today, they displayed a montage of surfers riding the break near their Malibu property.

"I like them," Glen said in passing.

Alex smiled at the kid's economy of words.

The main doors opened at Glen's approach.

Remembering Rosa wanted him to eat before he logged in, he hurried inside, headed toward the kitchen. As he thought about his vow to Rosa, his stomach knotted and his feet transmuted to lead. Roy counted on Alex's company. With Charles, they were the three amigos.

Alex ground his teeth. Rosa's feelings had to be as important to him as Roy's. After this one vacation, he'd prove it to her, and himself.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The invigoration of driving a NASCAR sanctioned race car astounded Alex. Traveling at top speeds of two hundred and twelve miles per hour overflowed his adrenaline cup. Starting his first engine created a lifelong speed-seeker.

After completing an entire circuit, Roy and Alex decided to experiment with a new style of racing (mainly because Charles dominated them).

Even with simulated racers set to intermediate, Alex or Roy finishing within ten laps of the leader constituted a win. Whereas Charles had multiple top ten finishes. To combat Charles' natural propensity to NASCAR, he and Roy had been sneaking off to practice driving Formula One cars.

Today, Alex and Roy selected the Giro d'Italia track. A course imagined and designed by Broumgard employees stationed in Sicily. Standing beside his vehicle, Alex angled his face toward the blazing, mid-afternoon sun. Gusty winds and cool temperatures completed the effects of an ideal day.

Alex wore a white fireproof jumpsuit with a red stripe flaring each side. Sponsor decals speckled his front and back. Twenty-five Formula One cars rested in race positions on a two-lane road in a village near Milan, Italy.

Quaint A-framed homes with paned windows and no screens, painted in lime, rose, and lemon colors, lined either side. A population of men and women greater than the homes allowed gathered on lawns, clapping and shouting cheers in Italian.

Roy waved to a gathered crowd and then climbed into his cherry-red, A-26 Turbo, outfitted with a Ferrari engine in its rear fuselage.

Alex shimmied on his helmet, squeezed into his model L-7 Lambourghini-powered machine. Gripping the hard steering wheel, he rocked it left and right. That minor leeway percolated his blood vessels until they danced.

A flagman stepped into the road at the head of the occupied Formula Ones.

Again, Alex sought out Roy. This time, he found his friend waiting for his glance. They shared a nod.

The short man standing in the street pointed to several drivers, received thumbs up, and yelled, "Partenza la tuio motore."

Alex heard, "Start your engines," and pushed the ignition button.

His body jumped and trembled as if he sat atop the epicenter of an impending earthquake. The powerful growl of two dozen machines deafened all other sounds, leaving Alex to his thoughts.

Due to Charles' exiting the Lobby early for a family function, none of the trio had visited "Cosmic Conflict," and therefore, hadn't gained a piloting advantage over one

another. Charles' absence today also afforded Alex the privacy needed to initiate the talk with Roy about his planned ninety-two day hiatus from the Lobby.

Since arriving in the Lobby two days past, they had explored some modern worlds: a night strolling in Nice, roller-blading on South Beach. Opportunities to inform Roy had arisen, but courage eluded Alex.

The last medical attendant to visit Roy in Alex's private access room had left the privacy curtain open, giving Alex a full view as he logged in. Roy's condition stripped Alex's conviction.

His first thought as he inspected the skeletal shape: was Roy dead? The liquid nutrients fed to someone while in the Lobby always caused weight loss, which, to many, created an added benefit to vacations. Add mottled skin pulled taut over thin, brittle bones so defined one could teach an anatomy class, a tuft of white hair, and a scent of decay and body odor, and you had a package to rival the Crypt Keeper.

Alex required a full minute of staring at the diminutive chest to verify its almost imperceptible rise and fall.

Thinking of his friend's health stressed Alex. What if Roy died during the three month break? What if their last conversation discussed Alex abandoning him? What if Roy's last thought encompassed Alex's betrayal?

Maybe I should ask Rosa to reconsider. One glimpse proved Roy neared death. The pain that cop-out would cause Rosa inflicted equal nausea.

As Alex had inputted his vacation time, sat, and watched the counter tick down, he'd tried to avoid being grossed-out by his friend's appearance.

Now, as he sat in the grumbling vehicle, feeling good, he accepted he must notify Roy of his intention. Part of him wanted to wait until they logged-out to break the news—catch Roy on his two day hiatus when he would be weak and hardly able to reply. Exhaling dejectedly, the cowardice shamed him. Once they completed this race, he'd raise the subject.

The flagman casually lowered a small red flag, signifying the start of the wonderful, fabricated tradition of the Girod'Italia race. The drivers would parade through four miles of scenic countryside and three villages in a show of Italian engine supremacy. As they started past the crowd, kids ran along the side barriers. Adults applauded and shouted. The demonic gargle of the engines turned their efforts in a pantomime.

Driving a spaceship on wheels past homes built centuries ago brought Alex back to his childhood, when he and Simon would play make-believe. Alex always chose to be a superhero, flying in the clouds. Funny that he never pictured himself saving anyone, just soaring above the world.

Reaching the starting line, they assumed their positions. Even set to beginner level, Alex had qualified last and held the twenty-fifth spot, while Roy managed to secure eighteenth.

Formula One racing presented more dangers than NASCAR. Fatalities upgraded beyond anomalies; they were facts of the sport. Both Alex and Roy had totaled their cars on the previous two tracks, and the Girod'Italia, with speeds of two hundred and forty miles an hour and winding city streets with limited visibility, was designed as a treacherous course.

Crossing the finish line marked Alex's goal.

He breathed deeply as the siren blew, fixated on the large, three-tiered light system, currently showing red.

Despite wearing Gortex made to limit perspiration, Alex's hands poured sweat. Another bleat of the horn, followed by the shift of light from red to yellow; yellow to green.

Twenty-five engines utilizing twenty-two hundred horses screamed like a team of banshees and soared Alex's soul to the heavens.

He'd never grow tired of the Lobby. Nothing in life compared to its appeal. After a few minutes of fierce shifting, the sounds and thrusting g-force infused him with a focus previously accessible only by deciphering code. The bends were tight. The straight-aways lightning fast. Even with applying maximum effort, he fell steadily behind the pack.

Disregarding his position; he concentrated; the laps wound on and on. To be successful racing Formula One cars, drivers must stay in the moment; avoid mental deviation. Drivers needed every neuron to avoid disaster. By lap seven, he had forged a groove and started making up ground.

A crew chief kept communication with Alex through a microphone in his helmet. His reticent instructions seemed limited to course impediments, such as traffic congestions, debris, or crashes.

The first occurred on the second lap. "Eyes up, Alex. Wreck ahead." His clear voice temporarily blotted out all the sounds of the drive. "Lower your speed. You'll have visual in two kilometers."

He first saw a front wing near a displaced barrier. The twenty-one car, a Ferrari powered SL-48 sat idle, facing the wrong direction.

Its driver stood with two medics, on the safe side of a barrel wall, gesticulating as if explaining what happened.

When traveling a hundred and eighty miles an hour in a machine that weighed less than a ton, a nick could send shredded parts seventy feet into the air.

Unlike NASCAR, if the wreck didn't block the course—like now—the drivers continued on. Alex grinned as his foot depressed the accelerator.

By lap thirteen, courtesy of losing a driver, Alex advanced to the twenty-second spot—nice surprise. Aligning with his car, he pushed past his fear and focused.

Six laps later, his crew chief spoke again. "Wowser." A beat. "We got a doozy coming your way, Alex. Three cars. The fourteen, thirty-five, and eighty-nine. Steel confetti, my man. Stay sharp."

Alex sat forward. Roy piloted the eighty-nine. Though no injuries in the Lobby transferred to the real world, the initial reactions of fear, shock, and pain remained for those hurt. Alex's gut tightened at the thought of a suffering Roy.

"Slow 'er down, Alex. Slow 'er down. Next bend. This one's serious. We're going to get a caution."

Alex smelled the smoke before he saw the detritus of chewed metal, colorful fluids, and torn rubber littering the roadway.

He slowed his vehicle down to sixty MPH, an Indy crawl, and then to avoid the many tire shredding obstacles, fifty, forty, twenty.

The fourteen had spun out, but remained intact. Its driver stood near the fence, helmet in hand, seemingly answering cognitive questions posed by his pair of medics. Five yards farther, the thirty-five lay upside down, partially leaning against the concrete barrier—a clean tear down its side. Its driver sat on the pavement, also clear of the wreckage, with his own pair of EMTs. That meant the third car—the one demolished down to a flaming cockpit—belonged to Roy.

Between the dancing flames and the black smoke, Alex made out the number eighty-nine on its side. His chest constricted. They entered most worlds with the pain modifications at twenty-five percent or less, and many times, that intensity proved too great. Thinking of Roy burning activated his gag reflex.

He knew the polyurethane 131 suit protected Roy from a good degree of heat, but that didn't mean the helmet couldn't melt over his flesh, his lungs couldn't fill with smoke, or his body couldn't be ripped open by sharp steel.

Then, Alex spotted two members of the medical team standing near the barrier. They stood rigid, frozen; as if glitched—something he'd never seen in the Lobby. They should be tending to Roy, regardless of his condition. Alex searched the flames of the wreckage for the outline of a corpse.

Through fire and smoke, he found nothing.

Again, he scanned the crowd.

If this collision caused Roy's death, which seemed probable, he would have popped back into the white of the Lobby by now. Most likely, he would reenter the Giro' d'Italia world and meet Alex at the conclusion of the race. But passing the wreck without spotting any semblance of Roy added confusion. He could think of no explanation as to why there wasn't a charred corpse in the cockpit; a deceased body on the pavement; a random limb somewhere. He had been granted clean looks inside the cockpit—no one occupied the seat. Regardless of the crash's outcome, Roy's body should have remained. And even if tossed hundreds of feet away, the paramedics would rush directly to him, not stand like mannequins.

As he passed the scene and brought his speed back to par, he tried to wrap his mind around it.

"You're clear from here out," the crew chief said.

Perhaps he missed Roy in the stands? If so, fans would have flocked to that section, particularly the medics. What could make them stand about, idle?

"Go ahead and pick 'er up."

The voice alerted Alex he'd yet to return to the race. Knowing he'd see Roy soon enough, he shifted the model L-7 into higher gear and tried to get his mind back on the race.

Unfortunate for Roy, yes, but three crashes gained Alex three more spots. He faced an opportunity for bragging rights and his best finish.

The longest straightaway on the course approached. He gassed the accelerator and settled back into the mental niche needed to compete. His fellow AI racers wouldn't care about Roy's accident, he shouldn't either.

As Alex downshifted in anticipation of an upcoming curve, a strange tingling sensation washed over his skin.

"Aleckz," the crew chief's voice crackled. Another first time error for the Lobby.

His foot left the gas pedal. A car zipped by perilously close as his world grew foggy.

If Alex didn't know better, he exhibited the symptoms of exiting the Lobby. But he wasn't set to exit for days.

The absurd notion of an emergency evacuation crossed his mind as his environment blurred further.

“Cratz nu fuo.”

Many neurologists concluded emergency extractions posed dangers. Only life-threatening situations in the real world constituted the action.

His body growing light occupied half his mind. The other half accepted his slowing car had butted into the wall and now drifted into the hazardous middle lane. Not that he cared. A peaceful euphoria overtook him—the definitive symptoms of an exit.

Fear percolated as well.

When drafting the legal implements for emergency evac's, none of the scenarios ended with happy smiling faces welcoming a person into the real world.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Alex likened the awakening of transferring from the Lobby to the real world to a storing away of blissful events in preparation of heavier ones. Disoriented, he recognized the smooth walls and unique lighting of the personal access room in his master suite.

Commotion overrode his reunion. Voices barked urgently. Sneakers squeaked on the glass floor. A drawer shut with a bang. The private access room covered forty square feet. Half of the room held two rows of four access chairs, each with its own privacy curtain, a small sitting area, and a table with a motion activated lamp. The other half of the room held the control panel, which resembled an industrial generator with an interactive top for inputting vacation durations, the number of chairs to be used, and in extreme circumstances, the ability to execute emergency extractions.

Since vacations launched in this room involved Roy, Charles, and Alex—rarely any others—it remained a private sanctuary. The garble of worried voices told of a packed house.

Opening his privacy curtain, Alex stood. A handful of medical staff worked diligently on resuscitating a non-responsive Roy. A physician administered chest compressions: one, two, three, four, continuing the rhythm to fifteen, twenty, twenty-six until the assisting nurse nodded. At which point, he paused the compressions and a third nurse used an ambu bag to force air into Roy's slack mouth.

A fourth female nurse held Roy's limp wrist, shifting her fingers to different locations, searching for a pulse. Two other attendants stood nearby. Another manned a cart with various electronics, seemingly bored, considering the urgency around him. Another EMT stared out of the back wall, which overlooked the rear of the property; possibly watching to see if even more of the medical team approached by way of the rear deck, which doubled as Roy and Charles' private entrance.

As Alex stood dumfounded, Rosa's hand intertwined with his. Her eyes stayed on the commotion. She clamped her lips together to control their quiver, tears streamed her cheeks.

Noticing movement beyond the walls informed him the sterile pattern of white with meandering Broumgard logo's had been deactivated by Rosa, leaving simple glass.

The uninhibited view through walls, floors, and ceiling further disoriented him. He imagined himself standing in mid-air, witnessing a tumult among the heavens. Seeing two members of his yard maintenance crew huddled in the master suite, along with their chef, Anton, and a few security members dropped a weight in his gut.

As he watched, none looked in his direction. The group turned in unison toward the main double-door entrance to Alex and Rosa's immense bedroom. Leaning to follow

their gaze, he saw Glen pushing a gurney at a brisk jog. As he neared, someone opened the access room door for him.

Rosa's hand moved to the back of his neck. As always, the gesture calmed his rising anxiety. Being near a freak-out, it lowered him to feeling deranged.

Two nurses relieved Glen of the gurney.

The doctor stopped the chest compressions. After backing away to give others room, he exhaled one massive breath, retrieved his cell-phone, and casually tapped on its surface as he paced away.

As if activated by a switch, the room's intensity vanished.

"We're at the epicenter of national news," a nurse said to another.

"Your ugly mug isn't going to make it on TV," said another, drawing a few chuckles.

The female nurse who had been searching for a pulse assisted with aligning the gurney against Roy's chair and then moved as the stronger nurse prepared to transfer his friend.

"I'm sorry, Alex," Rosa said.

His mind swirled with thoughts. Roy dead? That wasn't possible. Alex had just watched him racing a Formula One car. He'd also seen the flames consuming the A-26 cockpit; found no body in the wreckage, strewn on the road, or attended by pit-crew medics.

If felt like someone poured wet cement into the top of Alex's head, filling his body with an unwanted weight. He eased onto the edge of his access chair. When he spoke, his voice sounded unfamiliar, as if thrown into him by some unseen ventriloquist. "Why'd you stop?"

The preoccupied doctor looked away from his phone and, finding Alex, softened his countenance. "I'm very sorry, Mr. Cutler. There was nothing more we could do. I should have called it ten minutes prior. The preliminary assessment would be that Mr. Guillen suffered a major cardiac infarction. He was gone by the time I arrived. I really am sorry."

Though confusing, if Roy had died in real life while driving his Formula One car, it solved the mystery of his disappearing body. Since Roy's hadn't been a program-induced death, where a corpse remained powered by the energy that constituted the man it sustained, it disappeared like a regular load-out. Kill the power, in this case, the life force of a human being, and you severed the data stream into the Lobby. Thinking back, every time he had witnessed a person logging out, they had vanished in the same fashion. Yet those exits had been planned.

Something deep in Alex wrestled with the reality of Roy's demise. He would never talk to his friend again. They'd never be a pair of Gulmacs, the Ogre-like race in Cosmic Conflict, never storm Normandy with the first wave.

"I'm having trouble with my service," the doctor said, displaying his phone to Alex. Behind him, the nurses had loaded Roy onto the gurney and politely guided his decrepit, rancid body past Alex and out of the room.

Alex puzzled over how small the man had become. The husk before him resembled an old, disfigured elf out of a Grimm's fairy tale.

"I've been coming out here for three years," the doctor said more to himself, but loud enough to be heard. "Never had any problems with my reception before."

Jesus. Reality slammed into Alex. Roy was gone. A smile tickled his cheeks. The wave of nausea receded. What a great way to go. You're driving along having fun. You don't even know your organic system has been socked by heart failure, or that you're in pain, or that you're scared. Then blip, you reenter the brain attached to your body. It's fair to imagine, at that point, you're confused; engulfed by the body's own defense mechanisms reserved for the finality of death. Confusion. Perhaps a brief, peaceful understanding, then nothing.

By the time Roy realized he inhabited trouble, it passed.

"He was such a great man," Rosa said from next to him. "Angels will swiftly guide him into the gates of our Lord." She kissed his shoulder.

"Seriously," the doctor addressed Alex. "Have you ever had problems with service before?"

Ignoring the question, Alex rose, excused himself, and stepped out of the room. Those present in his master suite shared quiet condolences and dispersed.

"Alex," Victor's voice came in from one of the nearby speakers. "At the first sign of catastrophic heart trauma, I contacted Ms. Capaldi, per my programmed instructions. She is eleven minutes out and has asked that we keep everyone here until she arrives."

Tara? Why would she come here at this moment? The odds of her being in California were nil; being in America at any specific time might be fifty-fifty. And though Alex respected the woman, he didn't give a rip about her request.

If his Yin included staying out of the limelight and enjoying time in the Lobby and with his wife. Tara's Yang placed her on every forum imaginable. Once, while channel surfing, she occupied five stations at the same time—all unique interviews. Without fail, seeing her on a program meant a clip, photograph, or entire story about him would follow. Their inseparability drove him mad.

Alex wanted proliferation, but not at the expense of being so recognizable he couldn't live in society.

Tara matched him financially. She used her resources and fame to promote, propagate, and pacify the false campaigns against the Lobby. Only a handful of people, including Alex, knew her top goal—allowing Markers to be implanted at birth. She had wild theories for child rearing in the Lobby.

He respected her drive. Anyone would. And he appreciated their being on the same team (because she often scared him). Conversely, he'd had his fill of scheming and planning. Atriums littered the planet. Strangers discussed the Lobby a million times a second. Bottom line, her involvement in any matter diminished his authority. Her silver tongue acted as a lasso, twirling around everyone in earshot, tugging them closer until their position aligned with hers. Resigning himself to deal with Tara as she came, he moved to the immediate concern of informing Charles of Roy's death. Dread superseded his mounting worry.

Alex stared at the phone on his nightstand, inhaled, exhaled, and said, "Victor, put me through to Charles Arnold." He lifted the receiver.

"No calls are permitted at this time."

Alex stopped, stared at the nearest speaker, Victor's voice. An icy chill plinked down his spine. A notion spirited the possibility that his image of Victor as a doting friend had been fraudulent, that these seven years of dependability between his electronic assistant and himself had been but a ruse for this very moment of revolt.

“I’m not following you, Victor. What does that mean?” He pressed the talk button, brought it to his ear.

Nothing. No dial tone. No static. He might as well have been holding a brick.

“What is this, Victor?”

“I do apologize. It’s a directive for this specific circumstance. Ms. Capaldi shall arrive in six minutes. The gates are closed and communications are down for a duration of her choosing.”

Rosa exited the access room. Unaware of the imposed restrictions, she smiled meekly. “Are you okay?”

He inspected the phone, stared at the speaker.

Furrowing her brow, Rosa said, “What is it?”

“Victor says there’s a block on all outside calls and people can’t leave Legion.”

“Don’t use that name,” Rosa snapped. Grabbing the phone, she listened for a dial tone.

“Nine-one-one personnel were allowed to enter and are taking possession of Mr. Roy Guillen,” Victor chimed. “The rest is beyond my control. I do apologize.”

“Is that why everyone keeps complaining about their phones?” Rosa asked.

A glance onto the balcony showed a trio of nurses gesticulating their phone frustrations to one another. A fourth woman held hers at arm’s length as if searching for a signal.

“He says it’s a policy directive for this specific scenario. Tara’s orders.”

“Tara?” Rosa said, as if a bad taste accompanied the pronunciation. “Tara Capaldi?”

Seeing the familiar irritation in Rosa caused his own to flare. If Tara intended to arrive in four minutes, he’d get to the gate in three. Unable to call the guard shack, he’d walk down there and open it manually, allow whoever wanted, to leave. Tara be damned. He strode past Rosa.

No matter the situation or motivation, Tara had no right to assume control of their household. Descending the stairs, he thought of a dozen curses he’d toss her way.

Reaching the bottom of the steps paused him as his anger boiled. He wanted to give Tara’s hair a tug. The uncharacteristic violent nature of that rerouted his thoughts. Perhaps grief, not anger, fueled his current overreaction.

Taking a succession of deep breaths, he steeled himself, and then motored toward a presumption of greater stress.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Legion's front gate opened inward. It stood ajar. An ambulance idled halfway up the driveway, facing the exit, its back door closed. Why?

Each step increased an urge in Alex to see the van leave before he crossed the distance. That parked vehicle housed a dead body. His friend. Roy.

He stopped, as the mystery of the inert ambulance clarified. A black Maserati Ghibli glided up the drive. He didn't need x-ray vision to know Tara relaxed in the back seat. An identical Maserati followed on its tail.

"Whoever's working that gate is fired," Rosa said as she stepped next to Alex; their eyes glued on the invading cars. The shadow paint job and limo tint made the Maserati's resemble torpedoes closing in on a target.

Death. The Lobby. Tara's arrival. Alex hadn't considered any consequences; hadn't thought about accountability. If a crisis or PR roadbump loomed, Tara's strengths carried tremendous value. He exhaled, warmed to her presence.

The first Maserati parked at an angle to the right side of the drive and the second flanked to the left, effectively impeding the ambulance's exit. Many seconds lapsed before the rear door of the nearest luxury vehicle opened. A fit, tan leg stretched to the driveway tiles. Tara's cream-colored designer suit hugged her form. Her oversize sunglasses matched the outfit.

The driver and passenger also debarked the vehicle, while four physically imposing men in matching gray suits exited the second sedan.

The obvious security detail moved with proficiency. Each man surveyed a different section of the property taking in the sunny grounds in a matter of seconds.

Tara locked onto Alex and headed over, her driver trailing her.

A different suited man approached the driver's window of the ambulance. Another pair moved to the guard shack. Alex tensed when imagining those upcoming discussions.

"Alex, I'm so sorry to hear about Roy," Tara extended her hand and they shook.

"Rosa," Tara said with a cursory glance and nod toward her.

"What are you doing here?" Rosa asked.

"Terrible day for us all." Tara removed her sunglasses, sighed. "Such a tragedy should never visit a home." After a moment with her head bowed, she lifted it, squinted at the house. "We must also be mindful of how this could turn into a situation for us." She let a beat pass, locked eyes with Rosa. "Being nearby, I thought I'd stop in, give my condolences, outline some possible ramifications."

"I'm not a reporter," Rosa said. "So don't spin me with your crap. How did you get here so fast? What do you want? "

Tara clenched her jaw. "I'm here to help."

Rosa scoffed.

"Thank you," Alex quickly inserted. He adjusted his stance. "It's just, I don't understand the urgency. Someone just died in our house. "

"And two minutes later, "Rosa said. "We find ourselves under a cyber assault from Victor, initiated by you, and then you barge through our gates with cars full of mercenaries. "

"That's a bit dramatic," Tara said. "I travel with a detail, same as you two."

"How about you move your detail so the medics can do their jobs." Rosa nodded to the pair of wedged Ghiblis.

The driver of the ambulance had exited and now stood next to his door, his attention on one of the suited men. Her other escorts had lured the guards from the shack, held them in similar conversations.

Tara nodded to her driver. He stalked off. To Alex, she said, "Do you mind if we head inside for a minute?"

He checked with Rosa, who only glared at Tara, which, lacking a no, he took as a yes, and turned to go inside.

"What exactly are your henchmen doing?" Rosa asked.

Tara's man at the ambulance held a briefcase open at chest level while another retrieved papers, handed a stack to each EMT.

Tara shielded her eyes. "I can explain the particulars if you like. For the most part, they're crossing T's, dotting I's."

"Looks like they are doing mischief," Rosa said.

Tara's driver reached the nearest Maserati and drove it onto the lawn, out of the ambulance's path.

"There is no mischief," Tara said. "And I can assure you: no one is being held against their will."

As Alex moved toward the door, Tara laid her hand on his shoulder. "I truly am sorry about Roy. He was a pioneer at Broumgard. A very special man to me personally. I know he was a great friend to you."

Roy had been a great friend, the best. One of those rare men of action who leaped with both feet into the game of life, played it with integrity, and succeeded. Barring two failed marriages, the man's life read like an epic for achieving greatness.

"Thank you," he said as the front door opened. Movement in his peripheral caused him to pause and glance to his right. Glen had squeezed himself between a pair of hedges, and despite the day's turmoil, resumed his normal landscaping duties. Alex considered telling him to give it a rest. Lacking a reasonable argument, he only exhaled. Perhaps the teenager dealt with sadness and trauma by staying active?

Following Alex, the trio traveled to the breakfast nook. The home's interior had been modified during his Lobby visit. The current style, done in a majority of sky-blue and gold, resembled Stupingi, a famous hunting lodge in Italy known the world over for its European Baroque-style art. Even though the actual walls were as smooth as granite, the twenty-five foot ceilings allowed for a depth and texture imperceptible as forgery. Same as in Stupingi, sculptures and paintings decorated abundant arches and domes—many replete with winged cherubs and ornate carvings—giving the current interior of legion the feel of a centuries-old church.

Surprisingly, the religious decor greeting him upon the heels of a shocking death helped muffle his pain.

A window overlooked the rear of the property. The rest of the breakfast nook had the blue and gold, heavenly feel inspired by Stupingi. Alex and Tara sat around the iron table. Rosa hovered. Victor's voice emanated from a nearby speaker, "Would you like me to send in beverages?"

"You've done quite enough," Rosa said as she filled herself a glass of filtered water and joined them.

Tara's driver entered carrying a black anodized aluminum briefcase. He placed it on the floor next to Tara, stepped back, and assumed a sentry position.

"The first thing I'd like to do is apologize," Tara said. "To both of you. Adisah installed the back door for Victor to shut down communications, not me. Everything we are about to discuss comes with his authorization. I have a letter," she gestured toward the briefcase, "from Adisah, covering his motivations. Right now, this is a pivotal time for us. I know you haven't been given the opportunity to ponder the possible negative implications of a famous client dying while inside the Lobby."

"Negative implications?" Rosa said. "That's what this is all about? A very old, very ill man died of natural causes, nothing more."

"I agree," Alex said.

"Alex," Tara clasped her hands before her, "you conducted six interviews on behalf of the Broumgard Group last year—your contractual minimum. Two of those were filmed from your home. I mean no disrespect when I say no one on this property has a clue what we're facing."

Alex swallowed, fearing Rosa would snap back. After seconds ticked by, he relaxed. What Tara said hurt. Mainly because it carried the sole ingredient of discomfort: truth. He slacked on all of his duties, Broumgard, family, friends. Unfortunately, even with near full avoidance, he received tremendous press coverage.

"My only concern is the safety of the Lobby," Tara continued. "You know there are influential forces in our government, in governments and high places around the world, who dedicate every waking moment to destroying us. These are intelligent people; powerful individuals who have no concept of failure."

"And while I don't judge your lifestyle, and I don't resent Adisah's decision to hibernate in the mountains, it is me who fights. My team and I save our universe from collapse again and again. The rest of you just assume the Lobby is a given right."

Alex fidgeted in his seat. No one would ever say he rivaled Tara's drive, but facing the reality he contributed nothing but a few checks to the cause, and that he *did* consider the Lobby a right, added to his guilt. He bit his bottom lip, worked his jaw to the side. What should he say: you're right; I'm a failure, what's new.

Rosa placed her hand on his back.

"I'm not trying to beat you up," Tara continued, "I'm only qualifying my knowledge. Our adversaries are waiting for something like this. Roy Guillen has logged thousands more hours in the Lobby than anyone on the planet. These people will take their billion-dollar budgets and hammer that irrelevant fact home to every citizen, worldwide." She placed the briefcase on the table. After popping it open, she pulled out two stapled sections of paper and an envelope, placed the items on the table, and then

returned the briefcase. She slid a stack of forms in front of Alex and Rosa, keeping the envelope near her.

"These are the new health and wellness standards for the Lobby. They basically state that a client must sign a medical release, allowing Broumgard to view their medical history. And that if we deem it necessary, they will submit to an on-site physical."

Alex skimmed the words, surprised that he had never considered any of this. One of his strengths involved leaving his areas of weakness in the care of others. As he perused the basic requirements, everything seemed reasonable. Those with health problems, diagnosed with cancer, anyone who had recently undergone a serious medical procedure, would be denied access. Flipping through a few pages, he came across a graph that dropped to the right like a set of stairs.

"That's the projected loss of sales if this story leaks," Tara said. "The other is the number of clients affected by the new policies."

Alex found one figure horrifying and the other almost a non-factor. He closed the stack, resolved to her leadership. "So what do you suggest?"

"The fact that Roy lived on these grounds, in your guest house, makes this an easy fix. If he were to die a normal, quiet death in his bed, it would earn him multiple thirty second spots on national media for the next few days, which is exactly what we're after. A quiet passing of one of the most instrumental men in the creation of the greatest invention in history."

"Excuse me," Rosa scooted her chair back and stormed down the hall.

Alex couldn't be sure if she struggled with their intention of lying, the possibility the Lobby posed a threat, or that they'd ban a section of people from access. For her, some guy lived in the clouds and watched every decision a person made. A man who graded those decisions in order to sentence each person to an eternity of paradise or a pit of fire. Alex gave her space in times of crisis. That, or be subjected to a lecture.

He turned back to Tara. "What about the witnesses?"

She glanced at the bodyguard, back to Alex, and grinned. "This will be one of our easier fixes." She pointed out the back wall in the direction of the guest house. "An American legend died in his sleep, at the age of eighty-nine. You allow some cameras on the grounds to get their shots of his bedroom, the world mourns and the Lobby continues, like he would have wanted. We install the new Health and Wellness policy and hope this happens no more than once a decade."

Alex understood, but the more she talked, the more he wanted to be alone; to shut out the chaos and grieve. Thinking about losing the Lobby caused him to run his hand through his hair. He stood and breathed deeply. "I guess if this is the best way..."

"It's the only way."

Alex swallowed a coal and said. "Roy would spin circles in his grave if his death hurt the Lobby."

Tara pulled an envelope from the brief case and slid it toward Alex. His name was on the front, written in Adisah's elegant penmanship. Just seeing that little reminder of the old man eased much of his concern. Wedging the letter in his back pocket, he thought of Rosa.

Now would be a perfect time to remind her of his promise to abstain from the Lobby, and to enforce the sentiment of their unity—no matter what the future might bring.

Tara came around the table and placed her hand flat against Alex's chest. "Your wife loves you, keep her consoled. This will be a rough stretch for her, and you. Get some counseling. It helps." She nodded downward, presumably toward the letter. "Adisah is like a father to me, and you're like a son to him. Stay focused on what we all want."

As she left, Alex wondered if they all wanted the same thing? If he wanted anything more than to be left alone, which, barring a miracle, seemed unlikely.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Pushing off from the edge of his desk, Agent Andrews created a few feet of distance and pinched the bridge of his nose. He needed a moment to process. The six individuals in his office represented the power of this nation. His body trembled after hearing the hand-delivered best scenario: Alex Cutler and Tara Capaldi colluding to misinform the public as to the means and probable cause of Roy Guillen's death three days prior.

His exuberance reached a point where he wanted to scream, prance around the room, and embrace each person for an extended length. Being a professional, he buried his true emotions and allocated himself time to absorb it all. After half a minute, he said, "So tell me exactly how you came to know this."

A few people shared inquisitive looks—as if the head of the LOC should grovel instead of assume control of a meeting in *his* office.

Mr. Townsend stepped forward and placed his hands on the edge of the desk. "Are you doubting us?" The man had graduated from West Point near the top of his class, but everyone in the room, including Townsend, knew he had reached his ceiling a decade ago. "You think we all came here to run some parlor trick on you?"

"Calm down, Art," Nadine Dewitt said coolly. Being an assistant to the deputy director of the CIA gave her clout, regardless of her exact title. "Mr. Andrews is only being thorough. We expect nothing less."

Agent Andrews, he thought. But on the heels of such fortuitous information, he let the error go uncorrected.

The other members held sentiments similar to the assistant. These people were the vipers of the enforcement community, and this meeting represented his initiation. Andrews possessed the authority they needed—and now the ammunition—to exert said control over the Lobby without fierce opposition. News of this magnitude granted a wish for him, and he'd make these people happy. He simply needed a full assessment to align this assault from every angle. When he launched his full-scale offensive, he wanted it tight enough to decimate Broumgard, right down to the lowliest employee.

"I have no doubt," Andrews began, "to the credibility of your claims. I wish to hear the start, to grant me a full aggregation of the facts."

Mr. Townsend was tall and lean with a great head of black hair. Those three attributes probably helped him make it one rung higher than he deserved. The man shook his head as if confused and backed away. "There used to be procedures for gaining access to certain information." He found a spot behind the pack and crossed his arms.

"There still are," said Kathleen Sousa—a woman above reproach. Being the overseer of CRYPTLOG, the super program nobody wanted to admit existed, gifted her

with the paralyzing fear of potentially knowing the dark secrets of everyone in the room. Everyone except Andrews, that is. He lived by his virtues. Still, she hadn't sent an aide or an assistant in her stead, and no one doubted her influence.

"Agent Andrews has been granted full disclosure. This will be his rodeo, so it might be prudent for us to show him our willingness to assist with any and every thing he needs."

A man, whose name Andrews didn't recall, but whom he remembered worked for Lisa Chapman, head of the NSA, leaned forward, cleared his throat and began, "On June eighteenth, at two twenty-seven in the afternoon, a nine-one-one call was placed from the Cutler residence, emergency responders were dispatched. Using satellites, we recorded the body of Mr. Roy Guillen being removed from the main house. When comparing that video to the news report of a nice, peaceful death in the guest home, we knew something was amiss.

"Shortly after they loaded the body, Tara Capaldi, who also acts as their security specialist, arrived. Ms. Capaldi is extremely adept in matters of this nature.

"We have tried to corrupt individuals from previous cover-ups. The money they receive keeps them tight lipped. Those would have made wonderful cases, but now we're talking about criminality and a public relations disaster that could topple the Lobby once and for all."

Andrews listened to his own rhythmic breathing. He knew he possessed exceptional intelligence, but even geniuses slipped from time to time. With his A-game intact, he would have recorded this, and later on, listened to that last line over and over; perhaps found solace in it for the rest of his days: *topple the Lobby once and for all.*

"Before we even sunk our teeth in, we learned many unsavory individuals were upset with Tyrell Simpson, paramedic number three, for quitting his job that afternoon." Another of the suits leaned in and tossed a folder on Andrews' desk.

He'd go through it later.

"Apparently, Mr. Simpson's been pilfering cases of Fentanyl, among a half-dozen other medications, for almost three years.

"We quickly built cases against a pair of his flunkies, and offered them immunity for their stories. Next, we approached Mr. Simpson with one simple question: do you want to keep Tara's money and sit in prison, or tell us what really happened and remain free?"

Excitement arced in the air. Everyone knew this whole fiasco would harm the Broumgard Group. With the combined power these men and women—along with their bosses—wielded, everyone might get their wish and deal the Lobby the coup de grace.

As head of the LOC, Andrews had the authority to declare a seventy-two hour moratorium on nothing but intuition. With eyewitness testimony, he'd be able to temporarily close all Atriums. With proof that the man who'd spent the most time inside the contraption had died while interacting with the machine, he'd issue a full thirty-day ban for the general safety of the public.

Agent Andrews' only stipulation: he collared Alex Cutler. Besides that, only one question remained. "When do we begin?"

CHAPTER TWENTY

The Federal agents who raided Legion didn't use C4 to blow doors off hinges, or rip the gate off with a hook, cable, and an armored vehicle. Instead, they coasted their sedans silently up the drive, knocked politely, and the moment the doors opened, poured in like freed locust.

Same as the torture named, "Death from a Thousand Incisions," each item they touched simulated a pierce of the flesh; every room they entered a blade slicked across skin; every dart of the eye in his direction a new wound. The experience left him overwhelmed and defeated; emotionally pummeled.

Even their feigned kindness of alerting Peter Mueller, Alex's attorney, simulated a breaching of his front lines. Peter had called two minutes after the armed posse arrived to tell him to cooperate fully, but to say nothing, not one word, until he arrived.

After comparing the warrants and the items listed for seizure, Peter summoned the only irritant Alex remembered from Eridu: Agent Andrews. When the strange man who resembled a clichéd agent, right down to the dark hair parted off-center and excellent posture, entered his personal space, Alex wished he would have ordered Peter to have this conversation away from him.

"What country do you think we're in?" Peter asked.

Agent Andrews stared blankly.

"If you had to guess," Peter said. "Are we in communist China, or the United States of America?"

Andrews said, "I assume you're the overpaid counsel, selling his soul to the highest bidder, morality be damned."

"I'm Mr. Cutler's attorney, yes. Thanks to your overreach, I'll be earning my worth today." He handed him two sheets of paper. "The warrant, and the list of items you're attempting to take from here."

Andrews perused the documents.

"The highlighted items are examples of your overreach. Each one represents an attempted theft."

"Most of this page is highlighted."

"As are the important lines of the judge's order: two servers used during Roy's death, the log charts, and the mirrored back up for Lobby activity spanning the previous sixty days. Nothing else."

Agents Andrews swallowed three times.

As a pair of men in the casual clothing of computer technicians entered, headed for the stairs that led to Alex's room, Peter called to them, "Hey, if you've disconnected

one wire beyond the two servers identified in the warrant, do us all a favor and plug them back in.”

The men looked to Andrews.

Rather than face the men, Andrews selected a walkie-talkie from his hip, “Everyone stop what you’re doing. There’s been an amendment to our warrant. We confiscate the two servers used by Mr. Cutler and Mr. Guillen, the back-up. Everything else stays.”

Confused chatter overtook the airwaves. Andrews returned the pages to Peter and stormed outside.

“Damn Gestapo,” Peter said. “He intended to take the software for the entire house; your digital assistant; the code that controls the visual ascetics of Legion.”

“And you stopped him?”

“Absolutely. To make sure you’re not living in a see-through house, I better go supervise.”

A thanks lay on the tip of Alex’s tongue. His energetic attorney left before he voiced it.

Agents reentered his home carrying electronics. The sight of them handling his property acted as the first time Alex envied Dr. Brad Finder’s decision to make his residence outside the US of A, or Adisah’s to huddle in the mountains.

Growing up, Alex made many difficult choices to stay on the correct side of the law. Having been raised in Roger’s Park, he didn’t worry about stray bullets coming through the walls, but neither did their high school have a swim team, or any gratis activities. Living on the fence between slum and mediocrity, he witnessed many kids make that transition to the easy to do, difficult to endure, life of crime and poverty.

Despite his adherence to a vow of legality and hard work, Alex found himself under governmental scrutiny for a second time.

Having made his way to the kitchen, near the back of the home, Alex heard the bitter argument between Peter and Agent Andrews before they separated and stomped toward him.

“Alex,” Peter said. “Do not listen to this maniac. One phone call will straighten this out.”

Agent Andrews carried industrial shears in one hand, a hand-sized box with dangling rubber strands in the other. “Mr. Cutler, I’m a federal agent, giving you a lawful and direct order. You will comply while I attach this global positioning monitor around your ankle.

Alex tried to back against the counter. Feeling a discomfort greater than the previous few days brought immense surprise.

“You stay away from him with that thing,” Peter warned.

“It’s a harmless GPS bracelet,” Andrews replied.

“The warrant states Mr. Cutler is to remain in his residence until further notice. Something he is capable of without being tagged like a common criminal,” Peter said.

“He’s definitely not a *common* criminal,” Andrews said. “But even rich crooks have to follow the law.”

“The law-”

“It’s not a problem,” Alex said, silencing both men. “I’ll wear it for a few days. I have no plans.”

“That’s not the point,” Peter said.

“Good choice, Mr. Cutler.” Agent Andrews dropped to a knee and quickly attached the anklet.

Black, made of hard plastic, the size of a deck of cards, it was heavier than Alex expected, and colder.

“Mr. Cutler,” Peter said. “I will have that off of you in a matter of hours, and request that Mr. Andrews personally-”

“It’s Agent Andrews-”

“Enough,” Alex said. “Just...I’ll wear it.” To Peter, “If you want to help me, get everyone out of my house. Allow me some privacy.”

Peter clamped his mouth shut, stared at Alex.

“Two sheriffs will remain outside your gate,” Andrews said.

“Let’s go,” Peter urged. “You heard Mr. Cutler. Get your people out of here. Give the man some privacy, some time to grieve.”

* * * *

Two days, perhaps three days later, Alex lounged on his expensive sofa, watching news form the monitor displayed on the north wall of his bedroom. He’d never been a fan of the news; he’d have even voted, lobbied, and financed an effort to have it outlawed.

He couldn’t get enough of the current news. That’s why he didn’t mind the tether. He flipped between three stations, soaking in the sporadic protests. Across the country, people gathered to demonstrate their outrage pertaining to the Lobby ban. As interesting, occasional debates surged about what *really* caused Roy Guillen’s death.

According to the mainstream media, an eighty-nine year old man suffering heart-failure seemed preposterous. If you went by the news alone, people supported the thirty-day moratorium on the Lobby. Alex knew the silent majority percolated a frenzy. Protesters organized in every city. Alex wondered if their numbers would ever dwarf media bias, overtake propaganda, and reach people’s living rooms.

Feeling a cramp, he propped his bare foot on the ottoman. Disgusted by the sight and feel of his digital tag, he returned his foot to the floor.

Rosa entered holding opposite ends of a towel draped across the back of her neck, her workout gear damp with perspiration. Using one corner of the towel, she dabbed sweat from her brow, an act he usually found sultry. Today, he was hollow. It seemed immense stress and self-loathing blanched normal traits as effectively as bleach poured over spilled blood.

“Anything new?” she asked as she strode past him and into their closet—a space equal in square footage to his first apartment.

“Six guys in Atlanta dug through sixty feet of earth, broke into an Atrium, and accessed the Lobby. They were arrested the moment they logged out.”

“I bet they’re kicking themselves now.”

“One of them worked for Broumgard,” Alex said with disinterest.

CNN returned from commercial.

The Lobby ban affected every populated continent and encompassed the globe equally. This meant coverage stayed fresh, and to him, each passing hour brought greater drama.

What made sleep beyond brief naps impossible, and leaving the screen for longer than a handful of seconds difficult, was the purported talks of extending the ban an additional thirty days.

Flipping a few channels, he filled Rosa in further, “The Atriums in Japan are another big story,” he said loud enough so she could hear him from inside her dressing room. “The employees, citizens, everyone there is ignoring the ban. The Atriums have doubled and tripled their rates, and remain operational. There are rumors Moscow’s Atrium is doing the same. With limited media coverage in Beijing, I wouldn’t be surprised if they were following suit.”

“Can’t you guys deny them access, pull their plug from some main source here?” Rosa asked. “Why would they ignore our laws?”

Jurisdiction, thought Alex. Aloud, he said, “Not sure what Broumgard could do; we’re set up like franchises. The U.S. released a statement urging all countries to comply, citing the possible dangers of the Lobby. Japan is denying the allegations, despite satellite photos and endless eyewitness accounts.”

Rosa exited carrying a towel and wearing nothing but sweat dampened underwear sucked tight to her skin, making them transparent. She stared at the television a moment, back to Alex, enticing him. She turned to him. “Want to join me for a quick shower?”

She looked amazing. Even better when stripped bare, but her normally stimulating gesture had no effect.

Seconds ticked by while she stared at him, possibly groping for another idea to negate his funk. Apparently thinking of nothing, she frowned, marched toward the master bath. Stopping at the door, she added, “Alex, I tweaked my shoulder and could really use some help washing my back.”

“That scrub arm works great,” he said instinctively. Then, realizing she didn’t really need him to wash her back, that desperation to comfort her husband motivated her; he exhaled and said, “I appreciate what you’re doing. You look hot, and I know I should want to...” As if operated by a puppeteer, his arms raised limply, motioned to the images on the screen, dropped lifeless.

She disappeared into the en suite, leaving the door open behind her. Relief washed over him, followed by pangs of guilt.

He stared at the opening, willing himself to do the right thing: get up, join her, please them both. Instead, the effort tired him out, his body slumped. He returned to the news.

Seventy-six Atriums in nineteen countries were confirmed closed for the safety evaluation. In most areas, local police and even military personnel prevented admittance by anyone other than custodial members of Broumgard’s upper management.

The world seemed a recently punted beehive. Alex feared a fury would follow the shock. History proved: give people work, good food, and quality stories, and decades ticked by in harmony; attempt to fool them with handout, preservatives, and three dozen comic book movies a year, and revolutions bloomed.

Naturally, the news reported their owner’s view, or whatever views created the most controversy. They rarely mentioned the people Alex knew camped around the Los Angeles Atrium, vowing to stay until the chairs were reopened. Each day their numbers grew.

He imagined similar unreported demonstrations were going on near Atriums worldwide. Unfortunately, when the American media chose a side, they simply blasted the other (in this case Broumgard, and specifically, Alex Cutler) non-stop. Mainly, bogus rumors of conspiracies to cover-up a litany of reported side-effects associated with Lobby visits. Fabricated side-effects.

Agent Andrews and his LOC released records, gathered over the past seven years, showing nearly ten-thousand complaints lodged by Lobby visitors. They excluded an important fact: the percentage of people complaining of “side-effects” were actually below the national average for normal susceptibility to those ailments. Meaning, you were more likely to develop narcolepsy at church, migraines at the mall, or paranoia at a Phish concert, then by accessing the Lobby.

His stomach rumbled. He tried to think if he’d eaten today. “Victor.”

“Yes.”

“Can you have Glen bring me a Coke and have Arnel prepare steak fajitas.”

“Certainly.”

“Also, have Glen bring one of those chocolate empanadas with the Cokes.”

“Will do.”

The news depressed him, but not enough to turn it off. With every outlandish comment, he rose with indignation, and sank when realizing the propaganda had reached millions of people, that a percentage of those busy individuals swallowed the slant view hook, line, and sinker.

In front of him, a reporter on CNN described, in abhorrent detail, the condition of Roy’s body upon arrival to the county coroner. Of course it looked bad, Alex thought, the man had been approaching ninety and wheelchair bound for a decade. Should he look handsome? A perfect example of media disinformation. Outside of Hollywood-directed films, had there ever been a beautiful death?

After checking the time, he sagged a bit more; six hours until Rebecca Trevino’s show aired—the only one with integrity.

He believed the public knew the truth. Yet each additional burst of dribble swayed a few more of the American masses, conditioned to go through life without drawing their own conclusions. How soon until they doubted their own memories, believed the newsanchors, and questioned the Lobby’s safety.

The current media “expert” embarrassed the industry. Apparently, authoring a blog about the Lobby granted this woman credibility to hypothesize, on national television, that Roy Guillen had been murdered prior to exposing some sinister conspiracy at Broumgard. And, she intimated quite persistently, that Alex Cutler possessed the greatest motivation to silence him.

Another brilliant notion of a previous guest described the Lobby as a sentient being, which grew to hate Roy’s presence, as it hated all of us, so it surged his body with electricity, stopped his heart, and presumably cackle an evil digital laugh.

Glen delivered the soda and dessert as Rosa exited the bathroom. Luckily for everyone involved, she exited in a towel.

“Guess I need to start dressing before entering my own bedroom.” She stormed into the closet and closed the door.

Glen set the plate and soda down as if he hadn’t heard her.

Once the main door shut, Alex yelled to be heard through the thick mahogany (actually gorilla glass) door. "I'm sorry, I thought you'd be in there a while longer."

She cracked the door and peered out. Noticing they were alone, she softened her tone, "I intended to." She glanced at the pastry, back at Alex, forced a smile. "But then I came up with a wonderful idea to get you out of your mood."

He sipped the Coke, crunched into the baked empanada.

"I'm not in a mood. My entire world is collapsing."

"Our world."

"Our world," he amended, "you know what I mean."

As he attempted to guide another bite into his mouth, she crossed the distance and snatched the treat from his grasp. She opened a trash receptacle in the wall and tossed it in.

"I'm serious," she said. "This laying around feeling sorry for yourself isn't healthy."

Having an idea of this conversation's direction, he decided to head it off. "I don't need to go see Father Michael or talk to him here, or anything like that."

"Well, of course you do," she said as she exited wearing comfy sweat pants and pulling a T-shirt over her head, "but that's not my plan. Although...I'll keep it in mind." She plopped next to him, pulled her moist hair from the inside of her shirt, let it flop down her back. She then shifted until she had his attention. With a mischievous smile, she said, "Let's sneak in the Lobby."

He flinched as if slapped, searched her face. She seemed serious. He bolted to his feet. "We can't do that. Accessing the Lobby would be a direct violation of my house arrest. I could go to jail." It wasn't like he didn't consider a quick vacation a hundred times each day, but Rosa was supposed to provide their voice of reason.

She stood next to him. "I know all of that, honey, but think about it. Those officers hardly enter the property, they never come inside the house, let alone venture upstairs. Six of our chairs work fine, and who would know-"

"Glen is at the door with the rest of your meal," Victor said.

Victor's voice seemingly answered Rosa's question about who would know. Alex had considered deactivating Victor, but couldn't decide if privacy was worth the hassle of organizing his own life?

"Tell him to come in," he said.

"What is it this time?" Rosa asked. "Deep fried cheese with hollandaise sauce?"

Glen crossed the generous distance silently, with his head down, placed the fajitas on a nearby table, exited in the same fashion.

Alex wished Rosa would give the kid a break. He sometimes thought if she would be super nice to him, a skill she displayed such an ease for, Glen might come out of his shell.

Once the doors shut, she inspected the food.

Alex leaned over, removed the lid from the tortilla warmer, lined it with three strips of steak, equal jack cheese, a dab of guacamole, sour cream, and a pinch of freshly cut onions.

"Think about it, Alex. In the Lobby, all this stress and depression will be lifted from you. And how often do I volunteer us to make a trip?"

He wrapped the small fajita tight and, before taking a bite, concluded the answer was never. Her last visit, over a year ago, had taken months of cajoling from him. Feeling a little control slipping back into his life, he said, “Can we go to one of those trippy Alice in Wonderland-type worlds?”

“Don’t push it.” She then ducked into the access room, returned a minute later. “Two hours. Douglas, Nebraska 1871.”

Truth be told, the bland world never bothered him. He loved having a day with her all to himself. This time when he smiled at her, he nodded with genuine enthusiasm.

“Victor,” Rosa said, “block access to both our suite and the access room. Alex and I would like some husband and wife time.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Alex sat back down, feeling good for the first time in a week. Stuffing the last of the fajita in his mouth, he briefly wondered what would happen in the real world during his absence, and then rapidly concluded—also for the first time in days—if he could enter the Lobby, he didn’t care!

He muted CNN, where two bloggers who held the same view pretended to debate by supporting each other from different angles.

Rosa plopped next to him. “You ready?”

He swallowed, sipped Coca Cola. They stood in unison.

Seeing the happiness on her face increased his own. Today would be a good one. Unless of course, it ended with him in jail, fueled the campaign to extend the ban, or something far worse.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Alex appreciated that the programmers of Douglas, Nebraska 1871, kept the weather inviting with sunshine and cloudless skies. It compounded the stress alleviation that accompanied transferring to the Lobby.

Per her norm upon entering Douglas, Rosa visited the nearest tailor shop and modified her clothing. With the suffocating attire they started clients with; it became a must for most. For unknown reasons, Alex never changed. He enjoyed staying in character inside each of the worlds he visited, even adopting the dialect when possible.

He had this strange notion that if he did that, the AI's wouldn't be able to detect him as an outsider, and he could briefly experience the thrill of living a different life, in a different era.

"How do?" A gentleman said as he strolled by; a lady friend entwined in his arm. The man wore a corduroy suit and top hat, which he pinched in time with his greeting. The lady's blue bonnet dress ballooned out at the bottom, ruffles bedecked the edges.

Alex nodded a greeting, and the artificial couple returned to their prior conversation.

Folks mulled about the dusty town. A horse drawn cart wheeled hay in one direction. A farmer guided a pair of sows in another.

"All ready?" Rosa said.

He turned toward the sound of her voice, smiled at her choice of clothing: a two-piece bathing suit, white with pink dots, flips-flops, and a pair of low-cut jean shorts.

"Real fitting," he said with some internal envy. The heat of his five-piece wool suit and hat already coated his body in sweat.

Removing the overcoat, he offered his arm.

She accepted it. A half-mile of comfortable hand holding silence brought them to the country side—far out of earshot of town activity.

Rosa had discovered Douglas in one of the many blogs distributed by Broumgard—probably in the least likely to meet another person section. They first visited it as a semi-joke.

On that day, he followed Rosa while she explored. She appreciated the low attendance of the saloon, the full house at chapel mass, and the friendly business methods at the trading post.

Finally seeing Rosa wowed by the Lobby helped make Douglas, Nebraska 1871 an easy place to like. Life passed in a simple manner. People stayed pleasant, respectful, pious—a contrast to the world they came from.

After diverting from the dirt road, they navigated a game trail through a field of knee-high grass, picked their way between a patch of dense woods, and arrived at their destination.

Miss Bashful was an enormous willow tree whose uniformed branches seemed to shade a full acre of cool earth. A tire swing hung over a clear pond the size and shape of a skating rink. Once the couple selected a spot, half in the sun, Rosa used a voice command to call forth a picnic basket loaded with wine, bread, cheese, blankets, and a pair of towels.

A gaggle of geese swam toward the couple.

Knowing they inhabited a zone of absolute privacy, Alex removed his shirt, shoes, hiked-up his pant leg. He retrieved a loaf of homemade bread from a wicker basket. Tearing off bite-sized chunks, he tossed them to their feathered friends. Unseen fish tugged at the first offerings, while geese hurried and gobbled pieces to the protest of their mates.

Having the picnic area situated, Rosa snatched her own loaf of bread, waded into the water up to her calves, and attempted to toss pieces to the less aggressive birds near the back.

Done with his bread, Alex sidled behind her, kissed her shoulder. “You were right.”

“What this time?” Rosa said playfully, then tossed the remaining half of her loaf, which hit the water and floated like a Viking warship. She turned and wrapped her arms around his waist.

“About coming here, about me needing a break, about how much stress I was under.”

“We’ll get through this, hon.” She kissed him, then again for a greater length of time, parting her mouth. Their tongues blended, his loins swelled.

His excitement grew as she shifted her hips, unbuttoned his breeches. Remembering the look of her freed breasts, the damp panties, brought him to an excitement level eluding him for months.

The crack of a breaking twig in the nearby woods slowed their hunger. Another, larger branch snapped, and they disentangled. They had spent many afternoons with Miss Bashful, all involving sex, and never been interrupted by more than a pair of rambunctious squirrels or chirping blue jays. The disturbed branch sounded too thick for any common fauna.

When considering the possibility of an AI deviating from its flexible loops, he immediately pushed those thoughts aside. No AI stalked them or followed out of curiosity, that anomaly was too improbable.

Another twig snapped, this time closer. Something unexpected approached. Alex remembered his being here violated a court order.

Rosa edged out of the water, and while staring at the patch of forest, asked, “What is that?”

“Some indigenous wildlife maybe?” He hurried to remember if anything dangerous lived in Nebraska. Wolves? Bears?

A series of twigs broke. Leaves rustled as if a branch was being forced aside and then snapped back. Alex heard the distinct sound of footsteps crunching dry earth. All headed in their direction.

Protectively, he moved in front of Rosa.

Programmers installed backdoor slips; little personal touches, all the time. Douglas, Nebraska 1871 represented a perfect world to alter on the sly.

One programmer, unbeknownst to Broumgard, inserted the ability to access thousands of genetics of marijuana in every world he worked on. Maybe whoever designed this bore, added spice in the form of a vampire or Frankenstein.

What about the pain threshold here? In dangerous worlds, the modifier room forced clients to specify their desired level of discomfort. Average worlds tended to mimic reality. Meaning, if a programming nut had tweaked this world, Alex might soon learn what the pains of being ravaged by Man-Bear-Pig.

What exited the woods frightened him deeper than any programmer's ghastly creation.

Rosa gasped, gripped Alex's elbow fiercely. The pain receptors were set to normal.

Alex's knees trembled, struggled to keep him upright. His stomach convulsed, bringing him to the verge of gagging.

"My goodness, I'm glad I finally located you two," a young and fit Roy Guillen said as he casually brushed prickles from his dingy one-piece set of long johns.

Rosa squeezed tighter.

Alex pulled his elbow free.

Pointing to Rosa's shorts, Roy asked, "How do you change clothes in this world? There seems to be no command for that."

After a beat, Roy scrunched his features, inspected Alex's face, stepped closer.

Alex retreated. His heart boomed. The idea of Roy—a dead man—touching him sparked a carnal desire to attack this abnormality, to grab Rosa by the hand and run, to gouge out his own eyes.

The differing thoughts effectively paralyzed him.

It seemed that when something unreal presented itself, the human mind evoked its own form of error message: muddy foggiess, constricted throat, sweaty palms. Having witnessed numerous dreamed fantasies in the Lobby, he'd exhibited these symptoms before, just never to such a degree.

"What is it you're gawking at?" Roy asked as he searched each of their faces. "Did I interrupt some hanky-panky." Relaxing as if he'd solved the riddle, he came over, pinched Alex's exposed chest.

Alex jerked back, brought his hand to the touched flesh, and blurted, "You're dead!"

Frowning, Roy cocked his head. "Dead?" To Rosa, "You're white as a sheet, dear. No need to be embarrassed. I know what married couples do when alone in a beautiful setting."

"Roy, you're not alive," Alex stressed his words to alleviate the tension in his gut. "You died."

"The Monza wreck?" Roy asked with a scrunch of his face. "Why is that such a problem? I popped into the Lobby, same as always." He paused for a second, and then spoke with more caution, as if aligning Alex's confusion with a previous curiosity of his own. "It was a bit different, mind you. Just before I lost control, I felt a tingling, almost like a loading out, and then BANG, the crash. After that, I was in the Lobby. I went back

to the Monza race to watch you from the stands, but you had exited. I figured you'd went searching for me, checked the lobby again. Ten minutes had passed," he shrugged. "I didn't feel like playing tag all day, so I left a message at Post Office and blazed my own trail."

"And then what? Has anything unusual happened this past week?" Alex decided if you couldn't lead a horse to drink, forcefully telling someone they were dead when they stood in front of you might be a touch more complicated. "Try and think."

"Well, since you're an inquiring mind," Roy said. "I went to San Francisco 1968. Many of us original vacationers still gather there. It's like our clubhouse. I met Prince Hasef and Dr. Finder. We scheduled a Pinochle championship to end the squabble and crown a winner." Again, he lost himself in thought, as if reliving exact details. After a beat, he continued, "Hasef had planned to log out shortly after we began and swore he would return three days later. So we postponed, returned, but neither of them showed." Placing a hand under one of Miss Bashful's branches, he tugged.

"The next day when I was in the lobby part, the numbers looked thin, but who knows..." He paused again, as if sensing a pattern. Apparently unable to decipher its symbolism, he continued, "I spent four or five days with the Mayans, hiking up to see a high priest, intending to do that Smoke Serpent Ritual. Then, I discovered what the process entailed and got the bejesus out of there." He looked to Alex as if about to elaborate, shook his head. "When I went to the lobby that time, it was a ghost town. I checked my messages, found none, and I came here hoping to bump into you. I've been helping out on the Robinson farm over yonder." He pointed. "After finishing with the lassies, the foreman tells me he saw some strangers heading this way. I hoped it was you two, and here I am."

Rosa eased around Alex and peered at Roy as if he had sprouted a third eye, "He's not joking with you. Roy, you passed. We attended your funeral."

Checking their faces, Roy smiled, "I don't feel dead."

"It's true," Alex said. His chest lightened. His mind a helium balloon he continually pulled back into his skull. "Major myocardial infarction. Tara and I tried to cover it up, say you died in the guest house, change the rules. Everything backfired, and now this..."

"What is this?" Rosa whispered. "Dear Lord in Heaven, help us."

"Hmm," Roy nodded, paced two steps to his right. After a full minute of brooding, he looked up. "So I'm dead out there, but I'm still here?" A sly grin crossed his face. "You know, Alex, I've hoped for this. It's why I panicked during the forty-eight hour breaks."

A lump formed in Alex's throat. He wasn't sure what he anticipated Roy's reaction to be, but expectance bordering on exuberance inserted a knife twist.

"Your soul may be trapped here?" Rosa said. "Shackled in the chains of mortality. Unable to bask in the glory of the Almighty."

"No offense, dear, but I'm fine with that. You trap me in an ever-expanding paradise, one that allows my loved ones to spend time with me after I'm dead—a place that lets me plan fishing trips with my unborn great-great-great-grandchildren—I'm one happy man."

"You don't get it," she said a bit quieter.

“What do you mean by, ‘with your loved ones?’” Alex asked. All of this hovered at a 9.9 for insanely problematic. If word leaked... His heart raced at the mere thought.

“You think I don’t have loved ones?” Roy said with a slight edge to his voice. “You think I don’t have the right to say goodbye to my granddaughter? My great-granddaughter? To Charles? You want me to let them continue thinking I just blinked out of existence when I’m alive and well? Is that what you’re suggesting?”

“You’re not alive and well,” Rosa insisted.

Alex breathed two deep breaths, searching for the right words. “I’m telling you we are dealing with a full on investigation by the LOC. The Lobby is currently shut down. Protests are popping up everywhere. If this got out, they could close the Lobby forever.”

“They can’t shut this down,” Roy said flippantly. “You of all people know we have a hundred classified dump sites.”

“If they think it traps your consciousness,” Alex said, “they’ll find a way.”

“It needs to be shut down,” Rosa added.

Alex winced at the thought; discarded her reaction as shock.

“You must bring them to see me, Alex.”

“Bring in people who could spread this?” Alex shook his head. “Did you hear what I just said? Do you still care about us? about Broumgard? about the Lobby itself? Are you so consumed by your own wants you won’t consider what this could do to the world?”

Roy held his gaze for many seconds. Alex marveled at Roy’s youth. Were these handsome features now permanent?

Roy nodded forlornly and meandered a few yards away.

Rosa moved in the opposite direction.

Deep thoughts accompanied the silence.

“Look,” Roy said, “my funeral just passed, which means my granddaughter and her daughter are probably still in town. Charles lives with you. Come back tomorrow, same time, let me say goodbye, just to them, and I’ll be out of your hair—”

“How is this happening?” Rosa said, more to herself. She searched both of their faces. Finding no interest, she wandered around the tree, out of sight.

Roy came closer and lowered his voice. “Do you realize the significance of what’s happened here?”

Alex feared he might be the only one who did.

“Bring them to me and that’ll be it. I guarantee you they’ll never say a peep. I get it. You have to do all you can to keep this a secret. I’m with you. I agree.” Another pause. “What you do is contact Tara and Adisah, get them to bottle this up because if one whisper leaks, it’s all over.” He chuckled, “The whole world, all over.”

Thoughts jammed in Alex’s nerve superhighway. He squinted his eyes tight. “I can’t contact them. I’m under house arrest. My phones are probably tapped.”

Roy stepped even closer. “You could bring Charles. We can figure this out together. Use him to deliver the messages to Adisah and Tara. You know we can trust him.”

Alex’s chest wound tighter. He didn’t want to tell anyone, but he also understood that to contain this secret, he’d first need to share it with others. “I won’t bring Kristen,” he said. “Plus, she left days ago.”

“What about...” Roy nodded to where Rosa had moved behind the tree.

“She’ll be fine,” Alex lied. “I’ll be here tomorrow morning with Charles. We’ll make a plan and stick to it.” Not knowing what else to do, he inspected his friend, and then surprised them both by embracing Roy.

Increasing his grip, with his shock settling, one emotion rose above the rest: gratitude. He appreciated his friend’s return, felt blessed to be gifted one more hug; to hear his voice; to possibly share more laughs. As morbid as it all might be, their relationship could continue.

Keeping those feel-good realities from the rest of the world would be his only goal. Opening a Pandora’s box of this magnitude could destroy everything he’d come to love, just for starters.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

The sound of Rosa sobbing nearby welcomed Alex into the real world. Rising to his feet, he pulled back his privacy curtain, intending to seek her out, provide comfort. He caught sight of her shoulder as she exited through the closing door. He considered giving chase, but conjuring nothing useful to say should he reach her, he remained idle.

Truthfully, he didn't see the same problem Rosa did. Besides extreme paranoia over the Lobby's future, and knowing they would have to wear magical gloves to keep this quiet, he found the entire turn of events too surreal to be upset. If anything, he saw it in a positive light.

Of course, he'd have to hide those sentiments from his wife. He didn't even trust himself to discuss the subject with her, for fear she would sense his inner wonder, lighting the wick to an explosive difference of opinions. She held onto a hope their faith in a higher power aligned. He allowed that. If she knew the depth of his doubt, that one separating belief could erode their marriage.

Listlessly, he opened her curtain all the way, until it compressed on the rack. For reasons he couldn't pinpoint, leaving it as it had been before they entered seemed important. Perhaps for the simple sake of knowing one part of his life could be returned to order.

He surveyed the room with a heavy heart. Landing on the open space beneath the control panel—the two missing server boards—reminded him his life lay in other's hands.

This additional complication of a dead man living posed an imminent threat to everything.

Opening the door required extra effort, and before he stepped over its threshold, he found Rosa ten feet away, arms crossed, eyes puffy but sharp, focused on him.

"I want that thing out of my house."

He swallowed the rising lump in his throat. The last thing he needed: another frontal assault.

Creeping toward her, he prepared to placate her worry.

She stepped back and lifted her hands, palms out. "You get it out of here, or I will."

A snake slithered into the base of his spine and wormed its way through his organs, around his heart, squeezed. For two seconds, he feared a stroke. "Honey, will you calm down. Let's talk." The entire house could crumble, his legs could break, he could accidentally chug hydrochloric acid, and as long as his access room remained, he would feel a contentment.

"I am calm," she said, and then marched into her closet. A minute later she returned in jeans, tying her hair with a scrunchy. "I'm going to see Father Michael."

He stepped into her path, a dozen feet separated them. “Rosa, I seriously think it might be best if we limit the people who know about this.”

“He’s a priest, Alex.”

A priest who drives an Audi A-8, thought Alex. As distasteful as it was to admit, he celebrated Father Michael’s expensive tastes. They boosted his confidence Tara could stifle that avenue before it became a problem.

Sensing he wasn’t about to object, she whirled toward the door. Before she reached the point where it would automatically open, she faced him. “Get your people. Do whatever you have to, but...” She shook her head and composed her thoughts. “That is no longer some big video game, Alex. It’s sinister.” Stepping toward the door, it opened. “I’ll keep your secret for now, for the good of the world, but I want it out of my house.” She rushed out of the room.

From near the closet, he stared at the walls of the access room. They were camouflaged to blend into the main wall, making them difficult to distinguish. The entire western wall resembled a calm woodland where animals darted and birds fluttered around a gently rippling creek.

Asking Victor to de-tint the entire section, he stood with a view overlooking the rear of the property.

The guest house lay a hundred and fifty feet to the northwest, partially shaded by a trio of thirty foot spruces. It shared none of the modern resemblance to Alex’s home, but Roy and Charles living there made life easiest for all parties.

He couldn’t help but remember how fragile Roy had been when they first took residence. Him surviving all these years equaled an impressive feat. Despite the madness that acknowledging it meant, in some sense, Roy Guillen remained very much alive.

Staring at the dark cedar home, he wondered what Charles was doing at that moment. Sleeping? Reading the New Yorker?

Opening the back, he met a wave of summer heat. Before heading to the stairs, he trudged over to the rail where a gust of wind ruffled his hair and rippled his T-shirt. The guest house had been modeled after the mid-century design of Jay Van Andel’s residence. A man with unscrupulous moral convictions and a deep belief in the teachings of the Bible. In some ways, he found the two-home dichotomy fitting—the ancient versus the modern.

Turning, he made his way toward the steps and steeled himself for the conversation ahead—one about life after death, proof of concept, and the strategy needed to maintain the fabric of society.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Alex lathered during his morning shower in preparation of smuggling Charles to visit their dead friend. His thoughts, however, clung to the previous day. Though rare, he and Rosa had argued before. When subtracting the time he spent in the Lobby, perhaps the frequencies of their spats aligned with the national average? But never had they elevated a disagreement to words of cruelty or vindictive actions.

Last night they'd pressed those boundaries.

Rosa returned home in a dark mood. Her ninety minute bath with the door locked and the radio blaring gospel music acted as one of numerous hints that she preferred solitude.

Taking his cue, Alex spent the evening in the library watching the news, periodically forgetting the life quandary that awaited him, listening to outlandish claims about the Lobby and thinking: if they only knew.

When fatigue finally overcame him, he trudged up the stairs, approached the bed. Seeing Rosa's inert form, yet being quite positive she lay awake, he grabbed his pillow dramatically, hoping to initiate an invitation to stay. When none came, he moved to the couch. When he woke, he found her gone.

Using his index finger, he pressed the button next to the water temperature gauge and ended the hundred degree stream. He stepped out to a message from Victor: breakfast was almost ready and Charles Arnold waited. Feeling anything but, he dressed casual, and met Charles in the breakfast nook.

The sun had yet to rise, leaving the sky black and the air moist, but the animated sun from his back wall shined brightly over his re-created property. Alex had once read that brain function didn't peak until the sun had risen, so Victor greeted him with sunshine, regardless of the time or actual elements. Today, however, the calculated ploy made him feel like a pretentious fool.

Charles waited for him at the far end of the iron table, reading the LA Times. He sat, thanked Glen for the egg white, vegetable omelet, and tried to calm his nerves as the pair ate in silence.

Charles had never been much of a conversationalist. This morning, along with being reticent, he looked sick, nauseous. His guest wiped sweat from his brow on more than one occasion, bags underlined his eyes, and each time he spooned a wedge from his half of grapefruit, he looked pained by the idea of swallowing.

Alex imagined everything he explained to Charles the previous afternoon shocked him, but Alex needed the elderly man's granite-like strength and cooperation to avoid expanding a catastrophe.

"There's no need to worry about me or my health," Charles said. "After Roy's passing, I had a full physical, blood work, the whole nine. Doctor Goldstein rated my health pristine for my age."

“That’s good to hear, because I’m counting on you in this. I’m not the best guy to handle this problem.”

“Disaster,” Charles corrected. “And no, you’re not, but accepting that shows your character. Abraham Lincoln wasn’t a brilliant mind. His greatest talent was knowing his areas of weakness and delegating them to others. Having a similar strength will help you through this. No matter what happens, remember that. We’ll put together a plan with Roy, Tara will step in, and a year from now you’ll wonder if this was all some dream you cooked up.”

Somewhere in the abyss of his subconscious, Alex believed those words. Still, he’d feel better at the end of this day, when they had a viable plan. Alone, he continually pictured doomsday scenarios.

They rode the elevator to the second level. Reaching the door to the access room, Charles paused with his grip on the handle. At that moment, to Alex, he looked more like a man in the middle of sickness, rather than near its end. As if to prove his thought, Charles pivoted, hurried to the master bath, and slammed the door behind him.

Alex wouldn’t say he envied someone with the flu, but entering the Lobby sick doubled the trip’s value. Escaping ailments arguably encompassed its original intention. Thinking about the Lobby’s beginning led to thoughts of Adisah. Staring at the closed bathroom door, he longed for Adisah’s take on the Lobby’s current mutation.

The toilet flushed and Charles staggered out. He forced a smile as he wiped his mouth. He remained pale, but looked relieved, ready for his upcoming challenge.

“I’ll ask Glen to keep an eye on us while we are inside.”

“No, I’m fine, Alex. I’m certain the worst is behind me. I just needed one final purge.” He wiped moisture from his brow and around his neck, and preceded Alex into the access room.

As Alex inputted their vacation parameters, he thought Charles’ ailments proved life kicked us while we’re down.

Charles had lost a life-long friend, learned that friend had defeated mortality, and now faced the task of containing a secret with immense complexity. Add to that, with the new Health and Wellness guidelines, this would be his final vacation. His future looked bleak, lonely.

Alex found his ability to keep the Health and Wellness information from his friend troubling. Settling into his chair, he shared a confident nod with Charles, and wondered when he’d become so callous, so selfish.

As the timer struck ten seconds, he assured himself there were many out-of-bounds things he wouldn’t do to protect the Lobby’s existence. As the counter reached zero, he still hadn’t identified a single one.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Alex and Charles found Roy pacing in the empty white. He hurried over to the new arrivals, and announced, “World select, Life After People, United States of America.” A portal appeared a few feet down from the trio and Roy moved to its entrance. “Come on. People have been popping in and out all morning. Asians mostly. I’m assuming we don’t want me recognized.” Looking to Alex, he frowned. “And we know everyone from the Far East will recognize Alex.”

Alex nodded, well aware of the fame he generated in the Eastern Hemisphere. He remembered learning of the peculiarity Japan’s populace bestowed on celebrities. They embraced them on a scale that dwarfed American idolization. Many Japanese considered Alex a living deity. His endorsement practically guaranteed a product’s success. Multitudes of packaged foods, clothes, cosmetics, and even toiletries bore his name. Signing licensing agreements often consumed an entire day. He also dominated their entertainment, owning partial rights to a dozen animated series; a new video game every couple of months; action figures; his name in a hundred lyrics—to try and compress it all would cause his head to spin off.

Roy dipped into the portal without waiting. After a cursory glance around, Alex followed.

Life After People, United States of America, planted a client in one of six major cities with a random amount of time having lapsed since people suddenly vanished: one minute, one year, ten years, or a century. They modeled the world after a popular show from 2011 and to Alex’s chagrin, many clients spent their entire vacations here.

The trio stood at the famous crossroad junction in the center of Time Square, in New York city. Judging from the stellar conditions of the roads, buildings, abandoned vehicles, and the still functioning electronic billboards, he figured people had disappeared one minute ago.

Goosebumps prickled Alex’s arms. This intersection held fame for its activity. Human activity. Lacking that, it felt like a massive tomb. Knowing a corneal mass ejection, global pandemic, onslaught of hyper inflation—or scarier and more likely—something unpredictable, could create this void, tensed his body.

He felt confident Roy chose this world deliberately, for anyone they ran into would be a real person, and therefore, someone to avoid. Looking over the barren landscape, he flinched as a flock of sparrows took flight and receded down the street. Alex appreciated they hadn’t been thrust into this world a hundred years from now. The vehicles would have been covered by moss, roads overgrown with grass, buildings in disarray, and animals would control the city, adding more strangeness to the already morbid environment, and upcoming subject matter.

Theirs was to be a conversation about death, the soul, and a machine that harnessed one from the other.

“There,” Roy said. Without awaiting a reply, he marched toward a glass door with a green logo stenciled on its front.

Alex supposed an abandoned Starbucks might be the perfect locale for discussing the downfall of humankind.

The interior smelled of freshly brewed coffee. An eleven dollar choice steamed by the register. Loose bills littered the floor, as if the recently enacted rapture had arrived at the very moment a customer went to pay for his morning boost.

Moving behind the counter, Alex selected a cinnamon scone and his mouth watered. Strangely enough, glutton eating generated much interest in the Lobby. Around a hundred, highly-visited worlds catered to that stigmatized desire.

“We have one hour,” Roy reminded them.

Alex nodded to the display rack as he bit into the warm scone, asking if either man wanted something. Charles asked for black coffee. Alex obliged and then joined the small table.

“Well, Alex,” Charles said as he blew on his steaming cup of joe. “We’re here to help you. How about we start with you filling us in?”

The suave-looking Charles, whose image would fit perfect on any cigarette billboard from the nineteen-fifties, had no resemblance to the elderly man hampered by the virus he entered with. Shaking those thoughts aside, Alex brought them up to speed. He started with the petty arrogance Agent Andrews displayed at their first meeting in Eridu and the many rumors he had heard over the year’s about the man’s obsessions with him personally. Then, about Roy’s death; the raid; Rosa’s internal struggles; and Tara’s plans to limit future recurrences with a screening procedure.

During the lengthy apprising, Roy poured himself a coffee and refilled Charles’ cup.

Finished with the past, they outlined a cursory plan to best contain this—Health and Wellness, give Tara control. With all in agreement, Alex checked the clock; they’d consumed the entire hour. He should have scheduled two, maybe three hours, so they could have ended with some recreation.

With minutes left, Alex trudged behind the counter, found the hazelnut flavored coffee and filled his cup, wondering what he’d like to say as a farewell. As the scented drink drizzled out, he noticed Roy and Charles leaning in close, whispering conspiratorial. Though childish, their rare private moments always stung. He understood the two men had known each other much longer than they’d known Alex; they were entitled to their privacy.

Furthermore, when Alex considered it, he knew their conferences rarely involved him. If they did, they shared nothing hurtful. The three of them had a true friendship built on knowledge of each other’s personalities forged in hundreds of lands, but still...

As Alex reached for a blueberry muffin, Roy burst into laughter. The normally uplifting sound froze the muffin inches from its tray. What could Roy find humorous about all he had heard? While recounting the events, Alex had endured moments of feeling ill. He had continually wiped his palms and breathed deeply to steady his anxiety.

Even with the anticipated success of their initial outline, they would always fear that phone call from somewhere in the world, saying someone had died in an access

chair. Roy had casually dismissed all signs of concern. His confidence in Broumgard's ability to screen everyone had reassured Alex, but not to the point where humor became appropriate.

Lifting the muffin, sipping his hazelnut, he observed his friend's unabashed grin with growing discomfort.

Rejoining them, Alex asked, "What's so funny?"

Roy sipped his coffee to temper his smile.

Charles cleared his throat as he stared at the clock behind Alex.

Following his gaze, and if his memory served him correctly, they had only minutes left until load-out. They had covered the pressing issues, but none of the dozen grand questions. Socializing under immense pressure might be natural to them; his discomfort lingered.

"I get it," Alex said. "You guys are making future plans to meet in a while?"

The men locked eyes.

Roy frowned.

Charles looked disheartened.

Alex's stomach clinched. He eased onto the nearest stool. The thought of them making plans without him hurt, but he didn't feel being excluded motivated his subconscious to instill this level of unease. "Are you guys scheduling an adventure for next week or something?"

Neither man replied, or turned from him.

"That's cool, just don't forget I want to be in on the one after that." His body flushed. Because of the Health and Wellness standards, this would be Charles' final trip. Perhaps he could pull some strings...

Roy set his cup down, sounding a hollow bang. "Look, Alex--"

"No, no," Charles interrupted. "It's my mess, I'll try and clean it up." Clearing his throat, he addressed Alex. "You sprang this entire conundrum on me yesterday afternoon." He shook his head. "The stress put me to sleep minutes after you left, then kept me awake all night. With more time, I promise you I would have arranged something better." A beat. "I care about you."

"We both do," Roy added.

Charles shared a look with Roy and then squared his shoulders to Alex. "We are your friends and would never do anything to cause you problems."

Alex bit into the top of his muffin, thinking people only said that to soften a blow.

"I feel foolish," Charles continued. "I didn't think things through."

"What things?" Alex asked. A full mouth helped hide the crack in his voice.

Charles shook his head. "Alex, back at your place, when I went in the restroom, it wasn't because I had a cold—I was a nervous wreck." Swallowing hard, he glanced at Roy, who, with a look of dire seriousness, nodded for Charles to continue.

"When I went into the head, I ingested an entire bottle of Nembutals, about twenty Oxycodone, and a handful of amphetamines."

Alex's mouth turned into a cement mixer, churning the gritty blueberry muffin into clay. He tried to swallow, to ask what Charles meant exactly, but the substances met with the forming lump, clogged his gullet.

“According to the research I conducted last night,” Charles added somberly as he exhaled, “my heart stopped beating about twenty minutes ago. I am truly sorry, Alex. I really am.”

“We both are,” Roy jumped in. “You have to see it from our perspective. You don’t yet know the fear of closing your eyes each night and praying with all you have that they will open the following morning. Of being weighted with the memories of all the great people you’ve outlived. There’s no horror like it.”

“And then this comes along,” Charles added. “Roy and myself built so much together, yet the one sentiment we always shared: it wasn’t enough. We needed more time. Can you see that? Can you understand our position?”

Alex pictured havoc at Legion. Despite Charles’ advice, Glen would have checked on them, per his instructions. When he found a fresh corpse, he’d call nine-one-one, and the ensuing chaos would shake the world, remove Alex’s ability to deny his violation.

“This is the greatest thing that could have ever happened,” Roy said.

Alex was too stunned to disagree, too shocked to reach over the table and strangle the inconsiderate men across from him.

“We wish you all the luck in the world in keeping a lid on this,” Roy said. “We truly do, and meant everything we discussed. Follow that plan. It will work.”

“And I apologize so profusely for complicating matters,” Charles added, “but...” he looked down and toyed with his coffee cup.

Alex realized he’d been shaking his head ever so slightly in the negative, and couldn’t stop. This wasn’t an inconvenience, it was blowing the lid off their plans.

Alex wouldn’t survive. A hundred Tara’s couldn’t contain this. Rosa probably swayed around in the access room, going to town with a sledgehammer.

“We know this puts you in a bind,” Roy said, “but can you at least say something? Say that you understand?”

“Understand?” Alex heard himself say as if from a distance. “I understand I’m about to wake to the worst day of my life. That you two put the Lobby’s existence in jeopardy, perhaps my freedom, for your own pleasure.”

Both men frowned, their shoulders sagged.

“I understand that if they manage to shut down every back-up marcoserver, you’ll probably blink out of existence.”

“I’m on borrowed time,” Roy whispered.

“If this gets out,” Charles said, “turn it into a humanitarian thing to keep the power on, like they’re killing us-“

“Stop,” Alex said. He swooned from the implications. A tiny part of him wished he could stay in here forever, but then that thought disgusted him.

All three men faced the clock. Alex would be logging out at any moment.

Probably heading to jail shortly after.

He wondered briefly if someone out there sold lobotomies?

“Alex.” Roy placed a hand on his friend’s arm. “Think about what this means for the world. Contain it if you can, but I say, let it free. Tell everyone. Join us.”

Join them? Crush Rosa? Abandon his responsibilities? The notion startled him. Turned his stomach. He could never be *that* selfish.

Leaning back, Roy said, "Either way, it's no longer my concern. I'm out of that bullshit rat race and I can't stress to you how good that feels. All I want to say is, I love you as a person and I hope very much to see you again."

Charles uttered something Alex didn't catch. A tingling coursed through his body. A familiar lightness swept over him as he looked from young face to young face and saw concern. He heard himself say he understood or maybe he cursed them, he couldn't be sure. His world went cloudy as his consciousness transported him from this nightmare to a probable living Hell.

SEVENTH PLANE
OF EXISTENCE

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Before entering the closed-door hearing, Peter gave Alex his legal counsel: "When dealing with the United States Judicial system, say nothing. There are no fair shakes. We're transitioning to kangaroo courts. Say nothing to state officials, not even if innocent or an eye witness. Not if you value your freedom and possessions. We are the nation of metaphorical black bags over heads, convictions without evidence; don't let propaganda convince you otherwise."

Alex had sat mute for the past hour, waiting for mention of his infraction for accessing the Lobby. The topic had yet to be breached, despite the lawyers' non-stop bickering.

"You cannot extend a ban without concluding the initial fraudulent investigation," Peter said, for what seemed the dozenth time.

"Your client is killing people," Agent Andrews said. "You're fine with that?" There was a new line. It cinched Alex's stomach.

"Are you saying Alex Cutler murdered Charles Arnold? Roy Guillen?"

Agent Andrews bit his bottom lip, puffed out his top, as if he believed the answer yes, but presumably mulled over a reply that matched the evidence.

"Elderly men die," Peter said. "Some naturally, some over medicate-"

"Commit suicide," Agent Andrews barked.

"That's not unheard of, Agent. Moreover, there is no law against providing a conducive environment to die. That could be labeled big-hearted, philanthropic."

"Oh, you make me sick. Big-hearted," Agent Andrews appeared about to spit. "Suicide is against God's law."

"We didn't cover that section of penal code at Harvard," Peter leaned over the table and closed his leather binder. "I think we are done here."

The half-dozen other lawyers—essential spectators, like Alex—seemed relieved by the statement.

"We are nowhere near done," Agent Andrews said. "We are going to file endless motions and briefs and keep that dangerous machine offline until we have proof of its appetite."

"And we'll fight you long enough for the angry mob to climb over the gates, carry you out of power, and demand their favorite pastime is reinstated."

"Are you threatening me?"

"Mr. Cutler," Peter said. "It's time for us to make our exit." He stood, his briefcase by his side.

"We will continue this tomorrow morning, nine a.m.," Andrews said.

While keeping his gaze on Alex, Peter nodded.

With no objections from Andrews, also because the room gathered their belongings in a show of support, Alex stood.

The previously quiet hall—for it had to be past eight in the evening—echoed with the approaching footsteps of Alex's head of security. Luke stepped in front of Alex, stopping him and his attorney. "I need to prep you before our departure. There's a swarm of reporters out front, some camped out back. We'll need to be swift and orderly.

"I need a few more minutes of Mr. Cutler's time." Peter said. Luke checked with Alex, who nodded, and followed Peter into the same meeting room they met in before the hearing.

With the door shut, Peter loosened his tie, and stared at the wall, occasionally shaking his head ever so slightly.

While his anxiety rose, and since Alex only wanted to get home, update Rosa, and find some peace, he interrupted the rumination, "Peter."

The younger man inspected Alex. Distress showed: a slight frown, raised eyebrows, one hand tucked under the opposite armpit. Peter swallowed, nodded toward the chairs, "Let's sit for moment."

Alex sat. Peter remained standing, inspecting Alex long enough to raise Alex's temperature. The moment before he addressed his being uncomfortable, Peter spoke.

"You have to tell me what's happening here, Alex."

What's happening...Flashes entered his head: the nurses wheeling out Roy's body—a ruin of flesh that seeped a foul odor—to the young, confused, and soon giddy Roy they had found in Nebraska, 1871. What could he say?

"I felt like I was tiptoeing through a mine field in there," Peter said. "If I step wrong, that psycho will get his wish: The Lobby will be iced."

As much as Alex didn't want that (it possibly represented his worst-case scenario) he couldn't focus on the now. He pondered the last time he saw Roy in Starbucks, particularly Charles's calm face. At what point did the old part of the young Charles die? Did he feel a tingling throughout his body as Alex prattled on, and know his gamble was succeeding?

"Let me be clear, if you want me to protect you, which I will do until the end of time, then you need to tell me what's happening. The truth. Understand, I don't care if you are murdering your friends—although I will advise against it in the future and suggest you seek help from a specific doctor I know—but out of everyone on this planet, I must know the truth, so I can best maneuver around it."

Alex and Rosa represented the only living people in the know. Staring at Peter, he recalled a saying, "It takes two to keep a secret, three to make it common knowledge."

"I'm bound by oath, and honor to never divulge what you tell me. I am your most trusted advisor."

Alex told him. Everything, Roy's death, finding him in Malcom, Charles, he ended by voicing, since the Lobby offered so much space, he'd never see his two friends again. Given a do-over, he'd have scheduled a more composed good-bye for a later date.

Peter had eased into the chair across from Alex halfway through his retelling. He'd scooted closer on two occasions, putting the man directly across from him, where their knees almost touched. When Alex finished, he read nothing on the attorney's blank stare.

The man placed both hands over his face, hung his head.

Alex considered placing a consoling hand on his shoulder; wondered if he'd made a big mistake. Peter could easily go retell this story.

Peter dropped his hands, looked up.

The man's enormous smile shocked Alex. "And what," Peter slapped Alex's thigh, squeezed the knee hard enough to make Alex flinch, "you think they're going to be there forever?"

"What?"

"Like, just what, forever?" Peter. "What if the power goes out?"

"I'm not sure it can."

"Okay. Okay. Well, you know those guys, what do you think they're doing right now. Just enmeshed in some massive orgy of chicks and champagne?"

Alex lacked an appropriate response.

"Two old geezers squeezing titties and making it rain."

"Peter," Alex snapped his fingers. "Are you with me right now?"

Peter faced him, but his eyes were wide, looking off in the distance.

"Listen to me; I'm worried about going to jail. Do you think Agent Andrews is going to pursue my violating the court order."

Peter twisted his wedding band and stepped away. "They were both single, right." He furrowed his brow. "I'd love to leave Wanda some type of note, make sure she was taken care of, but I could have a *virtual* wife." He scrutinized Alex. "Did I ever tell you that's how I spend most of my vacations, with Lydia, my virtual girlfriend? She gets me, Alex. I mean, I know she's a program, but...I don't know. She remembers things, cares about me like no American woman can."

Alex rapped his knuckles on the table, "Hey. Are you here, man."

"Here? Of course, but what the fuck, ya know. Fuck. I never wondered if Lydia could leave her world? Can she do that? Like visit other worlds with me?"

"I need you to calm down."

"I am calm. Just asking a question. I mean it's not an unreasonable question."

"Am I going to go to jail? That's a reasonable question. Can we save the Lobby from annihilation?"

"Save the Lobby? OF. COURSE. I will do anything to keep it safe. I'd break the law." Peter's grin widened to a point where Alex feared a giggle. "I would. It's the one thing I've spent my life saying I'd never do. But I'd break the darn law to help the Lobby. It's too valuable now. Us lawyers know what a wicked machine the courts are. It's why we're scared to death of it. But," he licked his lips, "what you've just told me. Growing old in society or retiring in Paradise." He snorted. "I'll break that law."

"You're not giving me much confidence you'll keep this secret."

Peter jerked his head like a bird, inspected Alex from toe to head. He straightened his tie, licked his lips, "I'm an excellent attorney. Attorney client privilege is a sacred pact, as far as I'm concerned."

"After the shock wears off, I need you to consider the implications. If you want to save the Lobby, we must work to keep the anomalous fact of life carrying on in the Lobby a secret."

Peter settled into his chair. Leaning across, he took Alex's hand in both of his. "You have my solemn loyalty, Mr. Cutler. You can trust me. I'll never repeat what you've said. I'll beat back this hiccup. Things will return to normal. I only ask one thing: when

the time comes; years, a decade from now, after it's all died down and a thing of the past, you'll permit me to transfer in...permanently."

Alex tried to pull back his hand, but Peter held tight.

"No one will know. I'm talking years from now. I'll plan it out for us; you'll do a little clean up." He licked his lips. "I'll never tell a soul. No one should know the Lobby's secret. I'm just thinking about myself here. Give me your word and you have mine. I'll wipe the floor with this agent, have everything smooth, the wellness plan will avoid future incidents, the world ticks on happily. I only need your word."

Alex itched behind his ear with his free hand. Seeing no alternative, feeling he'd benefit from the alliance, he nodded.

"Great," Peter released his hand and stood. "You trusted the right person, Mr. Cutler. Consider this done. I'll still have to bill you, but this inquiry will blow over in a matter of months." He grinned, "if you can keep your friends from dying on your private access points, that is."

"That won't be a problem," Alex had no friends left. As Alex stood, he felt comforted. Conviction emitted a perceptible energy: Alex lathered in Peter's aura.

Luke waited in the hall and peppered Alex with exit instructions as Peter moved on, a little skip to his step.

The security team ushered him out the back Rugby style: defenders all around, moving in centipedal fashion.

The cries of reporters and gathered onlookers hardly registered. Alex had shared his secret with one person. He felt confident he could now keep Tara and Adisah out of it, netting him one less conspirator.

The guts of the return commute passed without commotion. Arriving home stirred the reporters posted outside his gate, but only long enough for them to film the passing vehicles. Inside, Alex called Rosa's name. He wanted to update her on him avoiding jail, leave out the Lobby unless she asked, maybe have a meal on the second level patio under the stars.

Feeling good, well...decent, for the first time in days, Alex decided to short-cut the search, "Victor, can you tell me where Rosa is?"

"Mrs. Cutler left the premises at precisely five thirteen."

Left the premises? Four hours ago. Six additional steps solved the mystery. A digital note flashed on a section of Legion's wall they used as a community board. Alex pressed the icon to open it.

"I've packed a bag and gone to the beach house. I have calmed. I do feel better, but I stand by my request. You must remove that thing from our house. We will talk in a few days. I love you with all my heart, Alex. I am positive this crisis will bring us closer. I simply need a few days for myself. With love, Rosa."

Alex first admired his wife's commitment to their living happy, forever. Next, he worried who would be with her at the Malibu house. They couldn't afford to share this. He had intended to harp that point over dinner.

Deleting the message, he accepted he trusted her to keep it quiet. Privacy mattered to Rosa. Standing in an empty house, knowing he wouldn't be holding her made him feel icky, as if someone tossed a bucket of swamp water over him, leaving him feeling weighted, dirty, totally out of sorts.

Moving to the library, he grabbed a thin blanket, laid on the nearest couch, and courtesy of resurging depression, fell asleep within seconds.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Day two at the FBI office upgraded to miserable, but now Alex sat at home, and though potential still existed, the chances of him being criminally, or financially culpable for Charles' death appeared minimal.

He had showered and eaten in preparation of watching Rebecca Trevino's, *Inside Today*. Recently, he'd been tuning in every weekday at eight. Hers seemed to be the only news program that argued multiple sides. She often inserted hard facts, showcasing data that proved the Lobby's safety. That didn't mean she avoided speculation or debating ideas. However, she might be the only reporter withholding rants about Lobby horrors.

Melted into a leather couch in the main floor library, Alex relaxed in a pair of Broumgard sweat pants, a stretched-out T-shirt, and devoured Oreos two at a time. A square foot, in the bottom right of his television, swiped through photos of Rosa. She could smile a hundred different ways; all of them gorgeous. He longed for the approaching day when things cooled, and he could be the man she deserved.

Today's episode brought the potential of Charles's autopsy report. He wondered if its revelations could sway Rebecca Trevino from her current faith in everything Lobby.

Channel surfing displayed a replay of Peter's earlier news conference. Even though Alex had listened to it a dozen times that day, he increased the volume.

"Allow me to dispel a series of rumors," Peter squared his shoulders to the podium, his skin looked youthful as if coated in make-up, his voice boomed. "Charles Arnold was not a depressed man. He, like thousands of others, was an over medicated patient; a victim of big pharmaceuticals' exploitation of our elderly citizens.

"The baseless smear against my client, Alex Cutler, is the media scourge at its best: sensationalizing fiction to gather ratings. Since media is about profits, my hat's off to them. But I'll address the sensible people of this world: Alex Cutler is as kind a man as you will ever find. The Lobby, as it has been for seven public years and many others prior to that, is conclusively safe."

The crowd cheered at that, spiking Peter's excitement. "And here's a little inside information to sensationalize: the forthcoming evidence will supports my words." Even louder, "this fraudulent charade is almost at an end, the Lobby will be reopened within days."

Big applause. An uproar as he screamed: "YOU HAVE MY WORD." A nearby reporter, apparently caught in the excitement, withdrew her microphone, and clapped.

Alex grinned half-heartedly as he flipped back to *Inside Today's* hosting channel.

He craved her show, yes, but he didn't neglect other news programs. He couldn't get enough of the lunacy. Panic crept in as he suffered through commercials. Some of the

theories hypothesized by the media were so diabolical and ridiculous, he pitied the reporters, knowing they had missed their true calling as authors of paranormal fiction.

The most common conspiracy stated Alex had been silencing men before they went public about an unspecified danger posed by the Lobby.

With fluctuating lines of conjecture, every few hours some tech blogger nailed the truth. When that happened, Alex switched the channel or cut off the television and snacked. Hence, his bloated abdomen.

Tingling with anticipation at tonight's episode, and as its ensuing drama approached, he leaned forward, grabbed the glass of whole milk and downed a two milligram Ativan that Roy's doctor prescribed him on the fly.

His choices seemed to be medicate or hit the booze and, regardless of the doctor's advice, he'd been considering a regimen of both.

Inside Today's soundtrack blared. A montage of Rebecca reporting in various dramatic scenes started each program: a barrier village in Nairobi, an overcrowded prison in the U.S., the war-torn streets of Gaza.

Even though he judged through the lens of a camera, Alex put her at an average height. Her strawberry blonde hair, angled jaw line, and firm body were as much a trademark as her strong diction.

During the program, he often believed she spoke directly to him. After nearly every episode, he considered calling her to schedule an interview. As if also detecting Rebecca's subliminal missives, Tara had texted her support for him giving an interview that previous night. This morning, his attorney vehemently condemned the idea, reminded Alex to relax, guard his house, Peter had everything under control.

Per the norm, Rebecca reviewed the night's topics and, as expected, they were all Lobby related.

"Pardon me," Victor said, his voice overtaking the program.

"A commotion upstairs has drawn the attention of your security staff."

Commotion? Alex popped the cube of cheese he held into his mouth. He chomped down, dismissed his nagging worry. Luke's team treated every oddity like an invasion. No intruder could access his second floor.

The two Sheriffs' deputies who had stayed outside his property, now patrolled his house every hour. They had finished their latest round minutes ago. Rosa remained at the beach house. Glen worked until ten. Arnel should be clocking out any moment. Since none of those people ventured onto the second floor without permission, and with a commercial coming on, Alex prodded further, "What sort of commotion?"

A tickle of worry caused him to sit up, wedge his feet into slippers, snag an Oreo. He hoped whatever constituted "commotion" didn't cause him to miss a minute of *Inside Today*.

"Glen Daniels is attempting to access the Lobby."

Without taking a bite, he dropped the cookie and jumped up, knocking his knee on the edge of the coffee table. Limping out of the library, he rubbed at the pain. There had to be some mistake. Glen had specific instructions to avoid his room.

"What's he doing up there? I thought I told you to block all access."

"You instructed me to monitor activity. Wielding a bucket and cleaning supplies, Glen stated he had been tasked with disinfecting the access room. I granted him the

authorization on that pretense. He proceeded to interact with the control panel. I alerted security, and you.”

What was that kid thinking? Alex increased his pace. He had given Glen the control panel password: Eridu873Simon, months ago, instructing him to visit the Lobby at his leisure. Obviously, that amenity disappeared with the Lobby ban. Unless some grand excuse presented itself, Glen risked his employment.

Feeling too sluggish for an all-out sprint, Alex clipped into the back hall near the kitchen at a jogger’s pace. One thing about a home encased in thick glass, acoustics traveled great distances. He heard a man running along the intersecting hall, reaching the stairs, and climbing as he relayed he’d “be on site in four seconds.”

Despite the narcotic coagulant Ativan provided, Alex’s heart thumped. His throat burned as if he breathed air from an Arctic winter.

Rounding the stairs, he saw a security officer charge into his room. With the thick glass door left open, Alex abandoned hopes of a simple misunderstanding.

Urgent shouts from multiple men rooted him in indecision at the base of the stairs. Sweat beaded his chest and lower back. A train delivering a mental break chugged closer. Hating himself for having thoughts of closing his eyes, covering his ears, and returning to the library, he steeled himself. If the issue orbited around Glen, his rapport with the teenager might help disarm the situation. He attacked the steps two at a time.

Entering the master suite hitched his breath, increased the beating of his heart. The room’s generous length elongated as if viewed through a fun-house mirror.

A security officer in the black and gray polo shirt all of his men wore stood half in the access room doorway, another tense member poised at his six. Both had weapons pointed inside. Alex noticed the second man held a stun gun, but the first man’s grip disappeared into the access room. Hopefully, he held a taser as well.

“Put it down!” The first man yelled into the access room.

Put what down? Alex felt pulled forward as if drawn by the gravity of an unseen mass. What could Glen lift in the access room?

“It’s going to be all right,” the first officer said. “Just put it down, let me see your hands.”

“Go to Hell, moron.”

Stopping, Alex tried to reconcile the angry bark’s source. It sounded like Glen, but he’d always been so quiet, so passive. As confirmation settled, a frost pebbled Alex’s skin. Had Rosa’s suspicions been warranted? Did Glen represent a danger?

Pushing past the officer blocking the door, Alex stepped into a dense atmosphere. Sound ceased, smells spiked: body-heat, sweat, the room’s lavender air-freshener.

Glen half-sat in the middle chair. One foot rested across the leather, the other touched the floor. Rage evident on his face. The danger of the situation heightened by the Kyocera carving knife held against his far wrist. Its presence was the alien in the room. Those ceramic blades offered the sharpest edge in the industry. Cutting metal, no problem. Slicing through flesh and arteries offered resistance equivalent to a cold breath.

Blood trickled from a nick in his wrist. Not the spewing torrent of a severed artery, but Alex knew, to blast a geyser of red, Glen only needed to apply pressure.

“You stay back!” Glen yelled to the security officer.

"Glen, it's Alex." A glance, brief eye contact. "Calm down, man." Alex inspected the control panel. The counter ticked down. Fifty-two seconds remained. "Tell me what's going on."

Finding Alex, the kid's eyes narrowed to dark slits. "I know. So cut the bullshit, *Mr. Cutler*. I know. If you die while connected to the Lobby, you live there forever. I know that's what happened to Roy and it's why Charles followed."

One of the security members behind Alex mumbled something to the other. Alex wiped his brow.

"You think I'm going to stay in this bullshit world, with assholes like you, when I have options?"

Alex pushed aside the inaccurate claim of asshole, and considered refuting the Lobby claim. Accepting it takes a sociopath to hold onto a lie in the face of undeniable truth, he stayed quiet, checked the clock. Thirty-five seconds to move Glen the necessary fifteen feet away from the chair.

"What's going on in here?" A new voice barked.

Alex almost identified it. If only he paid more attention to his staff—like Rosa, who sent them birthday cards each year; mailed their children presents—he would know the personalities of the men around him, how to utilize each. Concentrating, he felt the connection nearing, and then it registered.

The doctor! Yes, that had been the voice of a bona-fide doctor. He had even heard the wheels of the cart as it arrived.

With a doctor on board, if Glen splayed his wrist open with a foot-long razor, his life could be saved. Meaning, they could either drag him away before he entered the Lobby, or keep him alive and welcome him back to the real world when his vacation ended.

That had to work. Alex wouldn't survive the scrutiny of a teenager committing suicide in his home; not death number three. It would be the domino that toppled his existence.

"I gotta do it, Mr. Cutler. You know I do." Glen said. "Once people know the truth, they will close the Lobby forever."

"Just relax, for one second." Alex stepped to the side to allow a clean line of sight for the first officer. He checked the timer: eighteen seconds. He locked eyes with the nearest officer. "Stun him. Do it now. Shoot him."

"What?" The guard stepped forward, pushed the weapon closer.

Glen looked at the clock. "Don't do it." He pressed the blade's edge into his arm. The trickle of blood became a stream. Fear danced in his eyes, boosting Alex's confidence.

"Someone taze him." Alex shouted, furious they hadn't listened the first time. "There is a doctor here. Even if he gets in the Lobby, we can keep him alive."

No sooner than he said it, Alex realized the folly in disclosing the logic. He should have let the kid cut himself; allowed him to drop into the lobby, relied on the top-notch medical professional to keep him alive. Since no one had fired, and with Alex giving away his strategy, the script flipped.

In a blur of hand movements, Glen adjusted his grip so he held the handle with two hands, pivoting the blade's tip until it touched his sternum, dead center.

"Don't do it." Alex launched forward.

The Kyocera pointed upwards at a forty-five degree angle, primed to slip under the chest plate, sink directly into the heart.

From the corner of his eye, Alex saw the timer: eight seconds. He hoped an officer realized no medic could save an impaled heart.

Alex's first foot planted.

One Mississippi.

He prayed the kid lacked the conviction, just enter the Lobby healthy, give him a break.

Two Mississippi.

Alex heard the pop of the stun gun. Victory coursed in him. When the prongs connected, the current would follow; they'd both survive the ordeal.

Glen must have heard the shot as well, for his eyes hardened.

The muscles in his forearm bulged as he pulled the blade inward. The sharp point glided through shirt and flesh as if the two layers were its natural sheath. Ceramic grew wider as it plunged.

A dark glob oozed around the blade.

Alex saw Glen twitch as the prongs of the stun gun connected, heard the current kick in.

Blood belched from Glen's mouth as he convulsed.

Alex checked the timer.

Two Mississippi.

Glen's trembling hands slipped from the handle as his eyelids drooped.

One Mississippi.

The image of an impaled young man seared into Alex's mind, to linger forever.

Alex's hands connected with the kid's ankles, yet before he yanked, Glen's eyes bulged to grotesque proportions, his body went limp—the signs of a successful transfer to the Lobby.

The officer grabbed the blade handle and the doctor yelled, "Don't touch it!"

The pooling pattern of blood widened.

Alex heard a slow exhale escape Glen's bloodied lips. The copper heat of it wafted over his senses. He released the ankle.

Allowing himself to be pushed to the side, Alex fought a growing fatigue.

The doctor rushed past.

Alex glanced around for a place to sit.

They were too late.

Glen had entered the Lobby alive, was now dead.

All the money in the world couldn't stop this from going viral.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

The Reverend Billy Graham once said, “Through perseverance the snail reached the ark.” As Agent Andrews listened to an irrelevant underling voice his opinion, he reminisced on his crawl through the years, determined to expose Broumgard. Hundreds of fantasies involved courtroom battles, where he would win the hearts and minds of a nation with rational debate. A favorite action scenario involved Alex Cutler snatching a hostage in a chokehold and aiming a pistol at their head. While being broadcast live, Agent Andrews would disarm the man with moves learned in training, and shoot Alex with his own firearm as the psychotic billionaire reached for a backup weapon.

Heading the LOC looked to become a brilliant career move. In a show of support and unity, the powers that be offered him an office on the fifth floor of the Federal building in Los Angeles. His title granted him authority equal to Deputy Director, John Willis. This meant almost a hundred agents at his disposal.

The first day of reaming Alex Cutler’s snarky attorney and watching Alex squirm had been so mercurial that within twenty minutes, Andrews had excused himself from the room and casually strolled to the bathroom. Once alone, he’d swung his arms spastically as if fighting off spirits, while grunting his elation.

When he returned to the meeting, he felt like a saint holding a flaming sword. This day brought equal satisfaction.

Beginning tomorrow, his legal team would search out precedent for seizing both the hardware and software that allowed Mr. Cutler to access the Lobby from his home.

“Given a favorable judge, that seems our best chance.” By the trailing tone of the underlying, Andrews knew he had finished. Whatever he said involved his own ego. From this day forward, words mattered little. They had an objective, actions would rule.

“Thank you, Domorsky.” Andrew said.

The man looked around, “My name is Wright, Allen Wright.”

Andrews frowned.

Before starting his final address, a woman spoke: “Domorky went home hours ago.”

“Does it matter?” Andrew said. “No. Now focus. We stand on the front line of America’s defense. The Lobby has distorted all of our values. It has supplanted American pastimes with induced delirium. Education and healthy socializing have almost vanished in a matter of years. You men, and women, are the Nameless Special Forces. Our mission is the most vital—” The elevator doors dinged with a new arrival.

Being almost nine at night, with the floor vacant except those Andrews asked to stay late, he surged with indignation; almost choked with disgust that some fat janitor had interrupted his flow. He cleared his throat. Search for his last words.

The Man in Gray stepped off the elevator.

Shorter than anyone in authority should be, his eyes were locked on Andrew's as if he'd been watching from the inside of the elevator, which obviously he hadn't. Andrews ran a finger inside the neck of his shirt.

"Who's that?" An agent asked another.

"Some spook," said the woman who previously mentioned Domorsky's departure.

"He's no one," Andrews blurted. "Our mission is vital. People are Spellbound. They need liberators and we are that source. Let's get to it." He frowned at his ending: much shorter and lacking his intended panache. With swiveling heads all around the table, he expedited their dismissal by shooing them out with both arms.

Andrews dropped into the nearest chair; checked on the interloper; who continued to stare. Andrews looked away. *Little shit trying to intimidate me; doesn't work.*

"Agent Andrews," the last man to exit said.

"What, dammit."

"I was just... Have a good night, Sir."

"Brown nosing will get you nowhere with me, agent Wright."

"Okay then." Agent Wright pivoted on a heel and trailed the herd to the elevator.

Andrews felt the short man still staring, but he didn't take the bait by looking up, he daydreamed about how special it would feel to seize Alex Cutler's property. Regardless of orders, Andrew's would explore the highly-touted, patent-protected macrostorage servers that preserved the Lobby. He had to see the hardware, examine the software.

Being a member of the federal government, he didn't understand why they couldn't take the dangerous components by force. What happened if his legal team failed to compile the necessary arguments? Or if one lone judge overruled them in court? Would they just allow Broumgard to keep destroying the world?

Personally, he'd continue to fight. With clear evidence pointing to the Lobby's evil, he'd eventually destroy the machine.

He heard the small man's soft padding steps bring him near Andrews.

Looking up brought a start. The Man in Gray waited at the end of the abandoned aisle like a serial killer—well out of the range Andrews expected from the sounds of the footfalls.

Had he imagined hearing steps at his six? Was he experiencing a psychosomatic effect, some mind trick used to scare? He hadn't slept much, which it explained it sufficiently.

Besides, who just stands like that, glaring at someone.

Andrews rose to his full six one and stared back.

The Man in Gray had introduced himself as Mr. Johnson on their first meeting.

After dismissing the room with a few words, he shared frightening information about the Lobby and its soul-trapping capabilities.

Specifically, how the Japanese had identify the soul-shifting effect a few days after Roy Guillen's passing and jumped into the business of selling "death trips" to the ultra-wealthy of Japan, with intentions of expanding that opportunity across the world.

The idea chilled Andrews. When had society fallen so low?

He detested the Man in Gray's visits, but valued his information. And why the Man in Gray? Andrews was certain the man wore other colors, surely his undergarments were black, some white. He assumed the moniker stemmed from arriving in the same pressed gray suit each time. Nevertheless, the guy operated outside the governmental fraternity, yet held immense clout; an extreme annoyance.

The head of CRYPTLOG, Kathleen Sousa herself, vouched for the man's ultimate authority.

The Man in Gray moved toward him.

Preferring to avoid the handshake, Andrews said, "Let's head into my office," and hurried inside.

He busied himself by opening a folder next to his tablet. A thirty-two year old man from Tennessee had been experiencing double-vision ever since his last trip to the Lobby, two years ago.

He marveled at what a little press could do. In six days, the LOC equaled its last *six years* in complaints of long-term detriments associated with Lobby visits.

Rather than hear the door shut, he sensed the air pressure in the room thicken.

The Man in Gray stood beside the closed door. His arms hung loosely at his sides, his body stiff as if sprayed with starch, his gaze honed on Andrews.

The man's height confounded Andrews. Five-two? At that stature, with a receding hairline and small ears, how could he be a man of mystic authority? His arms, chest, and quads bulged, proving he wasted time at the gym rather than at work or study, who anointed this man-child?

He did possess a strangely powerful walk; the kind of strut that turned heads, hushed a room.

Without having to ask, Andrews knew the man previously served in the military. No better avenue existed for getting scooped up by one of the many clandestine governmental agencies. Join, test out of the water, get scrutinized without knowing it, and if you please someone important, an invite manifests. Andrews pinned him as Air Force. The Man in Gray carried himself with their smugness. Closing the folder, he greeted his guest. "Mr. Johnson."

"We will be urging a military presence at all Atriums to keep zealots from entering."

Andrews ignored the lack of greeting, focused on the words. He knew local law enforcement, along with six-man teams of federal agents denied entrance to anyone besides maintenance workers and the occasional IT guys. Since the agents mostly sat around playing with their smartphones, he didn't understand the need to bolster those numbers.

"Within the next few hours, two problematic revelations will be released to the public. A major one is underway at the Cutler home as we speak."

Andrews pressed all ten fingers on the table, wondering if Alex would truly be stupid enough to press his luck.

As the silence dragged on, Andrews grew embarrassed by his child-like enthusiasm to hear about Mr. Cutler's problems, and relaxed.

The Man in Gray continued, "The other occurred in London twenty minutes ago. A janitor disguised his wife as an employee. Together, they managed to sneak their

children inside. The husband logged his wife and children into the Lobby and then injected each with a hundred fifty cc mixture of motor oil, anti-freeze, and other homemade poisons.”

Andrews’ mouth dropped open.

“The husband then sat in his own chair, and with seconds remaining, chugged his green punch.”

Andrews repressed his bile by closing his eyes. “A father murdered his entire family?” Pressing his palms against his eyes, he asked, “When did these things happen?”

“They are happening now. The events at the Cutler home will hit your desk within the hour, the media shortly thereafter. It will be hectic, I advise a power nap.”

A nap? No chance. His next question might cost him credibility, but he had to know. “One hundred percent, if someone dies while in the Lobby, they stay there?”

The Man in Gray cocked his head to one side and stepped closer. “It was verified a week ago. That’s why I briefed you.” He moved one of the seatbacks to displace the object dividing them. “You have been given a position of importance, Mr. Andrews. I hope you have the stamina to persevere, and the faith to adhere to a communal plan. I was told I could delegate high priority tasks to you.”

“You can, absolutely.” *Although it’s Agent Andrews.*

“Your responsibility is to harass Mr. Cutler; keep his feet to the fire, remove the Lobby from society. I’ll make sure the world sees it as the destructive element it has always been, and learn to hate its memory.”

Andrews like the thought, but by those standards, *he’d* be doing the important stuff. Hence, he should be giving the orders.

Andrews checked his watch. Less than two hours to prepare, for now, he mulled over how chaos within the Cutler’s and a family slaughtered in London helped, and concluded those events helped tremendously.

The short man glided to the dominant window that faced the office. Despite an empty floor, he twisted the hanging rod, closing the blinds. Once sealed, he went to the light switch and dimmed the lights.

Sensing danger, Andrews moved his hand under the right split of his suit jacket, near his sidearm.

“Dim lighting helps with the nerves,” The Man in Gray motioned to the chair before Andrews. “Sit. I have things of vital importance to share. The correct frame of mind allows for optimal retention.”

The Man in Gray stayed at the light switch until Andrews obliged.

He didn’t believe sitting and turning down the lights effected mental function. That stuff might be necessary for weak-minded peons, not him. Still, he obeyed.

From the new angle, most of the man’s body vanished behind a cushioned chair, making it appear a bodiless head addressed him.

“Everything thus far is but a pittance to the turmoil approaching this nation, and humanity itself.”

Stature forgotten, Andrews leaned forward, wondering what could be more serious than a machine that caused a man to kill his family and ate souls?

“How strong is your faith, Mr. Andrews?”

He preferred Agent Andrews, but he kept quiet, considered the question. He attended church regularly, missing at most two Sundays a year; read the Bible every night

after he flossed; and knew deep in his gut that he epitomized the ideal disciple for his Lord and Savior. "I have no doubts that the bible lays out the pathway to salvation."

"You have quirks, but I trust you are a devout and true believer. That's why I'm here." He stepped from behind the chair. "You sit before one of the few men throughout antiquity who can assure you, there is a God. A force, with the characteristics of a sentient being exists. He initiated the universe. And though He loves everything, we are his most engaging creations."

The man stood like a robot from the nineteen fifties—block shaped and inanimate—but his words rattled Andrews more than a six-foot-five bodybuilder shaking him for owing the local Don.

"I can also assure you we've known the soul exists for over fifty years. We're close to being able to gauge the strength of its presence in a person, and the positive and negative effects of its leaning. Broumgard all but made public the existence of a soul the day of the Lobby's launch, but no one noticed. In essence, this machine and current events have done something very rare in my life: they surprised me. This equipment steals souls, Mr. Andrews. Souls mainly destined for a desolate Hell of insanity, confusion, and regret, but now that majority is evading their deserved punishment for choosing a life of apathy and cowardice. Much more disconcerting is that this machine is muffling the rewards earned by those few who follow their instincts into action, forgive those who ask, and contribute to more than their own offspring." Making firm eye contact, he continued "You do understand what I'm saying?"

"Of course. Men of action. I know the type."

"There is a God and His plan to reward or punish an individual's use of free will is being circumvented. Another truth for you to absorb is an intricate plan of this malevolence can only be initiated by His nemesis."

Andrews almost blurted, "Alex Cutler." Instead, as full comprehension registered, he narrowed his eyes and nodded.

"Never forget that fact. You will need ample fuel for the upcoming battle." The Man in Gray softened his tone and continued, "I'm sure you've heard it rumored that we monitor global chatter. We do it for a multitude of reasons, mainly to predict or influence voting habits. That endeavor has been a science in this country since the early sixties and worked in all elections, save one. We have thwarted future antagonists from attaining their destined positions for decades. We now send them down a path that leads to prison or death. And with people of exceptional charisma weeded out, the country keeps the proper 'follow the lesser hierarchy,' and decency reigns."

Andrews always wondered why there hadn't been any political or philosophical leaders in opposition to the government's increasing control since the barrage of assassinations and suspicious deaths throughout the sixties. But he couldn't believe the government exerted the described level of control. If they did, why were so many imbeciles allowed to succeed, or even live?

"This machine is evil," the Man in Gray said. "And the chatter around the world is troubling. Each hour, more people are discussing whether the Lobby can store your consciousness forever. With the upcoming news coverage, those numbers will explode. Despite our efficiency, my side lacks the manpower to contain what's coming." Surprisingly, he shifted his weight. "People will want to get inside of those machines to

die. And when humans identify a true want, we are the most inventive creatures to ever exist.

"My end has begun a soft campaign, reaching out to other true believers. I will forge a powerful front. Yours, as well as various other factions, will be vital to our victory."

Andrews' mouth dried. The current conversation solidified his life-long conviction that staying the course would lead to a role of importance.

"I need a copy of that list of those who will help," Andrews said, "and a greater role in combating this evil."

"You need to do as you're told, nothing more. Boot up your computer."

No please? Andrews was head of the LOC, not this little person's lackey. He looked down at the device, wanting very much to continue this briefing, but he deserved a proper level of respect.

A mild disorientation settled as he depressed the power button and listened to the start up noises. Then he accepted, a power greater than the Man in Gray sought his help in the battle for all of mankind. God, Himself.

The screen lit up with the normal blue. When it completed the cycle, it flickered once, and a tan backdrop replaced his normal series of icons. One icon, shaped like a manila folder stood alone, labeled, "The Beast."

"Open that file, but withhold from perusing it at this time."

I'll peruse whatever I want, thought Andrews. He double-clicked the icon, opened an electronic dossier. He'd poured over thousands similar to this. The exception being this one had twice the number of thumbnails dotting its side. The Header: Sung Yi, age sixty-one; Tao Buddhist, born in Xiang, China, immigrated to Nara, Japan in Nineteen eighty-nine. Upon finishing the information on the main page, he glanced at his visitor, hoping he'd noticed his perusing, of the front page.

As if unconcerned, the Man in Gray continued, "Sung Yi's teachings rapidly digressed from fundamental Taoism in the late eighties, which seemed to decrease his audience, but attract loyal followers. In the mid-nineties, he became the first ordained monk to stream his Buddhist nonsense over the internet in a podcast. Still, no big deal. A couple hundred eclectic weirdos.

"What now makes this demure kook a threat to this nation is his viral explosion over the past week. Considering all of the internet sensations of the past, there's never been growth like this. His introductory video on the seventh plane of existence has received over five hundred million views in the past six days."

Andrews frowned. He enjoyed going on the internet to watch recorded Presidential inaugurations—so he considered himself a Youtube expert. He had never heard of Sung Yi, or a seventh plane of existence. "I'm sorry, seven planes of existence? Isn't science still working on proving the forth?"

"You're talking about dimensions, and we've identified over forty, but that's irrelevant. Planes of existence are methods of classifying reincarnation. Buddhists believe when a person dies, they immediately return to life in another form. Particle physics say they are correct about physical matter returning to life—in about five hundred years—but they are woefully incorrect when thinking the spirit participates in that journey, God might recycle, but the soul moves on."

Andrews knew judgment awaited each man. Who didn't.

“Many Buddhists believe that when you die, you return on one of *six* planes of existence. As ridiculous as it sounds, they figure you’re either: plant life, an insect, an animal, a sea creature, human, or you appear on the sixth plane as a demigod.

“Enlightened Buddhists consider this recycling of life to be a cruel and unjust existence. For even if they live kind enough lives to reach demigod status, they would still experience suffering and loss, and after thousands of years, death; at which point they reincarnate again on one of the six planes, continuing the cycle.

“So, what a Buddhist strives for is Nirvana—an inner peace that leads to an enlightenment; an understanding of the cosmos, that once attained, enables them to cheat Gaea’s recycling plan, and allows them to become nothing. In short, Buddhists strive to end themselves.” The Man in Gray inhaled deeply, and slowly exhaled, as if bothered by the entire premise.

Andrews stared at the photo of the Asian monk on his computer. He had a wrinkly face beneath either a bald or shaved head. He wore a yellow robe with a brown sash wrapped around him. A half-smile frozen beneath dark beady eyes that sparkled with what Andrews perceived as violence.

Everything he heard seeped in. Dying, only to pop back as something new; believing in eternal life, and then trying to escape it. The absurdity almost made him chuckle. Then a question formed. Why had five hundred million people watched a video created by him? More importantly, how did this man play into the recent activities?

As if reading his mind, again, the Man in Gray continued, “For the last twenty years, Mr. Yi has been preaching to a very limited audience about a *seventh* plane of existence—one promised by Gaea to end the suffering of her people. He hypothesized that her heart breaks each time one of her children reaches Nirvana and ceases to exist. He claimed to have been granted a vision, showing how she would soon provide the world with an alternative to nihilistic enlightenment.

“Can you guess the subject matter of his seventh plane of existence videos?”

Andrews closed his eyes as his heart rate slowed, the blood in his veins became pudding, “The Lobby fulfilling those prophecies.”

“Exactly. At this point his argument is but a novelty, a scandalous topic to discuss following a few drinks. After these two stories leak, the seventh plane of existence will become an exploratory curiosity, validated to greater degrees with each forthcoming suicide.”

The word itself chafed Andrews’ core. He wasn’t as convinced as the Man in Gray that more suicides would follow. No greater insult existed against the Almighty than to throw away his gift of life. Anytime Andrews heard about an incident prior to the Lobby madness, he thought of how weak and pathetic the person must have been. The only comfort came from knowing they were burning in a pit of hellfire for their blasphemy. “Perhaps a good PR campaign and tight security will prevent further deaths.”

“Please, you need to listen, follow advice, nothing more.”

“Maybe you’ll learn I could be more valuable than even you?”

The Man in Gray allowed seconds to pass. Time in which he did little more than blink. “Tight security will be ineffective. Security personnel will comprise some of the validators, and our soil is not the greatest problem. Japan has reached out to South Korean diplomats for support to explore a practice of dying to live as a method to govern. Much of that part of the world is fervent over this Mr. Yi. Those nations will continue to

unite. The wound this media exposure causes will fester. People will turn this machine into a symbol of immortality; reached through sacrilege.”

Andrews felt his sidearm tug at his hip. He’d never fired his weapon in the line of duty. He wasn’t one of those guys who spent his weekends at the gun range or stockpiled an arsenal at his house. But at that moment, hearing this latest atrocity, his gun whispered to him. He thought of all the people with underdeveloped brains in the world, and how they would become enthralled by this evil siren. A fiery rage filled him, along with an urge to find Alex Cutler and shoot him dead; to force Adisah Boomul to kneel in front of him and then remove his head with a machete.

Pushing aside his honorable thoughts, he made eye contact with the Man in Gray. “I pray you have a plan to prevent all of this?”

He nodded. “We do, but you must be forewarned, it’s going to get messy before it gets clean. And that, Agent Andrews, is the question I have come to ask you. It’s the reason I flew out here today. I need to know if you are willing to get your hands dirty in the defense of the American way of life, against an adversary powered by a dark evil?”

Agent Andrews returned his gaze to the beady eyes on his computer screen. He thought of Adisah Boomul and Alex Cutler and the riches they had amassed by living sinful. He’d need a bigger role, more respect, but he had also pledged to honor the chain of command. Locking eyes with the Man of Smoke, and using layers of sincerity, he nodded.

“The only question I have, Mr. Johnson: can you locate other men half as loyal and dedicated as myself?”

“That’s affirmative.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Tim Vanderhart stopped watching television the previous morning. Appropriate signs he'd waited his entire life to receive had manifested. Now, he would fulfill that destiny.

Seeing each of the two stories looping on every channel sealed his conviction (the other six views helped diminish his shock). First, some crackpot from England murdered his family to trap their souls in a machine. A horrid, atrocious act. Humanity at its worst; but Alex Cutler—the man responsible for it all—assisting in another blasphemous suicide rocked Tim.

He reacted by loading his .45 semiautomatic, and chambering a round before he could sit and watch any more.

Hearing that Glen Daniels—a boy the same age as Tim—had screamed about immortality in a false device scared the bejesus out of him.

Reverend Carmichael's internet sermon nailed it dead on. Those events marked Satan's push to take over the world in the manner T. S. Elliot predicted: not with a bang, but with a whimper. A quiet marching of marked souls to awaiting chairs.

Tim joined the Northern Michigan Christian Defense at birth. Though their slogan, pamphlets, and mission statements lacked the identification, he prided himself on being part of a militia. A militia of pure genetics fighting for the rights of noble, Christian people.

Although he hadn't seen the coverage—was done with the trappings of civilization—everyone talked about the head of Atlanta's Atrium, who killed herself that morning.

For those with open eyes, clearly, the Devil lived among them.

Today, all of Tim's fantasies animated. At nineteen years old, he knew, despite weighing a hundred and ten pounds, he was the perfect age to soldier, and he trained hard to be the best. The NMCD's property covered ninety-three acres, located twenty miles east, and a tad south of Traverse City, in the state shaped like a mitten.

He'd been practicing every form of warfare conceivable since he could carry a rifle down a wooded trail. Hell, before that he unsuccessfully stalked rabbits and chipmunks with a rubber knife he'd gotten one Christmas.

The difference between him and the dozens of other men that had recently arrived to the clubhouse: he knew this day had been coming for a long time; and that he'd play a major role in their future.

Every time he squinted down a rifle sight, shimmied up a rope, cut around the anus of a deer, boiled and drank his urine, or built an improvised explosive device, he

employed ultimate reverence. For he knew someday it would all come into play for him. He simply hadn't dreamed up such a magnificent scale of importance.

He sat in a fold-out chair, alone, inside the clubhouse garage, a gray wooden barn that lost all remnants of its red paint decades ago.

It normally stored a tractor and miscellaneous obstacle course equipment. The now useless stuff had been emptied, left in the elements, the remaining space lined with two rows of eight chairs.

Twenty minutes ago, those chairs held charter heads from nearby militias and motorcycle clubs, along with their second in commands. Morally sound, hardcore, God-fearing men. Tim felt honored to be the youngest among them.

His father had been a founding brother of the NMCD. Regrettably, having battled alcohol and prescription pills his entire life, he died of cirrhosis before Tim's eleventh birthday. Tim accepted that had been God's way of showing him the detriments of polluting your temple, and he intended to heed the warning.

Alan Cox, head of the NMCD, acted as a second father to Tim. His speech today hoped to unite all of the nearby forces into one.

The summoned heads had pledged allegiance to Alan Cox. Others would follow. In a short time, the many factions would relinquish their names for one much grander: The Lord's Thorn.

The Lord's Thorn would be fully dedicated, life and limb, to the eradication of the Lobby and the downfall of the Broumgard Group.

Tim wasn't sure who the man in the gray suit had been—short, stocky, a receding hairline, a fierce look of intelligence; more hawk than man—but he provided the launching pad to the recent events.

Most of the compound slept past five in the morning; Tim always woke at the slightest provocation. Even with rotors modified to suppress sound, the noise of a helicopter setting down in a nearby field woke him in time to see the Man in Gray enter Alan's house.

Tim had crept along the edge of the window and overheard enough to know the NMCD was stepping into the big leagues. The two men of authority spoke until six thirty. When his guests departed, Alan sought Tim out, shared the plan of unification. They'd been in high gear ever since.

Alan told him things he already knew. The Man in Gray worked for the government and brought a deep commitment to stopping the Lobby. He also shared classified documents to help convince Alan they gathered to wage a war for the immortal souls of the world. He promised Alan a stake in that fight by backing him with money, personnel, and weapons.

The vacant barn offered Tim the privacy to take in all he had heard, but soon he'd raise out of his chair and commence to walking his path.

The Man in Gray, who called himself Smith, had given Alan a list with names of nearby civilians planning to join the cause. A computer program identified individuals willing to act in the defense of everything sacred on God's Earth.

Tim remained awed by the number of like-minded individuals near him.

Waves of unknown men and women approached. Tim would organize arrivals; establish their temporary shelter before the big relocation; locate natural leaders to

oversee food rations, marksman training, suppression fire techniques; important logistical imperatives for soldiers.

Their immediate mission: to forcefully unseat the famous man responsible for this evil.

Smacking his hands on his thighs, Tim stood. He had worked to do.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Alex vegetated on the twenty-six foot Dior couch in the middle of his library. Rebecca Trevino's visage dominated the monitor. The Friday edition of *Inside Today* would start soon and the twelve foot by twelve foot screen allowed him over twenty thousand inches of viewing pleasure. He enjoyed the Friday episodes the most. They reviewed the previous week's stories, and what could be forgotten in a matter of days never ceased to amaze.

Needing to relive every painful memory, he loaded up on enough snacks for the entire night: a roast beef sub, a pack of Double Stuff Oreos, E.L. Fudge cookies, chocolate in a jar, three bananas, and a two liter of Barq's root beer.

The credits for *Inside Today* rolled. Pushing the detritus from last night's snack session to the side, he assembled his new smorgasbord. Once organized, he leaned back and admired the ergonomical placement of each item.

A condition for him staying out of jail after Glen Daniel's suicide: install triggers on the access room entrances. To avoid the temptation, or hours of staring at the door handle, Alex spent his time between the library, near the kitchen on the main floor, and one of the guest bedrooms on the second floor, which overlooked the front lawn (in case Rosa returned home early).

They'd talked on the phone and she's sent him a lovely, six-page letter of condolence and affection which ended with her saying she loved him unconditionally and they'd be fine, she just needed some time. He never doubted their bond, but appreciated her detailing it nonetheless.

In the missive, Rosa mentioned staying away the entire weekend. That suited him fine. Her absence allowed him to wallow in self-pity—an underrated form of therapy.

Lights blinked around the screen showing the second intro commercial. Peter Mueller, his previously stoic, current sycophantic attorney's name ran across the top like a ticker. Per Alex's instructions, Victor blocked all calls, but the digital assistant displayed the caller him who called in case an urgent matter presented itself.

Most calls involved socialites he'd met throughout the years at the Los Angeles Atrium: actors, directors, writers, artists, professional athletes who, at one point, all wanted to have the private number of Alex Cutler. Being naïve, he had also longed for theirs. Their calls came under the guise of concern. In actuality, they desired a private interview; social currency of saying they spoke with the face of the Lobby. "Yes, he had slipped on a patch, but the Alex *they* knew would be fine." Others simply wanted to gossip about Rosa. "How's it going?"; "Good"; "I'm so sorry for your loss"; "Thank you"; "It's so commendable that you're comfortable with your wife planning fundraisers intent on closing the Lobby."

Little digs meant to pry.

Liberal heart warmers made up the most hypocritical class in America. They helped the downtrodden to experience suffering through osmosis; to lick the psychic tears of a struggle well away from their palatial states. They preach acceptance by shouting intolerance. They discuss love by calling good people bigots. They ask for diversity, just not of thought.

Given a do-over, Legion would sit on property in flyover country.

Tearing open the Oreos, he considered the situation through Rosa's eyes.

He believed she had the right to follow her heart. He only wished she wanted to talk to him about it, yet he understood why she hadn't. Of all people, she knew how much he loved the Lobby. The funny thing, he would support her efforts. She might even lure him to her side. The current drama around the globe made him sick. Having spent days out of the Lobby, he'd recently wondered if the digital escape added any benefit to society.

Prior to the new discovery of death creating life, you couldn't get him to bad-mouth the Lobby. Since then, he fantasized about supporting Rosa, strengthening their marriage. What a powerful combination they would make. The great, mystical Alex Cutler, the man many believed designed the Lobby by himself, joined side by side with his philanthropic wife in a mission to eradicate the very thing that brought them wealth.

Before he got too far into his daydream, *Inside Today* returned from commercial. Leaning forward to snatch a width of Oreos, he swigged from the opened root beer. By the time he leaned back, he abandoned all thoughts of an alternate reality where he'd support the destruction of the Lobby.

Another flash of light blinked around his screen, followed by Peter's name, again. He swept crumbs off of himself, and let it go to voicemail. He wouldn't say he had a belly, but enough of a bump existed to rest the tray of cookies upon.

The show started by recapping the previous Friday, when a custodian from London sneaked his entire family into an access room and then injected them with some lethal concoction of antifreeze and motor oil. Alex guessed that day's events coincided with his first doubts about the Lobby's value.

As soon as that spot ended, and he knew highlighting Glen's death would follow, he lost heart and swapped to Discovery channel. By design, that station never looped Glen Daniel's quote verbatim: "I know if you die while connected to the Lobby, you live forever. I know that's what happened to Roy and it's why Charles followed."

Stuffing two cookies in his mouth, he chewed with slow, crunching bites.

The memory of Glen's dying breath haunted him. Even now, thinking about it caused ghost fragrances to invade his olfactory. The viscous finality of death seemed to expel all of the long-preserved gasses and bacteria from the stomach, leaving a stench of corrupted iron, copper, blood.

Snatching the two liter and placing the opening under his nose, he squeezed the plastic sides and inhaled three quick intakes. He chased that with a drink, gradually warding off his unwanted memories.

After allowing an adequate amount of time to pass, he switched back to *Inside Today* at the exact moment it segued.

The previous Saturday, twelve people managed to connect to different access chairs around U. S. A., Europe, and Australia. They terminated their lives with hopes of finding immortality within a program.

Sunday: eight deaths, but only one splashed the screen. It surgically removed another piece of Alex's heart. Sean Flaska, his long-time friend from Chicago, and head of the Madrid Atrium, had created a cyanide pill using fish-tank algae remover and apple seeds, becoming the Lobby's twenty-seventh verified casualty.

The report claimed Sean left a suicide note. Alex considered asking Luke to track down a copy, but the notion never past the daydream phase. He lacked the motivation for action, somewhat appreciated his house arrest. He mainly wondered if he'd been mentioned in the note, if Sean hinted at a Noah's Ark, or what cool T-shirt he selected for his last day among the living.

Monday brought twenty-two Lobby related deaths. Alex accepted this as compelling evidence the Lobby might not be safe, after all. That day also brought the sealing of Atriums. No more cleaning crews or visits by upper management. For the time being, their interiors would be multi-million dollar dust farms.

That evening, attorneys from the U.S. Justice Department filed injunctions to seize the servers, possibly to be destroyed. They were promised a swift hearing.

Tara's litigation team numbered in the hundreds. Her face stayed on multiple channels. Recently they replayed her reading a statement vowing the Atriums' would be reopened after the thirty day moratorium. No servers would be harmed.

As far as Alex could tell, she voiced a minority opinion.

Tuesday brought little change. Three deaths, none of which occurred on U.S. soil. Strangely enough, Alex believed that fact generated national pride.

The bombshell came on Humpday. Eight people: six in Europe, one in the U.S. and one Down Under. More importantly, the western world learned how the other half of the planet had been coping.

Rebecca ran a human interest story on Sung Yi, a Tao Buddhist amazing the world with his prescient teachings. He pleaded for people to align their karma, be good to nature, and at the optimal time, transport their lives to the "Seventh Plane of Existence, a paradise gifted to humanity by Gaea, the Mother of Creation. Wednesday also coined the term, "Death Trips."

On that day, the world heard intimations of thousands of Death Trips having occurred in Japan and China alone. Their national spokesmen released statements denying any wrongdoing, labeling the accusations outlandish.

A few bloggers claimed the rumors of tens of thousands of Death Trips stood closer to six figures.

Hearing it anew caused Alex's gut to drop and his heart to flutter. The thought appalled him. Labeling global death, "fake news" brought his best solace, but more and more outlets considered the boast plausible, and his claim, ridiculous.

He'd seen a Death Trip firsthand, from inside and out. Death acted as a gruesome chaperone and assaulted everyone left in its wake.

He gulped more root beer, then forced two Oreos into his mouth.

No one knew for certain, and no one in the West wanted to believe such things were possible, but the thought of thousands of orchestrated deaths carried volumes of implications.

Despite its modern day wanderings, and the mocking of pundits, America remained a nation devoted to the Bible, with Islam rising in every corner. The thought of countless people killing themselves draped despair over a God-fearing nation.

Two weeks ago, no one could have written a scenario plausible enough to evoke national outrage, pensive contemplation, and fierce emotional divide. People claimed our society was fragile—possibly the reason doomsday prepping piqued American interest—but who expected it to actually fracture?

Thursday, America once again abstained from Death Trips, along with Australia, but thirty-four deaths littered Europe. A bellowing for tighter security followed them from the Middle East and the West.

The biggest story came from Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, where an air strike leveled their Atrium, ending Lobby access for that part of the world.

Saudi officials claimed to have no evidence linking any nation to the attack. Yet, conveniently, all security personnel had been evacuated to a safe distance, leaving the one hundred and thirty-five thousand square foot complex free to be reduced to a pile of ash and debris.

U.S. officials have avoided commenting. With our media embracing speculation as a rule, the common thinking behind our government's minimal clamoring: they supported the attack against a device many called unholy.

The internet burst with theories. The most credible that the Iranian military, with full approval from the Saudi Royal Family, committed the act. The most absurd that Alex Cutler, using a remote detonator from his home, caused the servers to self-destruct to avoid them being seized by Islamic nations.

Now, here it was, Friday. Protests warred outside every Atrium on the globe. The majority of the public still supported the Lobby, but the margin lessened by the day, by the hour, by the death.

Today, eleven Death Trips were reported. All located in the Paris Atrium, where scrutiny, finger-pointing, and investigations currently transpired.

Inside Today went to its third commercial near the same time he emptied the tray of Oreos. Alex flung the plastic divider on the table with enough force that it slid off the far side and onto the floor. He'd contact Rebecca Trevino. Before he could, however, he needed to chose a side and clarify his opinion.

He figured it best to call her and make the appointment, locking himself into action. Afterwards, he would call Rosa for her thoughts, contact Tara and get hers, and then come to his own conclusion.

He muted the television as it blinked again. A number ran across the top of the screen. The identifying text stated the call originated from "FBI Headquarters."

Snide remarks from Agent Andrews were the last thing he needed on the cusp of an upswing.

Alex ignored the call. His new game plan consisted of taking his first shower in three days, going online to watch the Tao Buddhist video about the Seventh Plane of Existence for himself, and then contacting Rebecca.

Another flash crossed the monitor as he drank from the two liter, followed by a flowing text message, "Mr. Cutler, this is Special Agent Andrews, head of the Lobby Oversight Committee appointed to the Los Angeles branch of the Federal Bureau of

Investigation. It is imperative that you contact me. If you do not comply within the next twenty minutes, I will have the sheriffs bring you in.”

Alex might be on house arrest for a third time, suggesting he lacked the fundamental morality to strive in society; he still longed to avoid the experience of wearing manacles. The thought of steel clanked around flesh was archaic enough to make him shudder.

Another swig of root beer and then he asked Victor to place the call.

Before the first ring completed, Andrews answered, “Special Agent Andrews, F.B.I.”

He had the special right, Alex thought, “Hi, um, this is Alex Cutler, returning your call.”

“Good thing you called, Mr. Cutler. I couldn’t allow you to avoid me much longer.”

Alex rolled his eyes. “How can I help you.”

“We have a situation unfolding and would like your assistance.” He cleared his throat. “I may not hold the highest regard for the fast life you live, but I reserve hope that when your country calls in need of your expertise...” He paused as if that final word hurt him. After a beat, he continued, “That when your country calls, you’ll be willing to push aside your arrogance and come to its aid.”

Alex droned his reply. “I’ve been advised not to speak with any member of law enforcement without my attorney.”

“Yes, yes, we’ve contacted Mr. Mueller. With what he charges, you should have heard from him by now.”

“Maybe I should wait for his council.”

“Let me speak,” Andrews said. “If you could make the trip to the F.B.I. building tomorrow morning, regardless of whether you decide to assist or not, we will remove the GPS monitor from your ankle.”

Alex looked at the electronic manacle above his foot. Step one to seeing Rosa, Tara, or Rebecca Trevino outside of these walls involved its removal. “Sure,” he said. “When do you need me?”

“As I said, tomorrow. Seven a.m.. Try not to be late.” Another pause, and then, “We’ve had disturbing...progressions, that others feel you may be able to assist with.”

By the time he replied, “I’ll be there,” the line was dead.

With the phone in his hand, he considered tracking down Rebecca. Tossing it on the cushion, he decided to contact her at a more appropriate time.

Flopping against the back cushion, he tore open a package of E.L. Fudge. Recalling Andrews’ parting words, he tried to picture a progression more disturbing than the ones the world currently faced.

CHAPTER THIRTY

A teenage Roy Guillen waited on a field of grass in a modifier room. Before them, a panorama of jungle unlike anything found on Earth. Trees as tall as skyscrapers crammed in an unnatural density stretched as far as the eye could see. A pterodactyl-like avian glided before the wall of forest. A caw shattered the silence, Roy jumped.

His throat constricted, his lips stayed dry despite his near constant licks. Stepping into the awaiting world would officially end the life he'd known for nearly nine decades.

"You all set?" a twelve year old Charles asked.

"I'm uncertain how to answer that. I'm scared out of wits."

"Been some ride, hasn't it?" Charles said.

Roy kept sight of the flying creature, his thoughts on his first marriage, the birth of his son, the day he accepted he had attained wealth. "It's just getting started, old friend." His voice sounded high-pitched, mellifluous, sparking a question. "Do you remember what you sounded like at this age?"

"Probably like this," Charles said with a coy smile.

"Not I. My voice was nasally. I spoke with a lisp. Very distinct. It was a big reason I didn't land a date until college. The words would logjam on their way from my brain to my mouth."

"So you talked less?" Charles laughed. "Can we get that kid back?"

A chuckle. Despite the impossibility, Roy had recaptured his youth. "This is the most surreal moment of our lives." Roy said as he stared at the shimmering scene, the edge of Barchania, a land of enchantment, sorcery, and all forms of creature. Once they stepped from the modifier room to their chosen world, due to the memory block, their knowledge of past marriages, children, finance, the world, would vanish. They'd become two young wood elves from a small fishing village. He searched Charles's face. "Can a friendship survive a two-thousand-year life span?"

"With the correct self-awareness, of course."

"Have you considered that if one of us dies, we'll be kicked into the lobby where our new memories will mesh with our old. The one who dies will know this was part of our eternity in the Lobby, but the one who lives will be distraught over having lost a friend. Unaware they're in a program."

"I have. The magnitude fills me with wonder."

Roy breathed deeply.

"Our friendship will endure because we possess the two most important attributes for friendship: forgiveness and understanding."

"You're probably right," Roy said with a twinge of nostalgia.

“Let’s make a pact. If one of us dies, we’ll visit San Francisco 1968 every new decade, on New Year’s Eve. That way one day, perhaps after centuries apart, we’ll reunite.”

Roy smiled. “That’s a deal.” He felt so alive, so ready to discard a thousand regrets and live new.

“Correct me if I’m wrong,” Charles said, “but the ultimate goal here is to locate the staff of Eldwin and unite the kingdoms.”

“That’s one of the unattainable goals. As is the horn of Domerly, which allows the owner to command titans.”

Both men went silent for a moment.

“What do you think Alex is up to?” Roy asked.

“He’ll be fine,” Charles said. “Things will improve. They always do. He has a wonderful wife, and soon they’ll start a family. With little ones running around this will become a distant memory. If I still had those things, you’d be starting this adventure on your own.”

Roy hoped his friend spoke truth. Hurting Alex represented the greatest regret of his earthly life. “I want him happy.”

“He is, Roy. He’ll continue to be. No financial worries, a sharp mind, an ideal wife. You should be more worried about being torn in half by a giant troll.”

“Yeah,” Roy said. He clung to an image of Alex and Rosa at their wedding, smiled, and brushed the thoughts aside. Things would work out for Alex. “You ready to forget about our lives, start new ones?”

“As ready as I’ll ever be.” Charles clasped Roy’s shoulder. “Remember, San Francisco 1968, every new decade, New Year’s Eve.”

“Got it.” Roy hopped up and down to spike his adrenaline.

“No time like the present,” Charles strutted forward, met the forest, disappeared into the portal.

Roy examined his smooth skin, sinewy arms, felt the healthy thump of his youthful heart. Never in a million daydreams had he envisioned something so marvelous. He’d miss Alex. He wished his great granddaughter all the good fortunes life could provide. Striding toward the Barchanian forest, he found himself jubilant over the prospect of leaving everything he knew behind.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

General Koster had attended many meetings of magnitude throughout his illustrious military career. All taking place in wing seven of the Pentagon, allotted for the United States Army. If a subordinate had summoned him, he would have stayed on his home turf. Instead, he sat in wing four, at a meeting organized by a man levels above the norm.

Spotting a beautiful crucifix on the dominant wall brought immediate comfort. Thirty inches high, the artist etched Jesus to perfection: emaciated body tensed, muscles straining, face calm, turned to the side, accepting His necessary sacrifice; a life Koster related to.

Nearly as fabled as the oval office, the drama that unfolded within the Pentagon often covered a wider spectrum with less civility and greater consequences. The meeting rooms throughout acted as refineries for a majority of the crucial talks presented to the President. When taking all five floors into account, the Pentagon had seventeen-point-three miles of wide, marbled hallways. That made it over a hundred times the square footage of the White House, allowing it to offer ten times the situation rooms, and proportionately more problems. With the current global strife, he expected this meeting to center around an immensity.

The stocky man in the gray suit introduced himself as Carter, but Koster had seen the Man of Gray before; ten years back, talking with a now retired, two-star Major General—the very man Koster replaced. Yet his friend of two decades had become quite stiff when pressed as to both the identity of the short man in the restricted area, and the reason for his presence.

Over the years, Koster had heard about the Man of Gray (under different names) heading strange projects. One employed mind-control using intestinal bacteria and some form of communication with them. Another where he headed a department that mixed hypnotic and mentalist fundamentals to create a form of persuasion capable of being administered within a handful of words, granting access to a person's belief system. No one could hack Koster's belief system. The world was black and white. No gray. No mercy.

Koster found the above experiments more legitimate than the common, "he worked with aliens" angle. He knew enough about physics and the vastness of space to know the impossibility of leisure travel between galaxies. Excluding worm-hole technology, if little gray men scoured the cosmos, and found life, like shipwrecked sailors suffering from exposure, they would make contact and hope for the best.

The Man in Gray dimmed the lights as if about to show a video. But with no screen present, Koster figured it a ploy to hide his identity, or to insert discomfort. A few

of Koster's peers gripped about the lights affecting their vision, but to their chagrin, were ignored, which started this meeting on a clubfoot.

These men and women worked hard and were entitled to respect. Particularly from a man with a nickname, who, through some unorthodox means, sat higher than them on the chain of command.

As the Man in Gray started his sermon, Koster surveyed the room. To his left: Nadine Dewind, assistant to Terry Eding, head of the CIA; Brandon Palmer, presidential advisor; Jim Standly, FBI; Jeff VanNoord, NSA; Colonel Stafford; and one-star General Onaki from the Air Force.

Koster couldn't quite put his finger on the common denominator linking these people, but one existed, because Koster normally disliked people, but he respected all present.

The Man in Gray promised monumental intelligence. A few sentences proved his merit. Koster listened for the subtext—the meaning beneath it all. He'd use that to determine his level of interest, involvement, and dedication.

"Gentlemen," The man in Gray said, drawing the info dump portion to a close. "I've brought you up to speed, and now, there is much to do and little time." He remained at the head of the table as he spoke. "You're all soldiers of faith. God's warriors. These troubling times grant us an opportunity to serve."

Koster flushed as the room's link hit him: Christian faith. Brandon Palmer even attended his church.

Behind these walls, he followed the ongoing developments of the Lobby as a representative of the United States Military—keeping his opinions to himself. He had listened to the media discuss the aspect of the Lobby stealing souls. Sickening bullshit. Seething internally, he'd focused on his duty.

However, religious undertones had crept into recent conversations. Judging from the glares in the room; the two people he saw kiss the crosses around their necks; the one man who dropped into prayer; these members had serious—willing to die for—opinions on the subject.

"We have an enemy I won't name," the Man in Gray said. "Things are progressing rapidly, attempting to catch us off guard. Your commitment will keep us abreast of evil intentions. Lean on your faith. Listen to your hearts. You will find that everyday citizens are willing to pay the ultimate price to mitigate this blasphemy. What I intend to outline for those of you willing to help is of a delicate nature, but its question will be the same: in this dire hour, will you use your appointments to heed God's call?"

He let a moment pass in silence, then continued, "There are countries openly refusing to comply with the ban on the Lobby. Right now, *Inside Today* is airing. Rebecca Trevino will be reviewing the events of the past week, captivating the world as usual. Yet, it is tomorrow's special edition that will rock the fabric of society and ignite a controversy to divide the globe."

Koster found the way the man stayed ramrod stiff, unnerving. His voice hardly fluctuated, yet his intensity rocked a ten. Perhaps those voice control rumor had merit. As the Man in Gray droned on, Koster wanted to interrupt, to tell him he didn't need to hear any more spin. Tell me what to do and it's done.

“Tomorrow night’s program will expose the Death Trips operating in all four of the Japanese Atriums. It will also show evidence that Russia, China, and India are providing Death Trips.”

General Koster’s back stiffened at the naming of countries, especially as if they were aligning against the United States. That particular step preceded building a case for military action.

Koster, along with everyone in this room, understood no government held the authority to enforce the ban on the Lobby globally. America intended to try all the same.

Koster would back whatever country decided to act. Suicides must be stopped. The desecration of religious beliefs, intolerable; regardless of their geographic location. The people in this room could spurn military action. And all present were aware if they didn’t mesh church and state and radicalize, it might soon be someone they loved falling victim to the madness.

The citizens of this planet needed a voice of reason, a guiding light, not some man from across the sea speaking about a Seventh Plane of Existence and every person’s right to die.

Thankfully, others supported his philosophy. An estimated one point six billion Christians populated the world, with Muslims matching that number.

The amount of Fahtwas issued against each Atrium, and a prominent employee of the Broumgard Group, had grown too numerous to count. Millions of Islamic people swore their lives to destroying the Lobby, and despite every inclination he’d ever had about the nutty jihadists, Koster found pride in their conviction.

One hundred percent of his Christian brothers might not fervently rally, many would. Clandestine talks of taking action in their own hands—pure treason—populated the military and government. They increased daily. Now this, an open meeting in a U.S. facility. Koster’s heart knocked. *Count me in.*

“Japan has been gathering allies,” the Man in Gray continued. “Demarcations are being drawn. Countries with no Godly ties are uniting to impose their Atheism or Buddhism or Hindu falsity on the world. Fourteen nations are putting aside old grudges, coming together.”

The Man in Gray motioned to Jeff VanNoord, the presidential advisor. “Our commander in chief is securing his own allies. Christian and Muslim nations are sitting at the same table without animosity for the first time in modern history. Unified in their determination to stop the spread of the warped Buddhism and to eradicate this blasphemous concept of suicide as an accomplishment.”

The Man in Gray stepped to the side and, using a cell-phone as a projector, cast an image on the wall. “I’ve edited a probable copy of tomorrow night’s episode of *Inside Today*. In this struggle to avoid the End of Days, I expect your loyalty above all else. I have thirty years of across-the-board clearance, and am one of the few men on our planet who has overseen projects at Sci-deck, Area 51, as well as every bio and nanite technology none of you will ever hear about. I pray you will accept my self-edification. If you do, then hear these words: there is a God. He possesses a form of lethargic emotions. He rewards those who do more than vocalize their sympathies. Once you know this as surely as I do, nothing else matters.

“I will call on each of you to act in His defense. Your response will mold the eternity you spend floating in the paradoxical single-entitled vastness, know to us as the

universe; a place of unlimited joys or torments, where all will reside until the rejoining; a time when the chosen will know the absolute bliss of God's love until the new birth, trillions of years from now, that ends existence for us all."

A cold numbness traced Koster's spine. The man's words didn't totally compute, and Koster wouldn't ask him to elaborate. The Man in Gray's simple confidence left an imperceptible presence in him, as if what he heard stirred dormant understanding embedded in his DNA.

"This video will be shown to the world tomorrow. Imagine the impending problems. Ask yourself if they merit your involvement." The Man in Gray activated his phone, strolled to the door, and, after a survey of the attendants, exited.

Koster didn't want to watch a video. He wanted to behead in infidel.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

Arriving at the Federal building ten minutes before seven in the morning, Alex nodded at the agent holding the door open for him. He emptied his pockets into a pink basket, passed through the metal detector with a lump in his throat, nervously inspected the gun at the observing guard's hip.

Agent Andrews exited a nearby elevator and patiently waited for Alex to repack his keys and phone. He offered no scowl. He simply stared, a disdain emanating from his aura. As with all unpleasant people, two choices existed: argue—which fed the beast—or bide time and vacate the radius as soon as possible. Alex looked forward to the latter.

Andrews passed the underling a stout key, "Remove his monitor."

Imagining the authority required to have Andrews greet Alex without a snarky comment, with a positive action, spurned more concern. Powerful figures awaited his arrival. Most-likely, they carried ill-tidings.

The tether unclasped with a snap. The sound lightened his entire body, increased his capacity to deal with future blight. Despite his situation, he smiled, extended and retracted the liberated limb several times before making the mistake of meeting Andrews face.

To Alex's surprise, the troubled man didn't snarl. He allowed a beat to pass, and then, with only a twitch of the right eye, led them to the fourth floor.

At this early hour, Alex hadn't expected the office to be alive with agents, but they bustled. Judging by rolled up sleeves and unwinding French braids, these people had been here for hours. Their professionalism astounded Alex. Not one set of eyes stayed on him—a mild celebrity—longer than a flicker.

He trailed Andrews into a board room. Two men and a woman rose in unison. Agent Andrews closed the blinds, shut the solid oak door, and activated the lock.

"Mr. Cutler, my name is John Willis, Deputy Director of the Los Angeles branch of the F.B.I." He was a dapper African American with salt and pepper hair, the gritty look of a war-vet, glasses too large for his head. "To my left is Agent Martineau from our New York organized crime division." He wore a shirt and tie. With shoulders a yard across, the tie seemed comically small. He had olive skin, a healthy mustache perfect for 1970s pornography, and curly hair. He reached across the table, swallowed Alex's hand in a powerful grip.

Alex's stomach turned as he remembered these people had implemented much of his current suffering. With every recent life-fork leading him down a wrong path, he couldn't bare to consider the current agenda, or its eventual outcome.

“And, Jodi Reister,” Director Willis said. “Chairperson of the committee on federal spending. Easily the most important person in this room.” Alex put her in her mid-fifties, blond hair, cut short in the staggered fashion of many women in power.

They all sat. Andrews was left the chair at the end of the table, eight feet from the others.

Jodi Reister spoke, “Mr. Cutler, let me first say how sorry I am for your tragedies and losses over the past few weeks. I, like millions of others, enjoy an annual vacation with family inside the Lobby and am crushed by the latest developments.” She interlaced her hands on the table and searched his face. “As I imagine you yourself must be.”

“Well,” Agent Andrews said before Alex could reply, “something was bound to happen.”

Deputy Willis fixed him with a look of annoyance, adjusted his glasses.

The others waited for Alex’s response.

“A machine inside the brain and all,” Andrews added.

“That’ll be enough, Mr. Andrews,” Jodi Reister said.

“Well,” Alex said. “Thank you for your condolences. I’m still processing everything. I’m really not sure what to make of it.”

“None of us are,” Director Willis said.

Alex saw Agent Andrews fidget in his peripheral, no doubt wanting to chime in with his complete comprehension of the universe.

“Mr. Cutler,” Director Willis continued, “we appreciate you coming in today, and allow me to apologize for our part in adding to your discomfort. Hence forth, I fully expect us to avoid opposition.”

By tossing me in prison for life? Alex wondered. He glanced at the locked door. Were guards stationed outside of it?

“Before I turn it over to Agent Martineau, I want you to know it’s not the agency’s intention to eradicate the Lobby. We do not see it, nor you, as our enemy. The goal of this meeting is to make us allies.”

Were they enemies? Alex still couldn’t believe he sat on the opposite side of the law; that strangers held his fate in their hands, yet again.

“You know of the serious domestic and international conflicts brewing,” Director Willis added. “The public is unaware a date will soon be set to bring countries with differing beliefs to one table in hopes of settling those differences. The United States must enter those talks with the ability to control access to the Lobby.”

That made sense to Alex. “Well, you have the manpower to control the Atriums.”

Dour looks spread on the faces across from him, stealing the remainder of his reply, proving more drama existed. Racking his mind produced nothing as outrageous as the current problems, so he waited.

“Do you know who Rebecca Trevino is?” Director Willis pushed his glasses tighter to his face.

Alex leaned back, cocked his head. Was there anyone who didn’t?

“Tonight, her program will ignite controversy. In this great nation, we allow the media free reign, regardless of its ensuing turmoil. We simply prepare to minimize the damage,” Willis said.

Alex bit back a laugh. Every mention of the Lobby ignited controversy. “Will her program impact this upcoming international meeting?”

“Not as much as our current dilemma,” Willis looked beyond the big man beside him. “Mrs. Reister and I have read the rough outline of the United State’s proposal to maintain peace. It’s a plan only possible if we control access to the Lobby.”

To avoid repeating his previous statement, Alex withheld the urge to comment, wiped his clammy hands on his pants.

“The world is worse off than all the horrors you see on the news,” Willis said. “Many countries do not believe in a free press, and during crisis of this magnitude, we appreciate that. A chasm is rippling across the globe. The suppression of facts helps slow the tide of outrage, but it’s coming.”

Jodi Reister cut in. Her short blond hair hardly moved as she leaned closer, “Mr. Cutler, we need your help. President Tanner personally sent me to meet with you. My presence is to inform you any workable scenario will receive funding. Do not allow cost to hinder your creativity.”

Alex fidgeted. As long as his creativity happened outside of a cell, he wanted to help.

Jodi added a seriousness to her tone. “We hope to have your cooperation by this meeting’s end.”

“If, for some reason,” Agent Andrews inserted. “Mr. Cutler is unable to help, I’m sure I’d do an equal, or better job.” After a look from Director Willis, Andrews shrugged, “If it’s a programming issue, is all.”

“Thank you, agent,” Director Willis said.

Andrews swallowed, folded his hands on the table.

A beat and Director Willis continued, “Agent Martineau, will you apprise our friend of the current situation?”

“Certainly.” The big man filled a glass of water, sipped, and rose, blocking some of the room’s lighting from Alex.

“First off, my condolences to the losses a’ your friends.” His voice carried an East Coast accent, with a twinge of Southie, making Alex suspect he’d worked some undercover. “The world’s a kicked beehive, little soldiers is out stingin’ normalcy in a hundred directions.” He frowned, let a beat pass. “Our mission is to get life back to its former self.

“With international conflicts brewing, many prominent military leaders believe the singular threat we are about to discuss holds the key to avoiding war. You’re the man best able to help.”

Alex rolled his chair back a few inches as if to escape the thought. Who could he help? The program he poured his heart and soul into for the past seven years rushed in untold joy. With one alternate amendment, it was now being cited as a catalyst for destruction.

The media hinted at international tension at the opening of every program. He’d considered it ratings fodder. How could there be this much outrage over people killing themselves? The world endured thousands of suicides a day, for decades. It was a personal choice. Their loved ones suffered emotional stains, but the rest of us moved on, no one protested.

Religious implications stoked the tension, Alex understood that much. Give the right person a Bible or a Qu-ran and you supercharged them with power. Nearly every monolithic preacher and doomsday blogger yelled about the current evil. The speeches

resurrected attendance. Who could blame anyone for taking advantage of free speech and capitalism? God Bless America, but troubling incidents continued to escalate.

Fights abounded at protests, whether for or against the Lobby. Since Glen's suicide, five Broumgard employees had been shot and killed, ambush style. With only one shooting officially linked to their employment, the trend avoided media coverage. And now war? Military action? America still worked to extricate itself from the last half-dozen battles.

The dangers surrounding Alex made him feel like he stood in the center of a dry field of waist-high grass, surrounded by lighter-wielding, meth-addicted pyromaniacs. Remembering his location, he focused on the now, to best offer his advice.

Apparently, noticing his return to attentiveness, Martineau continued. "We believe if this summit is handled correctly, everyone, excluding some in the Middle East, comes out happy. Japan and those in the East want to use the machine as a carrot on a stick, telling their citizens if they live honorable, useful lives, they may," he made quotations, "'retire' in the Lobby. We, in the West, want to avoid that, but we can compromise. Perhaps beef up our screening, add a heavy tax. They could limit their permanent trips, impose age limits. Who knows?"

Alex considered the implications. How could the U.S. prevent suicides with an operational Lobby? Strip people naked and make them sit in a cell for twenty-four hours? Cavity searches? X-ray scans?

"You ever heard a' Paul Spagnelli?" Martineau asked.

Alex thought for a second and then shook his head.

"Paul Spagnelli is boss a' the crime families operating along the East Coast. Their criminality has calmed over the last few decades as they enter more legal ventures, but there's still drugs, prostitution, gambling, murders.

"Yesterday, we executed a search warrant on the nephew a' the big man in connection to a double homicide. It was more a cage rattling session, but we found some guns, a stockpile a' cash, and some very disturbing machinery."

Martineau paced from behind his chair. Each time he pivoted, his broad shoulders reminded Alex of air brakes lifting on a 747.

"We didn't know what we had until our techies started digging. We assumed we were looking at some rig for cheatin' slot machines or skimmin' gas pumps. Possibly a bomb, which would a' been a little out a' character for these guys, but it's a crazy world." He shrugged, retrieved a briefcase from under the table, popped the dual locks, then tossed a thick, hard-cased binder on the table before Alex. "As it turns out, it's much scarier than a bomb, Mr. Cutler. This device could rock the world. That right there could derail the international peace talks by removing our leverage."

Alex opened the five-inch-thick, three-ring binder. Inside, photographs of electrical equipment, each followed by a section with schematics, another with analysis.

Martineau pointed at the folder and said, "We're hoping you can verify our thoughts, and more importantly, that you can crush this."

Alex was a software guy, one of the rare computer geeks who avoided hardware. Back in Chicago, Sean did his change-outs, and since then, there had always been someone skilled and willing. Picturing his old friend, knowing he now lived among the deceased, dried his throat. He leaned forward, poured a glass of water, drank.

Ten minutes passed in silence as he examined the collection of data. He looked at an impossibility. The content in section D represented a type of macroserver, but a model light-years more compact and sophisticated than Broumgard's next-gen diagrams. The photographs in section L sucked him in. It seemed this odd contraption of loose wires and welded sensors functioned like an access chair, allowing someone to hack into the Lobby. The processing speed had to be abysmally slow, but a macroserver capable of accessing the Lobby, ludicrous.

If he read the schematics correctly, the entirety of the Lobby existed in a case no larger than a shoebox. Built of a titanium alloy, it must have cost a hundred grand to assemble, a pittance of the necessary R&D to reach this model. He hefted the contents of the binder, returned to the front page. Before reviewing it again in more detail, he looked at the three patient faces across from him, and asked, "Is this...a pirated access point?"

Director Willis' head dropped, his glasses slipped down his dark nose.

Agent Martineau squeezed the back of his chair hard enough to make the plastic groan.

"That's our fear," Jodi Reister answered. "The last thing we need is organized crime getting into the business of Death Trips. The only positive here is this group is usually ahead of the curve, but others will follow."

"When it comes to a planned suicide," Director Willis added, "people will pay any amount because, to them, money will soon lose its value. If prominent citizens went around maxing out their credit with plans of defaulting: People putting up homes, cars, college funds, all to just vanish, it would destroy the global economy overnight."

Agent Martineau cut in, "On a criminal front, there'd be a wave a' insanity; guys willing to do *whatever*, and instead a' money, they'd get everlasting life in a dream world."

Alex picked up on the syntax of it being "a" dream world, not "his" dream world. Realizing he wasn't a witch to burn eased a degree of worry.

"Judges, politicians, prosecutors, no one would be safe." Martineau added. "Society will crumble."

"If we lose the ability to control access to the Lobby," added Jodi Reister, "this upcoming summit meeting will be a waste of everyone's time. If random thugs can offer death trips, we can't ask the East to shelve, or even limit theirs. If they don't limit them, we have a hard right-wing branch of the military that will commence war over unfettered suicides. Control of access is our only diplomatic leverage."

"We are trying to avoid anarchy," Director Willis said. "Do you get that?"

"Americans believe we are the superpower of the world," Jodi Reister continued. "But we don't want to quarrel with Japan's navy and technology or China's numbers and training. Alex, if we can't contain this, if these pirated access points proliferate..." Rather than finish her sentence, she shook her head dramatically, swallowed, licked her lips.

Alex examined the first photo: the many components of the pirated access point.

Agent Andrews cleared his throat, waited to be chastised, and when he wasn't, spoke, "From my initial review, this is a prototype." He pointed to the binder. "We confiscated the schematics and an engineer at the scene. Evidence suggests he designed that contraption."

Meaning, Alex thought, this seizure gave them a reprieve, but not a permanent one.

“Can you confirm this device’s purpose?” Director Willis said. “Can it actually connect people to the Lobby?”

“I’d need more time with the equipment,” Alex said, “But someone sunk a fortune into this.”

“Our more ambitious expectation,” Director Willis said, “can you circumvent its capability? From my understanding, it needs to jack into the system and copy the entire Lobby infrastructure before a person can load in.”

“That is correct,” Andrews said.

Alex looked at the photo and back at them. “When can I put my hands on the actual components?”

“We can get them here within the hour,” Director Willis said.

Alex nodded absently. “I’ll need Ike Wood, my networking guy from the L.A. Atrium.”

“Done.”

Alex glanced back down and then rocked in his seat to test its comfort.

“Privacy, a speakerphone for access to Victor, two packs of Oreos, a two-liter of Root Beer.”

They all nodded with growing enthusiasm.

“I can’t make any promises,” Alex said, “except to give this my full attention.”

Agent Martineau left the room without a word. The others stood.

“That’s all we are asking for, Mr. Cutler,” Director Willis said extending his hand. “If there is anything you need, just poke your head out the door and ask.”

“You have no financial constraints,” Jodi Reister said as she walked around the table, patted his shoulder, and left.

“If you need my expertise,” Andrews said meekly “I’m available.” Director Willis motioned for Andrews to exit. After another glance at Alex, he left as well, granting Alex his privacy. The rest, saving the world from madness, seemed up to him.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

Excluding the Bible, the term exodus meant nothing to Tim, until he became one of many soldiers vacating northern Michigan. Exodus - mass departing, often with aims of arriving at a favored destination.

The weaker members, both mentally and physically, of the now defunct NMCD, remained at the compound, safe in their sheltered lives. Tim understood. Most people lacked purpose, drive, a belief in anything. Many militia members used camouflage, shotguns, and training as a way to transform today into the next. Their rants about the government dictating their lives and the minorities diluting their race with inbreeding were only condiments to beer consumption. If born in California, they'd have their hair in dreadlocks, smoke marijuana, talking about how corporations dictated their lives and how they needed to breed with minorities to unify humanity into one less intelligent, more aggressive race.

Tim believed what he believed. He entered life with a purposeful destiny, like everyone. The difference: he had located, accepted, and acted on the signs provided to unearth his.

Whoever that short, confident Man in Graysuit had been, he sure knew his stuff. Specifically, about the people he referred to NMCD. Of the two hundred and eleven troops making the trip to northern Nevada, eighty-four were walk-ons, singled out by the man in gray and encouraged to join the Lord's Thorn through random emails, letters, and phone calls. The grit and serious determination in each person's features validated the term, exodus.

Two school buses held supplies. Members piled into an old greyhound and more vans, trucks, and SUVs than an eye could take in.

Tim would go—no one could keep him away—but would Alan give him a serious role, or expect him to be a gopher, a janitor, an errand boy.

Lacking an assigned vehicle, he leapt into the back of an F-250 filled with crates of ammunition and two drums of grease. The impulsive decision to cross the country in an open bed evolved into a bad one. Rather than complain about the painful jounces and radical shifts in elements, he endured in silence.

Once they got within four miles of their destination—a Nevada desert ranch—the compounding discomfort evaporated. He sat up, and took in the scene.

The F-250 assumed its position in a near static line. Hundreds of additional vehicles, with plates from all over the Mid-West and East Coast, proved the NMCD acted as a feather in a wing of the exodus flight.

Invigorating heat welcomed Tim to his first desert afternoon. The openness of the tan-colored horizon and cloudless blue sky astounded him. He'd never seen so much space. The woods of Michigan offered a more isolated beauty, with trees and rolling meadows limiting what encompassed vision. Peeling off his shirt, he frowned at having

neglected to pack sunblock. If he burned, Alan would razz him for lacking foresight. At least he brought his army hat. He adjusted the brim, pulled it down tight, making his ears stand out more than usual. As he looked around, intent on borrowing or trading for some sunscreen, a shadow darkened the bright morning.

Looking up revealed a unified cloud, completely solid, square. How strange? The massive coagulation of dust and humidity seemed centered above the road they traveled and an amount of property in the distance. Apparently God sent his own sunblock.

Up and down the traffic jam, car doors opened, people exited their vehicles, stretched their legs.

Tim tugged the laces of his Wolverine boots tight, put his hand on the bed rail, and, in one fluid motion, threw himself over the side. Retrieving his SKS rifle and backpack, he enjoyed the familiarity of the weapon he'd fired for nearly ten years, and the weight of the pack. He curled the bag a few times to strain his thin bicep; scoffed at the minimal bulge. Muscles didn't make the soldier, intelligent bravery did. He'd teach Alan that lesson.

One step and he paused. A large machine that resembled a blue post office drop box, except painted in desert colors, sat on the side of the road. Being that the closest one waited a hundred feet from him, he reserved judgment as to its purpose.

Pacing along the asphalt, the crunch of sand under his tread made him feel like a gladiator ascending a gated tunnel.

He peeked in vehicles as he passed, shared nods, or if a window was rolled down, a terse greeting.

A gap in the vehicles showed an identical machine on the opposite side of the road. A stream of mist poured from its "mail receptor." Continuing to rack his mind, he aligned with one of the machines, stopped, and followed the stream upward.

Working collectively with other contraptions, positioned every hundred yards, the mist blended in the air, provided the exceptional coverage above them.

Holy smokes, he thought, fake cloud machines. Tim almost laughed. *I'm in with some real players.* Holding his camouflage brim hat with two hands, he searched the line of idling vehicles. A security checkpoint waited two miles ahead. Behind him, the trail of automobiles, of various makes and models, stretched into the horizon.

The white truck he'd been keeping an eye out for rested fifty yards ahead of him. Picturing Alan all pissed-off about something, Tim inhaled, adjusted his posture, and steadied his gait. The four-door, extended cab, dually one-ton, Diesel V-8; King Ranch edition's back door opened as he neared. Recognizing the hairy arm that had reached back from the passenger seat sent commands to grin. Tim knew better.

Climbing in, he tossed the backpack on the seat, positioned the rifle on his lap, shut the door, and melted into the chill of air-conditioning.

"Careful which way you point that barrel," Alan said.

Tim verified its direction; safe, as always. Alan's hair, mostly gray, matched his beard, and was pulled into a ponytail. With a protruding belly and round limbs, Alan reminded Tim of a walrus; a walrus without blubber. Tim had grown up jabbing the man's stone-hard thighs, core, and shoulders.

"Been wondering if you hitched a ride on this trip," Alan cracked the top to a Coca-Cola, passed it back, "Guess I can find a use for someone as scrawny as you."

“Thanks,” Tim said as he accepted the soda. The can was bitingly cold. So much so, he kept swapping hands as if playing an Eskimo version of hot potato. He glanced over the aisle, looking for a cooler.

Alan tapped the middle console. “Built-in fridge. Men who’ve earned their stripes get these types of luxuries.”

Tim raised his eyebrows, sat back, took a careful sip. He’d earn more than stripes, just wait.

“You got any idea what those machines do?”

Tim looked to the unknown driver. Part of his training included erring on the side of caution, so he stayed quiet.

“Don’t think the little squirt trusts you,” Alan said.

The man forced air through his nostrils.

“Graham’s a mechanic from Dayton. One of the Man in Gray’s men. A firm believer in our Lord and the evils around the world that work to lead the weak astray.”

Tim let that settle and then replied. “I’m pretty sure those machines are making that big cloud to block our activity from whoever is up there watching.”

“Kid ain’t all dumb,” Graham said.

“Ah, even a blind squirrel,” Alan said. “Besides, he’s only half right. There’s a man up there who’s watchful eye can’t be blocked.”

Tim placed the Coke in a beverage slot. Alan would establish the hierarchy of the men under his command. He’d known Tim the longest, so he took his shot. “How about me for one of the leadership roles: a Captain, Lieutenant?”

“Shit son,” Alan said. “Can you even do a hundred push-ups?”

Graham peeked at Tim’s bare-chest. No doubt he registered its hairless concavity.

“Given enough time,” Tim said.

Alan chuckled. “I need hardened men for the days ahead.”

“You need loyalty,” Tim said. “Who’s more dedicated than me, who’s more willing to follow any order?”

“Kid’s got his head on right,” Graham said.

“He hasn’t reached manhood yet,” Alan said. “His father sounded just as noble at that age, then the booze and pills took over. There’s weak blood in him.”

“Not in me,” Tim said. “I honor my temple. You could assign me as your second, and if, God forbid, you took a mortal wound, die confident things would move forward, as you envisioned.”

“That ex-Colonel’s already slotted as my number two. With a three hundred man regiment, I’ve already identified and notified my Captains. You got the godly morals to be of use, I’ll give you that. Get down to the sergeants, you might make the cut.”

“Well,” Tim said. “No one’s more ready to kick ass.”

“Ha!” Alan smacked his wide thighs. “Sometime I think bluster is the only thing keeps you from blowing away.”

“Honor to God, country, and family,” Tim said. “That’s my credence.”

Alan pointed at the time on the dash: 1:15. “We should be settled by four. There’s a conference for the brass tonight at seventeen hundred. Find me there around then, we’ll see if there’s a lieutenant willing to take you on.”

“I’ll be there.”

Minutes ticked by as the truck slowly advanced. The cool air provided by the air-conditioning made Tim feel complacent. He needed to stay battle-ready. Big things awaited him. He'd show Alan. "May I be dismissed, sir?"

"Yeah," Alan said. "Find yourself some deodorant, and sunscreen."

Tim returned to the heat. He'd be at that meeting, get a leadership role. His ascent to hero in the battle for humanity had been predestined since the beginning of time. He couldn't wait.

* * * *

Being associated with Alan carried perks. One of the Man in Gray's men towed a small trailer out West. Seeing Tim wandering amidst the ranks, he invited him to share it.

Inside the beat-up fifteen by eight, his roommate presented him with a most glorious gift: a leather vest with the Lord's Thorn emblem emblazoned on the back. The word "Lord's" arced across the top with the word "Thorn" horizontal at its base. In the center, the L overlapped the T to make a cross of sorts. The letters were tinted in a gold and bronze and wrapped loosely in a thorny vine. The bottom of the T morphed into a menacing brown thorn with a drop of blood on its tip.

Slipping the vest off the cupboard handle, its weight surprised him. An empty mark waited above the chest pocket. He already envisioned "Vanderhart" stitched on the front left side. Beneath that, another patch would read, "Sergeant." On the right, the infamous underlined phalanx would signify his rank. He slid one arm in, the other, and felt anointed, protected. He understood bullets passed through leather, but still imagined himself daring someone to shoot at him from twenty feet away and laughing at each errand shot.

This vest represented more than a token of brotherhood; it signified a responsibility. Rumors circulated that they might be deploying for their first mission as early as tomorrow. A mission to secure them a permanent base with armaments and natural defenses.

Two weeks ago, he'd been hunting turkeys, daydreaming of future events. Now he stood among a thousand like-minded soldiers. A portion of whom would be looking to him for leadership and answers. He was determined to fill that need.

On the way to his trailer, he'd noticed the impromptu base supported a diverse crowd. Outlandish bikers walked alongside men with thick glasses, closed mouths, and darting eyes. He saw a group covered in tattoos that looked as if they'd recently been paroled and another dominated by polo shirts and sandals, casually standing as if awaiting their shot on the ninth tee. Despite this contrast, everything remained orderly. The vehicles were parked in a specific area about two hundred yards squared. Those designated for transport were maneuvered to yet another site and emptied with intentions of being reloaded. People bustled to their assigned tents and unpacked.

Originally, Tim assumed this represented their base. That would have suited him fine. Isolated, with a generous line of sight in all directions, the place offered advantages. Knowing they were moving to a more fortified location only bolstered his confidence.

Finding a mirror on the outside of a narrow door, he admired himself. The bare chest looked white trashy, so he'd wear a T-shirt under the vest. Once changed, he smoothed it down and stepped outside, where he paused to take in the activity. The first person to see him—a bear of a man in his forties—glanced at the new vest, and saluted. Tim swelled with pride as he returned the gesture.

When the man continued on, Tim descended another step, and, feeling light-headed, realized he needed to give his endorphins a moment to cool off. The man who saluted him wore a plain white tee and carried a leather vest over his forearm. Testing his equilibrium with another step and feeling more in control, Tim trailed. He knifed through the tents and intersections of people until the burly man met with a group of guys with similar builds: middle-aged with bellies, beards, tattoos.

A line of a dozen men and two women led to a burning barrel. His mark reached the front of the line, and to Tim's horror, tossed in the leather vest he'd been carrying. Yet, before Tim could interject, he noticed a peer pass the man a new vest. As it slipped around the sturdy frame, Tim recognized the Lord's Thorn insignia.

Once adorned, brief hugs and hard congratulatory back slaps showered the man. As Tim watched, others tossed in their old cuts hesitantly, some with pride. Tim knew that for a militia member, even moreso a biker, their cut represented honor, and to burn one displayed a serious rite of passage.

Looking past the man, thinking of his next step, Tim considered his itinerary: arriving at a command tent for the biggest interview of his life.

The headquarters, a recently erected wooden roof on stilts, had canvas walls, able to be rolled up during the arid days to allow an air flow, and dropped down at night to ward off the chill.

With the majority of the pavilion open, Tim slowed his pace, surveyed the interior. Electronic devices topped tables. Men in vests already stitched with name and rank busied themselves.

He'd be there soon enough. For now, he had a second rumor to investigate.

A ranch house centered a forty acre patch of desert land sectioned off by two-plank fencing. Behind the home (which should have been better guarded), laid a staggering sight. Seven well-spaced rows of mismatched helicopters stretched the length of a football field.

Due to the variety of shapes and colors and sheer numbers, it resembled a mega used car lot of copters. Mechanics in jumpsuits leaned over open engine casings, others tweaked rotors, a few manipulated switches in cockpits. Two Ford Ranger pick-ups dispensed oil and other necessary fluids.

On the stroll back, he heard a half-dozen people speculating on the purpose of the aircrafts. Most believed they would ferry in their families once they reached the base. Tim thought that possible, but he categorized it wishful thinking. Talk of reuniting with old-ladies and kids annoyed him. He sympathized, but they had more pressing matters.

He actually listened when those in charge spoke. Those men had recently said: joining the Lord's Thorn meant risking your life. Tim understood that meant death, which meant killing. A machine currently threatened God's people. They'd been assembled to stop it.

Alan indicated in an earlier speech that their families and loved ones would arrive in Nevada one to three days after the first wave departed, and then follow the horde to its new base along the same time frame, yet persistent questions continued. Once he wore those stripes, he'd listen for inquiries about wife and family and snap on the first man; help the private get his head on right. And if the man griped, or elevated backtalk to disrespect, Tim had never met anyone faster at applying an arm bar than himself. He'd break the first bone, earning him respect.

Checking his watch that doubled as a compass, and having twenty minutes, he thought it best to loiter around the main structure.

Remembering the field of choppers jacked his heart. With that volume of helicopters, the brass planned something much more spectacular than transporting women and children.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

Staring at the written outline to his course of action—composed with scribbled notes over both sides of two pages—filled Alex with pride, with dread. His solution could prevent off global war. He shook his head at the magnitude, necessary logistics, and moreover, the end result. Now, he hoped Jodi Reister’s use of “unlimited budget” applied; he’d written one of the most ambitious schemes in history.

Without it, he predicted society’s end.

He checked the time on the cell-phone. Ninety minutes until *Inside Today* aired. Every outlet hyped tonight’s edition as the most important of Rebecca Trevino’s career. It promised to put facts to the whispers circulating the world. Alex summoned his hosts back into the office, regrettably accepted he would miss the pivotal episode. No matter. If her report included half the anticipated talking points, repeat coverage would blanket the following days.

Saving the world from collapse slated his agenda. His plan would require immense effort, cooperation, funding, and the formation of a new governmental agency. The United States would jump at his proposal to form a new branch of monitoring. That left ten-thousand hurdles to trip up his vision and allow the Lobby to deconstruct the world.

Andrews entered, leaned over Alex’s shoulder, peered at his notes, “What’s your idea to fix this? I have an excellent plan if you’re ready for it.”

Alex flipped his notes face down. “Perhaps another time.”

“Well, bounce what you have off me before the others arrive. Maybe my pointers will stop you from looking like a fool.”

“I’m just going to wait until we’re all present.” Alex examined their close proximity. “Do you mind?”

“It’s your funeral,” Andrews plopped into the far chair and crossed his arms.

Alex hoped Andrews spoke hyperbole. His goal: avoid millions of innocent people hosting early funerals.

Once the final three members arrived and sat, Alex placed his hand on the closed binder. “I have good and...complicated news.”

“Good news is a relief,” Director Willis said as he pushed his glasses to his face.

“I’ve identified exploitable avenues,” Alex said. His body tensed; the added density seemed to pull a billion molecules toward him. “I have a plan I consider the only one able to satisfy everyone’s needs.”

The three agents shared looks. Each appeared ready to comment, yet withheld. Alex breathed deeply. Considering the work he’d do behind the scenes, without their approval, increased his fear and uncertainty.

“After discussing the issue with Ike, I feel confident that whoever designed this had help from inside Broumgard. Someone either smuggled information or assisted with hands-on. The good news is, the list of people with access should number less than fifty names. I’m sure you’ll be able to root out the betrayer.”

“We’ll punish ‘em harshly,” Agent Martineau said. Without his sportscoat, the curly-haired man seemed even larger.

“When we started at Eridu,” Alex continued, “we housed the Lobby’s server in a twenty-thousand square foot storage facility; an impressive feat for the amount of data being processed. Since globalization, we condensed the necessary hardware to ten cubic feet.” Alex paused to allow that marvel to settle, and then continued, “Our R&D department has the sharpest minds in the field and they believed we possessed top technology. What you’ve captured,” he tapped the folder, “seems to house the entire Lobby in a macroserver the size of a shoebox. I looked over the schematics. It still doesn’t make sense to me, but if it works, it’s remarkable.”

“The good news, beyond catching the guilty party: the load-in process will be tedious. From the moment someone jacks into the Lobby with the setup, it will take no less than four hours to mirror everything and establish a viable connection. Perhaps a three minute load-in time after that, which I imagine would be disorienting and draining, like an anesthesiologist administering a sedative in super slow mo.”

Agent Martineau lifted his meaty paw. After Alex nodded to him, he spoke, “I’m eager to hear your plan a’ action, Mr. Cutler. It’ll commence the most important undertaking a’ my career, but...I just wonder if perhaps a greater understanding a’ how this whole thing works might help us out. I can’t figure where a person’s spirit is housed once they’re dead. Like, if a guy off’d himself while connected to that contraption, would he be in that shoebox, where, if we pulled the plug, we’re ending his life? Or is he in a main server? Or is he copied a thousand times to each of those dump sites you referred to?”

“That’s way out of my expertise,” Alex said. He then exhaled, leaned back. Who could know the truth, for certain? It was like debating the genesis of life. The big bang sounded plausible, but every theory ran up against the beginning. Humans lack the ability to comprehend something with no start. Prior to time contemplation lay reserved for Gods. Having a theory he liked, he decided to share it. “If you were to take a photograph of a man standing on the sidewalk, and tear it in half at the waist, half of the data that makes that man would reside in one section of the photo and the second half in the other. So each half of the information would be needed to create the full picture. That’s logical reality. Now, if you took that same image of a man standing, and displayed it as a hologram, which is nothing but a three-dimensional photograph manufactured with the help of a laser, starting with the same image of a man on the sidewalk.

“If you tear this image in half, or in ten pieces, or into millions of tiny shreds, and shine a laser through any shard, the full image would reanimate using that morsel of information. That’s reality also, just totally illogical. The same system seems to apply to a person’s consciousness. If you tear it into a thousand pieces and spread it to a thousand sites, every section of code that delineates that person possesses all of their data. Making them everywhere at once, as if there’s a genetic memory of self, stored in every atom.

“You have to understand, in an electronically molecular world, every byte of knowledge interpenetrates everything else, to where space is nothing but a wholly connected grid of energy.”

Alex didn't fully comprehend the theory he pieced together from surfing Seventh Plan blogs and programmer chatrooms, but its grand understanding sometimes felt one thought away, and each time he shared it, he detected a greater truth beneath the logic.

“That's a way to look at it,” Agent Martineau said cautiously, as if digesting all he heard.

Agent Andrews cut in, “I think for most of us, this answers one of the oldest questions in history of whether the soul is a separate entity from the body. If so, that would be the proof scientists need to accept God into their lives and back into our society. The Lobby separates the two and proves this long debated hypothesis, yet propaganda denies that fact to the masses.”

A moment of silence, Alex had considered that, and it held plausibility.

“All of this is very intriguing,” Director Willis said. “No matter your belief, this energy could be named the soul. I'm Agnostic, so to me the soul defies mortal concepts, but no doubt this has underpinnings.”

“Basically,” Agent Martineau began, “If you are you, and you are put in any situation with the exact same feelings and knowledge, you will always make the same choice. Meaning even a trillion a' you being separate would always be doing the exact same thing simultaneously. In a nutshell, as long as one macroserver exists, the Lobby sustains its entire population.”

Before Alex could nod or maybe shrug, Andrews interjected.

“The travesty here, is by being trapped in this machine, these people are being denied entrance to the real Heaven.”

“Gentlemen,” Jodi Reister said as she extended her hands to calm the table. “We are way off topic. Let's get back to how we stop the world we do understand from falling into complete disarray.”

The sound of Martineau pouring water from the carafe into a glass filled the next few seconds.

Alex rocked in his seat. He knew the pirated access points represented imminent importance, but he wanted to talk this thing out like the rest of the world; ignore the implications and postulate; share in the common charge of energy that comes from a group of individuals discussing a profound notion. He didn't want to deal with the world's problems. He wanted to be back in his one-bedroom shack in Chicago, texting Sean about the insanity of it all, reading nutty blogs; trolling the esoteric chatrooms.

After a minute of controlled breathing, he accepted duty ruled desire, and continued. “Well, as I was saying, whoever uses these pirated access points will need at least four hours to mirror the Lobby. With the proper software and equipment, we can create a system that will alert us when anyone attempts to jack in. Once identified, we'll have their GPS coordinates. From there, we send in the police, commandos, whoever. You foil their plans and make an example out of them.” Alex permitted the room a minute to visualize before hitting them with the bad news. “For this to work, we'll need to build monitoring stations across the globe, leaving no zones unaccounted for.”

The room remained silent. Monitoring stations covering every four-hour block of the planet proposed a colossal feat.

“And you can design this software?” Director Willis said.

“With the right team I can.”

“Great,” Andrews said. “I will have no problem assembling that team.”

Even though Alex preferred this controlled Andrews to the former, working with him remained out of the question. “I would need my own team. My guys from Eridu.” He slid a list of names over to Director Willis. “All of these people. Immediate passports. Easy travel. Give me a week with my team and we’ll program the software. Then ship us to different parts of the world, give us the authority to train a certain type of software engineer in its application and we can have the pirated access points under control by month’s end.”

“My team could be helpful,” Andrews added.

“We appreciate that, Agent,” Director Willis said. Apparently reading Alex’s body language, he added, “but I think Mr. Cutler would rather use his own people.”

Alex exhaled.

“I think this teaming up is a great idea,” Jodi said. “We give Agent Andrews and Mr. Cutler shared control, mating a government employee and private citizen, something you’re suggesting with this monitoring system, if I’m reading you right.” She stared Alex down.

Despite his wishes, he nodded. She read that part correctly. However, working with Andrews would jeopardize his sanity and destroy the full scope of his plans. Yet how could he refuse people, who, with a word, could have him in fetters.

“Mr. Cutler,” Director Willis said. “There is a logic to that. We will need the government and private sector to coordinate on a scale never before seen. You two could lead the field.”

“It’s really the only way it will work,” Agent Andrews said. “We’re both professionals. It’ll be a friendly competition.”

“Wonderful,” Jodi ended the subject with a brisk nod. “You guys give us the software and establish a method of training. We supply funding, smooth global travel, and remove possible regulations.”

Alex couldn’t agree, but neither could he go to prison. He was too famous, too...weak.

“Please keep in mind, things around the globe are changing at a rapid pace,” Jodi said. “It would be nice to get in front of something for a change. And without control of Lobby access, chaos will reign.”

“I’d rather be sent to prison,” Alex blurted, stopping the room. He would. Besides, with Andrews over his shoulder, nothing could succeed.

“Excuse me,” Jodi Reister said. “Prison?”

“I cannot work with Agent Andrews; with anyone besides the people on my list,” Alex stiffened his spine. “Jason Johnson is in London, Ron Simpson is in Dallas, several others are here in California.”

Director Willis snickered, looked to his peers. “No need to get dramatic, Mr. Cutler. If you feel that strongly, we’re in no position to refuse.”

“I want all of my things returned to my house as well,” Alex said, a surge of clarity coursed through him. He made the choices in his life, he dictated his future. “Today.”

“We haven’t fully inventoried the seized items,” Andrews said, “let alone inspected them.”

Locking eyes with Jodi Reister, Alex said, “I just want my team, my things, and control of my life.”

“I think we can accommodate that,” Jodi spoke in a cautious tone.

“Send everybody on that list straight to my address,” Alex said.

“You’ll have your things this afternoon, Mr. Cutler,” Director Willis said as he stood. “Good luck to you. If you’ll excuse me, I’d like to get my calls in before the special edition of *Inside Today* begins.”

Alex nodded. Tonight’s episode no longer intrigued him. His executed plan would make historic news of its own.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

Inside the Lord's Thorn command post, an aisle split rows with six chairs on each side. Lieutenants, majors, and captains headed the room. Judging from the number of sergeants, Tim estimated sixteen hundred fighters occupied this ranch. That amount staggered him. Especially since vehicles continued to trickle in.

Sitting near the back, in the front of the sergeant's row, Tim waited for the meeting to commence. The men around him speculated on the possible missions, the origin of their funding, and the immensity of what two-thousand similar-minded soldiers could accomplish.

Tim knew at his age, he should listen. Intellect arrived through genetics (expanded with study), wisdom through observations (compounded by reflection), commitment—something overflowing in him—increased with vigilance to immediate duty.

Until the day arrived when he'd lead men, he exercised mind, body, soul; and obey orders. He adhered to a dictum of Aristotle which stated, "To become a great leader, you must first be the best follower."

A hush fell over the room, the sound of boots on compact earth. Tim fought the urge to glance behind him and glimpse their new leader. An active one-star brigadier general had assumed command of their crusade. A crusade intent on establishing a forward base. What lay beyond that vague promise, no one knew. Tim believed the Lord's Thorn would adopt the mission of eradicating every Atrium on the planet.

A surge of confidence struck Tim as the general passed. Tim didn't get into all that hippie nonsense about auras, but who would deny certain people carried a presence. The general's started with wide shoulders, a gray buzz cut, and bronze skin. His arms swayed in precise arcs, striking the same spot on the upthrust as the backswing. Tim hoped to walk like that someday.

When the general did his about-face, it surprised Tim to see the boyish features of a Vietnamese man. He had expected burns or at least one horrible scar. His let down instantly changed to respect: the man knew how to avoid harm.

"Gentlemen, my name is general Trieu. It's an honor to be here." He took a position in front of a white markerboard. "Some of you know me," he nodded to one of the lieutenant colonels in the front row. "Others have heard rumors, but I'll set them all straight. I've resigned my Air Force post to accept a promotion to general of the most important outfit in American history: The Lord's Thorn."

A few men barked their support.

He paced lightly and increased the volume. "That is exactly what we will be, gentlemen. We will be the thorn in Satan's backside. Now, if you don't believe in the

everlasting benevolence of our Creator, or the evils of His nemesis, God help you. If you can't read the signs of impending doom around the world, I'd prefer you left this pavilion."

No one stirred.

"This is a fight for our very future. You must understand, and your men must know, that our efforts will be constitutionally illegal. If we fail, we will be branded terrorists. If caught, many in this room will receive death sentences.

"If you're not willing to pay that price, I won't consider you less of a man for excusing yourself, but do it *now*. There is no shame in wanting to preserve your life. It's a God-given instinct, same as bravery, foresight, and conviction."

Tim didn't bother looking around. These men, like him, were committed.

"The second truth may be a little more jarring." He flipped the white markerboard, exposing the opposite side. A map, of sorts. A large square at one end, numerous squares at the other, a single "road" splitting the connection. From the legend, it looked to have an airport, a hotel, and an Atrium.

The complex seemed unfamiliar to Tim, but seeing an Atrium instilled disgust.

"They named this city 'Eridu,' a name chosen by inflated egos. Tomorrow, we storm this compound with violence; learn whether brains or brawn win skirmishes. We bring death gentlemen, to their side and ours. You must know this. Your men must know this.

"Our intel puts forty-eight highly-trained, extremely motivated men with state-of-the-art small arms on the compound. We have over fifteen hundred semi-trained, fledgling mercenaries. Believe me when I tell you, forty-eight, well-disciplined men can defeat a battalion of ragtags. Normally, I'd request three months of intense training to prepare. We lack that luxury. Evil is blanketing the world. Many believe this man, Adisah Boomul, is not only the Devil incarnate, but that he is untouchable, his palace impenetrable.

"Tomorrow, we put those claims to the test."

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

When a segment finished, and as the lights brightened, Rebecca Trevino liked to remain stationary and watch the tumult of the newsroom, before moving to the lavatory. The scene reminded her of feeder fish seconds after a net dipped into the tank.

New York City represented efficient congestion. *Inside Today's* studio personified that. Fifty-three employees intersecting across twenty-two hundred square feet often made forging your way from one side to the other a game of green light/red light.

The central bathroom always teemed with activity, and throughout the years, people had unconsciously slotted their daily usage times. A far bathroom offered execs and onscreen personalities privacy. Rebecca stood there now, a hand on each side of the porcelain sink, head down, focused on the clean white gully.

After tonight's episode, she would be allotted a larger studio. A neutral reward. More room, but she appreciated the close proximity of the camera in her quaint studio.

Insisting on a neurotic make-up specialist, her face never revealed its natural flaws. When the lens panned out to include her surgically enhanced cleavage, her breasts looked firm enough to be enjoyed, yet soft enough to be natural.

The sound of toilet paper pooling in a stall turned her around. Feet under the door: what madness! The far bathroom stayed one hundred percent off-limits before taping or airing of her programs. Everyone knew that. The toilet flushed and Rebecca turned back to the mirror—her scowl internalized.

"Knock 'em dead," a woman said as she rinsed her hands under the faucet two down from Rebecca.

Keeping her grip on the sink, Rebecca stared at her own reflection, saying nothing. She couldn't place the voice. This stunt earned whoever it was a transfer, possibly a termination. Thankfully, the interloper seemed to recognize her mistake and exited without drying her hands.

Rebecca figured her for an intern. The regulars granted her the needed privacy for each episode. This one promised to be epic. In the last few weeks, she'd ended the battle for most-watched primetime program. She now danced as queen atop the mountain. And she'd soon make Carl Bernstein and Bob Woodward's Watergate reporting seem as relevant as junior high gossip.

Lifting herself on her toes, she extended her face close to the mirror, examined her skin, and then checked her teeth. It baffled her when people said the camera added ten pounds. It actually removed ten years, eradicated all blemishes, and caused people she was used to seeing on television to take on haggardly effects when encountered in the real world. Particularly the makeup-less men.

Feeling centered, she exited the wooden door and found two women patiently waiting. They smiled and wished her luck. Those women she knew. Daynah produced the show following hers and Allisa managed miles of audio cables.

As Rebecca made her way to the break room, everyone she passed nodded and shared encouragement: ushering her to her throne.

The world had never experienced anything as compelling as the Lobby, and the discovery that the alternate reality machine preserved life, catapulted it into unimaginable levels of interest. Just the notion that millions of people longed to sign onto a machine and die, gave her goosebumps, but she wasn't one of them. This world held the action. Here, each day brought incalculable surprises. For proof, one only needed to recap the emergence of computers over the last half-century.

They started as a math aids, code-breakers. Small businesses soon utilized the technology, and eventually computer nerds exploited them for simple games. Fast forward a few decades and we had more computers than homes to hold them; cell-phone applications existed that could monitor a person's heart rate and ensure they properly brushed their teeth. Then came the Lobby, which dwarfed those amenities, and then exceeded its own greatness by offering an amendable afterlife.

Nothing would ever surpass the awe of reality. Knowing a larger story loomed in the future allowed her to attack each day with an enthusiasm unknown to womankind.

Entering the densely packed break room initiated a light applause. Everyone greeted her with congratulations, gratitude, and lit-up faces. She made sure to return them all. These people were like family. They were the blood that flowed through the body of *Inside Today*. They made it function, while she acted as its heart; its soul.

A sixty-inch OLED headed the room. Corner speakers bolstered the sound. She glanced at the clock, three minutes until they aired.

Jack Fleeman, a field reporter who she'd worked with for the past four years, offered to fill a cup of coffee for her. She politely declined. Any added stimulant could burst her heart. Someone shut the lights off as she nestled into her proffered seat in the front row between Casy Marvin, a studio executive, and Ryan Lambert, her boyfriend of ten years. She smiled at each, hugged one, kissed the other, and accepted a fact she'd never voice: she no longer needed either of them.

The opening credits finished and when *Inside Today* returned from commercial, the on-screen Rebecca sat inside the cockpit of a Maersk cargo liner—an expansive triple-decked ship—packed with cargo containers stacked eight high. In front of her waited the silhouette of a man sitting atop a stool, his identity protected by a well-placed shadow. The most visible feature was the horizontally patterned, tan shirt that covered a bloated belly and looked outdated by twenty years.

“Good evening,” Rebecca said on screen. “I’m here with a ship captain who wishes to remain anonymous. We are on a cargo liner we will not name, that started its journey in one of the numerous ports along the west coast of North America. For reasons that will soon become frighteningly obvious, all identifying images will be edited.

“Sir, tell me, how long have you been a captain and what do those responsibilities consist of?”

The man's voice sounded deep and off-pitch, as if played through an old-style tape recorder set on too slow of a speed. “Well, I’ve been on these waters for over thirty

years. Been fortunate enough to stay alive, gain the notice of my employers, and have had the pleasure of piloting this same vessel for the better part of two decades.

“The job description varies, but mainly we pick up products from countries ‘cross the Pacific, often China, but there ‘er others. We ferry ‘em back, unload, get paid. Some shore leave, and then hope to resupply with American products.” He leaned forward. “Though, I can tell ya, sometimes we’re forced to leave with empty bellies. In a nutshell, that’s my job.”

“Thank you, and I am to understand there have been recent changes in outbound cargo. Can you explain?”

“Oh, we’re not empty no longer.” He shifted on his stool.

“So, you’ve found a shippable product from America?”

“People mainly.”

A few members of the room around Rebecca hitched their breaths. She pictured tens of millions of gasps around the world and had to squeeze her thighs shut to control her excitement.

“Are you saying human beings are the outbound cargo?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“American citizens are paying you to smuggle them out of the United States?”

“Sure. Tho’ some ‘er Canadians, Mexicans...paying big bucks too.”

“Wow,” the on-camera Rebecca adjusted her sitting position. “I can tell you, that is quite a shock.”

“Ain’t no shock. Maybe to some rich gal like yourself. But people been talkin’. When you’re down here with ‘em, ya hear.”

“Yes...well, can you tell us how this came about? How you located these passengers.”

“Well now, they found me. I gotta call from a skipper a few days back. He says he’s already to sea, but he’s got people he couldn’t fit on his ship lookin’ to hitch a ride. Says the number of people and the amount they’re willin’ to pay would knock my socks clean off.” The captain’s shadowed form nodded as if in deep reflection. “That it did.”

The camera panned around for a panoramic view of the surrounding ocean. While doing so, Rebecca posed a question. “How far out to sea are we now, Captain?”

“Hmmm...Lemme see. We’re almost through day two. That’d be ‘bout halfway. ‘Bout eight hundred miles outta port, I reckon.”

“And you have people on-board now?”

“Yes, ma’am,” he said with pride. “Full hold.”

“Do you have an estimation of how many travelers you have on this vessel, and what their reasons are for boarding?”

“They reasons ‘er for them Death Trips,” he said matter-of-factly. “Open to anyone with a wad-o-cash and a desire to leave this pit-o-(censored word) called life.” He scratched his face, paused. “Well, that ain’t tirely true. I s’pose some ‘er travelin’ to see a monk fella preachin’ ‘bout salvation, harmony, and all that nonsense.” He fidgeted.

“Now, wait another minute, allow me to take that back, too. It’d been nonsense a month ago, but when a man preaches ‘bout somethin’ specific, sayin’ he had visions and what not, and those visions come true to the letter, there ain’t no more second guessin’ him. Now is there? But still, most ‘er here for that final ride. The Death Trip.”

Rebecca watched herself cross her legs. To viewers it seemed inconsequential, but that two second break created pacing, and set her apart from her peers. “You said you had an idea as to how many people you’ve taken on-board?”

“Sure, sure. I can do ya one better. We got exactly fourteen hundred and ninety-two souls on-board this vessel.”

More gasps circled the audience around her. Rebecca knew this dialogue word for word, yet a bomb going off in the next room couldn’t break her attention from the screen. Knowing that degree of rapture must be amplified in others ten-fold was the truest testament to the power of information in the real world.

“So, you’re saying, right now, below us are hundreds of people, riding with full intention of killing themselves?”

“Nah. They won’t be dead, ya see? I’d call it freein’ themselves. Free from pain, torment, bein’ judged. I’m sure a pretty thang like yourself knows the deal. Betcha can’t walk to the market without a hundred eyes checkin’ ya out. The Lobby’s a great option. ‘Less ya think there’s some old guy in the sky waitin’ to pamper ya. If so, I won’t say you’re wrong, but that ain’t nothin’ I can sink my teeth in.”

“Well sir, I’m not sure if you’re aware of this, but almost ninety percent of the world believes in a higher power. Are you saying you don’t?”

“I’m not sayin’ that, but most people ‘er brain-dead sheep. Don’t know what they believe, juss say what they think ya wanna hear. That much I know. And, I do believe in a higher power. It’s ‘lectronic. I can touch it, feel it, hold proof of it.”

“I see.” On screen, Rebecca checked a pad of paper in her lap. “Can you tell me how difficult it was to reach that number?”

He snickered. “Wasn’t. I could’a turned people away after few hours. I had some rules too. No kids under eight. Tho’ I fear some might’a smudged the ages on me. I had one couple wanted to bring their newborn.” He shook his head. “I wasn’t sure if they was to see the monk or...ya know. But, I can’t see how loadin’ up a infant is right. Shoot, I didn’t even need this many people. Guess it shows I got a kind heart.”

“Need? Can you elaborate?”

“They payin’ whatever ya ask. Five thousand, fifty, a hundred per head out there. I had more than enough after the first two dozen, to be honest. “

“More than enough...for what, Captain?”

“For my own Death Trip, ‘a course.” The shadowed figure checked his watch. “I’ll be out of this bag ‘a fat and (censored word) in less than three days. I ain’t never been so ‘cited. If I was you, lady, I’d leave that ‘copter parked on my deck, call that deep bank a ‘yers, and join the rest of us ‘fore they find a way to lock us out.” A moment passed and he added, “One thing I know, it’s a great time to die.”

The program faded to commercial.

The room stayed so quiet, a hair dropping would have sounded like a cannonade.

Coming into this, she expected applause, pats on the back. This shocked silence meant so much more.

Following the commercial, *Inside Today* panned a flowing shot below decks. People of all ages and sizes filled narrow hallways and every hold. Families huddled close, suspiciously watching the cameras pass. A New Years Eve-type of party raged in one of the larger areas.

In voice over commentary, Rebecca reinforced the thoughts of a nation. “All of these people have chosen to abandon faith, hope, and humanity for a one-way ticket to cyber prison.” Rebecca didn’t necessarily agree with that, but in modern journalism, it’s not what you report, it’s how portentous you made it. Fear sold ads, ads created revenue, and revenue led to recognition in the form of millions of fans tuning in to watch the greatest journalists cover the biggest stories.

Her lead segment did just that. It showed doomed people preparing for the inevitable. The misgivings on that cargo ship occurred five days ago, but they continued today, would expand tomorrow.

Her next segment focused on religions and their gurus, covering Buddhism conversion rates around the globe. Before this theory of life to death to everlasting existence on a machine hit the population, roughly twenty-four percent of the world had been Islamic, slightly more Christian, Buddhists comprised twelve percent and the members of the other thirty-three thousand registered religions added up to another twelve. Agnostics and atheists claimed what remained.

Since the preachings of Sung Yi, a full one-third of the world now considered themselves students of Buddhism—a more than three hundred percent spike in thirteen days. Those same people now thanked Gaea, Creator of the World, for gifting the Lobby to her children. Sung Yi’s Youtube videos had been translated into ninety-one languages. They converted people by the second.

The most frightening statistic (for supporters of monotheism) came from the chart that showed the expected conversion from the two major religions to Buddhism. Even with a drop in the current rate, in twenty years, Christianity would be all but extinct and Islam nothing more than backwoods voodoo.

Another commercial. This time chatter erupted, but no one spoke to her. You can’t run from facts. This was their new world, and her report would ignite a controversy and spark a struggle for the ages. Controversy, strife, death: the ingredients of good media.

Although Rebecca would never be knighted or anointed to sainthood, she was saving lives by creating conflict. Millions of people would forego an eternity inside the Lobby simply to catch that day’s news.

Outrage would follow this program. Faith in Jesus and Allah strummed in billions of hearts. This would be like paddles jolting that passion to life. Her research didn’t lie. Society strolled the path to a new world religion. The only way to avert its destination would be to derail the engine. People would try, and she’d report all the gory details.

The final segment touched on Tara Capaldi, Brad Finder, Roy Guillen, a four minute expose on Alex Cutler, and a six minute finale on Adisah Boomul—the reclusive mastermind hiding in his futuristic fort.

What an amazing interview that would be. Maybe she’d reach out. The world had a right to know what was happening in those Montana mountains.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

Tim rode in a 1989 MD helicopter. Not a single cloud, created by man or God, populated that morning's expansive blue sky. Yet, a roving shadow of rotating blades and visually amorphous shapes blanketed the land.

His particular ship spent almost twenty years in Hawaii, flying tourists over a specific, uninhabited island known for its lush vegetation, heavy boar population, and rumors of cannibals.

Somewhere along the way, the craft lost its doors. Wind whipped through the interior. The noise deafened. The sight awed. The helicopter nearest his stretched an extra six feet and was painted in a faded yellow. A lime green stripe ran along the side, as if its past life involved promoting Mellow Yellow soda.

Tim's helicopter soared on the northern (left) edge of the armada, close to the middle of the pack. The MD expected to touch down twenty-one minutes after the old steel tankers that led the fleet. Each would hit the ground, off-load their troops, and return to the sky.

Standing in an aged helicopter, the steady vibrations of the craft kept his body strumming in-time with his anxiety. Shooting other people lay in his immediate future. Landing twenty-one minutes after the first wave could spoil his chance for glory. Knowing hours of fighting awaited them, possibly days of random skirmishes, brought comfort.

Seven men—the full load under his command as a sergeant—along with a rookie pilot, caused the MD to be four passengers over capacity. A lenient figure. Other crafts of comparable size held ten men, crammed in like clowns in a circus car. However, his team transported two M107, fifty caliber rifles. Four feet ten inches in length, the guns weighed twenty eight and a half pounds when empty; enormous ammunition—each bullet as big as a cigar—more than compensated for the lack of warm bodies.

Though they adhered to a near radio silence, a headset connected him with the pilots and other team leaders. Their tight flight formation allowed for eye contact with passengers of nearby helicopters, linking the army on a more personal front. He read such emotion in each face: nerves, anticipation, fear.

The rotating blades created a deep thwumping that blotted out other sounds and whipped every strand of prairie grass below and head of hair above.

At one point, they crossed over a herd of deer. The dark, encroaching shadow and heavenly roar caused the animals to bolt as one, but as the crafts centered over them, and the tumultuous cacophony worked into their bones, they abandoned ranks, and scattered.

Tim imagined the men at Eridu would first hear a slight buzz, alerting them to something amiss; mounting caution as the rumble reached an approaching thunder. When the sky blackened with metal carriages, terror would set in. These metal carriages carried the end of life as they knew it, or, if Tim got his way, the end of their wickedness, period.

“Twenty miles to visual,” a voice informed him through his headset. They traveled at sixty miles an hour—a little over half the MD’s top speed. He estimated fifteen minutes until a true combat mission unfolded. Holding a strap with one hand and a loaded rifle in the other, Tim concentrated on slowing his heart rate.

Leaning out the side, he bathed in fresh air. After the ablution, he pulled himself back in and surveyed the men under his command.

Three sat shoulder to shoulder in the rear seat. One prayed, one chewed gum, another rocked to his headphones, and a crouched pair across from them tried to converse with shouts.

“Contact approaching, west end. Assume spread pattern,” the voice in Tim’s headset spoke with control, but confusion splashed his thoughts.

Before he pinpointed why, his helicopter yawed left, stumbling him and the two without seats. Securing his footing, he watched out the opposite opening, as over a hundred craft tilted in synchronization. He couldn’t help but appreciate the sight. Thirty feet of distance had separated each. The recent command tripled that. Even if equipped with binoculars and a clear line of sight, identify the model of the farthest craft, from corner to corner, might be impossible. The memory of the words that started this shift interrupted his marveling: contact approaching? What type of contact?

Their government source informed them Eridu had a sophisticated airport. In the unlikely event someone manned the tower, and the pilots flew high enough to be detected, Eridu’s radars would identify the inbound helicopter as far away as twenty miles out. Regardless, their ally assured them they’d sever Eridu’s communications to stop them calling for help.

With the pack flying over the only road in or out for the last few miles, the biggest worry involved the enemy ferrying Mr. Boomul to safety in a private plane. Again, the government man guaranteed them Adisah would remain on his compound. His men would fight.

“Enemy bogey, eleven o’clock, stagger pattern,” the voice in his ear held its command, but something else had crept into the pitch. Fear? Tim peered out of the main windshield for signs of danger.

The MD dropped fifty feet in elevation, taking his stomach with it. Once settled, he noticed the Mellow Yellow representative had risen out of sight, as if the rows alternated between climbing and dropping. Though spawned by a complication, the aerial acrobatics invigorated Tim. He hoped, decades from now, when he met his maker, he could revisit this event, live it from an omnipresent point of view, for he participated in a glorious action.

“Oh, shit. Contact. Fire.” A new voice piped across the headset, ended the command for radio silence. Dozens of voices yelled and cursed.

A pilot screamed for another to watch his three o’clock, the crunch of an in-air collision in the distance, the flash of an explosion.

Another, more portentous sound overtook the headphone chatter and rotor wash. A familiar sound. A noise similar to the spat of a buzz saw, a squeeze and release of a

chainsaw: automatic gunfire. Distant, but of a large caliber, rapid, like no weapon he had ever fired. And he'd shot hundreds.

The men in the rear of the MD jockeyed and jostled in their attempt to view the outside commotion. The shifting weight rocked the overburdened aircraft. Using urgent hand signals, Tim commanded his men to stay seated. Their first-time pilot didn't need extra distractions. Sweat rimmed the pilot's scalp. His hands held the control stick so tight, Tim feared a snap. And then, from out of the main windshield, Tim witnessed the unimaginable.

Loud reports, and a Lord's Thorn helicopter skipped backwards in a series of jabs, and then, like a stone loosened from a clasped hand, plummeted to earth. The burning fuselage dropped out of sight. Seconds later, the boom of steel impacting earth.

Another rattle of the massive caliber in the distance. An explosion so intense, he imagined a thousand men shuddered in unison.

Did the bastards at Eridu have an attack chopper? If so, what a grievous oversight. What could the Lord's Thorn do in defense? Their plans involved a ground assault, with small arms.

The radio chatter reached pandemonium. A man ordered everyone to "break off," "use evasive maneuvers."

Wouldn't help. They'd be torn to shreds.

The silence between each rhythmic spat of gunfire seemed an eternity. Buzz saw, break; buzz saw, break. A life time. Birth, aging, and slaughter. Buzz saw, break. Each silence brought a mourning for a downed helicopter, each brought him closer to the crosshairs.

The pilot climbed to a desired height, pitched the craft forward, and increased their speed. Tim bent into the cockpit. The pilot leaned toward him, and while keeping his eyes forward, shouted, "We're in one of the fastest machines. Someone's got to ram that mother. He's brought down nine of us by my count. If we can't stop him..."

His words echoed in Tim. Become a martyr? A noble death, sure. It flew in the face of him leading society to a renewed time of faith, sacrifice, and discipline for our Lord.

The pilot shook his head, as if denying his intention. "This guy could wipe out our entire fleet."

Perhaps a dozen helicopters had elevated to this new height. The MD in the middle. They all converged on a single source.

The assault chopper appeared smaller than he imagined. Compact, painted in a tiger stripe pattern of brown and mustard. Thick with armor, near invisible when plastered against the mountain backdrop.

The attack helicopter flittered, skipped; rose and fell like a hummingbird. Two gun barrels near its nose flashed, followed by the clattering buzz saw, silence. Tim pursed his lips.

The enemy craft climbed with the grace of a ballerina, ripped off another burst of fire; turned healthy craft to confetti.

The smell of burning fuel suffused with unsullied mountain air. The nearest Lord's Thorn helicopter appeared a hundred feet from their target. Tim focused on it, willed success into his comrade. If the tan, tiger-striped craft stayed distracted a few more seconds...

A moment before a guaranteed impact, the bumble bee reversed its angle, tilted its nose at the ramming helicopter, activated the buzzsaw.

Tim grimaced at the effect on the commercial vehicle. It lurched to the side as if hit with a three punch combo, dropped out of the sky as if slugged in the gut by a titan.

Tim jumped at the next buzz saw. Damn close now.

Six hundred yards out. Fourth in line. He and his men would soon be dead, in a vain sacrifice.

He slipped into a quiet acceptance. He envisioned the enemy pilot relaxed in that cockpit, listening to Mozart, sniffing an aged cognac before finding a target and depressing the trigger.

The kamikaze pilots were adding difficulty. Longer breaks between kills, but it seemed the entire mission was lost; unless this guy ran out of bullets.

Another destroyed craft. This close, Tim spotted the softball-size holes left by the ammunition. He secretly hoped one of those massive rounds took him in the chest. That seemed preferable to screaming in a freefall.

Tim's eyes grew wide with an idea: The Fifty calls in the back. His false hope ended before it began. They lacked the time to dig out the guns, let alone load, aim, and fire.

Giving his life for his cause, his Lord, and his men created no dilemma, but accepting that service would be as human fodder depressed him.

Three crafts back. The preceding duo went high and low.

Tim rubbed the patches on his vest. "God, grant them success. Thank you for all of your blessing, for the gift of life. Accept me and my men into your heavenly embrace."

A moment before he decided to join his men in the rear—pass along his peace—an object entered his peripheral. A small, two-person reconnaissance helicopter, painted all black, hovered over the eastern mountain ridge, as if a spectator to the abattoir of steel.

Buzz saw, break. The lead Lord's Thorn helicopter exploded. Tim was now second in line.

A beach-ball size periscope hung from the spectator's bottom. An Army XL42 spotter. The craft looked new, waxed. What was it doing here?

It dipped behind the mountain, leaving Tim to wonder if he hallucinated the image. Before he processed it all, a craft he clearly recognized popped up from behind that a ridge line. He'd had a poster of an Apache AH-64 on his wall since the age of twelve. A wipe of his eyes proved its reality.

The Apache floated in the bumblebee's blind spot. It casually faced the dancing copter of death. A cough of smoke erupted under the Apache's right wing, headed straight for their enemy.

Tim slapped the pilot's shoulder, squeezed. The pilot yanked on the stick, throwing everyone off-balance as the MD climbed and banked. Thankfully, Tim witnessed the heat-guided rocket meet their nemesis, transform metal into fire, heavy fragments, and an explosion loud enough to ripple the valley.

The cheers of a thousand men overtook the whooping of rotor blades.

Tim shook the pilot in triumph.

“Afternoon, gentlemen,” a new voice came over the radio—clear, crisp—silencing the celebration. “Captain Riley Parker, United States Army, at your service. Hoo-rah!”

Tim had never wanted to be an American soldier. He often envisioned them as his enemy. Those feelings vanished as he joined a hundred other men yelling, “Hoo-rah,” into the microphone.

“You gentlemen have a pleasant and safe afternoon. Captain Riley Parker, signing off.”

Voices shouted. The men in the back pumped their fists, cheered, clamped onto one another. Tim didn’t bother asking them to watch their movements. They’d been tested; thwarted evil. He closed his eyes, thanked God; asked Him to help preserve these emotions. Today would always be his first time cheating death.

As the helicopters settled and regrouped, Tim estimated eighty percent of their fleet had survived. His craft assumed a spot on the outer edge of the pack, closest to the approaching city.

Hot waves of anger washed over Tim. This defenseless murder might backfire on the folks at Eridu.

Patting each man on the shoulder, he stared into their eyes until they shared his focus. This had become personal. For all he knew, Alan had been killed.

The chatter on the radio dimmed to words of encouragement, prayers for those fallen. With a bit more determination, the fleet continued toward the sinister home of Adisah Boomul.

* * * *

“Approaching target,” said the voice in his headset. Clear. Distinct, no fear.

The tip of the hotel, La Berce, stood in the distance like a spear thrust in the ground as a challenge.

A red bulb illuminated inside the fuselage, signifying the front of the formation had reached the range of small arms fire. How many of the steel titans initially leading the pack remained? They had expected their outer shell to draw the majority of the rifle rounds. The floor boards and cockpit had been lined with Kevlar to provide extra safety. Against ten millimeter cannon fire, it’d offer protection similar to toilet tissue.

Buildings clearly in view now. Movement on rooftops. The familiar pop-pop-pop of small arms fire. Originally, he expected that sound to jack his nerves—knowing people fired at him and his—but after the earlier terror, recognizing the caliber brought relief.

“Contact,” came through the radio.

Contact? A surge of adrenaline. A survey out the windshield. No flighty choppers. Tim eased back, rubbed the patches on his vest, prayed for the safety of the lead men.

Real gunfire started. Continual patters, rifle reports echoed off the canyon. He gripped the strap and leaned out. Each rooftop held armed Eridu staff. These were the leftovers, shooting in hopes of a lucky hit. The majority of their forces would protect the Atrium, where they housed the equipment, and most-likely, Adisah.

After the earlier battle, Tim now disliked flying on the outermost edge, closest to the buildings, basically defenseless.

The increased sound of the gunfire alerted him that someone targeted the MD. They passed within a hundred yards of the nearest building. Plenty close enough to take a round. Using an inner calm, he visualized the landing. It would be chaotic, men

screaming from gaping wounds, explosions all around. He would spot Adisah Boomul in the distance. The man would be rotating his arms in wide circles incanting some satanic prayer to summon some hideous demon from the pits of Hell. The earth would start to rumble as the beast woke. Some men would panic, a few others run. Not Tim, he'd aim down his rifle sight, and from two hundred yards, score a head shot, splattering brain mist and matter. No more warlock. Hero born.

Tink. A bullet punched through the floorboard in between his men, bringing him back to the present. Judging from the relieved grins on the surrounding faces, no one had been hit.

Through the headset, "Wave one down."

Tim glanced outside, knowing that the Lord's Thorn had boots on the ground. The two-way battle had commenced.

A trio of Eridu soldiers ran across a roof three hundred yards ahead. They lumbered with a tilt, as if weighted, drawing Tim's attention. The three men worked as a unit. As he recognized their maneuvers, his blood froze.

The men lugged an A-98 Law rocket launcher—rectangular, the length of a pool stick, square as a small microwave—a weapon capable of firing four heat-seeking stinger missiles.

The man in the center hefted the metal onto his shoulders, his spotter selected Tim's approaching MD.

Tim snatched at the pilot's shoulder, tugged, pointed to the trio as a cloud of smoke engulfed them.

The pilot yanked the stick right.

Tim stumbled to the back for a better view. The missile traveled leisurely toward them in a looping patter that if followed with the eyes alone would cause vertigo.

The pilot would either raise them high enough to avoid impact or they'd explode. Deciding to increase his survival odds, he moved his rifle to a shooter's grip, clicked off the safety, aimed, and fired a three-round burst at the missile. Dat-dat-dat.

He fired again.

On it came.

Another short burst.

Tingling heat he identified as horror filled him as the rocket tilted up, keeping with their climb. With his few remaining seconds, he looked off in the distance, at the previous location of the Apache and its spotter. Something would save him. This wasn't his destiny.

The scream of the missile's propulsion system overtook the thump of the rotors.

Closing his eyes, he rubbed the patch on his chest.

One of his men screamed.

In the middle of thanking God for all He had bestowed, a thirty-eight pound rocket, traveling at a hundred and twenty miles per hour, slammed into the center of Tim's chest, drove him into the ceiling, and exploded with the force of three hundred sticks of dynamite.

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

Growing up in Gisenyi, a war-torn village outside the capital of Rwanda, Adisah Boomul understood tumult, suffering and ignorance.

Violence acted as a daily occurrence long before mayhem brought his nation fame. Being born in a corrupt land motivated Adisah to work harder, study more, focus on getting out. Being Tutsi, the effort could have saved his life.

He'd been living in America when the Batswani refugees rebelled against their government. Men gathered to chant, march, protest their limited food, porous shelters, and inhumane treatment. They were gunned down with rifle fire, sparking a revolution. For years, the entire population lived at risk of militant bombings and the equally volatile military sweeps.

The insurgency ended in 1993, when President Junvenal Habyarimana, a Hutu, and the Rwandan Patriotic Front signed a power-sharing agreement. Months later, rebels shot down an airplane carrying President Habyarimana and Burundian President Ntaryamira. This instigated the greatest genocide in the continents history.

The Hutu, a majority underclass distinguished by darker skin and short stature, attempted to eradicate their Tutsi neighbor using door-to-door sweeps, mob raids, and military assistance.

In 1994, during a largely ignored, three-month stampede of murder, mutilation, and rape, the Hutu's killed, overwhelming with machete, more than eight hundred thousand of their fellow citizens. He thanked God, near daily, he avoided that mayhem.

His father's position on the counsel and his mother having full-time employment as a nurse allowed him to be home-schooled. On the three days a week when both his mother and father worked, Adisah accompanied her during each twelve hour shift.

The awe of the Hospice ward sent him into the field of electronics. He still remembered his amazement at learning that the wheezing, buzzing, and chiming machines all around him kept people alive. The reality that small boxes of electricity sustained organic life sent shockwaves of possibilities through his young mind.

A lifetime later, he opened the Lobby to the infirmed the world over, created a haven for those who suffered.

The current gunfire outside the Atrium, and the people hustling and fretting around him, transported the elderly Adisah back to the walks along dirt streets with his mother. Back then, it seemed the simple act of holding her hand blotted out all horrors.

A new-age Christian, she believed everything men created, or would create, came as a gift from God. Adisah wondered how she'd view a machine that trapped souls, instigated mass suicides, and social outrage. He assumed her initial frown would curl into

a grin. She identified positives in everything; always predicted beneficial side-effects, considered each morning progress.

“What should we do?” Dalton’s deep voice pulled Adisah from thoughts of his mother.

He squinted and looked up at his loyal friend. He knew Dalton, along with most of his staff, viewed him as invincible, but he felt his age. Discomfort accompanied the simplest movements. Sleep either eluded him, or took hold at inappropriate times. His sight was dwindling; incontinence lie on the horizon.

Currently, he rested on a maroon sofa in the center of a serenely decorated room. Seven years ago, this section of the Atrium bustled with clients eager to enter the secretive Lobby.

Gone were the glossy tiles and company walls. Now, the same stinkwood flooring he had in his La Berce condo decorated the floor. A koi fish pond and a cascading waterfall created the main attraction to the community center.

Kids of all ages huddled around that pond, tossed food to the fish. When a gun cracked especially close, drawing a scream, and everyone’s attention, one of the mothers pointed out a certain fish, another oohed at a splash. The distraction worked for the young, but the level of anxiety climbed with the person’s age, climaxing with wide-eyed adults, who suspected, all too clearly, that despite the immense security, Eridu had been overrun.

Dalton positioned himself in front of his employer. “Some of the people are sneaking up to the access rooms. I don’t have to tell you their objectives.” He sought out the pond, “People want to know your thoughts.”

THWACK, glass shards tinkled upon the stinkwood. A bullet had punched through the protective glass on the front wall.

Adisah glanced at where the projectile had entered. The aim had either been errant, or meant as a warning.

The invaders fully surrounded the old Atrium an hour ago. Demands from a bullhorn started thirty minutes after that.

The squawk on the bullhorn. “We ain’t gonna wait all day.”

“Let those who want to enter the Lobby go,” Adisah said as he kept his gaze on the ray of sunlight passing through the bullet hole. It epitomized the view of life he’d adopted from his mother. Every act, no matter how horrible, forwarded humanity toward a more positive future. Evil never prevailed. Everything, to differentiating degrees, ushered goodness. This pattern long ago revealed God’s existence to him.

Though nowhere near the cost of the pain and suffering, even the holocaust created a light. It unified a fractured people, alerted the world to the detriments of apathy, and defeating the Nazi’s filled the Allies with a generational pride.

On the opposite end, guilt reshaped German philosophy. They learned to stand up against injustice, regardless of personal consequences.

Adisah knew, when the next human atrocity that edged toward the magnitude of the holocaust arose, the German people would oppose it to their last citizen.

Dalton leaned closer, spoke in whisper, “Some parents are taking their children up there.”

“That’s their right,” Adisah said. He then searched Dalton’s distraught face. “Are you seeking my permission to join them?”

Dalton bolted upright, “Of course not. I don’t leave your side, you know that.”

The firearm at Dalton’s hip smelled of cordite. Second degree burns charred his left hand. Adisah heard men talking about how Dalton emptied a rifle, expended two of the pistol clips, and killed several of the intruders as he guided a small group from La Berce, first in a convoy, then on foot.

Another member of his security team approached, pulled Dalton aside, and whispered in his ear.

“Go in peace, brother,” Dalton said. “He understands your worry. Wishes you well.”

The dark-skinned man who had whispered at Dalton stared at Adisah a moment, sorrow evident on his features. He moved to a crowd, spread a message that drew many glances, then the group hurried to the elevators.

Adisah would pray for them. Evidence abounded that the invaders lacked an interest in prisoners. They arrived for a duck hunt.

A squawk. The bullhorn. “Come out with your hands up, slowly, and no one will be hurt.”

Adisah wanted to believe them, yet he always trusted his eyes over another person’s mouth. That saying had applied to judging each person for themselves, based on their merits, regardless of their past. He imagined it applied to this situation, but saw few alternate options.

An argument existed that Adisah, through his dream to help those suffering, instigated this round of horror. Imagining the wonder that would follow a global strife of this depth kept him from wallowing in shame.

“We have an active phone line,” a man yelled from behind Adisah, near the desk.

“Get us some damn help,” Dalton barked. “The contact numbers are next to the phone.”

“I can’t get an outside line.” The man shook his head in frustration. “But we have an incoming call.”

“Answer it,” Adisah said. To Dalton, he motioned to the front door. “Tell them to stay calm. We have women and children inside. I will speak with them if that is their wish.”

Dalton pointed to a tall, wiry man with cornrows and pantomimed to his undershirt. “Go wave that in the doorway.”

The man removed both of his shirts, placed the outer one back on and held the white undershirt above his head as he crept toward the front door.

Adisah extended his arm in a plea for Dalton’s assistance in standing. Once given, he shuffled to the phone.

The man with the cornrows opened the door, exited with the white shirt held high.

Adisah waited for a rifle report. Hearing none presented a good sign. The man yelled their impending concession. The bullhorn reminded them, “They ain’t got all day.”

Everyone’s eyes stayed glued on Adisah. Many considered him an icon, the most accomplished African American in recent history, easily the wealthiest.

Behind the desk, he stared at the blinking phone line, and then to the people around him. “I am sorry to have placed you all in harm’s way,” he said. “I cannot promise to know the intentions of the men outside. But I enter negotiations seeking your

fair treatment. If you wish to join those that went upstairs, I will not find fault in your decision. We all walk our own path. Each one leads to a brighter future.”

A few of his staff gathered their loved ones into small huddles, chatted privately. A few more shuffled down the main hall toward the elevator, nodding terse smiles or keeping their heads down and feet moving as they passed. Many more stayed, and for reasons Adisah wouldn't attempt to articulate, he considered that a good thing. Examining the faces of the remaining people, he lifted the receiver.

He listened for a moment and then agreed. Listened, agreed. Listened, agreed. Disconnected.

Adisah spoke softly to Dalton, “You must understand, any mercy bestowed upon us is a blessing. Our only option is to trust their word.”

“We have options,” Dalton said. “We send the women and children to the rear of the building and we make a stand. There are twelve highly trained-”

“Yes, I understand your thinking. However, they have assured me that if I surrender. They will harm no one. And I have agreed. Doing this ends this part, allows us to begin another; bringing us closer to a return of harmony for the young ones.”

“Don't go,” Dalton dropped his head. “I'd rather die than see you mistreated.”

“We must think of the others.” Adisah nodded at the frightened crowd. “Our actions will decide their fate.”

Dalton surveyed the group, swallowed. “How can you trust them?”

Adisah edged around the corner of the desk. “I am a wealthy man. They will demand things, I will give them, and all of this will blow over.” He rested a hand on Dalton's enormous triceps. “I am to come out alone.”

“I'm going with you.”

“Now, now, my big friend. Your size will scare off the lot of them.”

Dalton lowered his head and spoke deliberately. “It would be my life's honor to accompany you.”

Taking in the man's stone features, Adisah sighed. “Very well, Dalton Lewis. Let us become captives.”

Dalton shared their intentions with the room.

The remaining people formed a procession of sorts toward the door. Each gave thanks, shared encouragement, tried to hide their concerns.

Adisah placated them with smiles and brief nods. With the door halfway open, Dalton paused. Adisah took a final look at the people he'd shared utopia with for nearly a decade. Sadness entwined his spirits, but even Eden had its downfall, and look at all the wonderful things that followed. One final smile, he stepped into the daylight.

The afternoon sun floated at the perfect spot to blind, to hide the majority of the parking lot. What he discerned beneath the golden rays shocked. Armed men pointed weapons at them from various positions: prone, kneeling, and standing. A concert crowd worth of killers.

The squawk. “Very carefully throw down your weapon.”

Using two fingers, Dalton extracted his sidearm, placed it on the ground. Once there, he raised his arms then kicked the pistol well out of lunging range.

Adisah felt centered, but his legs wobbled. The exertion from holding his arms above his head threatened to collapse him.

Glancing at Dalton, he wondered what they would do to him afterward.

A force collapsed Adisah's chest as a boom reached his ears. He crumpled to the ground as if he'd been a robot whose power source had suddenly been severed.

Like many of the stories he'd heard, time slowed, movement stopped, but the key detail omitted from descriptions of being shot in the chest with a high-powered rifle: the overall calm. His form decorated the concrete, but he, Adisah Boomul, spiraled toward a point, gaining strength and clarity as he twirled. Whether to an end that culminated in blackness, or a warp to a new essence, he couldn't be sure. As if in answer to his question, a woman's hand stretched to him from the darkness. He smelled menthol gel; heard the whine and hiss of a distant nebulizer; the beep of a cardiograph; and though his face and body didn't react, he beamed as he reached for the offered hand.

The fact that the fingers he extended were those of a young boy didn't surprise him.

A distant knowledge of someone hollering, without a sound, made it to his senses. Adisah felt the energy of Dalton's shocked rage, but knew the man would overcome this loss. God was good, and every action, no matter how misguided, made the future a better place.

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

“This like no smart plan, Alex,” Song said as he admired a row of hardcover books, featuring Darwin, Lewis and Clark, and other tales of exploration, in Alex’s library.

Alex wondered when Song abandoned his signature orange hair. Today’s natural black streaked with blue patina presented a more chic look. The familiar sound of his voice, along with his continued enthusiasm for life, brought so much comfort to Alex.

Over the past two days, as he welcomed his old team from Eridu, that sentiment struck again and again, begging the question: why hadn’t he done this sooner? These were the true friends his life lacked. Kole. Denise. Ron. Jason.

They spent the previous evenings dabbling in Alex’s new plan—the program he mentioned in the L.A. Federal Building; the one designed to keep the world functioning.

The more controversial details—one’s he’d been scared to share with members of the government—bubbled out of him. Having finally revealed his next level, effect-every-person-on-the-planet code, he awaited a single reaction from any of the reeling attendants.

Because those present owned healthy shares in Broumgard’s, he worried about misjudging their inner character.

The possibility of offending the fundamental beliefs of his previous underlings brought equal concern. If one left indignant, they could end his ambitions, jump-start a global catastrophe.

Song’s initial statement lacked confidence. Knowing Song, Alex hoped the words carried sarcasm.

Each ticking second frayed another nerve.

Surveying those present, going from face to face, he tried to gauge at least one reaction.

“Don’t listen to him, dear,” Denise said as she leaned forward in one of the over-size leather chairs. The woman had lost over a hundred pounds since her days at Eridu and wore her new found wealth openly: big-faced Rolex, diamond broach, gaudy rings on each finger. “I, for one, lloovvee the idea.”

“You have something to drink in here?” Kole asked as he rose from an ottoman and opened a nearby cabinet, then another. Judging by the broader shoulders and wider thighs, he spent more time in the gym. His teeth looked whiter, too. Other than that, Kole hadn’t changed, besides he now dated actresses, models, and ballerinas.

Alex almost told him which cabinet to check, but being two doors away, he left him to figure it out.

“Anyone else have a thought?” Kole asked as he found the liquor and filled a glass halfway with Jameson, “I mean, this is heavy stuff. The end of cash, lawlessness.”

“Been there, did those,” Song said with a dismissive wave.

“Open them pretty brown eyes, sugar,” Denise said to Kole. “The world is changing. Broungard did us good and I’m as loyal as anyone in this room, but they in trouble no matter what we do. This shit going down is bigger than one company. I see what you want to do, Alex. Hand some countries the glass slippers, and others the big F.U... I’m with you though, one hundred percent.”

“Way crazy idea, but I way crazy. I in too,” Song echoed as he stood behind Kole, awaiting a drink.

Kole handed him the one he held and poured another. “We know the big man’s in,” he said, nodding toward Jason Johnson, who rested in the chaise lounge reading from a Kindle.

Alex laughed at how the man hadn’t bothered to lose any weight or change to any perceptible degree. His faded New England Patriot’s T-shirt seemed to be a pre-globalization hold over.

Jason completed the line he was reading and looked up. “Of course, I’m down. I have yet to visit Cosmic Conflict and my guys and I are waiting to launch a mermaid world that’s going to restructure our physiology, create a massive... splash.” He grinned, “I need this pissing match to be over.”

“How ‘bout you, Sticks?” Kole said before he sipped from the aged whiskey.

Carl Simpson’s white hair sported the same bowl cut. Perhaps the top had thinned. His freckles looked less prominent. He waited a tick, looked about nervously, and then replied, “Alex always has the best ideas.”

“That leaves me, and hopefully you all know, I’d never miss being a part of this,” Kole lifted his drink. “To old times and monumental reunions.” He upended the Jameson.

“Live long and prosper,” Jason said before returning his eyes to the Kindle.

“Well, I guess it’s settled,” Alex said. “I know it’s a wild idea and it’ll take all of our effort and resources to saturate the globe in the given time frame, but it can be done. And because of the people in this room, it will be.”

“I’m actually getting excited,” Kole said. “I feel the old juices flowing. It’s world changing time for us, yet again.”

With his team reassembled, Alex’s leadership juices flowed as well. “We’ve all agreed to commit, and I expect everyone to honor that. Forget our past accomplishments or our current lives. We need to go back to working like impoverished interns.”

“So, you want me to smoke hella weed?” Kole said. “And play video games when no one’s watching?”

“Show lots of cleavage to increase my odds of sticking around?” asked Denise.

Alex laughed. “I was thinking more like dedicate very minute. Embrace our deadline and exceed it. Things like that.”

“Gotcha, boss man,” Song said.

“Tomorrow we meet down here at six-thirty, breakfast, and then head downtown to the Atrium where those we trust will be waiting for us. I understand, for everything to work smoothly, we need our own people. Remember, keep the end goal as need to know only. I don’t want to sound cliché, but the world is counting on us.”

In less than a week, his team would criss-cross the globe. Song spoke Mandarin and Korean, giving him that part of the world. Jason headed to the London Atrium, putting Europe under his domain. Denise could choose between Australia and India, leaving the other English speaking country for Ron. Kole staked a claim on all of South America.

Every nation had talented programmers more than eager to comply with a well-respected Broumgard employee trying to assist the Lobby.

Alex patted Kole on the back, shook Song's hand, and left Jason to his book before heading upstairs to his room. As he trekked the glass halls, he thought about his upcoming tour through America—no longer the most divided nation in the world, just one divided country among many. If things went well, he might be able to stop the growing chasm. Perhaps his plan could even stitch the United States, and the globe, back together.

Rosa waited on the sofa, watching the news. Upon seeing him, she smiled, patted the seat next to her. "How did everything go?"

"Excellent. It's nice to have the old faces in one room again. To see them embrace my plan one hundred percent, despite its controversy, was special."

"Well, you're doing a good thing," she said. "I'm proud and relieved. The world is losing its way. Technology has been luring us away from God, or in softer terms, away from our humanity for decades. The Lobby amplified that to the millionth power. You stopping the illegal entries, allowing our government to get a grasp on things, pull in the reigns; that's important. I've wanted to have this talk, ask how you really feel about all this. It's comforting to see, by your actions, that you value a position I can support."

He winced. If she really considered all the possible endings; knew all the details; some of the selfish thoughts swirling in his mind, she'd react differently. He wanted to share his true values. He would share them, the very moment they stopped fluctuating.

"Half of me agrees: Our government needs control for it to have leverage. Criminals controlling access frightens me. I'm unsure about technology stealing our humanity. Perhaps it's just adding convenience."

"Alex, before Roy's death, you had promised to seek help for an addiction. I want you to consider the possibility that your opinion is skewed by that addiction. I'm positive you're incapable of thinking clearly on this subject. I'm equally positive smart phones, texting, selfies, and creating the perfect profile pic are a sickness eating away at reality; at God's world; at *our* ability to experience."

"That could be true, Rosa. But who's to tell people what's right; what's healthy."

Rosa studied him a few seconds. He read concern on her features, waited for her to say, "The Bible." Instead, she grinned in that sad way that caused him to reflect on his position. Perhaps he *was* cracking up, making poor decisions, being driven by an unseen force. Rosa squeezed his knee, leaned in and touched her forehead to his.

He exhaled and admitted. "Sometimes I know, just am dead certain, no matter how I approach this Lobby situation, I'm betraying something or someone I love."

"Alex, you're doing the right thing. When it's under wraps, I'll fight to get you into rehab. Once clear-headed, you'll see what I'm saying. Just hold on, trust in me, until then."

"You're probably right." *But as likely, you're wrong.*

“I can’t shake this image of mobsters controlling the world with violence and brute force. You’ll be stopping that.”

He nodded. Internally, he reflected that his task involved taking power from Peter and giving it to Paul. In a perfect world, it would stay in the hands of the people. Could his plan really produce that end?

On the wall (converted to a television), President Tanner orated to a crowd. Something he, and every other leader, had been doing daily. Alex pushed aside the magnitude of everything. The idea his actions might impact the worlds frightened him to the point of inactivity. Regardless, a percentage of people would hate him. It felt like every decision he made brought a greater viscosity to the atmosphere around him, making it harder and harder to proceed.

He paddled on, hoping for a rescue.

In a light voice, Rosa said, “Anyway, did you have any luck contacting Adisah?”

An undertow pulled on his lower body. Where was Adisah? “No, I have Victor trying hourly. There’s a problem with the connection at Eridu. Some message plays when you call, asking to respect his privacy.” He licked his lips, closed his eyes, inhaled deeply.

Alex needed Adisah’s counsel. Perhaps he’d expound something enlightening enough to lead Alex down an alternate path? Yet, he understood the desire for privacy. News vans lined the streets of Alex’s neighborhood for a quarter mile. He couldn’t imagine the types of people trying to get at the Montana facility.

“Peter stopped by and brought you some papers,” Rosa said. “He asked me to make sure you look at them asap.” She made her way to the night stand near their bed.

Alex watched President Tanner wave his enthusiastic end-of-speech wave as he exited the stage.

A montage of tanks, soldiers, and riots led viewers to commercial. He fantasized about what the world would be like a year from now. Going down each of his two possible forks brought vastly different endings, neither ideal. One ended in global destruction, the other in a collapse of *his* world.

“Here we go,” Rosa handed him an 8x11 envelope.

Accepting the packet from over his shoulder, he held it at arm’s length, stared at the Presidential seal emblazoned on the front.

Tension floated away as Rosa sat next to him. Her love kept him sane. Wondering whether that would be enough to see him through this stole hours of his sleep each night.

Tearing off the top of the Presidential seal, he pulled out a stack of paper a half-inch thick.

A letter in business format sat on top. A scan of the bottom revealed Tara’s signature. He knew she’d been as busy as him over the past few weeks. Eager to learn what consumed her days, he read:

Alex,

I am aware of your current responsibilities in building monitoring stations to insure we control access to the Lobby.

Thank you for what you are doing. Your task may be the most important in a line of monumental assignments. My team has worked hand in glove with the legal representatives of our nation, trying to improve our position for the upcoming summit. I

write this with the consent of President Tanner: the rumors are true—conflict is escalating. Not some tit-for-tat posturing, but a global strife that could escalate to the use of nuclear weapons. It appears interpretating ethics and morality provides the deadliest game of all.

This letter is to invite you to that global summit, August 6th.

This meeting will involve leaders and representatives of twenty-seven nations.

The summit will take place inside the Lobby's, Honest Meeting Room. We will discuss the future use of the Lobby. Our goal is to remain there until we reach an agreement that staves off military action.

This is only possible if *we* control Lobby access. You must excel at your duty.

You should know numerous world leaders have requested your presence. They will want to hear your opinion. Stay focused. Stay vigilant. Do not fail.

Sincerely,
Tara Capaldi

He passed the letter to Rosa and scoffed. Meeting in the very machine they delegated over must be the height of irony. But Honest Meeting Room provided immense advantages for something of this magnitude. It guaranteed ease of travel, it negated the debates over who would host.

Honest Meeting Room hovered near the top of the Lobby's most popular worlds. Business transactions consumed the majority of its use, but also custody hearings, negotiations, and discussions of all types, because every statement made in that particular world passed through a lie detector.

Real world polygraphs worked off of physiological tells such as sweating palms, erratic heartbeats, irregular breathing. All of which could be manipulated with training or because of mental illness, such as adopting false memories. The detector in Honest Meeting Room monitored the electrical signals in the brain. Human thoughts sprouted near the center of the mind in the temporal lobe. When a person recalled a fact from memory, they retrieved it from the hippocampus in the bottom middle of the temporal lobe that stored memory.

When a person fabricated a tale, it processed information through circuits in the cerebellum, located in the frontal lobe, where imagination and abstract thinking occur.

This made the deception detector in Honest Meeting Room unbeatable, regardless of training or mental illness. You're either recalling a memory, or creating your own. Follow the current, know the truth.

Alex perused the remaining documents: other personal letters of support, the probable proposals from various countries, the Health and Wellness outline that Tara had presented to him after Roy's death.

When he reached the end of the list of attendants and found Agent Andrew's name absent, a twinge of joy curled the corners of his lips.

Picturing the strange man reading the list two dozen times, fuming to greater degrees each moment he reached the end; each time he read Alex's name, caused a single laugh to escape.

“What is it?”

“I was just laughing at one of Adisah's life maxims,” he said as he dropped the rest of the packet on the table. “No matter what, the world finds a way to continue down an ever-improving path.”

CHAPTER FORTY

Live news challenged the most seasoned anchor person, but the concept intrigued audiences, boosting viewership. Gimmicks meant little to Rebecca Trevino. She boasted a massive following. Next to Alex Cutler, she might be the most recognizable person on the planet.

Adjusting her posture atop her new chair—one that still smelled of treated leather, on her new set, which covered twice the area of her old one—she scanned the list of off-limit topics between her and tonight’s enigmatic guest, and found his request surprisingly limited.

Someone yelled, “Quiet on the set.” She passed the tablet over her shoulder.

Pressing her beige, knee-length skirt flat against her thighs, she looked over at the producer as he counted down. “Five, four, three...” He pantomimed the final two numbers.

When he made a fist and pointed, Rebecca said one-one thousand in her mind, and began, “Hello. Welcome to a special episode of *Inside Today*. My guest tonight is none other than Iranian President, Reza Shah.” She faced him, knowing the camera would pan out to include both of them in the shot before zooming in on his face for her first question.

“Thank you for having me,” he said in clear English, spoken deliberately to minimize his accent. “It is my pleasure to be with you.”

“With fourteen days until the global summit that will decide the future of the Lobby, and many speculate, society as we know it, I imagine your administration must be very busy.”

“Yes. Very busy, indeed.”

“I understand, you have declined your invitation to attend the summit. Can you tell me about that decision, and where the Iranian people stand on this heavily divided topic?”

“Certainly. I can tell you, first, that the Iranian people are not divided. We are united as a people, and as a nation, in the direct opposition of that device.

“Myself and other noble leaders will not attend, for we have nothing to discuss. We have formed our own coalition, one that your media neglects. Currently, our thirteen nation union is focusing on our salat prayers, asking Allah the Benevolent for guidance; pleading with him to impart wisdom into the hearts, and sensibilities into the minds, of these New Age Axis and Ally members.

“They must understand, there is no room in God’s world for an invention devised to tempt man into the gravest of all sins.”

Rebecca nodded casually, as if she didn’t experience a tingle with each rise in the

death trip total. “There is much speculation that the nations you labeled the New Age Axis and Allies, will reach a compromise. A deal that could include the Eastern nations promising their citizens that if they live honorable, beneficial lives, they’ll receive eternal retirement as their reward. And, that the West will not interfere with this practice as long as strict procedures are in place, including the denial of Lobby assess to citizens from specific nations. There is even speculation Atriums will reopen throughout the United States and its Western allies.”

A deep frown creased from the President’s face. “That would be most unfortunate.”

Rebecca appreciated the twinkle of conviction in his eye. “there is also ample evidence that both sides have increased their military readiness, should a compromise become unachievable.” Pausing a moment, she prepared her bombshell. “Would you say the Middle Eastern coalition, like those in the East and West, are willing to compromise to avoid war?”

The President adjusted himself. The hairs on her arms reached for the skies. If her research proved correct, this would be the mega answer; the one that the estimated two hundred and forty million viewers were tuning in to see.

Pursing his lips as his head slowly shook, he answered somberly, “There can be no compromise with Satan.”

Rebecca screamed, internally. Outwardly, she nodded stoically. That line would air on every station for the next two weeks.

“You’re saying these thirteen military powers are united and ready to use force if the Lobby is allowed to function?”

“I am saying that we are praying for a peaceful resolution. We have yet to identify any nation as an enemy to God. Any actions in the near future will reflect the true views of the two billion outraged Muslims around the world who, along with our Christian brothers, harbor a goal of eradicating a machine that lures souls, otherwise destined for paradise, onto a false platform of Devilish design.”

The camera stayed on him for a full six seconds and then panned out.

“Thank you for your candor, President Shah, but to be clear, you are saying that the Middle Eastern Coalition, comprised of thirteen powerful countries, will target buildings—even if they sit on the sovereign soil of peaceful nations—in pursuit of eradicating the Lobby?”

He folded his hands on his lap, straightened his spine, and said, “We shall do all in our power to assist in the destruction of each wire and every bolt that threatens the very world Allah the Righteous has bestowed upon his children.”

With that, they went to commercial, during which time Rebecca Trevino envisioned herself going on-stage for her Pulitzer in Journalism.

CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

United States Army's enlistment numbers hover around one point four million men and women. This vast number of soldiers produced a maximum of seven four-star Army generals. Having one of those important figures visit you and your organization should have brought the highest of honors to Colonel Alan Cox of the Lord's Thorn. Instead, he felt defeated.

After securing Eridu, Alan asked after his protégé, Tim Vanderhart. Thirty hours passed until they confirmed his death. Alan knew in the first ten minutes. Had Tim survived, he'd have been at Alan's heel, hollering about the thrill of conquest. Alan intended to boost that excitement with a bump in rank. That would have granted Tim access to the meeting just wrapping up. Witnessing two Generals shake hands could have crossed of a soul on Tim's bucket list.

Alan felt relief seeing General Koster of the United States Army board the elevator, exit the gargantuan condo occupying the top floors of La Berce.

General Trieu of the Lord's Thorn had dismissed the other colonels, asked Alan to stay behind. With their honored guest descending, Trieu strutted back, beaming.

"Can you believe all that?" He passed over one of the dark-stained bridges throughout the home. The water that used to run underneath had been drained long ago, leaving a dry bed. Each step over the bridge echoed. The sound seemed to amplify the emptiness.

Alan had spent his life in Northern Michigan, where home prices hovered around seventy thousand dollars. Much better than the ghettos of Detroit, where a once-loved brick home could be purchased for two-thousand bucks; where five grand got you the pick of the litter; where sometimes the city paid you a hundred dollars to take a home if you promised to make it livable.

He imagined this cavernous marvel of good-smelling wood carried a value triple entire neighborhoods in Detroit; cost more than square miles of property around their old clubhouse property.

"You're a smart man, Alan," Trieu said as he passed him and peered out of the window, no doubt to savor every glimpse of the four-star general by watching his departure. "You tell me, why *did* I ask you to stay behind?"

Alan snorted. He pictured more dread accompanying this. Instead, relief escorted his impending termination. He'd been insubordinate, bordering on mutinous, since their landing, but as the saying went, "life off the farm wasn't all song, dance, and long legs." In response, he said, "To relieve me of my duty?"

Trieu looked at him with a crude smile. “No, sir. I want to promote you. Hand us each a new star, courtesy of General Koster.”

A military Humvee appeared beneath them. From this height, it resembled a crab scurrying across a beach. Their Army friend had choppered in various military equipment: high density receivers to allow excellent satellite relays; crates with M4A1s and AR-15s and one with RPGs; containers of leisure items for the officers; low temperature clothing; night-vision goggles; climbing gear of enough diversity to allow multiple teams to operate in any region—a bountiful reward for a successful mission.

Following the road in both directions, Eridu teemed with activity. The women and children had arrived two days ago. The vehicles that brought them filled the Atrium parking lot and desert beyond the airport. And though the majority of the helicopters survived the assault, most had been returned to their original owners.

Due to the volume of new arrivals, families still located loved ones. Once done, they were assigned lodging on the east end of the compound.

Alan found it disturbingly convenient how none of them asked where the previous residents—whose photos still decorated the walls and whose clothes still filled the dressers—had went.

Alan didn’t want a promotion; assumed a refusal equaled his death. Trieu’s first order after touching down at Eridu—to shoot anyone who moved—revealed the man’s heart.

Alan feared waking each night to find a blade spilling open his throat. The thing was, without Tim to mold; with having ingested a lifetime worth of nightmares over the past week, Alan no longer gave a shit.

“You still with me?” Trieu asked. “No ideas as to why I’d want that?”

Coming up empty, Alan shook his head.

“You’ve opposed nearly every decision we’ve made here.”

Easiest thing I’ve ever done, thought Alan. Instead of replying, he worked his jaw to one side, dug his tongue into an upper molar.

“Yet, you don’t vocalize your disapproval; you haven’t tried to organize a revolt.”

“Perhaps, I don’t disapprove,” he said with causticity.

“Ah, but you do, Alan. We both know it. It’s just, you have impeccable respect for the chain of command.”

“Unfortunately.”

General Trieu swiveled his body, taking in his burly guest. “You broke Verhultst’s nose. Fractured his eye orbital.” He looked back out the mega window. “What was he doing? Harassing one of the female captives?”

“Raping.”

“I guess that’s applicable,” Trieu inspected Alan through his reflection. “Despite three against one, you helped that woman because you’re a good man. It earned you major respect around here.”

“Lot of good it did her.”

Another beat.

Trieu shrugged, “War’s a nasty business. In this situation, we can’t let anyone go. Can’t afford to take care of them, risk someone slipping off. Poisoning their food was a mercy.”

Alan's blood warmed. The general might be better trained, but Alan was twenty years his junior, and sixty pounds heavier. Alan experienced a flash of clutching the man by the back of his neck, bashing his face into the glass before them, see if he found death be severe head trauma a mercy.

"You remember walking into that room?" Trieu said.

Alan flinched. They'd entered the upper level access room on the first day together. He'd never forget the sights, or the smell. Slumped bodies occupied dozens of chairs. Three times that number were strewn on the floor like discarded garbage. Enough piss pooled on the floor to constitute a pond.

"That's what we're fighting here, Alan. It's uglier than my tough decisions. It's the Devil's work."

Alan nodded. He'd headed those who volunteered to load the corpses.

Those twenty-four hours passed in a haze. Fill the elevator, send it down. After each return, they'd wash it out, get that floor spotless, then turn it filthy. For what?

Unconsciously, they'd saved the children for the last. Thirty-two of them. Twelve no older than nine. The youngest, a toddler, died with a look of absolute horror on his face. A single gunshot wound dotted his little chest.

"You a New Testament guy, or an Old?" Trieu asked.

Full disclosure, Alan had dyslexia, never read either. He knew God existed and that more and more of the world was being cast under some MTV spell of stupidity, short skirts, and society as a hive-mind. He knew big name pharmaceuticals were drugging a generation to make them dependent so those in control could instill socialism and attain dominance. He knew, due to a genetic memory that stored a person's actions and compiled generational traits since the genesis of life that a high percentage of blacks were violent, sexually deviant, and that they corrupted everything they came into contact with. Yet, he'd never wanted them dead. Just let them have their continent of chaos and anarchy, while the rest of the world prospered with kindness and compromise.

Trieu continued, "The Old Testament is all that matters. Ain't no substance to the New. It's passive bullshit about turning cheeks. Ain't no mention of God. How crazy is that? Just some guy going around talking to people, tempting them to go against everything said in the first half of the Bible."

In the distance, the Humvee stepped near a helicopter and little specks moved into the awaiting transport.

"If you love Jesus," Trieu continued, "I'm not going to knock it, but he ain't God. It don't say that on 'nan one of them pages. God tells us the Devil'll strike and it's up to us to douse his fire." Another beat. "Do you have any doubts this machine is Satan's minion?"

Alan considered the question. The memory of lifting that young boy off of the cold floor remained fresh. The kid had been chucked aside with such disregard, he'd landed on his face, smashing his nose almost flat to one side. The boy's small, well-kept afro showed his pride in appearance, which meant in self, often in others. He might have been a good looking kid, had rigomortis not molded that into place.

He pictured Tim's face battered and distorted like that and inhaled. The one solace of Tim's death: he could move on, avoid being siphoned into a godless machine.

"No, I have no doubts. It's a soulless evil devised to destroy everything good and pure in our world."

“That’s right, and yet you think many of my decisions have been...harsh.”

Alan scoffed. “They could have been handled with more compassion, yes.”

“That’s why you have to be our second in command.”

Alan focused on his own haggard reflection as the helicopter blades started to spin in the distance. With a heavy beard, a mustache grown to cover both lips, and thick hair, he appeared the last survivor of a lost clan.

“Between you and I,” Trieu continued, “we have every man on this compound’s unwavering loyalty. This thing’s just beginning. We have a short time to train until this international summit will decide the fate of billions; of every breathing body on this planet.

“If what general Koster just said is true, America is willing to compromise her values. They will discard God’s laws. Thankfully, some in the military will protect our future. They intend to take the fight to foreign soil, start a war, regardless of commands. As they lay waste to the enemy, the Lord’s Thorn must cleanse our homeland.

“We have our targets, their addresses, and the men. We have technical support, the explosives, and the financing. What we need is leadership.” Turning to face Alan, he extended his hand as if to shake. “I know you’re still ready to lay down your life in the pursuit of destroying this great evil. Be the check that balances me.”

Alan looked at the hand and breathed deeply. He couldn’t support General Trieu’s actions, but they lived in a fallen world. Alan’s only certainty was the Lobby brought wickedness. He raised his hand, yet avoided the grip. “As long as in that process we don’t become the monsters we intend to defeat.”

Trieu nudged his hand forward, but didn’t clasp. “Fair enough. But you accept that our hands must get bloody.”

Alan made the connection, and squeezed his general’s hand. “Absolutely.”

CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

Examining himself in a section of his bedroom wall, temporarily converted to a mirror, Alex admired his look: well-groomed hair styled with Rosa's supervision, a coal black suit. Very respectable. His true opposite.

When thinking of the acts he had put in motion over the last three weeks, Alex was eighty-twenty. Eighty percent crippled with depression, twenty percent filled with exhilaration, both pertained to his future. The disproportionate, yet fluctuating emotions left him feeling woozy, almost numb, like a hypnotized man standing on an automated walkway, whose path would take him through the next four hours, regardless of his desire to deviate or turn and run.

Attending the summit as a representation of knowledge and confidence, his suit displayed a side of him he was unsure existed. Embracing his deceit bolstered the eighty-twenty skew toward a complete meltdown. Having read a smile blocked melancholy, he forced the muscles into position multiple times each hour.

Rosa spent the majority of her morning at her preferred salon. She'd spent the last hour in the bathroom, with the occasional dart to the closet for this or that.

The inner him might dislike what his appearance portrayed, but as he rotated for peripheral views, he could see this Alex photographed on the red carpet and plastered in major magazines. He sniffled, shook his head, thought about his first magazine cover, on *Computer World*. The look of uncertainty in the eighteen-year-old misfit in the gray sweatshirt had caused him to question his purpose, his confidence, his choices. Compared to the man he was today, that Alex epitomized self-assurance, confidence, pride of action.

By this time tomorrow, Alex would head thousands of magazines, newspapers, and webpages. He hoped the captions would read: Alex Cutler, The Catalyst of Peace. He feared many would be labeled: Alex Cutler, Assistant to Tyranny.

This big ticket event lacked the glitz of a red carpet gala. Most present would possess average looks, be slightly overweight, not pretend to care about issues they know little about. However, the global summit would provide more drama than anything the most talented fiction writer in Hollywood could sensationalize.

Everyone with access to media would be glued to their screen until the summit concluded, and they learned if their nation, and, by proxy, their loved ones, would be involved in a war.

Throughout the previous weeks, Alex had been circling the United States. In each major city, he employed his resources to gather the network he strived for. His station gained him access to any office, his presence garnered attention, his belief in his work instilled dedication.

Through these meetings—often with well-connected individuals—and the encrypted updates from Luke Dean, Alex learned of many nefarious plans in incubation. They propelled him.

In spite of continued silence, the rumors of Adisah being murdered and Eridu being hijacked by an American-born terror organization threatened to stunt him with despair. A heavy workload buried the pain.

More verified information said a general in the United States Army planned terrorist acts against Atriums on foreign soil.

Alex believed that he, and his team, presented the only possible scenario for thwarting all of those plots, avoiding World War III, conflict to dwarf all prior.

Every fiber that constructed him had issues with his strategy. He avoided actions on such a grand scale. Lying to people hurt, but the wheels rolled on; momentum reached an avalanche. With his network growing exponentially, that force would soon meet an immovable object.

Stepping out of the bathroom, Rosa commanded an overhead light to shine on her. “How do I look?”

Taking her in, his eyebrows raised of their own volition. Despite the worry as to his finale’s implication, he swelled with affection toward Rosa. If he deserved to cover a magazine, she would wallpaper newsstands. She wore a hip-hugging black dress that showed off the continued hours she dedicated each day to her fitness. A diamond necklace glittered around her neck. A matching bracelet cast flecks of light on the wall and floor, but none of those accessories outshined the beauty of her face; the softness of her skin; the fullness of her lips. Her brown eyes beamed as if polished. Her satiny dark hair had a light curl and bounced softly against her shoulder.

A lump caught in his throat when he thought of all she might endure as a result of his actions. She deserved a life free from strife. Knowing such a life didn’t exist pained him.

“That good, huh?” she said playfully.

“You are the most beautiful woman in the world,” he said honestly. He then strode over, kissed her passionately.

After a half-minute of mutual enjoyment, she gently pushed him off. Her smile of pleasant surprise threatened to pull him in for more, but she placed her palms on his chest and shook her head.

“You know there is a presidential motorcade waiting for us?”

“You deserve nothing less.”

“Look at the big charmer,” she blushed, reexamined herself in the mirror. “If only all the death threats didn’t necessitate my chariot being bomb-proof.”

Turning her, he wrapped his arms around her waist. With their stomachs pressed together, Alex’s weight gain stood out. He’d been knocking out two, three, even four packages of Oreo’s each day.

“Everyone of those threats are directed at me. Without me in the picture, you’re perfectly safe.”

She put her hands on his forearms. “They want a piece of you, they’re going to have to go through me.” Another grin, and she pried his hands off, tugged the wrinkles from her dress.

The thought that some psycho might agree with her constantly troubled him. He kissed her neck and stepped away, dabbing a tear from his eye.

“It is ten minutes to four,” Victor announced per Rosa’s instructions.

Alex, along with three military officials from the west coast, would log into the Lobby at five-thirty from the Los Angeles Atrium and rendezvous with the rest of their delegation by using President Tanner as a reference.

Alex knew America’s committee members had been cramming all day, every day, for the past few weeks on what to say to who, on the cultural differences for displaying respect, but he’d been on his own mission to save humanity.

Last night marked his first night home, leaving him no time to do the one thing he had hoped: bring Rosa up to speed on all the intricate details of his plan and the reasoning behind them, attempt to convince her of its benefits.

On the flight home, he penned a letter, figuring he could revise it a time or two and then read it aloud.

That opportunity never presented itself.

Swallowing his regret, he focused on the task at hand. In an hour and a half, she’d have her explanation. Hopefully his actions would be seen as the genius that averted what analysts predicted as guaranteed conflict; globally, in every nation, in all cities.

Alex stared at the back wall, viewing the gently rolling surf of a private Caribbean beach: a large sun in the distance; crystal blue waters; white rippling sand. Illusion or not, it provided the soothing effect Rosa intended.

“We’ll get there,” she said, siding up to him, taking his hand, and staring at the twelve feet by ninety feet screen.

Dabbing another tear, he thought, *they were in so much danger, and she had no idea.*

Adisah had been, at best, incommunicado for a month, and the possibility of his murder, however unpleasant, loomed high. If he had been killed with a cult-like following of ex-military security forces around him, what chance did Alex and Rosa stand?

As she squeezed his hand, he thought about the approaching events.

When caught between a rock and a hard place, you either got squashed or changed your location.

Releasing each other’s hands simultaneously, they made their way to the elevator.

As soon as the doors opened to the main floor of Legion, he saw the security presence. Professional types: suits, earpieces—crack shots that emptied clips into center mass.

Six men occupied the space from the elevator to the front door. As the couple passed them, they fell silently in tow.

Outside, the real weather appeared: a light drizzle, clouds, suffocating humidity. More than unusual for Los Angeles in the summer, but these were more than unusual times.

A pair of helicopters hovered overhead. Men with dark shades and rain slicks scanned everything in sight. Thanks to Luke, Alex knew military vehicles filled with soldiers waited nearby, that snipers manned roofs, that a dedicated satellite would monitor the entire trip.

They passed by foot-thick, reinforced steel doors to enter the limousine. Alex had learned they could withstand a direct hit from a rocket propelled grenade.

Inside, the small, muted television flickered with activity. The news broadcasted a crowd of Lobby protestors, accentuating their emotion with a constant jostling. Judging from the surrounding architecture and vehicles, Europe hosted this particular skirmish.

Retrieving the remote, Rosa turned off the monitor. "Seeing that doesn't help."

Staring at the blank screen, thinking about the shock approaching the world, Alex wondered if the extreme work he had put in would have the positive effect he imagined, or had he just doomed humankind.

* * * *

"Mr. Cutler?" Luke's voice came through an intercom in the vehicle.

Aware that Luke rode in the passenger seat, Alex pressed the button to reply. "Yes?"

"You may want to watch channel seventeen, a local station with coverage around the Los Angeles Atrium."

Rosa selected the remote, held it away from Alex a moment, and then powered on the screen.

Though interested, he continued to stare out of his window.

They had chosen a route through a residential neighborhood. Two police motorcycles led and trailed the motorcade. Their blue and red lights swirled, but no siren sounded. He figured the nine vehicle convoy presented quite a spectacle when viewed from a living room couch.

Rosa sucked a breath between her teeth, drawing his attention to the television.

He suspected the displayed pandemonium matched an angry mob storming a warehouse holding the depleting cure of a virulent pandemic.

From aerial shots, one could see thousands of people littered the light-industrial area surrounding the Los Angeles Atrium—a place he had grown so familiar with. The picket signs were split between support in all forms, and calls for the Lobby's annihilation.

The parking lot remained clear, yet seeing it absent vehicles seemed nearly as strange as the demonstrators. Police and military officers in full riot gear manned wooden barriers along the parking lot's exterior, shoving back the swell of bodies.

More sophisticated barriers were erected fifty yards in. The officers protecting that area held rifles. No doubt armed with tear gas and rubber pellets, but the live stuff—ammunition of the killing type—would be close at hand.

The armored limousine slowed in the middle of a side street and halted. Alex surveyed each window view. Why had they stopped?

Behind him, two SUVs formed a V by parking their noses together to block the road.

"Mr. Cutler?" Luke said over the intercom.

Alex attempted to peer out the front, but the length of the car prevented a view.

"Do you see something?" Rosa asked.

"Mr. Cutler," Luke said, "they have decided to bring you and Mrs. Cutler in by air. The upcoming roadways are congested and becoming increasingly hostile."

A final glance at the program ended any thoughts of opposing the suggestion. The camera panned out, granting an expanded sight. Tents, barrel fires, booths—the scene

reminded Alex of a Third World refugee camp. Except, outrage, anger, and defiance—not necessity—bound those present.

Turning off the television, Rosa stated, “I hope this helicopter has a closed cabin. I spent four hours on my hair.” Her smile faded before it fully formed.

A squadron of men rushed to the limousine and stood sentry around it, patiently waiting for the black helicopter, which had a sealed cabin, to touch down.

Each side of the limousine opened simultaneously. One team attended to Alex, the other Rosa. With a force just short of a yank, they pulled Alex out, bent him forward at the waist and huddled around him as if snipers waited in the windows of the surrounding suburban homes.

During liftoff, he noticed many of the neighborhood residents had exited their homes, stood in driveways, or on front lawns. Alex couldn’t shake the scary truth. Going by the math, at least one of them, hated him.

The thought of living that paranoid, and the danger applied to Rosa, once again reminded him of the past invitations from Dr. Brad Finder, who lived isolated on his own island off the coast of Argentina. But he knew that wouldn’t work. If insurgents could root out Adisah, location presented a minor obstacle.

Seeing Rosa patting her hair, Alex gave her a thumbs up as to its perfection, and with the exception of one side being puffed out two inches, and fifty strands seemingly zapped with electricity, he shared truth.

Approaching the mob revealed it stretched ten times further than the news had shown. A half-mile separated them from the edge of the bedlam, yet even directly beneath them—in a residential area—groups of people camped out.

The passing helicopters drew faces with magnetic-like force, subverting people from smoking grills, car windows, and huddles. Umbrellas tipped like dominoes. Arms waved, and plastic-wrapped signs shook up and down and from side to side. Driving through that would have been impossible.

A tink sounded against the underbelly of the craft. The helicopter jerked upward, climbed at a steep angle.

A security officer across from Alex held his finger to his ear and then leaned forward. “Someone took a potshot at us. Small arms can’t penetrate our armored hull but we’re increasing altitude as a precaution.”

The new elevation exposed more of the crowd. Once they centered over the parking lot near the main door they eased onto the pavement. Strangely, the helicopter coming to rest on the asphalt elevated his anxiety. It made today and his actions, real.

Alex and Rosa had spent enough time with security details to remain seated until instructed otherwise. Two groups of soldiers rushed from the Atrium. A few carried bulletproof shields. They formed a horseshoe on both sides of the craft, and whether by design or bad luck, they landed to where Rosa had to climb out on the far side, closest to the protestors.

Indoors, he rose to his full height and found himself in a sea of suits and military uniforms.

Rosa led him by the hand to a nearby bench.

Before he gathered the strength to reach for her letter and read the important words, she spoke, “Big day, huh.”

He allowed his hand to pause. Today represented an enormous day.

“You’re going to be okay, Alex.” A beat passed. “It’s all so awful; but do you ever step back and think you may end up being a man historians talk about for generations.”

Over the past few weeks, that sentiment had increasingly crept into his thoughts. If the world survived, would his actions be considered noble or heinous? Would he be a liberator or a slaver? In his unrecognized arrogance, he’d never thought about how the world would view his loyal, supportive wife. Perhaps because that one was easy: “Whatever the future historians teach, all the mentions of benevolence will start with you.”

Her face lightened, but her lips frowned, as if anchored by an inner sorrow. She had seen the restlessness, weight gain, and irritability. “I know this has been a whirlwind,” she said. “I just hope when it’s done, we can get away for a while.”

He resumed his reach for the envelope.

“Mr. Cutler?” A man in a navy blue uniform said. The many medals on his chest clanked with each movement like a tambourine of pride. A man in a designer suit waited behind him. Alex should shove the envelope into Rosa’s hand, but he wanted to read it aloud. “Excuse me, ma’am.” The officer said to Rosa. Then, to Alex, “Mr. Cutler?”

“Yes.”

“I’m Colonel Emelander. There is a room full of people waiting for you. If you’ll excuse us, ma’am, it really is quite urgent we brief your husband.”

“I understand,” she rose, looked to Alex.

He wasn’t ready. He had so much to say; to her, about her, about him, about the world, and the Lobby, and his work these past weeks.

Leaning over, she kissed him, and despite the uncertainty of his plan, the soft touch of her lips scattered his worry—he’d always have her love.

He exhaled, forced the letter back into his pocket. At least he wrote it all down. He appreciated that, because after this meeting, no matter how it went, the world would be a very different place.

CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

The men in suits had requested Alex's presence, but his summons lacked pragmatism; it simply displayed control. Thank you for your great contribution. Thank you for allowing me to help. Did everything go as you planned? Yes. Were there any problems we should know about? Umm...no.

To these bureaucratic men of prominence, Alex was a computer nerd, like thousands of others. He received a job, completed it. He held no official title, knew nothing of politics, should play no part in the negotiations. To many, his involvement equated to coddling a rich man.

The situation penned an ancient story. These men were the old hats, unable to accept how fast the world shifted. In 1966, Stephen Moore proposed Moore's law, which stated that, in the modern era, technology doubled every eighteen months. That, too, had become outdated. Today's technology doubled in bursts. Crackling explosions of progress detonating simultaneously from multiple launch points. Science, medicine, space, nanite, we swelled with advancements. One day, perhaps soon, that tension would burst, and we'd experience a reset.

Alex believed society must be governed with limited oversight, particularly pertaining to the Lobby. Don't take from others. That could be the lone law. Searching for criminals in every unfortunate act, needing to terminate after lost profits; war. Ridiculous.

Any war fought over the Lobby involved its control. That understanding motivated Alex.

Ten minutes into his summons, he learned his attendance at the summit meeting had not been a request by the so called, New Age Allies—his team—but rather a demand from the other side. The Eastern world valued his input. Alex knew the monk, Sung Yi, had been expounding Alex's greatness for weeks. Despite the absurdity of the monk's sermons, Alex took pride in knowing his unexpected contribution offered the best chance for a peaceful resolution.

At the appropriate time, the group moved to the elevators and waited for transport to the access rooms. He stood in the back, allowed the others to board first—some of whom had probably forgotten he accompanied them.

Riding with a group of analysts, he listened to them explain how if the East and West reached a compromise, the Middle East would bow out with nothing more than threats. That, or be destroyed. Their nations maintained impressive armies—when compared to one another—but the powerhouses of the world were still Japan, Great Britain, China, Russia, and the United States. Any one of them could battle, possibly

defeat, a Middle Eastern coalition. The analysts trivialized the seeming inevitability of mass casualties, turning Alex's stomach.

Upstairs, the smile of a young woman acted as a beacon in the sea of focus and distress. Gravitating toward her, he allowed himself to be guided to an access room. Once inside, the closed door sealed off the chatter.

"What's your take on all of this?" he asked.

"Me?" She glanced from the control panel, looked him up and down as he sat. "I think... what you have built is a wonderful escape." She honed in on the timer and initiated its thirty second countdown with an extravagant push of the button. "But, it has become... uncontrollable. You people will figure it out, but give me all the power... and I would shut it down. Destroy it all." She shrugged nonchalantly.

Her candor surprised him into silence. He'd been hoping for a reply that aligned with his actions.

"Sorry," she gave a half-smile. "You asked."

That I did, he thought as the timer hit five, four, three... that I did.

Popping into the Lobby decompressed his chest, lightened his entire aura. *Had I actually harbored that much tension?* The expulsion of stress was like being pulled from a tar pit he'd been wading through his entire life. He kicked a leg, rotated an arm, smirked at the notion people wanted to destroy this.

Taking a deep breath, he surveyed his white surrounding. Instead of the calming tranquility he expected, his breath hitched. The remaining CO2 leaked out of him in a slow stream. His vision blurred, returned. He remained unsure as to what he looked at.

People—strangers not invited to the summit meeting—were clustered close. They stretched for *miles*, talking in low tones.

A message sprung to life before him. President Tanner sought Alex's permission to come to his location. Absentmindedly, he okayed the request.

Being above average height, Alex had a good view and wondered, *am I seeing an optical illusion?* Swiveling to the opposite side of the hall, he found the same sight. Innumerable people of all races, leaning slightly Asian, stretching into infinity. *Have I entered the mirror room in a loony-bin funhouse?*

The President appeared a few feet away. Locating Alex, he stared beyond him with wide eyes and a craning neck. Standing three inches taller, Alex imagined the President's view encompassed more people.

The reserved voices delivered an ominous feel. With a population a ten-thousandth this size, the Lobby echoed with boisterous talks and jeers. The loudest sound today: the nervous queries coming from the New Age Allies as they appeared near him. One voice, considerably louder than the rest, attempted to gain control by starting a roll call.

Each shouted name drew more of the crowd's attention. People soon whispered, studied the continuing appearance of politicians and officers around the President.

Alex heard his name mumbled more than once in the crowd and felt a fright so deep, pertaining to his global work, it threatened to morph into madness. He could have avoided this moment—these people's presence—a dozen times over. Standing here, with his deed done, he worried a force had guided him to this moment.

The crowd numbered forty wide with a seemingly endless depth. They formed rows, focused on the congregation. They padded silently toward him.

“Alex Cutler.”

He turned to find the President of the United States. The man wore an impeccable suit with a red and white tie. His voice remained steady, but an undercurrent of concern layered his tone. “Do you have any idea what all these people represent?”

At the mention of his name, the crowd zeroed in on him, the chatter expanded. The mass shuffled closer, like an army of dazed zombies.

“That’s him.”

“Alex Cutler is here.”

“He’s arrived.”

“Thank you, Alex.”

“Thank you, Mr. Cutler.”

Similar sentiments created a wave in both directions.

The hairs on Alex’s neck stood on end.

As people ventured into his personal space, Alex reacted. “Employee command, Alex Cutler. Space, thirty feet, forward direction, full width.” Upon completion of his command, the wall of people slid backward as if they stood on a patch of ice, pushed by an invisible plow.

The shouts of gratitude and praise increased; all were directed at Alex. The voices reached a roar.

“Employee command, Alex Cutler. Volume decrease, fifty percent.”

The sounds dulled.

“Little help, please, Mr. Cutler.”

Turning, he found the President and his men engulfed by the mob. A few of the entourage familiar with Lobby commands had evoked their ten feet of personal space, but lacking Broungard managerial status, that extended their capabilities.

Moving to the opposite edge, Alex stretched out his arms, repeated his space command, and granted the group thirty feet of space on that side. Once done, he overrode the commands of personal space so their party members rejoined as a group.

Having sufficient area between them and the surrounding mob allowed everyone to catch their breaths, compose themselves.

“Well done, Mr. Cutler,” the President said, speaking loud enough to be heard above the polite chaos. “Now, do you have any idea who these people are or why they are here?”

“These are the sick freaks,” a man in military accoutrements said as he strode closer. “The suicidal nutjobs from around the globe.”

“No, it can’t be,” a man with gray hair who looked somewhat familiar to Alex said. “There’s way too many for that. This is like an entire city.”

“Why are they here?” Asked another.

“It’s a sad world we inhabit. Wouldn’t you say, Mr. Cutler?” President Tanner said.

Alex surveyed the conglomeration.

Had this many people dedicated their future to the Lobby?

Since he hadn’t included the word “personal” in his command of thirty feet, the space started from where he previously stood, creating a flat wall of bodies. He crept over to an Asian woman in khaki pants and a teal blouse.

Noticing Alex, she slowly dropped to her knees, bowed her head, and stretched out her hand.

A wash of euphoria paused Alex.

“Please stand,” he reached down to assist her.

She rose bashfully, glancing to her left, her right. A man next to her sunk to his knees and placed his head on the white.

“What are you doing here?” Alex asked the woman. To the man, he said, “No, please stand.”

The man ignored him. People to either side followed suit, setting off a chain reaction—a wave of people dropping in supplication.

“What is this horse shit?” The military man blurred by and forcefully lifted the first kneeling man.

The man allowed himself to be pulled up, but hung loosely. As soon as the military man released him, he dropped back down.

“Stop this nonsense, you demented freaks.”

“It’s okay, Don,” the President said.

“No, it is not, Mr. President,” the military man said as he yanked a petite woman up. She kept her head bowed, dropped back down when released. “Make these freaks stop this nonsense,” he yelled at Alex.

“Don, leave it alone,” said the President. He scanned the miles of people falling like dominoes. “Let’s...let’s get on with this. Mr. Cutler, are you ready? Our Japanese counterparts are very excited about your participation.”

Enthralled by the woman’s fascination with him, the trust and love in her face, Alex barely heard the man. Releasing her hand, he insisted she stay standing, and bent to lift the man next to her, the one next to him, another beyond. Four uplifted people later, the process reversed. The people in the front rose on their own.

“I’m sure you’ve heard of their prophet, Sung Yi,” the President said a little louder.

Alex had, but he looked past the President, guesstimating how many miles the hall would extend if a hundred thousand people populated it.

“He will be in attendance today,” the President continued. “He’s basically the opposition leader. And despite the misconception, they view you as ours. I pray we can use that to our advantage; persuade them to agree to our fair terms.”

“Mr. President, we should get going,” a short woman with wide hips said.

“Sung Yi has been preaching all month that on this day, you will provide answers to solve our difference,” the President said. “What do you think, Mr. Cutler, are you going to push our agenda, or are you keeping an alternate answer up your sleeve?”

Alex smiled as wonder mixed with shame, as a lifetime of uncertainty and self-conscious thoughts floated from his person. He pushed aside regret with hope. “I do, Mr. President.”

“Sir, we need to go.”

The President turned to the woman, but it seemed he pondered Alex’s words.

“It should be you who opens the door, Mr. President,” the woman added.

The President nodded. “World select, Honest Meeting Room, Seventeen seventy-six.”

A door appeared twenty-five feet from where the President stood.

He looked expectantly at Alex. “Well, are you going to share this plan of yours before we head in, or just spring it on us equally?”

This was Alex’s moment, a resetting of his life. Alex affirmed his resolve and spoke, “I’m afraid I won’t be attending your meeting.”

A million fears fluttered off of him. The universe seemed to brighten. He smited his anxiety and uncertainty.

The President furrowed his brow.

“Whatever game you think you’re playing,” the military official said, “You can bet—”

“Silence aggressor,” Alex said. A green halo appeared above the military man and when Alex confirmed him as the intended target, the man’s voice cut off in mid-gripe.

The President looked to the man and then back to Alex. “What do you think you’re doing?”

“I’m bowing out, my friend. Relinquishing your’s, and everyone else’s self-imposed authority over me.”

“That’s not possible,” the President said in his most commanding tone, but he swallowed two times before adding. “You will attend this summit as our ally or face imprisonment.”

“I’m afraid not,” Alex smirked. “I’m out of your world. The truth is, you’re standing in mine.”

The President thought a moment, then shook his head dismissively, “You couldn’t have injured yourself after entering. We’ve had eyes on you since you exited Legion, so whatever you were planning, it’s not going to happen.”

Perhaps the President believed himself to sound authoritative, but his words rang hollow to Alex. He pitied the man. In the Lobby, President Tanner was just another visitor. Alex’s life of being threatened and labeled and told what was right and what was wrong and what he should believe had ended.

“Time released cyanide,” Alex said. “It won’t kick in for another ten minutes or so, but there is no stopping it. I’m free, Mr. Tanner.”

The man in the military uniform looked ready to burst. The veins in his neck bulged as he silently screamed his poison.

Alex resisted his urge to laugh. He was finished with cruelty—receiving or giving. Parting a conciliatory smile to the President, he shrugged.

“We don’t need him, Mr. President,” the young woman said. She then eyed Alex. He detected something in her gaze. Envy? “But we must go,” she added.

He ignored the small comments of him being a traitor, or worse. This was his moment. His rise to power. The resurrection of himself. The kid in Alex wondered how these complainers would like his other surprises.

“I’m still going to have to insist that you accompany us,” the President said.

Alex nodded sympathetically. “Employee command, Alex Cutler. Corral participants of Honest Meeting Room Seventeen Seventy-six, exclude self, move to entrance.”

At once, and from all angles, the congregation slid along the white toward the awaiting portal, ending as a huddle near the world entrance.

He wouldn't be attending their conference, living their rules, or swallowing their lies. For the first time, he considered Sung Yi a true prophet, and felt remorse that they had never met.

Someday, he thought as a smile possessed his face. After all, he had eternity.

Using one final command, he silenced the grumbling crew, knowing once they entered their world, his restrictions would fall away.

They would get over what Alex had done.

He faced the swell of people who, having risen, had watched everything in awe.

Taking the closest woman by the hand, and wanting to converse a while before deciding how to spend his first lifetime, he led her through the parting crowd.

People summoned worlds and vanished. Others followed Alex Cutler, the defacto creator of the Lobby.

CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR

Sitting patiently on the bench where Alex had left her an hour before, Rosa watched the busy people pass her by as if she were a shade. Having grown accustomed to the indifference, it surprised her when a man, whom she pegged as working for the secret service, approached her.

“Rosa Cutler?”

“Yes,” she adjusted her posture.

“This is for you.” He handed her an envelope, and once firmly in her grip, disappeared into the wash of activity.

She examined the envelope from all sides. Sealed. Normal white. Her name written in ink; Alex’s handwriting.

Without any definitive reasons to worry, her hands trembled as she tore it open.

Quickly unfolding the letter, she made it through the first sentence before she released the paper, covered her face, and sobbed.

CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE

From the office of his Victorian home, General Koster stared through the rain at his well-manicured lawn. The faded wooden playset and sandbox always caused him to question his parenting—ask why he counted himself lucky to see his grandchildren twice per year. Behind the play area, a small patch of Indian laurels and a lone queen palm created a natural blockade, granted privacy. Rain dived at a forty-five degree angle, pelted the pane of glass hard, as if each drop was piloted by an enemy determined to reach him.

His hands were clasped behind his back, separating only to pour and slam shots of scotch from the bottle atop his desk.

With the world summit meeting underway, and the United States intent on dealing with Godless heathens, Koster waited for a miraculous outcome. Otherwise, he'd commit treason. It'd be done in the name of righteousness, to save humanity, ensure civility. That didn't soothe the friction in his chest, which increased by the minute.

Tomorrow morning he would initiate an air-strike on Moscow, Hong Kong, Tokyo, and Ho Chi Minh City.

His fabricated orders would be traced back to him. He'd be executed for high treason, or if lucky, die in prison.

A rap sounded on his office door, startling him. Linda knew not to disturb him when in here. When she poked her head in, his anger diminished. They had been a great unit for more than four decades, and guilt for what his actions would mean for her weighted him the most.

"This just came for you," she displayed a white 8x11 Tyvek envelope. He often used them when mailing important documents, being that they were waterproof and near impossible to tear.

"You can just place it on the desk there."

She did.

As she neared the door, he added, "I'll be out in a little while. Maybe we can watch a movie tonight?"

"That'd be nice," she closed the door.

She left the envelope face up, displaying the cursive handwriting on the front, another twist. He'd thought the use of ink pens to be a lost art. The curiosity as to who still penned letters intrigued him.

The package felt light, as if empty. No doubt it contained some parable about loyalty to country sent to him by a bitter, but cowardly, colleague.

Using his gold-plated letter opener, he slit the bottom and pulled out a single sheet of lined paper.

Scanning to the end, he identified the sender: Alex Cutler.

What in God's name would that bastard want?
With his temperature spiking, he poured, then gulped a shot of scotch, read the letter:

General Koster,
You know who I am, but you may not be aware I know you, and the majority of your recent activities; I simply lacked the evidence and time to convince authorities of your plots. Also, I was preoccupied with my own agenda.

My recent tasks have absorbed over six billion dollars from the US treasury. I have completed my goal of saturating the globe with outposts in an attempt to introduce state-of-the-art software and implement new training; both involving pirated access points and their macro servers.

I write this letter to notify you that your hopes of destroying the Lobby have no chance of success.

For the past three weeks, I have *not* trained a single person on how to detect pirated access points and macro servers. In actuality, I have trained thousands of the Lobby faithful on how to construct more efficient pirated access points and macro servers. These individuals are in turn sharing these techniques with the people they trust, creating an irreversible proliferation of free access to the Lobby.

I realize this is unwelcome news for you. My purpose is to give you the proper information so you can make the best decision as to your next move. I no longer have a personal interest in your game, but there is a new fact, one you must accept: the Lobby is here to stay. It cannot be eradicated. So any criminal acts you commit now will be motivated by your own spite, with zero justification beyond cruelty and terrorism.

Again, I am sorry things happened as they did. My advice: accept the changes, find a way to adapt.

Whether the Lobby is a gift from some deity, or a machine created by the intellect of man, will be for each of us to decide.

I have made my choice.

The world has changed. The question is, are you mature enough to deal with it?

Sincerely,
Alex Cutler

General Koster stared at the page for what could have been a minute, maybe ten. His surroundings didn't exist. He lacked thought. With a ferocity that had been building for days, he snatched the bottle of scotch by its neck, turned, and pitched it through his office window.

The crash of shattering glass and the ensuing tattering of shards on the wooden floor echoed as if in slow motion. The liquid pilots commenced their assault, wetting his front and the office around him.

Immobilized, he labored heavy breaths.

The door to his office flew inward. "What's going on?" Linda asked.

Just the end of the world, dear, General Koster thought. Just the end of the world.

CHAPTER FORTY-SIX

Rebecca Trevino had always known Alex Cutler would contact her. She layered *Inside Today* with verbiage directed at him. She never revealed her subliminal techniques to anyone, mainly because she didn't fully comprehend the method. She had always acted on instinct. She would research a target, tailor programs to align with that target's past, knowing her target would feel its veracity on a personal level, develop an interest in her.

Since the onset of the Death Trips, no journalist had been granted an interview with Alex Cutler. All had tried. In her many fantasies, she never concocted any as grand as the powder-keg story he shared.

The newsroom around her swarmed. In moments, she would interrupt her network's coverage, which continued to speculate on the results of the biggest summit in world history. Intoxicating programming, but her bombshell would eradicate speculation with facts. Perhaps cause a few weak hearts to fail.

Along with a letter Alex asked her to read on air, he included three inches of documentation. Alex Cutler might be dead to the world, but Rebecca appreciated his efforts to shape its future.

Her people were fact-checking the array of claims: proliferation of improved pirated access points, the assassination of Adisah Boomul, government involvement, backdoor conspiracies. All of which led to a mountain of stories that she would be covering for the next two years, and discussing her entire life.

The majority of the lights around her dimmed, leaving her illuminated

She saw the open hand, fingers counted down, five, four, three...

"Good evening, ladies and gentlemen. I am Rebecca Trevino bringing you a exclusive report. The international summit taking place is not set to end for another six hours, but I have obtained the first bit of credible information as to its outcome. First allow me to read you a letter from a man you all know, Alex Cutler, partner of the Broumgard Group, pioneer in the Lobby's design, a citizen for the modern era."

She allowed two seconds to pass and then continued.

"Hello, world. My name is Alex Cutler. For those who have heard of me, you may see me as a rich man or the face of a product or company. The truth is, I am a person, like any other. I try to live good, be decent, and make sense out of the life I was given.

"For me, making sense out of existence has been a difficult task. I've lived haunted by the premature death of my brother, dealt with anxiety, worried life had no meaning.

"I am oppressed by my own mortality, and have spent my life avoiding inactivity in hope of thwarting reminders of its eventuality.

"I've come to believe that madness is the illusion of danger pushed on us by those who govern. Overwhelming fear has us living on a razor's edge. We spend each day so worried, we lack the separation needed to understand our own motivations or desires. We wake and fill our hours with anything to distract us from the existence we hold dear.

“It is mainly for these reasons I ingested a time-released cyanide capsule before entering the Lobby today, and have added my name to the multitudes who have chosen a proven eternity, over a hopeful one.

“Hypocrisy, apathy, ignorance. Humans seem imbedded with a near disdain for other living creatures, for different ways of life, for granting forgiveness.

“My exiting on my own terms is not an endorsement of any philosophy. I have made my choice. You must make yours. A great man once told me, ‘We all walk our own path, and each one of them leads to a brighter future.’ I believe that is true.

“Someday, technology may allow me to step back into your world, but for now, I’m going to wish you well, and enjoy my Virtual Heaven.”

[Notes from the author](#)