

Chapter 1

The strobe of lighting and resulting peal of thunder jerk me from my fear induced trance and back into the present. Shivering, I sit alone in my office, the icy pall of dread hanging in the air fills the marrow of my bones.

More than feeling alone, I'm scared shitless.

Before today, my office had been a refuge. A place where logic and order were cornerstones. It didn't matter how bad things got on the outside, once inside these walls, I quantified chaos, enumerated discord, accounted for risk, and put each one into their assigned place.

That was before. Now everything hangs in the balance. All my struggles and sacrifices, all my successes, achievements and accolades are at risk. Everything I've worked so hard to accomplish has come down to the single click of a button.

"Look," I say, attempting to restore some semblance of control, "there are only two potential outcomes. Either everything is going to be fine and you'll feel like a chickenshit for being so scared or your paranoia will be justified and you'll be in serious trouble."

Refocused, I stare at the landmine of my computer screen, which is blank except one text box in the center which reads, "Execute?"

All I need to do is click the button, yet the war between the anticipation of getting an answer and the fear regarding my future keeps my finger hovering above the mouse in a stalemate.

In a quiet moment of ceasefire, I hear the normally loud internal voice of logic whisper, "You're gonna find out sooner or later."

Before the war resumes, I heed to my inner sage and click the mouse.

It takes 10 agonizing seconds for the computer to compile, collate and put the data I've requested into a compressed one-page report. It appears on my screen and I lean in to scan its contents. With anticipation now vanquished, fear rushes in to reap the spoils of war. It oozes into the growing pit in my stomach as the report confirms what I'd suspected.

My computer has been hacked. Worse, the hacker has installed a zombie program, allowing them remote access to my computer to use it for whatever illicit purposes they desire.

Fear ratchets up to terror as the information in the report points to my boss, a member of The Counsel of Three, as the one responsible for the hack.

I'm flabbergasted.

If true, this adds another layer of trouble. Sure, when I suspected my computer had been compromised, I knew there would be consequences. How the hell am I going to explain to the Counsel I'd hacked the State servers to gain access to their computers in order to find this out? Especially since the report shows one of them as the culprit?

Yeah, I'm in some serious shit.

I sit back in my chair, tilt my head up, and stare at the ceiling. Now that I've ripped the Band-Aid off, now that I know, I can allow my training to take over. As senior actuary for The Counsel of Three, it's my job to forecast risk and come up with procedures to mitigate loss should those risks become reality.

While I'd not predicted the risk associated with what I'd learned, I sure as hell could work to mitigate the potential loss associated with it. Besides, I need to focus on something other than what remains unknown, as well as the terrifying truth of what is known.

"Break it down into smaller pieces," I say aloud.

Could Counselman Jefferies really be the hacker? Possible, but not probable. In the years I've served under him, he's the least tech savvy member of the Counsel. Besides, why would one of the three most powerful men in all the Central Division of the America's need to hack into a subordinate's computer in the first place? It just didn't add. I set him aside as a suspect for the moment.

Was it possible someone hacked Counselman Jefferies computer, installed a zombie program on his machine, allowing the hacker to use it to hack into and set on up a zombie on mine? Again, possible, not probable. Yet, between these two choices, this one made more sense. It was odd, though, for a hacker to double his exposure.

I would know. I used to be one.

Although my intentions were good, hacking into each Counsel Member's computer to ensure all was in order is neither legal nor an official part of my job, but I didn't get to where I am by following the rules all the time.

My nefarious past has helped to anticipate and calculate potential avenues of threat and danger, as there's no algorithm that can account for the thought process of criminals. Turns out, my past had been advantageous. Until now.

It's decision time.

I close my eyes and consider the two paths I see in my mind's eye. One, I stop right now, immediately call an emergency session to inform the Counsel what I've uncovered, admit to illegally hacking into both the State server and their individual computers and let them, in their infinite wisdom, dictate the next course of action.

Or two, hack back into Counselman Jefferies computer and set up a trace program that will lead me to the original hack point.

In both cases, I'll need to take this to the Counsel. I'd rather go with answers rather than lay a steaming turd of a problem on their desk. Rooting out risk and mitigating loss from risk is my responsibility. Going to them now would only highlight a problem. If I had answers, I'd have some workable solutions they could decide upon. That would also help prove the necessity of my illegal trespass into non-sanctioned digital areas.

My decision made, I open my eyes, swivel my chair toward the polarized glass of my office window on the 99th floor. Situated one floor below the Council's main chambers, a not-so-subtle reminder of my place in the pecking order, I intend to look out over the late afternoon cityscape of Chicago's A sector.

Instead, I see my reflection. I'm an apparition. Ethereal, hollow, and haunted. My brown eyes appear to be black pearls set among skeletal sockets, my sand blond hair looks gray and thin, and my countenance, usually firm and confident, is weak and uncertain.

I must be projecting how I feel.

Despite my best efforts to suppress them, I cannot keep the waves of emotions in check. With its scalpel sharp blade, shame surgically eviscerates my pride, removing all I'd accomplished in my career.

How could I not see this coming, especially considering my past? True, I'd hacked to their computers to make sure all was okay, but I honestly didn't think I would find anything. At least nothing like this.

And what if my trace program confirms Counselman Jefferies is the hacker? Embarrassment points its accusing finger at me, taunting I'd fallen prey into thinking Council Members were above reproach. That they were perfect, impervious to wrongdoing or possessing

any predilection to abuse the enormous power bestowed upon them. That they were not only above the law, they were the law.

How could I justify failing to see them, not elected officials of the state, but as godheads given absolute authority?

I turned my attention from my gossamer reflection in the window and back at the report on my screen. Working to compartmentalize, now that I've felt my feelings, I need to think about the hack into Counselman Jefferies computer and what line code I'll need to write in order to get the information I'm seeking.

I place my fingers on the keyboard and, like so many times before, once engaged, the world around me dissolves and I'm unaware of anything but the satisfying, ordered, logical code I'm creating. There are no questions, there are no problems, just beautiful structure.

Two hours later, I return to the real world where the evening sky is now bruised dark purple and black. I look at the clock: 5:47. I'm done. There's nothing left to do until the trace program runs its course.

Although I have no direct proof Jefferies is the culprit, I copy everything I've found to this point and paste it in an ancient word processing program. From my backpack, I pull a handmade docking port I'd constructed back in my hacking days and plug it into the V Port on my computer.

Next, I pull out an even older thumb drive, plug it in and save the word doc into it. I remove the thumb drive, delete the word document from my system, then dump the cache from the computer as well.

I shut everything down, stand and review all the steps I'd taken to ensure I'd not missed anything. Certain there was no chance of tracing anything, I turn off the desk light, grab the thumb drive and slide it onto my jump craft key ring and slip them into my front pocket as I walk toward my office door. I turn and look into the dark cube of my office to make sure I haven't forgotten anything.

"I could never be a spy," I say into the empty room. "I wouldn't have the nerves."

Satisfied all was in order, I turn and made my way down the short hallway to the elevator. I push the button and only wait three seconds until the doors open.

My heart skips a beat, then two, then sinks. There, resplendent in his gleaming white robe, stood Counselman Jeffries.

Standing a few inches over 6 feet, he has thick wiry black hair which is always coiffed. He possesses angular facial features, making him look like a bird of prey, especially now that I knew what may be behind his beady, black eyes and hawkish nose.

"Alexander? Are you alright? It's as if you've seen a ghost."

Recovering, I bowed slightly. "Counselman Jeffries. I apologize if I interrupted your descent. I thought everyone had left for the night."

"No apologies necessary. I needed to attend to a few matters before the weekend."

"Yes, of course," I said.

"Are you heading down or are you content just standing there?" he said.

I can feel the thumb drive pressing against my thigh. It feels as if it has caught fire and is burning a hole in my tailored suit trousers. Fear grips my throat in a panicked fist. I had no voice.

All I envisioned was what was awaiting us upon exiting the elevator in the lobby below. Before I could go through the metal detector, I would have to empty my pockets and place them on a tray. Jefferies spying the thumb drive and inquiring about it.

I knew he was a collector of antiques, although his tastes centered on early communications devices. His prized possession, I recalled hearing Jefferies boast, was the first hand-held portable phone. A huge, heavy contraption that looked unwieldy and awkward to use.

“Alexander?” Jefferies asked, breaking me from my catatonic state. “Are you alright? Should I summon a medical bot?”

Need to act.

“I’m fine,” I replied. “No need to summon anybody.”

“Come on, then.”

Despite the risk, turning tail with some excuse was far riskier. I stepped into the elevator. Jefferies hit the button for the lobby and the doors closed.

"Do you and Mae have any plans for the weekend?" he asked.

“Not really. And you, Counselman?”

“Yes. Tomorrow, I’m heading to the East Sector to put my eyes on a piece that’s become available. Apparently, a collector has passed and his family inherited his vast collection and reached out to me knowing my penchant for such things.”

To regain my composure, I ran through previous conversations I’d had with Jefferies on the subject, recalling specifics that would help me appear as if nothing was out of the ordinary.

“If I recall correctly, the last we spoke of your collection, you said you were looking for an early Motorola Razr.” I paused, wanting to find the detail that would impress him and take

his attention away from anything remotely close to me. Finding the detail I wanted, I continued, “The model V3, wasn’t it? An early flip phone.”

Jefferies turned to face me, a wry smile etched across his face. “You’ve quite a memory Alexander. Impressive.” He then turned back to the front, tilted his head to the side, then whispered, “Quite a memory indeed.”

“Thank you, sir,” I said. “If you recall, I too am a collector of antiquities.”

Reaching the lobby, the elevator doors opened and I stepped to the side, allowing the senior member the respect owed. Jefferies exited and headed toward the hooped archway of the metal detector. Standing on either side of the detector were two fully armed autonomous sentry robots.

“Yes,” Jefferies answered, “if I recall, you collect ancient computer technologies, correct?”

Jefferies stepped through the metal detectors, not bothering to stop to empty anything out. No beep sounded, and the sentries remained passive.

Stopping at the threshold of the detector, I removed my Vennier jump craft key ring, the thumb drive attached to it and placed it on the tray, then walked through the detector.

“You’re quite correct, sir.” I replied, walking through the detector as composed as I could. Jefferies hadn’t bothered to turn around but had kept walking.

“Sir?” the sentry said as he rolled to a stop, blocking the path in front of me. Jefferies stopped and turned around. “Could you please explain what this is?”

The mechanical arm of the sentry was holding the key ring at eye level. “Scanners show this item is not consistent with your jump craft.”

Risk. I'd known being stopped was a possibility. True, I'd not expected Jefferies being present, but I'd already accounted for the risk and had planned a response.

"That, my good man," I said in a mock English accent, "is a custom-made security device I created. My jump craft won't start unless this device is in proximity to the key."

There was a pause, one that stretched into forever. The sentry was scanning my bio-feedback, measuring skin perspiration, heart rate, pupil dilation and respirations. Instead of letting the moment crack me, I took control.

"Now, if you don't mind, I'll be on my way."

I held out my hand. Another second ticked by, then the sentry released the key and thumb drive and they landed in my outstretched hand.

Jefferies had been watching the interaction between me and the sentry with keen interest. Walking toward Jeffries, I couldn't help but notice the look on his face. Instead of a mask of suspicion or concern, his face possessed an air of smugness and superiority. Then he smiled and looked more like a wolf eyeing a plump white sheep that had strayed from the safety of the herd and was ripe for the slaughter.

Chapter 2

I'd avoided the slaughter.

Once inside my Veneer jump craft, I took several deep breaths to calm my racing heart. Did Jefferies know? The way he'd smiled, like a cat playing with a mouse, it was not a friendly smile, but sinister. I looked at the flash drive dangling from the key ring. I wanted to remove it from the key ring, take off, throw it from the window and pretend it never existed. Return to my life as if nothing had happened.

If only it were that easy.

I started the launch cycle, contemplating if ignorance really was bliss. What if I'd never hacked into the system and was unaware my computer was compromised? If I had the power to go back, is that what I'd choose? When the dispatch controller spoke through the speaker system, I returned to the present moment.

I needed a drink. Mae was probably wondering why I wasn't home, but the promise of escape was too strong.

After providing the point of departure and destination, I waited for the vector and altitude instructions.

"Veneer 105. Your vector is 183 degrees, altitude is flight level 045. Have a good evening."

"Rog on 183 and flight level 045. Thank you," I repeated.

Once I reached an altitude of 450 feet and was heading south toward the only dive bar I knew, did I turn my thoughts back to Mae.

She was unaware of anything being wrong. Why burden her with more problems when I was still searching for answers myself. Why add to the stress when our marriage was on shaky ground, and had been for over a year?

“Good evening, Maurice,” I said queuing up our shared personal AI.

“Good evening, sir,” Maurice replied.

“Please call Mae,” I instructed.

“Calling Mae,” Maurice confirmed.

After several rings, she picked up. “Hey, you.”

Hey you? I can’t recall the last time she’d answered the phone like that, especially since the miscarriage. She sounded good, almost happy. Not the morose and disinterested tone that’s covered her soul since losing Christian. After 15 years of marriage, I knew everything I needed to know about her disposition within the first 5 seconds.

“Howdy,” I said trying to sound just as chipper.

“Where abouts are ya,” she asked.

“I need to take care of some things before I head home.”

Silence.

I knew it wouldn’t last. She wouldn’t be able to let it go.

The effervescence gone from her voice, she said, “I thought we’d planned on having a nice quiet diner and spend some time together. I was getting ready to put the brie in the oven.”

“I need to take care of something at work. It shouldn’t be more than an hour, then I’ll be home, will that work?”

Working closely with the Counsel, Mae knew there were sensitive things I was privy to that needed to remain confidential. She’d always understood and respected that boundary.

“Whatever,” she said then disconnected the call.

Yeah, I need a drink.

The Dog House is in D Sector, my old stomping grounds. It had opened the same year I’d could legally drink and had been the trendy spot. Those days are long gone. For both The Dog House and myself. The bar and I, at least for the moment, share a common thread. For a Friday night, the joint is as empty as I am.

Standing in the entryway I look at the floor. Women judge other women by their shoes, I judge a place based on how they take care of their floors.

The floor is a microcosm.

I remember when I’d first walked into The Dog House, the floor had been clean and new. Now, after years of traffic, multiple changes of management, and a declining neighborhood, the floor is a hodgepodge of multicolored squares each with its own unique veneer of caked on grime.

I walk as far away from the door as possible. Once seated, the robotic tender slides down the bar, his gears squealing in protest.

“What can I get ya,” he asks.

I look at the cheap latex skin covering his metallic skull and his blue eyes of glass looking at me with no inflection of care nor a hint of incredulity that a high-ranking government official is sitting in a dirty dive bar in a run-down sector of town.

“Do you still have ice rounds,” I ask.

“Yes, sir,” he replies.

“Scotch. With one round.”

He slides back down the bar, places a translucent ice round in a Scotch tumbler, pours two fingers of an 18-year-old Scotch whose label I don't recognize, then places the drink in front of me and heads back down to his charging port.

I take a healthy gulp. Just as I'd hoped, the cheap whiskey sets my disquieting thoughts aflame. I close my eyes, picture myself writing an individual word on tissue paper, then watch as the fluid conflagration from the whiskey consumes it, scorching the life out of its meaning.

Shame. Poof! Gone.

Humiliation. Eradicated.

Embarrassment. Destroyed.

Nothing remains but blackened moths of nothingness fluttering in currents caused by their own annihilation.

I relish the release, bask in its liquified burn. The joy of normalcy at the center of my soul is a salve. My world is as it should be. At least for a few moments.

I open my eyes, lift the Scotch tumbler, swirl the liquid around and watch as the large ice round slides rather than rolls around the bottom edge of the glass.

Bringing the glass to my lips, I drain the remaining two swallows. The contrast between fire in my throat and chill of ice on my lips is analogous to my situation. Fire and ice. Good and bad. Right and wrong. Innocent and guilty. Insane and sane.

The robotic tender slides down the bar, removes the glass and in programmed pantomime asks, "You wanna another?"

Glancing into the empty tumbler, I know I'm not sufficiently anesthetized to deal with both work and home.

I nod sending the tender down the length of the bar to pour another.

Once delivered, he makes no attempt at small talk, but slides to the other end of the bar and shuts down leaving me alone with my fire-vapored thoughts. Alone with the charred remains of my dilemma.

I reach into my jacket pocket and pull out my key ring with the plastic thumb drive attached, holding it close to my face. The Scotch has been successful in wiping clean the shame and humiliation because of my failures, but in the resulting vacuum, fear has filled the void. Fear of losing everything.

I take a healthy sip from the Scotch.

Turning the red plastic rectangle of ancient computer technology over, I imagine the incriminating data it contains as nothing more than a series of ones and zeros. Nothing scary about ones and zeros. I recall when I hacked the Counsels network and discovered there was a problem.

I place the thumb drive on top of the bar and renew the internal argument, trying to convince myself that hacking into their network was and is an official part of my job. It should be anyway.

Ones and zeros I remind myself. Just innocuous bits of data. Until they're converted back to weaponized data. I drain the rest of my second glass.

The robotic tender activates and slides back down to face me. He doesn't offer another. I know he's scanning to determine if I've reached the legal limits of sobriety.

I stare into eyes that look but do not see. The warm buzz of liquid armor feels good. I hope it'll last long enough to get home and through the inevitable fight I know awaits me. I grab the key from the bar top and head toward the door.

"Use State account number 861," I say over my shoulder.

If I was in some shit, may as well enjoy a few drinks courtesy of the State.

Mae was leaning against the kitchen island when I walked in the door. A bowl of mango salsa and a half-eaten bag of tortilla chips along with a Mexican beer sat on top. She didn't bother looking up.

"Hi," I said. "Sorry I'm late."

"Yep."

"Yep? What happened to 'hey you'?"

She looked up, her eyes as hollow as the glass eyes of the tender at The Dog House. Ironic.

"What happened to 'I'll be home in time for dinner'," she countered.

Remain calm. "I told you, I had some things to take care of after work."

A sheen of tears formed at the bottom of her eyes. No longer hollow, they'd become prismatic pools of sadness.

"And what kind of work is going on at The Dog House, Alex?"

She'd tracked me. Anger flared. Miraculously, I kept it contained. "Mae, something is happening, something that could destroy all we've built. I just needed space to process it, figure it out."

A single tear streaked down her cheek.

"Why couldn't you come home and talk to me about it? Why not let me help you process?"

"It's not that easy, Mae. I'm not sure of what's going on yet."

She shook her head, wiped the tear off her cheek and took a long pull from the bottle of beer.

“Since when did talking to your wife become difficult?”

“Oh, I don’t know,” I said unable to contain the anger, “maybe since you found it *impossible* to talk to me about Christian!”

There’s nothing more sobering than hearing words flow from your mouth you wish you could take back.

“Mae, I’m sorry,” I said.

Instead of breaking down over the loss of our first, unborn son, she shook her head as if clearing the cobwebs after taking an uppercut on the chin.

“You know what, it’s fine,” she said. “I can’t control the fact you’re an asshole, but I can control how I react when you act like one. It’s fine.”

I didn’t know how to react. I stood in stupefied silence.

Filling the uncomfortable void, I asked about the son we managed to have. “How’s Maxx?”

“Good,” she said with a chuckle. “Marta said he figured out how to disengage the child lock on the toilet and how to flush it.”

The abrupt change in both the topic and her disposition was unnerving. This was not the Mae I knew. Confused, I wasn’t sure if I should try to keep the argument going or abandon it. Although I’d had quite enough of treading in unknown territory, I’d much prefer to be on speaking terms with Mae rather than fight, again.

“I’m almost afraid to ask how Marta found out,” I said.

“She found out when she thought Max was down for a nap. She heard the toilet flush, then heard water running onto the floor. Apparently, he wanted Mr. Belvi-Deer to have a bath. Turns out, Mr. Belvi-Deer clogged the toilet.”

Despite everything, I smiled. Funny how even now, despite a growing personal crisis, it was toilet humor that brought a sense of relief.

“Damn, I love that kid,” I said.

“Yeah, I thought you’d like that. Poor Mr. Belvi-Deer. Turns out, he got quite the bath. First the toilet, then the washer and dryer.”

I chuckled at the thought. “I still haven’t eaten, and I’m famished. Mind if I help you polish off the salsa?”

Mae pushed the bowl toward me. “Help yourself,” she said as she turned and grabbed a beer out of the fridge, twisted off the top, and handed it to me. “Not like you need another, but you can’t have chips and salsa without a beer.”

Later, after I’d polished off the salsa and beer and peeking in to give Maxx a kiss, I headed downstairs, the weight of the situation compressing my thoughts and mood. Mae had a right to know, deserved to know, but tonight was the first time in over a year light had broken through her clouds of depression. Why give her something new to worry about when I didn’t know everything.

I reminded myself that until my trace was complete, until I knew who had hacked my system and what they had used my computer for, there was nothing but empty notions and guesses to go on. It was just a possibility that whoever hacked into my computer had done nothing.

Still, the memory of Counselman Jefferies wolfish smile emblazoned on my mind told me there was much more to it than a pimple-faced kid honing his hacking chops.

Descending the stairs, I decided to keep quiet, just as I'd done since my discovery on Monday. The trace would work over the weekend and I'd learn everything I needed on Monday. When I had the answers, I would tell her.

I walked into the living room. Mae sat on the couch, her long brunette hair flowing over the shoulders of her blue sweater. She'd turned off the lights and had lit several candles along with the gas fireplace. The warm glow made the room cozy and inviting. Normally, I'd feel the stress of the week fall away, would feel the warm cloak of relaxation wrap itself around my shoulders.

Sitting on the couch, the straight jacket of stress remained buckled.

Mae could sense when something wasn't quite right with me and her intuition was frustratingly accurate.

"You okay," she asked.

"Yeah, just a long week," I replied hoping that would pacify her. Once she locked into something, it was near impossible to escape the drill of questions that would inevitably extract the ore of information she was determined to smelt.

She looked at me, analyzing. I felt her working me over, her head tilted slightly toward me. It was a waiting game now. Either I would break or she'd relent and leave it be, except that she rarely relented.

I grabbed her hand relishing the smoothness of her skin, tracing her long fingers with mine.

“Don’t think for a moment you can get away with not telling me what’s rolling around inside that noodle of yours just by holding my hand.”

I couldn’t help but smile.

“Now, what’s up,” she said.

“Okay,” I replied, “like I said earlier, something is up, but I honestly don’t have all the information yet. It could be major, but it could also be nothing. I won’t know until Monday.”

She looked at me with her root beer brown eyes. I opened myself allowing her to probe.

“Just tell me one thing, are you in any danger?”

“I don’t know,” I answered.

Maurice punctuated the silence announcing through the house speakers that visitors were approaching. The few friends we had knew better than to show up unannounced, especially on a Friday evening. Since arriving home, I realized the thumb drive remained attached to my key ring in my pocket. My instincts told me I needed to get rid of it, but where?

“Maurice, display door cam on primary tv,” I commanded.

The inset screen came alive. On it, I could see the view of the lighted porch, the solar walkway lights casting their weak light onto the walkway itself. Standing up, I saw four robotic constabulary rolling up the walkway toward the house. A solitary human figure was trailing behind them. Although I couldn’t see details the knot in my gut told me who it was.

“Mae, get upstairs and be with Maxx.”

“Alex, what’s going on? Why is the constabulary here? Who is that?”

“I don’t have time to explain. Just do as I say and get upstairs.”

“Alex, please...”

“Just do as I say! Now!”

On the screen, two of the constabulary arrived at the front door as the other two broke off and headed around toward the back. As I'd feared, Counselman Jefferies stepped up onto the first step of the porch.

"My God, is that Counselman Jefferies?" Mae asked.

Balling my fists, I turned toward Mae, her shocked expression made it clear she saw the sheen of stress pulling my countenance taut.

"Get upstairs, Mae. Now!"

She didn't hesitate. Despite her strong will, she couldn't help the tears that formed in her eyes as she moved past me and ran up the stairs.

The door chime sounded. The Constabulary's voice sounded through the house speakers. "Alexander Donovan. Open the door, sir. We have a warrant for your arrest."

Having reached the landing at the top of the stairs, Mae stopped and turned. "Alex, why? What is happening?"

I was moving toward the kitchen, convinced the constabulary was not only after me, but the thumb drive. I needed to get it to a place I hoped they wouldn't find it.

"Mr. Donovan," the constabulary said, "we know you and your family are home. We can do this the easy way or we can do this the hard way. We'd rather not have to enter forcibly. You have 30 seconds to comply."

Fear turned to panic, gripped me by the throat, choking off any thoughts of returning to a normal life. In all my ruminations during the week I'd not seen this as a potential outcome and found myself in a situation I was unfamiliar, being ill prepared when it was most critical, when it counted the most.

Damn it! Don't just stand here, move! Act!

Spotting a place for the thumb drive, I removed my key ring from my pocket and removed the thumb drive, glad to be rid of it. Although I wanted to linger a moment longer, wanted to think through a plan that would lead out of this mess, I knew I needed to get to the door. If they burst through, it would only harm my chances of doing so successfully.

I ran back toward the front door. Mae still stood at the top of the stairs, fear and confusion tore at her face. Seeing her in such a state, knowing I'd not prepared for this, had not seen this coming, knowing I should've taken action much sooner, my heart shattered.

"Please, Mae. Whatever happens, you know me."

Before she could respond, I opened the door.

Chapter 3

I stood in the doorway facing the robotic constabulary. Although this was not my first interaction with a constable, the fact one was standing on the threshold of my home with an arrest warrant, it appeared larger, more intimidating. Standing well over 6 feet, its height-weight proportionate matte metal body took up almost the entire space of the doorway. Its cyclopean eye fixed in the center of its face glowed a menacing red.

“Thank you for your compliance,” the constable said. “Please step outside, sir. We have a warrant for your arrest.”

Standing at the threshold, being told I was under arrest for something I’d not done, in front of my wife, at my home, anger oozed through the fissures of my mind, scorching the fear and panic that had been there moments before.

Through clenched teeth I asked, “And what exactly is this all about, officer? What crime have I committed? What *exactly* am I being arrested for?”

Before the constable could respond, Jefferies spoke up. “Constable. Please temporarily stand down by executive order 812.”

“Yes, sir. Standing down until further instructions per executive order 812.”

He rolled to the side allowing Jefferies to step forward. “Alexander, may I come in so we may have a brief chat?”

I tried to subdue my anger, tried to remain calm and not allow my emotions to cloud my thinking, but things were happening fast. I assessed the risk, my mind buzzed as questions were being answered in real time.

The fact Counselman Jefferies is here, I felt confident it was not an outside hacker, but Jefferies that had hacked my computer and installed the zombie, and it was obvious he knew I’d

discovered it. The more disturbing question that remained was what crime had Jefferies committed using my computer and what was he trying covering up with my arrest? Those answers remained elusive.

Since he knows I've discovered the hack, does he know I saved that information onto the thumb drive? Is that why he's here? Is this his attempt to shut me up while trying to uncover if I knew more?

At the very least, have a conversation with him. Mae will be in the know and I can erase the image of her standing at the top of the stairs with that look of pain, fear and confusion on her face.

"Of course, sir," I said, choking down the anger. I opened the door and stepped back inside.

"Thank you," Jefferies said stepping in, followed by the lead constable. The other remained watch on the porch.

Closing the door behind me, I ushered Jefferies and the constable into the living room, turning on the lights as I did.

Spotting Mae at the top of the stairs, Jefferies stopped. "And you must be Mae. Alexander speaks well of you. Please come down and join us, will you?"

I gave her a slight nod, indicating she should do as Jefferies instructed. She'd stopped crying and was getting herself composed. By the time she reached the bottom landing, she was back in control.

"I apologize for this intrusion, but there is an urgent matter that I'm afraid needs immediate resolution. I hope we can reach one to avoid any," Jefferies paused looking for the right word, "entanglements."

“Please have a seat, Counselman. May I get you something to drink,” Mae asked.

“No, thank you.”

We took a seat, Mae and myself sat on the small loveseat, Jefferies sat on the couch.

Reaching over, I held Mae’s hand.

The constable positioned himself near the archway of the living room, facing us.

“Now then,” Jefferies began, “Alexander, do you know what this is about?”

Over the course of my career, I had become accustomed to Jefferies favorite method of starting conversations - with a question. Jefferies was a master. By starting conversations with a question, he put those he was speaking to immediately on the defensive. It was a subtle yet effective power play and depending on how the respondent answered, used against them later in the conversation.

This was certainly the case now. I weighed my two options. Tell the truth, admit that I’d hacked into the counsel’s server and his computer, saw that something was wrong, that my computer was hacked and the fact he was sitting here made me believe it was he who was the guilty party, or feign ignorance and hope that would force him to continue to talk. The longer he talked, the more questions might get answered.

“Why do you start conversations with a question,” I asked, buying more time.

The placid surface of control on Jefferies face broke, revealing turbulence I now knew roiled underneath. Regaining control, he smiled his warm smile that the public was all too familiar.

“Alexander,” he began, “to this point you’ve been a fine ally to the Counsel. Your record has been exemplary. It would be such a shame to throw all of that away. Throw all of this

away,” he said sweeping his hand around the living room. “I’d especially hate for you to lose such a beautiful woman such as Mae.”

It was one thing to use scare tactics against me, but it was another thing to level thin threats concerning Mae. I was tiring of being on the defensive.

“What, exactly, are you saying, sir?”

Mae squeezed my hand, her way to tell me to calm down.

I ignored it and pressed on. “What precisely is this all about, Counselman? After all, you’re the one who came here. And with an arrest warrant? For what? As you said, my record is exemplary and the last time I checked, Councilmembers, especially the one who is head of the judiciary branch, do not make house calls when executing arrest warrants.”

Jefferies face remained calm, unaffected. He sat motionless, his hands clasped together, looking more like a Buddhist monk than a member of the Counsel of Three. After allowing several more seconds to pass, his eyes narrowed and a thin smile created an upturned horizon on the otherwise unperturbed landscape.

“Your memory regarding my penchant for collecting, I admit, was surprising. When earlier this evening you recalled what I’d been searching for in my antiques collection, it was a good reminder that I need to be attuned with my,” he paused, rolled his eyes upward as if the word he was searching for floated somewhere between himself and the ceiling. “Underlings,” he said.

I’d not expected this reaction to my questions. It was unheard of to speak to a Counselman in any tone that wasn’t, at the very least, respectful. When a commoner addresses a member of any Counsel, there is an expected tone of reverence. To have spoken to a member of the Counsel in the way I just had, while not illegal, was unnatural and seemed wrong.

It felt wonderful. I remained quiet, not responding to this last comment.

“And as you reminded me,” Jefferies continued, “you, too, are a collector. The object the sentry questioned you about earlier this evening, if I’m not mistaken, was an ancient storage data drive. I believe they were called,” he paused once more, rolled his eyes toward the ceiling, “a thumb drive. Was that one from your collection?”

My newfound assertiveness acted as a counterweight to fear and anger, creating an equilibrium that allowed me to remain composed despite the mounting evidence that he was the perpetrator and that what I had could bring him down.

“Flash drive is the more common name for them,” I said, “But yes, thumb drive also works. However, like the flip phone you’re looking to acquire, sadly I do not have one in my collection. And if I did, you could be certain I wouldn’t have it on my person, but would keep it in a vacuum sealed display case. But to answer your question, yes, I’ve heard of them.”

“I’m sure you have,” Jefferies said. “Now, and this will be the last time I ask, why do you think I’m here?”

“You came to me, Counselman Jefferies, you tell me.”

The tiny smile on Jefferies face disappeared and curled into a sneer. For a moment, his eyes narrowed until they were slits, then he opened them and gazed at Mae, allowing them to wander over her.

“Such a shame,” he said, looking directly at her. “You could’ve done better, Mae.”

Mae squeezed my hand tight, both to keep me seated and for her own support. She did not appreciate being gawked at like a piece of meat in a butcher’s case. We both were fighting to remain still.

Jefferies looked back at me. “Trust me, Alexander. I will personally ensure Mae and your son are looked after.”

I felt myself slip from the shores of confidence, pulled into the current of uncertainty.

“I’m afraid I’m not following you, Counselman,” I said.

“Then let me be perfectly clear,” he answered, unclasping his hands. He leaned forward, “You are under arrest for conspiracy to commit fraud and for treason. I will take you to the courthouse for immediate trial. If found guilty, which I have no doubt the Eyes of Twelve will find you, it will be my recommendation to the Counsel you be...” He stopped talking. It was clear it wasn’t because he couldn’t find the word he was looking for. The wolfish look I’d seen earlier returned, and I knew he was toying with me.

“What do you think, Alexander,” he began again. “What do you think the proper punishment would be for someone in your position if found guilty of fraud and treason?”

I was too stunned to answer. Confusion blared in cacophonous reverberations inside my skull. Finding a solitary thought that made sense among the maelstrom of contradictions was impossible. Mae let go of my hand as if it had been scalding her.

Besides my mind, my heart broke in two. She believed that what Jefferies had accused me of was a true and I’d become toxic, poisonous, disgusting.

Being wrongly accused by a Council member was one thing, but to have Mae think that was possible was another thing altogether. I turned to face her.

“Mae. You know I couldn’t, possibly. You know me.”

Her eyes pooled with tears.

“No,” I pleaded, “you know me.”

I saw a light behind her eyes. A light that can only shine for a loved one, a light that comes from belief, a light that caused her tears to become prismatic jewels set upon her beautiful face. That was all I needed to let loose.

I turned, faced Jefferies determined to put the record straight.

“Counselman,” I began with teeth clenched, “I think you’re gravely mistaken. It is not I who is the guilty party. It is you. You’re the one who...”

“Please,” Jefferies interrupted, “constable, please come forward and show the accused the file you extracted from his computer this evening.”

Shock and horror worked in harmony to rend my face into a mask of fear. I sat wide-eyed and slack-jawed as the constable rolled forward, a tablet screen held in one of his aluminum hands. Displayed was the same report I’d run while hacked into the server. The report that earlier had shown the hack of my computer had come from Jefferies computer, now showed the opposite.

“What is this,” I demanded. “This is not true! You hacked *my* computer! You installed a zombie bot onto *my* machine!”

I no longer needed the trace program to tell me where the hack had originated.

“If anyone is guilty of fraud,” I continued, “it’s you Counselman. If anybody is therefore guilty of treason, it’s you, sir!”

Jefferies sat back, re-clasped his hands together, a smug expression coming down over his face like a curtain on a stage at the end of a performance. “We’ll just see about that. We’ll let the Eyes of Twelve decide.”

How could this be happening?

“There’s one remaining matter,” Jefferies said, “before the constable here places you under arrest, if found guilty of these crimes, what do you think the punishment will be?”

Both Mae and I knew the answer. She reached out and grabbed my hand, gripped it so tight it hurt as she sobbed. Both of us knew that if they found me guilty of treason, the only punishment would be liberation.

Jefferies unclasped his hand and raised his index finger. The constable knew that was his cue. He rolled forward. “Mr. Donovan. Please stand up and turn around.”

With no other course of action possible, I did as the constable instructed as he began reciting my rights. I looked down at Mae hoping this would not be the last time I would see her, but deep inside I realized that was probably the case.

Chapter 4

Tendrilled fingers of claustrophobia gripped me as tight as the restraints holding me to the sensory chair. Ironic.

It's one thing to see a photo of trial chambers, to look at it in a detached manner, idly imagine how scary to be inside one, safe in the knowledge you'd never have to be.

It's another thing when find yourself trapped in one, falsely accused of a crime, powerless to do anything about it. It paled everything that haunted my imagination.

The chamber was small, about 8 feet wide, 12 feet long and 6 feet tall, padded floor to ceiling with sound dampening foam triangles. In the center sat a large wooden chair that looked like electric chairs from a bygone era. Robotic attendants had strapped me to its unforgiving surface.

Beforehand, they had placed a cloth cap, bedecked with multiple sensors, into my head. Next, they inserted my hands into gloves affixed with wires that snaked from each fingertip and disappeared into a conduit that was connected to a small box sitting on the floor. The metal of sensor strips lining the inside of each glove still felt cold against my skin. Once my electronic cuff restraints was removed, they fit an apron around my neck, the inside of which has multiple metal sensor disks.

Once all was in place, an armature bolted to the left side of the chamber swung from its protective holder and they positioned the monitor that was attached to the end several feet in front of my face. Once satisfied, they turned and left. The door hissed shut.

All I can hear in the muted silence is the sound of my muffled breathing keeping time with the swooshing of the blood pulsing through the veins of my ears.

How the hell did I get here? How did I not see this?

Too late for that now. I need to focus on the present, not the past. Control the controllable. It is not a simple thing when you are held fast inside of a trail chamber.

Hard as I try to remain in the present, I cannot help but look back through the last few hours, the only image tattooed on my mind is Mae, sobbing as they placed the electric cuffs on my wrists. The light I'd seen in her eyes, the thread of hope and happiness that had shone through the clouds of guilt and despair had come roiling back into her sky of consciousness.

Just as she was at the threshold of moving past losing Christian, she lost her husband and for reasons that were just as perplexing.

I'd tried to plead with her one last time as they forcibly removed me from our home, that despite the wild accusations were categorically false, but I saw the glint of doubt on her face. I couldn't blame her for that. Had the roles been reversed, I've thought the same.

Now, besides shame, humiliation and embarrassment for not forecasting this situation, regret for not telling her about what was going on overshadowed them all.

How I longed for a second chance. I should've told her right away. I shouldn't have used the miscarriage as the excuse for my reticence and worse, my decree my silence. What a fool I'd been.

The screen in front of me came to life. Just a light blue screen.

"Please state your level of literacy," a woman's voice came through the speaker bar affixed to the bottom of the screen.

"Level 10," I answered.

I chided myself for answering so quickly. I need to be more careful. I know all my bio-data is being fed into the computer, but I wonder if they can listen to my thoughts. Is that what the cap was for?

“Level 10, thank you. In a moment,” the voice continued, “text will appear. Please read its contents aloud in their entirety. Once you have completed reading, please say ‘acknowledge’, indicating you’ve finished reading and you comprehend what you’ve read. You will have one minute to read each screen and provide your acknowledgement. We will display a timer in the upper right corner of the screen. If you need additional time, you may say ‘extension’ and we will add 30 more seconds. Please say ‘acknowledge’ now so that we may record your understanding of these instructions.”

“Acknowledge.”

Damn it! I’d done it again. Slow down. Think.

Text appeared which read:

Pursuant to General Statute 14-17, we have arrested you in connection with theft of state funds and conspiracy to fraud the State. We will also consider a second charge of treason by The Eyes of Twelve.

You are, at present, not guilty of these crimes. Per the laws that govern this territory, you are innocent until proven guilty. This automated interrogation chamber, along with the Eyes of Twelve will determine your guilt or innocence. If found guilty, they will apply sentencing.

You understand and agree that failure to take part in said interrogation in part or in whole will be regarded as an admission of the charges laid before you.

My head spun. A wave of nausea crashed upon me. I fought back the urge to vomit.

“Acknowledge,” I said.

It was a whisper.

The screen went black before the next screen appeared.

Are your electronic cuffs deactivated?

Although I knew the answer, I moved my eyes down to look at my wrists to keep myself from answering too quickly. I needed to slow down. The two bracelets encircling each wrist had no electric charge spanning them.

“Acknowledge,” I said.

The screen went black.

We have successfully synched biorhythm sensors. Per directive 58.3 you have the right to know technician DV2200 calibrated this machine on 16th of July at 21:45. Your current baseline vital signs are: Pulse rate 93, blood oxidation levels at 99 percent, respirations at 17 bpm and blood pressure reads 150 over 94. In a moment, you will see an image of a boy holding an ice cream cone. Once you recognize the boy, please respond with ‘acknowledge’.

The screen flashed to a photograph, but not a random boy. The photograph was of myself as a boy. Although I was only seven years old when the photo had been taken, I remembered the event the photo captured like it like it was yesterday. I’d been at the park with my father who had taken the photo. Five seconds after the photo, I’d dropped my ice cream cone and cried. Not because I no longer had ice cream but because I thought my father was going to be mad. He hadn’t been.

Despite my fear, father had taken me by the hand and together we walked back to the vendor and he’d bought me a new cone. That day changed our relationship. Without being able to vocalize it or really understand it, that was the first time I recall bonding with him.

How had the constabulary gotten a hold of a photograph of me as a child and why would they flash the image up?

I tried to sit upright and lean closer to the screen, but the restraints held me firm. The image disappeared.

Facial recognition program calibrated and successfully recorded neutral baseline construct.

“How did you get that photo?

Silence was the response to my question.

We have successfully completed all legal disclaimers and calibrations. The trial will begin in 60 seconds.

“Acknowledge,” I said.

A timer began counting down. 60 seconds to calm down. I took as deep a breath as the restraints allowed. 10 seconds slipped by in a flash. I closed my eyes and saw Mae, I should’ve told her about the thumb drive. Showed it to her, given it to her for safekeeping. Had I entrusted it to her, she could take the information to the press, let them unleash it before it was too late.

“No time for coulda, shoulda, woulda,” I said.

I ran through the information I’d uncovered, trying to see what kind of defense I could piece together in under 30 seconds. Jefferies had not only infiltrated my computer and had likely used it to siphon State funds, it was clear he had falsified documents, but how can I prove that? It’s hard to do when you’re strapped to a chair, with a full set of biorhythm sensors being feed into the 12 separate computer systems.

I always found it ironic that 12, non-sentient computer systems were The Eyes of Twelve. The only thing those 12 systems ‘saw’ was raw data. That raw data was compared with the vast data banks of previous trials and run through a complicated algorithm, whereby guilt or innocence was determined.

Opening my eyes, I saw I had 25 seconds remaining. I wondered if letting the Eyes of Twelve know I had information, stored in a secure location, that contradicted the charges would

provide enough doubt to keep them from condemning me. Would it buy me enough time to mount a proper defense?

Then again, if Jefferies possessed the ability to alter documents, infiltrate my work computer, manipulate data, and orchestrate this frame job, he'd be able to coordinate matters ensuring the thumb drive would never see the light of day. Plus, telling them I had conflicting data stored elsewhere, I'd play my only card and would let Jefferies know I had the information which would then put Mae in danger.

That was the reason why he came to the house. He wanted the thumb drive. I hoped after they escorted me out, they'd not discovered where I'd hidden it.

The computer voiced what the monitor read, "*Trial to begin in 3, 2, 1.*"

Chapter 5

Bile rose in my throat, the acid burned my nasal cavity. I swallowed hard, closed my eyes, the burn taking me back to the cheap whiskey. That seemed like a lifetime ago.

A time where innocence still had a place. Where there was order among the chaos. Where I could be proud of who I was and what I was doing.

A lifetime ago.

Although my eyes are still closed, I can tell the light from the monitor increased in brightness. I opened my eyes. They divided the monitor into 12 separate, equal sized squares each containing the face of a different person. I knew these were not real people, only human analogues displayed to make me feel more ‘comfortable’.

A 13th square appeared in the center of the screen. The floor of my stomach fell away. The 13th square contained the image of Counselman Jefferies.

“Ladies and gentlemen of the jury,” Jefferies began. “This trial has officially begun. As per directive 922, I am using my power as headship over the judicial branch to oversee this trial.”

My heart sunk into the vacuum where my stomach used to be.

“The evidence will show,” Jefferies continued, “that Mr. Donovan, through a sophisticated system of funneling, along with the creation of false accounts outside the boundaries of the Central Branch of the Americas, stole monies from the State with the intended purpose of fleeing to the Central Branch and living under an alias in the Southern Branch of the Americas.”

Had things not developed as they had, I’m convinced my trace program would verify everything Jefferies just said, but in the reverse order. If I, not he, preside over his trial, I could make the same opening statement.

“Mr. Donovan, how do you plead,” Jefferies asked.

“Innocent,” I replied.

“Very well. Noted,” Jefferies said. “Ladies and Gentleman, please allow me to call my first and only witness. I call Herold Vasilli.”

Harold Vasilli? The old curmudgeon that fancied himself an IT security specialist? What the hell is Jefferies doing?

A smaller square appeared next to the one occupied by Jefferies. Harold was silver-haired with blue eyes that glowed with excitement. It was easy to see Harold was enjoying the fact he’d been called upon by a high and mighty Council to provide his ‘expert’ testimony.

“Mr. Vasilli, please state your name and your current occupation for the jury,” Jefferies said.

“Harold Vasilli. I currently hold the position of senior IT security specialist. I work in the same headquarters as Counselman Jefferies and Mr. Donovan.”

“Thank you, Mr. Vasilli. Ladies and gentleman of the jury, the Counsel of Three had noted some discrepancies as it pertained to a particular operational account. As I’m sure you know, the State holds and maintains several accounts that facilitate, in this case, the funds necessary for daily operations.”

“This account has existed many years,” Jefferies continued. “We replenish the funds every quarter with the same dollar amounts, adjusted every fiscal year as needed and allocated any monies that are remaining at the end of each quarter to a separate investment account where the annual accumulation can gain interest so that at year's end, special projects that need funding have an alternate funding source. We noticed the quarter-end amounts did not reconcile with the

quarter-end deposits. To find out what was going on, the Council of Three called upon Mr. Vasilli to investigate. Mr. Vasilli, please tell the jury the results of your investigation?”

“With pleasure, Councilman,” Herold said.

I sat and listened, stupefied, as Harold, in all his glory, regaled the jury how he’d accessed my computer and found that I’d programmed my computer to emulate Counselman Jefferies computer to gain illegal access to the accounts and all other State-run programming.

Harold spoke of how I, besides funneling funds to an illegal account, had fabricated an identity in the Southern Branch of the Americas using the same alleged hijacked computer emulation software.

Although not asked for his opinion, that didn’t stop him from giving it. Harold believed after seeing all the ‘evidence’ I was going to flee to the Southern Branch of the Americas with my family and live off of the monies skimmed from the state.

“Thank you for your testimony, Mr. Vasilli,” Jefferies said. “You’ve woven quite a tale. Do you have any documentation that backs up your testimony?”

Incredulous, I sat as Harold presented document after document, each one fabricated to show it had been me, not Jefferies, that had perpetrated these crimes.

At the conclusion of his testimony Jefferies said, “On behalf of the Central Branch of the Americas and the Council of Three, I would like to thank you for your time, Mr. Vasilli. I know it was difficult to investigate the wrongdoings of a well-known and well-respected colleague as Mr. Donovan. We are indebted to you, sir.”

“Thank you, Counselman Jefferies. I’m always happy to do whatever is necessary for the Branch and the Council of Three.”

After Harold signed off, Jefferies turned his attention back to the jury. “Ladies and gentleman, this concludes all the evidence that I feel is necessary and thus, concludes my portion of the trial. You now have all information discovered, more than what I think sufficient to render a proper decision.”

Each of the Eyes of Twelve nodded their heads in acknowledgement.

“Now to hear from the accused,” Jefferies said. “Do you have a rebuttal to the information presented?”

A circuit breaker in my head blew. I snapped. Anger, white hot and electric jumped the gap between prudence and convention.

“Rebuttal,” I sizzled through clenched teeth. “Rebuttal? At what point was I given an opportunity to gather my evidence or call my expert witnesses to provide an opposing testimony? Was I supposed to gather them when you violated the sanctity of my home, Counselman? When you intimidated and humiliated me in front of my wife? Or was I supposed to depose my expert to testify on my behalf during the brief trip from my home to this God forsaken chamber of horrors which occurred, if I may remind the jury, only hours ago.”

“Rebuttal? Please tell me, Counselman Jefferies, when was an opportunity afforded me to put together a rebuttal?”

Without a ripple of concern, Jefferies said, “Please note Ladies and Gentlemen, the hostility displayed by the accused. I’m sure his bio-data confirms how agitated he is. Also note that in almost all cases, those who are innocent do not have cause to display such hostility, but insist their innocence. No, only those that possess guilt display hostility such as this.”

Like water poured on burning embers, I seethed, but held my tongue.

“In answer to your query,” Jefferies continued, “If you’re proclaiming innocence, then now it the time to provide your side of the story. You, after all, are the best witness that can provide the most accurate testimony. Please, Mr. Donovan, the floor is yours.”

Through the blaze of anger, I realized there was no way out. I could not go home, retrieve the thumb drive and submit it. That opportunity was gone, and I knew it. The only way I was leaving this chamber was once they reached a guilty verdict. There would be no re-trials.

“Well, Mr. Donovan,” Jefferies pressed.

“For the record,” I said, “not only am I innocent of the crimes levied against me, I am the victim of a crime. A victim of a coverup. For the record, let me state it was not I, but Counselman Jefferies who has stolen monies and it’s Jefferies who has orchestrated this coverup and is using me as his scapegoat.”

“And do you have any evidence that supports this assertion,” Jefferies asked.

Risk. I was well versed in its methodologies and intricacies. I was more than willing to take risk involving myself, but knowing where I’d hidden the thumb drive, I’d be putting Mae in harm’s way. Jefferies held the leverage and control.

“Not at this time, no,” was the only answer I could give.

“Thank you, Mr. Donovan, that will be quite enough then. Ladies and gentleman of the jury, the decision is now yours. How to you find the accused?”

The first of the twelve, a blond middle-aged looking woman in the uppermost left corner square spoke first. “Guilty.”

In clockwise fashion, each of the remaining 11 spoke the same single word, each guilty verdict a stick of dynamite that systematically destroyed hope. By the time the last of the twelve had spoken I felt guilt pressing upon me with the weight of my entire world.

Not for the crime they accused me of, but guilt that I'd failed at the most elementary level. I'd betrayed all the years of schooling and training that should've prepared me to predict and prepare for this. When something was wrong, when faced with potential hazards to myself and my family, I'd not given any warning, rationalizing inaction away, snuffing it with booze, and casting the blame of Mae for being shut off.

Guilty? Absolutely.

"As we've reached a unanimous decision I ask you, the jury, what of the sentence?"

Although I knew it was a foregone conclusion, in the deepest parts of me, a dim ember of hope remained. Perhaps the twelve would take my years of service and my exemplary record into consideration and sentence me to life on the lunar penal colony.

The same blond in upper left corner square began, "Liberation."

I gasped. Like the guilty verdict, each of the remaining twelve echoed the same until that too was unanimous.

For the first time since the trial began, I saw Jefferies smile a smug smile that pursed his thin lips. I realized the trail was the one thing Jefferies couldn't control or manipulate. He may have successfully manipulated my computer and documents, he may have been successful in controlling Harold, but even he could not control the Eyes of Twelve.

The sentence of liberation was the most severe punishment, and now Jefferies was free and clear. There would be no way they could find his dirty secret.

"It's incumbent upon me," Jefferies said, "that the jury fully understands and comprehends the ramifications of what the sentence of liberations carries. In order for the verdict to pass, a second round of acknowledgment must take place. You all must acknowledge that if you maintain your decision, Mr. Donovan's brain will be liberated from his body and

subsequently placed in the custody of an in vitro prison complex until the natural life of his brain expires.”

One by one the eyes of twelve acknowledge they understood.

“Per statute 893.2, please state the reason for such a sentence.”

“Treason against the State,” they each answered.

“So be it. The sentence of liberation is passed. Mr. Donovan, you are found guilty of all crimes and the Eyes of Twelve have decreed immediate liberation. You will therefore spend the rest of your life within the in vitro prison mainframe effective immediately. Sentries, please see to Mr. Donovan’s transfer. That will be all.”

And that was all. Unable to speak, unable to blink, unable to breathe, motionless in shock and horror I hardly notice the sentries enter the chamber. Numb, I didn’t feel them release the straps that held me to the chair. Disoriented, I didn’t notice being placed on a gurney and rolled into the waiting jump craft. Stupefied, I wasn’t aware of the passing landscape out the window on the short flight to in vitro prison 861 on the outskirts of the city.

It wasn’t until wheeled into the operating theatre where above me, on a terraced viewing area, sat the Counsel of Three. Spying Jefferies sitting to the right, dormant rage roared back to life. He held out his fist with his thumb pointing upward. One at a time, each Counselman did the same. Only until all three had raised their thumbs, was I transferred to the operating table.

The high-pitched whine of a bone saw snapped me back to the moment. Panic snuffed everything else. A mechanical hand, holding a clear plastic mask came into view. There was no voice giving me instruction as they placed the mask over my nose and mouth. A puff of air forced its way into my nostrils. That was my last thought before everything went black.

Chapter 6

He'd disappeared before, was about to vanish again, but before he could, there remained one thread Counselman Jefferies needed to tie up. One that unraveled on Friday. From the vantage point his office, he looked down at the air traffic flitting over A Sector.

Despite all the planning and maneuvering, despite the outcomes he'd orchestrated in his favor, everything had almost been perfect. Almost. Over the weekend, the splinter of doubt regarding the flash drive ruined what should be an auspicious occasion.

The flash drive was the only loose end.

"It could be nothing," he said aloud for the hundredth times since Friday night. He wasn't comfortable even after the guilty verdict.

"Counselman Jefferies, your 8:00 with Mr. Herold Vasilli has arrived," his AI assistant announced through desk mounted speakers.

He swung around to face the massive black teak doors. "Yes, show him in."

The doors swung inward and Harold Vasilli, trying his best to look composed, entered the vast office chambers save for the Cheshire grin stretching ear to ear.

"Come in, Vasilli. Come in. Please, have a seat," Jefferies said motioning to a white leather lined chair sitting across the desk from him.

"Thank you, Counselman," Harold said. Sitting down wide-eyed with wonder, he looked around at the rare materials that filled the impressive space.

"Please," Jefferies said, "this is not a formal meeting. You may dispense with the formality. No need for Counselman."

Unsure how to address him, Harold said, "Yes, sir."

“Good. Now then, I called you here for several reasons,” Jefferies paused, leaned forward and put on his best smile, “may I call you Harold, or would you prefer Mr. Vasilli?”

It was rare to be on a first-name basis. Pride welled within him and he couldn’t help but let out a chuckle. “Please, Harold would be an honor, sir.”

“Very well, Herold. Like I said, I called you here for several reasons. Most important, I want to reiterate how much the Counsel appreciated your work in helping us root out that treasonous rat. I know it was difficult, but your testimony on Friday was instrumental. The entire trial depended on it, and you certainly didn’t let us down.”

“Sir, it was a pleasure. Better to rid ourselves of a rat rather than have him scurrying about,” Harold said.

“Agreed. As a thank you for your work, the Counsel of Three has agreed to increase your pay to F9.”

“F9?” A rating that high was more than anything he’d ever dreamed possible.

“Indeed. Like I said, the Counsel of Three is indebted to you. It’s the least we could do. This grade is effective immediately.”

“Thank you, sir. It is I who is indebted to you and the rest of the Counsel. I’m honored to be called upon.”

“Of course, Harold. The second reason I called you in,” Jefferies said, moving on to the actual reasons he wanted to speak with him, “I know during your investigation, you did a thorough search of Alexander’s computer system. Correct?”

“Oh, yes, sir. Absolutely, sir. We went through his system with a fine-tooth comb.”

“And during that investigation, did you come across any evidence that Alexander transferred any data to an unknown, offsite source,” Jefferies asked.

Herold tilted his head sideways, furrows creased his forehead. “I’m not sure I follow your question, sir.”

“I’m sorry, Harold. I’m not well versed in computer lingo. Let me ask another way. Was there a way for Alexander to transfer information he’d stolen from the State and saved it to another computer or storage device?”

The furrows in Harold's forehead disappeared. He pursed his lips and moved his mouth from side to side as he contemplated the question.

“Well, I suppose he could’ve, but we would’ve uncovered that during our investigation. As per State protocol, he dumped his memory cache daily, but any data transferred to the cloud or to his AI would’ve been traceable. We recovered all the cloud data during the investigation.”

“What about data stored, not with his AI, but on an independent external drive,” Jefferies asked.

Again, Harold’s mouth moved side to side, as if he was swishing mouth wash.

Harold chuckled at the ridiculousness of the question. “Again, it’s possible, sir, but we haven’t used external storage drives for over a century.”

Leaning forward, his eyes narrowing, Jefferies asked, “But if Alexander had found an external storage drive, what were they called?”

“A flash drive, or a thumb drive,” Harold said, the giddiness disappearing from his face.

“Yes, a flash drive,” Jefferies repeated. “Would you have known if Alexander saved information onto a flash drive?”

Herold’s mouth became a small, straight line. “No,” he said after a long pause. “We wouldn't have known.”

“I see,” Jefferies said.

“However,” Harold said, his eyes lighting up, “the transfer of that data would’ve been impossible.”

“Why?”

“Well, sir, the thumb drive requires a USB port which stands for Universal Serial Bus. It's been over 100 years since they made computers with USB drives. Alexander couldn't get the information from his system onto a flash drive, even if he had one. No, quite impossible.”

“I see,” Jefferies said. “Impossible you say. If someone built a converter, it would be theoretically possible, correct?”

“Sure. In theory,” Harold answered. “Why are you asking, sir? Do you suspect Alexander had a flash drive?”

“No, don’t be silly, Harold,” Jefferies said, disarming the line of questions now that he’d gotten the answer to his question. “I simply like to learn from all experience wherever possible. Even one as unfortunate as this. I need to be more aware of what’s possible and, sometimes, what’s not possible when technology is concerned.”

“I see,” Harold said.

“One last question,” Jefferies said.

“Of course, sir. Anything.”

“How difficult would it be to build a bridge from my system to the in vitro prison server and set up my own portal into the mainframe?”

“It would take me less than 5 minutes to connect you,” Harold answered.

“Good,” Jefferies said. “Could you do the same for the system in my private chambers? The Counsel agreed it would be best if I kept my eye on Alexander. Being able to do it remotely is ideal.”

“A wise course of action, for sure,” Harold said.

Fifteen minutes later, the connections with in vitro prison 861’s server complete, Jefferies looked back out the window. He’d hoped for a different outcome. Reflecting on the information Vasilli had provided, the nagging feeling this loose end could unravel the entire rope was stronger than ever. He’d hoped the opposite would’ve been the case.

“Xavier,” he said activating his AI.

“Yes, sir,” Xavier answered.

“Please place a call to Warden Collins at in vitro prison 861.”

“Connecting. Stand by.”

A long silence, then Xavier said, “Connected. Go ahead, sir.”

“Warden Collins,” Jefferies said.

“Counselman Jefferies. To what do I owe the honor of this call?”

“As you’re well aware, our prisoner transfer to your facility on Friday was a high-priority case. I’m sure you’ve heard about it on all the streams.”

“Indeed. Forgive me for saying so, sir but all the prisoners sent here are top priority.”

“As this was a criminal of the highest level,” Jefferies continued ignoring the warden’s comment, “the Counsel of Three has decreed there should be additional oversight. I now have a remote connection to your servers and I’ll be able to log in remotely and make sure our guest is, well, behaving himself.”

After a long pause, Collins answered. “This is highly irregular.”

“As was the fact that an upper echelon member of the State stole funds, created false identities, and did so under our noses. In the best interests of the State, The Counsel feels this is prudent. One that will ensure trust with our constituents.”

“I understand,” Collins replied. “This is a government run facility. The servers are yours. You may do with them as you wish.”

“Thank you for your cooperation, warden. Tell me, how is the prisoner doing?”

“As a matter of fact,” Collins replied, “I checked on his progress just a while ago. The neural cartographer has mapped 90% of his brain. This one’s not like our usual local gentry, but we’re getting there. We expect he’ll be ready for insertion into the mainframe by tomorrow.”

“Very good. I’ll check in with you then. Thank you again, warden.”

Once disconnected, Jefferies got up from his desk and walked to the window. The late-morning air traffic was light. He didn’t want to wait any longer, certainly he couldn’t just sit idle until tomorrow. Waiting through the weekend to talk to Harold was bad enough.

Until he found the flash drive and destroyed it, the splinter in his mind would continue to prod. He weighed his options.

“No,” he whispered, “I won’t wait until tomorrow. I think it’s time I pay a visit to Mae in order to offer my condolences on her loss.”

Chapter 7

Rolling onto her back, Mae opened her eyes and watched the blades of the ceiling fan spin, listened as they sliced the air. She focused on the breeze tickling her face and not the cyclonic thoughts churning inside her head.

“How could Alex do this? He couldn’t have done this. I know him. How could he let this happen? Wasn’t he an expert in avoiding risk? Doesn’t that make him guilty? Why didn’t he tell me?”

The five blades of thought eviscerated her attempt at calm. The resulting ribbons of a peaceful life wafted in the weak wind. She closed her eyes and tried to focus on the breeze once more.

What day is it? Monday? What time is it? She’d lost track. She’d come upstairs to get some much-needed sleep before her mom had dinner ready. Rolling onto her side, she grabbed her watch, 5:20.

The movement activated its screen. She had 48 new messages. She put the watch back down on the nightstand not bothering to open any of them knowing they were from various news or gossip producers wanting an exclusive interview.

Now that the news was several days old, regardless of how sensational it has been in the moment, it had become stale. The circus, save for some stragglers had pulled up their tents and moved on to fresh kills in order to feed their insatiable audience of new and spectacular failures and destruction. She just needed to keep lying low until it blew over.

A light knock on the bedroom door, followed by the whispered voice of her mother, Jean floated through the room. “Mae, are you up? Are you decent?”

“Yes. Come in.”

Opening the door, her mother walked in, her slight frame barely making any sound on the carpet. Her well-worn yellow sweater was a small ray of sunshine lighting up the semi-darkened bedroom.

“Sweetie,” her mom said turning on the lamp sitting on the nightstand, “you have an important visitor.”

Visitor? Who could visit at a time like this? Dad had been right. We should’ve left for the family cabin.

“Mom, I don’t want to see anybody,” Mae said.

“But honey, it’s Counselman Jefferies. He says he’s not here on behalf of The Counsel of Three, but wants to offer his help,” she paused wanting to add gravity, “personally.”

“Help? How in the world could *he* help?”

A shocked and embarrassed look came over her mother’s face. “Honey, you don’t...”

“You never know where help may come from,” Jefferies said, interrupting her mother as he walked into the room uninvited.

“Mae,” her mother admonished, “Counselman Jefferies here has offered his help.”

Mae was trapped, invaded by Jefferies and betrayed by her mother who was supposed to be supporting her.

“Mae,” Jefferies said, “please, at least hear me out.”

“Yes, dear,” her mother said, “the least you can do is listen what Counselman Jefferies has to say.”

Mae looked at her mother, wondering how this woman, who'd been the pinnacle of wisdom, could be so blind. Had she fallen prey to the weak-minded public that thought because he had a fancy title, that he was one of the Counsel of Three, he was superior?

You weren't here three nights ago, she wanted to say, to witness how he'd looked joyful in ripping my life to pieces. You weren't here to listen to the acid that spewed from his mouth that had burned holes in my beliefs about who I thought Alex was.

"I know it's difficult. And like your mother here has said, I'm not here on behalf of The Counsel, nor is there any official business. I'm here because I..."

"Yes, why are you here," Mae hissed. "Are you here so the cameras and the remaining members of the press still camped on my yard could capture the warm, concerned, and compassionate Counselman paying a house call to a hapless widow? Did you come here to look good for your constituents? Or instead, is this some empty attempt to fill a hollow promise you made to Alex before you ripped him away from his family, that you'd be sure to look after us? Well, set your eyes on what you've created Counselman, sir."

Jean, too shocked to remain standing, crushed by the weight of embarrassment, sat down at the foot of the bed.

Mae looked at her mother, angry she'd been so enamored with Jefferies position she'd allowed him in. In the rapture of being in the Counselman's presence she'd forgotten or worse, ignored what Mae had told her transpired?

Out of the corner of her eye, Mae caught Jefferies looking around the room. Keeping his head still, only moving his eyes, he was sly about it. What was he looking for? Keeping her gaze on her mother, Mae focused her peripheral vision on Jefferies. Undetected, his eyes scanned the nightstand sitting opposite the bed, then over to the dresser against the wall.

Snapping her head toward Jefferies, Mae asked, “Looking for something, Counselman Jefferies?”

Unphased, Jefferies looked back at Mae. “Not at all. Just admiring the furnishings. Alexander had been a good provider. He’d mentioned he was a fan of craftsman style. Those pieces look to be authentic pieces.”

Using Alex in the past-tense was a gale-force wind that tore the tattered remains of her heart into even smaller pieces.

“Which is what I want to talk to you about,” Jefferies continued. “Despite the crimes the Eyes of Twelve found Alexander guilty of, he did so unaided. I’m certain you were unaware of any wrongdoing.”

“How do you know anything?”

“Mae,” her mother said laying her hand on the top of her foot trying to hush her, just as she’d done when Mae was a little girl.

“No, it’s alright,” Jefferies said. “Mae is understandably angry. I would be too.” Turning his attention back to Mae, Jefferies continued, “I had the constable that had accompanied me here on Friday night to run a Bioscan during our conversation. From the data collected, it was quite clear everything that was being revealed was a shock to you. Had you been complicit in the crimes, your reactions would’ve told us so. You cannot alter biology and automatic responses.”

“Don’t you need permissions before you’re allowed to run a Bioscan?” Mae said.

“Plus,” Jefferies continued ignoring her question, “we would’ve arrested you along with Alexander. The purpose of my visit today is not to discuss what was, but what is.”

Mae remained quiet.

Jefferies smiled, clasped his hands together and leaned forward before he began.

“Whatever you may think about me, Mae, I’m not a bad guy. I meant what I said. It would be a shame to see all of this go. I also meant what I said when I told Alexander I would ensure you and your son are looked after. And I’m a man of my word.”

Bullshit, Mae thought, her bottom lip seared with pain from her teeth keeping that word from blasting out.

“I took the liberty,” Jefferies went on, “to look into your mortgage. I know you’re no longer working and under the circumstances, you could not keep up with the payments. The Counsel of Three decided to pay it off so you could stay. Both for your sake and that of your son.”

“Oh Counselman,” Jean gushed. “How wonderful! Isn’t that wonderful, Mae?”

Any sense of relief came with equal parts guilt. How could she accept relief from the same man who’d taken Alex away? Wouldn’t taking the offering be an admission Alex was guilty of the crimes they accused him of? Wouldn’t that, by default, make Jefferies correct in his allegations?

“Sweetheart,” her mother prompted, “isn’t that just wonderful of the Counsel to do! They really do care.”

Mae remained silent.

“In addition, the Counsel has agreed to provide a top of the line, state-of-the-art Nan-Bot.”

“Oh, my,” Jean said. “A Nan bot? Mae, how wonderful.”

That’s when the dam broke.

“Wonderful?” Mae barked. “Mom, are you even hearing yourself? Wonderful? What’s the matter with you? Wonderful? What’s wonderful? That Alex was taken from his family, that I’m a widow, that Maxx is fatherless? That you and dad lost a son-in-law? And I get a consolation prize of a Nan-bot who will help take care of the house, a house the State has provided either out of pity or guilt for what they’ve done. Wonderful? Really?”

Turning her attention to Jefferies who had a clown smirk, she wound up to deliver another salvo.

Just as she was going to unleash it, Jefferies cut her off. “Mae. It’s already done. The house is yours. Free and clear. We’ve already made the arrangements. If you don’t wish to use the Nan bot, then don’t.”

“May I ask you a question, Counselman?” Mae said. She’d had enough.

“Of course,” Jefferies replied.

“Does the Counsel of Three work on behalf of their constituents, or do the constituents work on behalf of the Counsel of Three?”

The fake clown smile Jefferies had plastered on his face melted, the corners of his lips oozed like melted tallow. Anticipating what he knew she wanted to hear, being an expert politician, he evaded it. “We all work together in order to make The Central Branch of the America’s as great as it can be.”

“Come now, my dear Counselman. You know what I’m asking. Don’t be evasive. I’ll ask this one more time. Isn’t it the purpose of The Counsel of Three to work on behalf of its constituents?”

The smile continued to melt. “I think it’s obvious. The Counsel has agreed to pay off your mortgage and is providing you, a constituent, with help during a difficult time.”

Not satisfied, Mae pressed. “You haven’t answered the question, Jefferies,” purposefully leaving out the Counselman. “Does The Counsel of Three work on behalf of its constituents? I want a simple yes or no.”

There was no smile. The superficial light behind his eyes extinguished.

“Yes,” he answered.

“Since that’s the case,” Mae said, “you Counselman Jefferies work for me. As your boss, I’m ordering you to leave. Your business, or whatever it is you’re doing here is done.”

As quick as his smile had disappeared, it came back, bigger than before. “Of course, Mae. If you need anything from us, please reach out. I’ve already seen to it the Nan-bot has all of our contact information programmed into it.”

Silence.

As he turned to leave, the politician in him had to get in the last word. He paused, glanced over his shoulder and said, “Of course, as your employee, I ask you contact us during normal business hours.”

Once gone, Mae turned her attention to her mother, who still sat at the edge of the bed. She pulled a Kleenex from the small front pocket of her sweater and blotted tears from her eyes.

“Mom,” Mae said. “Counselman Jeffries is a man. A man no different from Dad. Just because he sits on the Counsel of Three doesn’t make him any greater or better.”

Wiping more tears from her eyes, her mother put her hand on Mae’s leg, giving it a squeeze only a mother can give. “I just wanted something nice for you, honey. Especially now. A house, free and clear and some help, regardless of its source, is welcomed. And I know that right now, everything is a mess, but a small bit of stability is far better than none at all.”

Mae disagreed, but knew this wasn’t the time or place to refute the point of view.

“Thanks, Mom.”

“Why don’t you freshen up and come down for supper?”

After her mom left, Mae sat on the edge of the bed staring at the blank wall. It was just a wall, a wall she’d noticed but not seen. Four days ago, before Jefferies had stripped away her world, it had been nothing more than a flat surface with dark blue paint. Now, staring at this same painted slab of fiberboard, it was becoming something more. It was no longer a wall. It was her wall.

No, something more, she realized. Not just my wall. This is our wall. Although there was no picture or painting adorning its matte surface Mae, feeling some secure footing for the first time since the nightmare began, could see a picture with her and Maxx and Alex.

True, they had found Alex guilty, but until she had that proof for herself, she decided to believe in his innocence. And as long as he was innocent, she hoped she could get him back.

*

Ensconced in the back seat of his luxury jump craft, Jefferies stewed. This had not played out as he’d hoped. Although he hadn’t thought he’d be able to find the flash drive lying around, he certainly hadn’t expected the reception he’d received.

Although he loathed having to spend some of his ‘retirement’ money on a house he’d never occupy, at least the mortgage payoff hadn’t been as bad as it could have been. Still, paying for a mortgage and a Nan-bot were expenditures, while necessary, that were painful.

Perhaps, he thought to himself, the Nan bot will have better success at locating the flash drive than me. Then again, replaying what Mae had said, she just might park the damn thing in the garage and never use it.

Still, it was a last card that remained to be played but that would have to wait until tomorrow morning.

“Xavier,” Jefferies said.

“Yes, sir.”

“Please connect me with warden Collins.”

“Yes, sir. Stand by.” Then, “Go ahead, sir.”

“Hello Counselman. What may I do for you?”

“I trust things have been going according to plan since we last spoke?”

“Indeed, they have. We will complete the neural mapping early tomorrow morning, as expected.”

“Good. Would you find it unreasonable if I logged in remotely and inserted Alexander into the mainframe myself?”

“I don’t see that as being a problem.”

“Very good. I’ll call you in the morning once I’ve overseen his insertion.”

After ringing off, Jefferies watched his city slide under the windows of his jump craft. A small sense of satisfaction permeating through him, knowing his card to play tomorrow was an ace.

Chapter 8

Beyond the blackness, I remained aware of activity outside its inky shroud, could feel the mask pressed to my face, the intermittent puffs of anesthesia coughed into my throat, could taste its metallic tinge as it suffused into my lungs. I heard the bone saw cutting into my skull, smelled the hot, powdered bone dust from its blade, felt the release of a pressure I'd not been aware existed until removed.

Then, there was nothing.

In a flash I found myself not in a surgical theatre, not in a semi-state of consciousness where I was aware of things happening around me, but stood alone in a desert.

Tufts of scrub and manzanita bushes dotted the baked, hard-packed soil as far as I could see. Wind whipped my hair and peppered my face with grit. I raised my hands, ran my fingers through my hair. Everything was in place. I was whole.

Turning in a circle, the desert spread in all directions, a mountain range, far-off in the distance was the singular feature that punctuated the monotonous horizon.

"How did I get here? Is this real," I asked.

"What is real," I heard Jefferies ask behind me.

I spun around, but nobody was there.

"Who are you looking for, Alexander?"

His voice coming from where I'd just looked.

"Where are you? Where am I?" I asked.

"You are in the mainframe of in vitro prison 861," Jefferies answered, his voice not coming from outside, but inside my head.

I spun around trying to get my bearings. There was light, but no sun. There was shadow, but no discernable light source in the opposite direction. I had no way to tell if it was midmorning or midday.

Disorientation, coupled with the vast nothingness of the landscape made me dizzy. I stopped turning in circles and focused on the mountain range in the distance. Having a focal point helped ward off oppressive isolation that clutched me by the nape of my neck.

“So, this isn’t real? There’s no desert, no sun, no wind, no mountain range,” I asked.

“This reality,” Jefferies said, “does not differ from the reality you subscribed to before your liberation. The brain has no eyes or ears. It can’t taste chocolate or smell freshly brewed coffee nor can it feel the difference between fine grit sandpaper from the smoothness of a baby’s skin.”

“The brain,” he continued, “relies on other parts to feed it information. Images from the eyes, sounds from the ears, smells from the nose, taste from the tongue and tactile sensory information from a whole complement of antennae affixed to one’s body.”

The mountains seemed so far away, analogous to the life I’d known, the person I’d been.

“This mainframe,” Jefferies said from nowhere and everywhere, “simply replaces those sensory components. We’ve altered the origin of the input signals, your brain does the rest. How do you think I’m able to speak to you? You no longer have ears to hear me nor a mouth to speak and yet we’re having a conversation. You no longer have eyes and yet you stare at the mountains.”

I wanted to close my eyes in defiance to what Jefferies could see through me, but the will to close my eyes did nothing. The thought command to close them went nowhere. The view of the mountains remained.

“I am in control of what you see and what you do,” Jefferies said. “You wish to close your eyes? Here.”

Everything went black. There was nothing except Jefferies voice resonating inside me.

“Open your eyes, Alexander.”

Although I fought the reflex to open them at his command, something took over and they opened. Gone was the desert and the mountain range. Instead of wind and grit, I stood in a field of snow, a tree lined edge of Douglas firs frocked in white replaced the mountain range. The winter air muted and hushed, the snow causing a whispered stillness.

“Or this,” Jefferies said.

The next instant the snowfield was gone, and I stood along an unknown shoreline. Before me, the ocean spread out toward an infinite horizon. I could smell the brine in the air, taste it on the tip of my tongue.

“Enough,” Jefferies said.

I was back in the desert, just as I’d been moments before. Although not real, there’s an immediate sense of belonging.

Trying to process what I’d been told and what I’d just experienced, trying to get a grip on the reality that was being experienced, a question entered my mind. I almost asked it, but stopped.

Can you hear what I’m thinking, I asked myself.

Silence.

Confidence, razor thin, cut the new façade of this new reality. I changed tack.

How, I asked myself, was I able to turn in circles, see the desert landscape and the mountains in the distance?

No answer.

“How was I able to turn in circles in this new reality,” I asked aloud.

“All reality is a hallucination,” Jefferies answered. “Your brain, whether still inside your skull or living in a blood perfusate solution in this new reality can only process so many bits of information each second. The amount of information, the number of bits that floods the brain, is too much for it to process at once. To cope, it sifts through the bits of information, picking out the important bits first.

The bits of information left behind create holes, which the brain is very good at filling in by plugging information from previous experiences. The resulting network connections, over time, become stronger and more automatic. Therefore, in order for this reality to have any affect it needs to mimic the old.”

It was easy to hear how pleased he was with himself.

I blinked in disbelief. Not from not understanding Jefferies diatribe, but the flippant manner he spoke about reality, as if it was expendable, easily thrown away and replaced. He made reality, any reality sound cheap.

“In your liberated state for example,” he went on, “if you think, ‘open your eyes’, an outgoing signal is received by a bio-electric interface and sent to the mainframe which then sends imagery information back to you. Your brain believes it’s under its own control. However, the warden of this facility or myself can log into the mainframe and manipulate the signals as we see fit. Your brain has no way of differentiating the signals received.”

I didn’t say a word.

“Speaking of manipulating signals,” he said, “I’ve put quite a bit of thought into how you should serve your sentence. I could, if I so desired, put you on that deserted island, or keep you

in this desert, left to wander under the sun until your brain dies of natural old age or you went insane. Just imagine it. Remaining under the broiling sun, no shade to be had, no water to slake your thirst for years on end.”

Whatever sliver of confidence I’d felt knowing Jefferies couldn’t read my thoughts were erased.

“Should I have mercy or should I bestow upon you a reality as harsh as the crimes you committed against the State?” Jefferies asked.

I didn’t bother with a response.

“I’m quite pleased with the manner in which you’ll serve your sentence,” he said. “I think it’s balanced. You’ll be happy to know I took your love for antiques into consideration. Dare I say I think on some level you’ll appreciate the gesture.”

I heard the snap of this fingers and the desert was gone and I found myself inside a small concrete prison cell, the walls of which painted in a nauseating sea-foam green. Against the opposite wall a low-lying metal framed cot with a thin mattress took up half the available space. Along the back wall, taking up another quarter of the cramped quarters, sat an antique stainless-steel toilet that shared the same wall with a matching industrial stainless-steel sink. The front of the cell was a wall of vertical steel bars running floor to ceiling.

I shivered. The air was cold and dank, held an icy moisture that draped itself around me, then into me. The only light came from fixtures hanging from the ceiling outside the cell. These created fingers of shadow that spilled across the floor and up the back wall, resembling a giant hand that could crush me within its black palm.

“How do you like your accommodations,” Jefferies asked. “This is a recreation of Attica Correctional Facility that had been in the state once called New York. Knowing your love for antiques, I thought you might enjoy becoming a part of history.”

I fought to keep my demeanor placid, not wanting to give any hints to the true nature of the panic and uncertainty filling me.

“I shall bid you farewell for now and will turn your orientation over to warden Collins. He’s the one in charge of this in vitro prison. He should be along shortly, but don’t worry Alexander, I will drop in from time to time and say hello. You and I have much to discuss, the first of which is what was on the flash drive I saw affixed to your key chain and where I might find it hidden.”

I said nothing. If he couldn’t read my thoughts, then my inner self was the last island of refuge amid this ocean of terror.

There was nothing but silence. I remained silent staring at the ugly wall, waiting until I felt confident Jefferies was gone before I assessed this new reality.

“Hello,” I said.

No reply.

Reaching out, I rapped my knuckle against the smooth concrete wall. It felt and sounded solid. Next, I placed my palm against the wall, the cold from the concrete seeped into the meaty part of my palm, then into the thin band of marrow with the bones of my hand.

Sitting down on the thin mattress, I unboxed the information crammed into my brain.

Okay, start at the beginning.

Everything I’m perceiving is an input from a mainframe computer. Between my brain and the mainframe is what Jefferies had referred to as a bio-interface. It stands to reason all my

sensory nerves are attached to this interface and the signals are converted from bio-electric to mechanical electrical signals.

If I reach out and touch the wall, an output signal is created, sent to the interface where it's converted, and then sent to the mainframe. The mainframe then sends the input signal back through the bio-interface and into my brain telling me that the wall is cold.

Following the same line of logic, if there were an operator sitting at a mainframe terminal, he or she could send an input signal that could tell my brain the wall was made of Jello or that there was no wall at all.

While I understood this logic, sitting on the real unreal bed, staring at the real unreal wall, realizing there's little difference between what is and what's perceived, my concept of reality has been split. Before liberation, I'd subscribed to a reality that was whole, unquestioned. The sky was blue, and trees were green. No questions asked. Now there is no sky or trees. Only an input signal from a mainframe feeding the information to my brain. As an organ, it cannot differentiate the origin of the signals, it just interprets data received.

Was the reality I'd known before liberation any different? How did I know, I wondered, that the sky was blue or that the trees were green? Why did I believe it? Just like now, because data had been feed into my brain and over time, I learned the difference between blue and green and between sky and trees. Once learned, it had become automatic.

Now, my perception of reality itself is fluid.

Coming to this conclusion feels correct. All of us perceive the world, at least the physical world, in different ways. Supporting this realization, I thought of Mae and the first time she'd changed how I perceived the physical world.

The memory of her first ever trip to my favorite theme park played across the screen in my mind. Born and raised in the western territory, I'd been to this fun park many times before, but Mae had been an East territory girl, so she'd never been. It was noon, and we were walking hand in hand, with not a care in the world when she said, "I love how they have music playing from various movies."

In all the times I'd visited the park, including that day, I'd not heard music. It wasn't until she'd pointed out there was music coming from speakers hidden all throughout the park that I realized music was, in fact, playing.

Raised in a musical family, she'd heard the music where I had not. The fluidity of reality had manifested itself in the awareness of an input signal that altered my perception of the physical world.

My mind switched tracks, as so often occurs when thinking about Mae. Thinking of her now, an emptiness ballooned and swallowed the logic. Knowing I'd never see the smile in her eyes, smell her hair, feel the smoothness of her skin again filled the emptiness with a yearning I'd never known. A yearning that wrenched my stomach. Cramped, I doubled over. The sense of loss and loneliness, the thoughts of what she must be going through, realizing Maxx would not have a father punched and kicked the wind out of my lungs.

Solitude consumed me and I allowed myself to be consumed by it. In its maw, I broke and allowed it to break me, a just penance for being so short-sighted. Then, alone in a cell that didn't really exist, a tear that wasn't real rolled down my cheek as I sobbed.

CHAPTER 9

There's a difference between crying and sobbing. Crying occurs when one too many emotions is added to an already full bucket creating a brief, minimal spill over. Sobbing is the bottom of the bucket falling out.

I can't recall when I'd cried last, but I do recall the one and until recently, the only other time I sobbed. It wasn't the day my father had been in the car accident nor on the day he died two weeks later. It was 10 years after his death, when I had to let him go.

I also recall I'd been so emotionally spent after purging the suppressed loss of his death, I'd slept for 12 solid hours. When I wake up, I sat up and got on with my life without him.

Now, in similar fashion, I don't how long I sobbed into the thin mattress in my cell, but once I'd purged all the guilt and repressed anger, I slept. I had no idea how long.

Just like before, I sat up and got on with my life. Whatever life meant. Jefferies may have separated my brain from my body, the mainframe might intercept my sensory information to trick me into a false reality, but I wasn't so sure they could take the essence of me.

"What about my inner self, my soul," I said aloud.

I was unsure if asking it aloud would prompt a response or not. There were none, which raised a series of interconnected questions.

What is the difference between thinking to myself, and speaking those same words aloud? With the small bits of information gathered so far, it didn't seem like Jefferies or anybody else could hear what I was thinking, only if I gave the thoughts a voice. Is there a different region of the brain involved with thinking and speaking?

My head spun trying to keep everything straight. Just keep calm, think, reason. Put it together slowly.

Okay, if I think, 'Jefferies is an asshole' that thought remains in one region of my brain, a region not linked to the bio-interface. Thus, the thought never reaches the mainframe. However, if I say, 'Jefferies is an asshole' my brain telling my jaw and tongue to say those words are intercepted and sent to the interface as an output signal. That signal is then received by the mainframe then sends back a corresponding input signal whereby I hear the words.

That makes sense.

If that's the case, then everything is a series of closed input and output data loops, which means they're only plugged into the regions of my brain responsible for sensory organs. They can't plumb the depths of who I really am, or what I'm thinking. Regardless of how quick their processors are, no matter how powerful their computers, they can only react with an input when I send an output.

I have the advantage.

A male voice said, "Hey, is anyone there?"

Startled, I look in the general direction of where the voice had come from. Unlike the voice of Jefferies, which seemed to be just another voice in my head, this seemed to come from outside the cell itself.

"Hello?" the same voice repeated.

It definitely came from outside the cell, even possessing an echo. Jefferies voice had not. I got up and walked toward the bars. Did the voice belong to the warden Jefferies has said would be along shortly?

"Who's there," I asked.

"Who do you want it to be," the voice replied.

I concentrated on the sound of his voice, captured the tone, drew a mental picture of the face a voice like that would come from. The timbre sounded middle age, the smooth tone told me he was probably a non-smoker, therefore likely smooth skinned. The rest I filled in. I pictured him with brown hair, hazel eyes.

After several seconds I responded, "I want you to be real."

"Um kay," he responded. "Well, I suppose I could ask the same question of you. How do I know you're real?"

What did Jefferies say the warden's name was? Caldron, Caldwell, Campbell? No. Collins? Yes, Collins. Careful now, I told myself. Tread carefully.

"I don't. Everything I'm experiencing is nothing more than a construct," I said.

"Okay, I'm with ya so far chief," he replied.

"Name's not chief," I said. "It's Alex."

"10-4," he replied. "At least we know that's real."

"And what's your name," I asked.

"Callidus."

"Callidus? That mean something," I asked.

"Dunno. Never bothered to ask, but knowing my mom it's probably Latin for Little Turd. You can call me Cal."

I wasn't sure what to think. I remained quiet to see what his next move would be.

"You still there," Cal asked.

Deciding to test the waters I answered, "Yep, sure am Little Turd."

The laugh that came was deep, solid and immediate. He'd not expected it, the response genuine.

“That was funny, nice pull. Thanks, man.”

He sure wasn't acting like the warden of an in vitro prison. Being close to The Counsel of Three, I was well aware of the in vitro prison system, knew of its power to dissuade potential wrong-doers. Of course, The Counsel perpetuated the legend of liberation through its vast array of media outlets, which trickled all the way down to word-of-mouth on the streets.

Still, despite the genuineness of his laughter, I remained suspicious and probed a bit.

“How long have you been a prisoner here?”

“Eh? What's that, sonny,” he asked in a faux old man's voice. “Speak up, sonny.”

“I said,” deciding to push the boundary further, “how long you been here, ya old geezer?”

Laughter once more resonated within the bleak confines of my cell. The bars shadowed fingers loosened their grip, or was that just my mind playing tricks.

“I don't know about you, Alex,” he replied, “but it sure is nice to have somebody to banter with. It's been a minute since I've had somebody to talk with.”

I'd always imagined liberation to be the most severe form of isolation, images of my brain floating in a pod with only my thoughts, nothing else but loneliness and emptiness. Could a single mainframe link all prisoners? Could we communicate with each other? Is that what was happening now?

“Yeah,” I said. “Seriously, how long you been here?”

“It's hard to track time in terms of minutes, hours, days, weeks and months. You'll see,” he replied. “Your circadian rhythm will get out of whack for a while, but you'll soon learn liberation time.”

“So, how's this work? Are you real or are you a part of the program interface? Are you a means by which the warden, or whomever oversees these operations, keeps tabs on me?”

“Easy there,” Cal replied. “It took me at least a month before I started asking questions like that. You must be cut from a different cloth. What’d you do on the outside?”

On the outside.

Although he’d meant nothing by the question, the word ‘outside’ eviscerated me. My blood became sorrow, my heart pumped emptiness, I became nothing. Until this moment, I’d accepted my liberation, but on an academic level only.

On the outside.

The full impact of becoming a prisoner inside my own mind slammed into my psyche, the ramifications beyond anything I could comprehend. The separation between mind, body, and self, created a black hole of insanity that churned the gossamer tendrils of sanity.

I closed my eyes and myself, but not in human form, instead I was a world suspended in space. A beautiful world of blue and green and white. I saw the shorelines of my life as the continents of experiences, the mountains of success rising from the landscape contrasted against the seas of my failures.

Above the face of the world, a tiny black cloud swirled. I felt its intent. Not content remaining alone in a void it wanted, not to join all that I had become, but craved to blot out all I’d been. It wanted to snuff the sane with its shroud of insanity.

Hate, unlike I’d ever known, came to the fore. A hate that I’d created and harbored the swirling black cloud of insanity, hate that I was allowing myself to be a victim at my hand. The cloud grew as the hate coursed through me.

I understood I was at a precipice. Continuing down this path, a cycle of self-hatred would feed the insanity which would feed the hatred. A closed loop of input and output.

If I were the creator of the cloud, I could uncreate it. A smaller cloud, brilliant white appeared next to the black, I watched the white cloud grow, the boundaries of the two mingled, the overlapping gray an unmistakable sign one was overtaking the other. The white diluted the black, and the black dirtied the white. The balance between the two empowering. The yin and yang of sanity was blurred.

I vowed to myself from this point forward, the first enemy I needed to defeat was myself. That was the only way I could get to Jefferies.

I opened my eyes. “Outside,” I answered Cal after the long pause, “I’d been the senior actuary working under The Counsel of Three. Einstein? No. Just a fancy bean counter with a gift for trusting his gut.”

Cal let out a long whistle. “Senior actuary for The Big Bad Counsel, huh? So, what’s that gut of yours telling you about me? Am I the real McCoy or not?”

“My gut tells me you’re the real McCoy, but the data to support that is as yet incomplete,” I said.

“And what kind of proof would you need,” he asked.

“I’m not sure,” I said. “I guess I’ll know when it happens. So, what got you liberated?”

“I was a hacker, but not the bad kind. The good kind.”

“I didn’t know there was such a thing.”

“Au contraire mon frere,” Cal said. “I didn’t disrupt global commerce or bring down the economy of struggling nations or crap like that. I was the modern-day version of Robin Hood. I stole from the rich and gave to the poor. Non-profits to be more specific.”

“And what was your percentage for helping?”

“How very negative of you. No, I took nothing for myself. At least not in those transactions. I put none of those rich folks in any kind of financial danger. 99% of the time they didn’t miss a thing. After all, who’s going to miss a couple of hundred bucks out of millions.”

“Obviously somebody did,” I said.

“In a cruel twist of irony, it wasn’t any rich miser who busted me. It was an organization I helped that conspired with the authorities to nab me. They served as the bait and laid themselves out. They bit the hand that was feeding them.”

Something more than sadness perfused his voice, more than loss. Betrayal. Of that, I was all too familiar.

“The betrayal is what must’ve hurt the most,” I said.

“Yeah. Hurt like a son-of-a-bitch. Once found out, then all the rich assholes came a-runnin’. The way they cried, you’d think I’d put them in the poorhouse. The most I’d ever taken from any of them was \$500. It was a molecule of hydrogen in the drop of water in the ocean to them. Clearly it wasn’t about money, but that somebody had outsmarted them that really got their goat.”

“They liberated you over \$500,” I asked.

“No. When you added the thousands of times I’d pilfered a few hundred bucks, it was the aggregate The Counsel considered. Plus, quite of few of those rich pricks made generous donations to various campaigns, so the Counsel needed to act in a way that ensured those dollars continued to flow. The story is ancient, only the cast of characters change.”

“I’m sorry, Cal. That really...” I couldn’t think of a word appropriate enough. Stink was too weak. Unfortunate sounded too diluted.

“Yeah,” he said. “It sucks ass. But onto more positive things. I know a thing or two about hacking and I suspect the mainframe and the warden’s terminal is vulnerable.”

Still not sure who I was speaking to, I resisted the urge to divulge my hacking past. “What do you mean,” I asked playing dumb.

“Technically speaking we’re just data, right? Our brains are producing bio-electric signals. Near as I can tell, those chemical signals are fused to an interface where they’re converted from the biology of C, G, A, T to binary ones and zeros.”

A flash of understanding burst into my mind. If we were information and the warden’s, or any other computer terminal had a weak firewall that didn’t monitor outgoing signals, it was possible to access his system.

“If we’re data points, we can...”

“Stop right there,” Cal interrupted me. “There’s no need to say what you’re thinking if you’re picking up what I’m layin’ down.”

What I’d concluded earlier was being reinforced by what Cal was inferring. And the fact he didn’t want me to say it out loud only confirmed my suspicion about the mainframe. Further, if something needed to be ‘said’ aloud, Cal and I would need to do it in some kind of code.

“I gotcha,” I said. “Hacking must’ve been a difficult thing to stop once you’d started. I mean, like you said, you were not really hurting anybody, and those you helped benefited. How did you get into it in the first place?”

“Finally, a good question! It’s about time. Like most things in life, it came about innocently enough. I was working at a bank handling the accounts of our ‘premiere’ clientele. It

bothered me that these folks would come in flying their top-of-the-line Zannik jump crafts to discuss various ways to expand their already vast fortunes.

“Two things never escaped me when discussing said fortunes. First, when is enough, enough? 6 million? 10? A billion? Nope. It was never enough, and I never understood that. Second, how was it these folks could amass such wealth in the first place? When I first started working at the bank, I’d been under the illusion they’d must possess some kind of special genius. Ya know, really had smarts. It turns out most of them were as dumb as a bag of hammers. Just morons. More often than not, it was a function of being at the right place at the right time, or knowing the right people at the right time. There was not as much skill involved as you’d think.”

“So, luck,” I said trying to decipher anything he’d said in code.

“Yes. A lot of luck. Oh, they’d never admit that though. So, there I sat, working for pennies, helping maneuver millions. So, I decided I’d do something about it.”

“Seems noble enough,” I said.

“It was. Is,” Cal said. “As senior account manager, I had access to their account information. Once I constructed an entry gate, all their robust security software couldn’t pick it up, and I was free to roam.”

Senior account manager. There was no mistaking the implication there. He knew that with my access code information as senior actuary, I’d have what we needed to hack into the mainframe.

“I’m sure being a convicted cybercriminal, there was no other option than liberation,” I said.

“Yes, that was the only way they felt they could isolate me, control me, to keep me from plying the seas of information,” he said.

“Did you work alone or did you have a second in command? Like a lieutenant,” I asked putting the feeler out to confirm what I believed he was implying.

“Always worked alone. When you add another person, you don’t just double your risk of exposure, it’s exponential. Then again, you’d know more about that than I would, Mr. Actuary Man.”

A safe answer. Nothing really there. Was he being as cautious as I was? If he were really a prisoner, he’d be thinking I was a ploy to entrap him, just as I’d thought.

“Yes,” I said, “and while that’s true 99.9% of the time, there’s always an exception to the rule. While it’s not probable, it’s possible you come across that one person who can become a lieutenant who not only mitigates that risk, but increases your chances of success.”

Although I felt certain he was picking up the code I was laying down, I was eager to hear his reply.

“I agree,” He replied.

He’d gotten it. Now I needed to know what he had in mind. With my knowledge, how would I hack into the warden’s system?

“That’s all well and good but...”

The sound of hard-soled dress shoes clacking against the cold concrete floor derailed my train of thought. The icy grip of dread clasped around me as the staccato sound of the footfalls came ever closer to my cell. I suspected the man filling the clickety-clack shoes belonged to warden Collins. And he was coming for me. It was time for my orientation.

Chapter 10

The first thing I saw was Warden Collins shadow. Long and thin, it appeared to be a separate entity. Not attached to a man, but to a sinuous black snake that slithered toward me. The fluid movement juxtaposed the staccato clack of the shoes. As he neared, his shadow retreated as if he were sucking the darkness back into him.

He stepped into my line of sight. Collins was tall, rail thin, clad in sickly white skin. His irises, which were icy blue, lay among jaundiced eyes one of which was off center and looked slightly to his left. His nose, was an incongruous hodgepodge of sharp angles that looked like someone had broken it more than once. He wore what looked to be a white chef's coat with black buttons that ran along the length of the right side. His salt and peppered hair was unkept.

His gnarled fingers, interlocked in front of him, looked like a bleached tangle of dead sticks. Stopping in front of my cell he smiled. Unlike the rest of him, his teeth gleamed white and were in perfect alignment.

"Mr. Donovan. It's wonderful to have you here. Welcome to my prison," he said.

His voice, like sandpaper, rasped against the concrete walls.

"How have you been enjoying your stay?" he asked.

How does one answer a question like that? I let silence answer.

"Come now," he said, "don't be shy. I know you've been blabbering away so there's no reason to clam up now."

A made a mental note confirming my suspicions, they could listen to whatever is said whenever they wanted. His smile disappeared, his head lowered, his gaze shot through the metal bars like lasers.

“That’s fine,” he said, “You’ll find your voice soon enough. It’s probably best you listen during your orientation, anyway. As I’m sure you know, but for clarity’s sake, I’m warden Collins. I run this in vitro prison. There isn’t a thing I don’t know about.”

He took one more step toward the cell door, unclasped his long fingers and wrapped them around the bars. They, along with the entire door disappeared. His shoes, a scuffed brown pair of dress shoes with a small heel clacked a few times and he walked toward me. I took two steps back to maintain my distance, but hated that I surrendered ground to him.

“Routine is the order of the day here,” he began, “and order shall be the routine. That is the basis for this orientation. I’m here to introduce you to how you will start each day. We like to refer to it as a remembrance period. We don’t give two shits about rehabilitating you but we do care very much that you never forget what you’ve become.”

“Tell me, Mr. Donovan,” he continued, “you seemed to have been a contemplative fellow before your liberation. Is that true?”

I knew I wouldn’t be able to stay silent forever, but short one-word answers seemed the best way to go.

“Yes,” I replied.

An impish smile creased his thin mouth. “Very good. Very good indeed. I think the vast majority of people have lost the ability to think, or have gotten too lazy to contemplate matters. They’re too lackadaisical to care enough about their own particular station or circumstances. It’s imperative you never forget who you really are, wouldn’t you agree?”

“I suppose,” I answered.

“Good,” he said his smile growing. “The less you fight, the more you’ll benefit from this daily remembrance. Are you ready to remember, Mr. Donovan? Remember what you really are. Ready to see what you’ve become?”

He didn’t wait for an answer. He unclasped his knurled fingers, raised his gangly arm, then snapped. The cell dissolved, the cold and dampness vanished, my body disappeared. I saw the inside of a large warehouse filled with rows of stacked shelves which held thousands of glass pods.

Collins voice, inside my mind, spoke. “This is the main confinement warehouse of my prison. You are not in a jail cell constructed by Councilman Jefferies, but you reside here. You’re nothing more than one among thousands of others also stored here.”

With the sound of his fingers snapping, the scene changed, and I saw only a single glass pod with a metal placard attached to the metal shelf on which it sat. The placard read “Prisoner 65-6720 - Alexander Donovan.”

Inside the pod, my brain was suspended in some kind of clear solution. A tangle of thin copper needles pierced its entire surface. On top of each needle, wires ran to a black circuit board at the bottom of the pod. On the outside of the pod, opposite the circuit board, a thick black cable ran to a conduit in the wall.

Input and output wires, I thought.

Then, disassociation ceased. Instead of being an outside observer of a separate reality, safe in the distinction between the two, the gravity that I was both the observer and the one experiencing my reality pulled me into a different orbit of existence.

“What you see is yourself,” Collins said from within the confines of my mind. “Well, at least what remains of yourself. The physical support system for your brain is no more.”

There was a hint of joy in his voice, gleeful in delivering this information.

“As I’d said,” he continued, “you will start each day in this state. The image you’re seeing will come to you via a live video feed. This is your true reality, Mr. Donovan. You may believe you’re in a cell, but that’s only a figment of reality that exists through the grace of Councilman Jefferies and the technologies made available by this prison mainframe.”

“We have reduced you to nothing more than a brain. There is no way out. And we will remind you of this every day.”

Instinct commanded my eyes to close, to shut out the terror, to block its corrosive contents from burning away any semblance of hope. I had no muscles to receive the message. They forced me to witness the video feed of myself as nothing more than a lump of convoluted gray matter.

“While what you’re witnessing now is the one true reality, there are as many other imagined realities as we see fit to provide. I believe Counselman Jefferies highlighted this when he placed you in the mainframe.”

I thought of the desert, imagined the vast open space, the hard packed sand, the wind, the mountain range far off in the distance. I concentrated my focus on the memory of the sun burnt sky, the particles of sand pelting my face. The shift in focus became a safety line, gossamer thin, but a safety line nonetheless. Tethered to this whisper thin strand of memory, I felt a bit more secure against the pull of insanity.

“Of course,” Collins said, “Councilman Jefferies is much more kind than I am. He may have created a reality of a snowy meadow and a deserted island, but we can place you in any environment, in any conditions we see fit.”

“So, this is how your day will start,” Collins continued, “this as your remembrance period. The rest of the day is where magic happens.”

Feeling the tenuous thread of the memory of the desert landscape fray, I stitched a fresh memory of Mae to bolster my security. There are many memories that I keep in my mental Rolodex of her, the one I grabbed was a memory created early in our marriage.

We’d enjoyed a dinner out one particular summer Friday night, a retro diner at the end of a pier stretching into the Pacific Ocean. As we drove back to the hotel we were staying, we had the windows of our rented jump craft down the radio was playing one of our favorite songs. We sang and laughed.

I turned to look at her and the entire world became slow motion. Her long brunette hair whipped in graceful arcs in the wind, her head cocked back slightly, she was laughing and her face was incandescent. The look in her eyes was equal parts joy and love.

“From the time of your liberation to your insertion in the mainframe,” Collins said snapping the lid on the memory, “we had a neural cartographer map your mind. This was so we may correctly simulate reality as you experienced it. Although we all possess the same instruments, how we use those instruments and how we perceive the inputs are different in each of us.”

“That was just a cursory scan,” he went on. “Now that you’re here, we can spend the rest of the time probing and mapping at our leisure. You know, find the rest of all those connections that make you, you.”

Time became a wall that separated me from Collins and Jefferies. With each second, one more piece of the wall disappeared, one cerebral cell at a time until they had free access to read and understand all thoughts and intentions in real time.

How, I wondered, would they'd go about that additional mapping? Was it a passive scan that the mainframe did in the background or was it more intrusive?

“In case you’re wondering how we’ll do it,” Collins said.

Was he reading my thoughts now?

“It’s done through a series of what we refer to as interactions. Interactions like we had in your cell, for example. Or your interaction with Councilman Jefferies in the desert and so on. In addition, during your remembrance periods we’ll be able to stimulate various regions of your brain and catalogue how it responds.”

Forced to watch my brain floating in a glass cranial pod while hearing Collins telling me it was only going to be a matter of time before they had free access to every part of me, I had two options. There’s power in options. Before being liberated, I had options too many to count. Now I had but two.

Option one—I could allow the black cloud of insanity to roil over the landscape of self, blot out the sun of sanity and live blissfully unaware of what was going on. Become too crazy to understand the nightmarish reality.

Or two—Bolster my resolve that I would fight every attempt they made to chip away at myself. In the time I had remaining, I would use it to go on the offensive. I would play their game not with the fear of being the loser, but I would play their game intending to be the victor.

I heard the snap of Collins fingers and I was back in my cell. The chill bit harder, the dank heavier, the narrow walls more constricting, the shadows deeper. Collins stood in front of me, then stepped backward through the bars until he was standing outside them. I didn't bother to move. I knew the bars would be solid for me, not permeable like they were for him.

"I hope you enjoyed our brief trip," he said. "This was only an introduction. Tomorrow's remembrance will be a little different."

I didn't reply, just stood in the middle of my cell next to my cot.

He interlocked his knobby fingers together, and bowing slightly said, "Until tomorrow then."

He turned and walked back down the hallway, the clickety-clack reverberations of his shoes receding until they disappeared. I sat on my cot considering my two options.

Insanity rested its consoling hand on my shoulder telling me it could all be over soon. It offered hope and release. A promise of a reality free from fear and strife. Besides, it whispered, the beauty is you'll not be aware of your own condition. Insanity was right. I'd be too crazy to know I was crazy. Tempting.

Options. If I resolved to fight, what would I be fighting for? Revenge? The vision of Mae laughing in slow motion on that summer night whispered its own temptation. Fight for me, she said. Fight for you. Fight for us.

The choice was simple.

Chapter 11

Mae looked at the scrap piece of paper she'd scribbled the address on, double checking she was at the correct location. The faded yellow numbers above the cracked and chipped pink door, sandwiched between two long ago abandon stores, confirmed she was indeed at the correct door. She'd not expected the Muhly Detective Agency to be a ramshackle affair in F-Sector.

There was no other choice. Detectives were a thing of the past, relics of a bygone era. With robotic constabulary, auto cameras capturing almost every inch of the city in crystal clear high def, there was almost no need for one. Almost.

After exhausting all the conventional search engines, she'd turned to more questionable places on the web. It took time to find the agency.

Muhly, he'd told her through a resonating bass voice during a brief phone call, was his last name. He'd insisted he not hear any details of the case over the phone, but provided Mae with the address, time, and date to meet and had hung up.

She looked up and down the litter strewn street. The only thing moving was an empty plastic bag swirling in the wind. She walked toward the pink door, noting there was no buzzer, no knocker.

She rapped her knuckles on the old door, stepped back, and listened for the sound of movement within. Nothing but the wind and the plastic bag scraping the sidewalk. She looked up and down the street and pulled at the collar of her black overcoat.

She knocked again, this time harder. A few seconds later, the door opened.

"Mr. Muhly?" Mae said.

He was of medium height, bald, with dull green eyes, wore a pink polo shirt and khakis. Holding the door open with one hand, he held a sandwich in the other. Stains dotting his shirt appeared to be casualties from battles between the man and his sandwich. Mae couldn't decide who was winning.

"May I help you?" he asked in the same deep bass timbre she'd heard on the phone.

"Yes, we spoke on the phone yesterday. I'm Mrs. Gatto. I have an appointment with Mr. Muhly."

His question surprised her. How many clients could this guy have? It's not like he was renting space in a downtown studio high rise.

He eyed her up and down, not being discrete, but his assessment was non-sexual. He spent a bit of time looking at her shoes before finally saying, "Humph. You're early. I'm in the middle of my lunch."

Not wanting to waste her time, but also not having any other options, Mae took her time gazing at the stains on his shirt, then at the small bit of sandwich he was pawing.

"Well," she said, "halfway through your lunch is an understatement. From the carnage left on your shirt and the one bite you've got left in your meat hook, I'd think you were about done with lunch."

He smiled a wry smile, his eyes filled with mirth.

Before he could say anything, she pressed. "Now, should I go elsewhere to find a service that can help me or will you pass on one last bite of a sandwich, half of which will probably end up on your shirt."

At that, he laughed aloud, pulled the door all the way open. “Please, Mrs. Gatto. Come in. It’s a pleasure to meet a dame with gumption. I’m Mr. Muhly of Muhly Detective Agency, but please, just call me Zach.”

He wiped his free hand on his khakis before holding it out for her. “It’s a genuine pleasure to meet you.”

Mae smiled, shook his hand. “It’s nice to meet you, Mr. Muhly. And if you don’t mind, let’s talk first before I decide if I want to call you Zach.”

She edged past him and entered his small office. Despite the dilapidated exterior, the inside, she was happy to see, was clean, neat and orderly. Taking a quick glance around, she couldn’t help but notice the lack of technology. Rows of bookshelves, not television screens, lined each wall, each shelf stacked neatly, but she could tell they weren’t there for decoration. Near the back of the office space, a large wooden desk sat, an ancient typewriter, not a computer screen, on its surface. A single upholstered chair sat facing the desk. The most advanced technology was a state-of-the-art coffee machine sitting on an end table near the desk.

Closing the door behind her, Zach said, “Yeah, I’m not really into the modern thing. I prefer codex over digital.”

He walked around her, tossing the remaining sandwich into the wire wastebasket, and sat in an old leather high-backed office chair, the springs groaning under the load. Pointing at the chair opposite, Zach said, “Please, Mrs. Gatto. Have a seat.”

Mae sat at the edge of the chair.

“Now then, what interest do you have in hiring me?” Zach said.

“Well,” she said, “it’s a matter regarding my husband.”

His wry smile returned and a knowing look etched itself across his face. “Yes, it usually is.”

Although he hadn’t said it, the implication that she was looking to find out if Alex was cheating was clear. Mae bristled.

“Mr. Muhly, let me make one thing absolutely clear. You will come to discover I’m not your usual client. I’m not some broken-hearted housewife sadly clinging to some desperate hope about a cheating husband, as you’ve assumed.”

His smile disappeared. He sat up, moved the typewriter off the side, grabbed a yellow legal notepad and a pen from a blotter set.

“My apologies, Mrs. Gatto. Now, please, tell me why you’re here. What is this matter regarding your husband?”

Mae took a deep breath, both to calm her nerves and keep her anger in check. This was not the time to fly off the handle. She’d said her peace. Now it was time to get down to business.

“I believe someone has wrongfully accused my husband of a crime he did not commit.”

Mae watched Muhly write a single word at the top of the legal pad, but it was too small for her to read. He then put the pen down, leaned forward, and interlocked his fingers.

“Alright. Interesting, go on,” he said.

Although she’d decided to believe in Alex’s innocence, in the still hours of early morning, when there were no distractions, she couldn’t help but let her mind wander. What had Alex always said? ‘There’s a difference between possible and probable. Anything is possible, but not everything is probable.’

Exhausted from the guilt of allowing a slim belief Alex had committed the crimes they had accused him of, she needed to know once and for all. After all, he'd admitted there was something wrong, something he wanted to tell her. She'd seen it in him, felt it, but when confronted, he'd not been able to tell her.

Zach sat back in his chair and rocked back and forth, patiently waiting for more information to come to him, content to remain silent.

She'd come this far. There was no going back. Alex was innocent or guilty. Most of her believed in his innocence. If that proved to be true, she'd exhaust every resource available to right the wrong. If Alex had done the crime, at least that information would give her closure to move on, however devastating that would be.

"Very well then," Mae said. She took a deep breath, steeled herself, and began. "First, my name is not Mrs. Gatto."

Zach unclasped his hands, leaned forward and scratched through the word he'd written, then held the pen above the paper before saying, "Very well. What is your name?"

Here we go, she thought to herself. Being married to Alex had taught her to recognize risk and plan accordingly. Speaking to a detective was risky. She was willing to accept the risk of him reporting her to the constabulary.

"My name is Mae Donovan," she said.

The pen remained hovering over the pad as he stared at her for a long moment. The name Alexander Donovan had been in the morning, afternoon and evening news streams. It was on the state-run radio and every other streaming service. Even Zach was familiar with the name Alexander Donovan.

By the time the media has spun the story, blasted the Donovan name with nuclear accusations. Mae had become radioactive, a victim of the media fallout. Nobody wanted to be near them.

Matching Zach's gaze, it was Mae's turn to wait patiently for a response. A long moment passed before he finally wrote a single word on his pad. "Why don't you start at the beginning, Mrs. Donovan, and let me see how I can help you?"

Three hours later, the plastic bag that had danced in the wind was long gone, replaced by the inhabitants of F sector. Hungry, desperate and hollow, they looked at her as an aberration, someone who didn't belong. Suspicious eyes followed her as she pulled her collar closed and hurried to the tube station that would take her back to the landing lot where she'd left the jump craft.

Under normal circumstances, walking amid the people of F-sector, even in the late afternoon, Mae would've been uncomfortable, but this was not a normal circumstance. Although indigent, being alive but not living, eking out an existence on the fringe of society, the people of F-sector were a harbinger of hope. Mae couldn't help but smile.

The meeting with Zach had gone better than she could've expected.

Chapter 12

Since returning to the cell, I'd done nothing but sit quietly, keeping to myself, electing to not speak with Cal who'd been quiet as a church mouse.

The lights outside the cell were turned off, in the resulting darkness it took a moment for me to adjust and realize there must be a single bulb far down the hallway that remained on.

It made sense, I thought. They would need to replicate my circadian rhythms to keep my brain healthy, at least for a while.

I pulled the green wool blanket of the cot down and slid underneath the starched sheet beneath it, and pulled them both up to my chin. The pillow was lumpy, but I didn't care. I stared up at the ceiling, determined to find an island of normalcy amid this sea of insanity.

Recalling something I'd read a long time ago, the first thing to do in a survival situation was to pause and take an inventory of what you had available that may be beneficial to survival. The thought itself was funny. I had nothing substantive. The lumpy pillow wasn't real, the blankets weren't real, nothing was real.

I only have my thoughts. At least for now. Collins said even those would stop being my own at some point. I'd heard about neural cartography, but only from a medical perspective. I knew neurologist used it to restore cognition in stroke patients, but I'd not heard it being used in the prison system, although it made sense why the Council of Three didn't advertise that little nugget of information. Instead of the technology being used to heal and restore lost connections, in the prison system, it was being used to wound and breakdown in order to inflict the most effective mental torture imaginable.

How would they map my mind? I wondered. I thought back to my conversation with Cal. Is he an artificial intelligence within the mainframes matrix to learn about me?

Even if I didn't give away any deep, dark secrets while speaking to him, an AI would learn through the interaction itself. Each word spoken would be one more piece of a puzzle that, when put together, would make me, me. All my individual thoughts in aggregate would make the picture complete.

What would happen if I didn't react to anything? Just kept my mouth shut? I could mitigate what they learned by not reacting. If they were going to take pieces of my puzzle, I was determined to make it difficult.

"You awake over there?" Cal asked.

I held my breath, not wanting to exhale. I didn't say a word.

"If you're feeling the same things I felt after my first remembrance, you're trying to make sense of it all. Although we're designed to be aware of our own consciousness, we're sure as shit not designed to see the very vessel that houses that consciousness from the outside. I know it freaked the hell outta me."

I exhaled, careful to not make a sound.

"You're probably wondering, even more so than you were at the outset, if I'm an AI. Sure, what I just said could be something an AI could say and I get why you're giving me the silent treatment so I won't push. You need time to, pardon the expression, wrap you mind around what's going. I get it. I've been there."

Sure, I thought, but wouldn't an AI...

“You’re probably thinking that’s exactly what an AI would say to make you believe it’s not an AI,” he said, interrupting the question I was asking myself. “Let me answer that for you. In a word, yup, it could. However, what are the chances it would do so without you first asking it a question or through a series of keywords it picked up during a conversation? If I were an AI, how likely is it I’d know what you’re going through, what you’re thinking, what you’re feeling unless I’d experienced the same thing?”

I wanted to reply, fought the urge, bit my lip and remained silent.

“That’s all I have to say,” Cal said. “Just do me a solid and think about it. You let me know when you’re ready to talk.”

Silent, lying in the dark, I weighed my choices. I could take a chance, believe Cal had been a hacker, now liberated and somehow, his reality was fused with mine, or he was an AI programmed to work within the mainframe to crack open my psyche like a walnut. The choice was mine to make. Although there was a preponderance of evidence pointing to Cal being a sophisticated AI, it just didn’t feel right.

Thinking back to our conversation before my remembrance period, Cal and I had spoken in code to not let anybody listening or recording know what we were saying. What were the chances an AI would be sophisticated enough to receive coded information, recognize it as code, disseminate and crack the code, then create an appropriate response to send back to me, and do all of that in real time?

Still, I reminded myself, nothing is as it seems. One of the amazing things about reality, I reflected, is how easy it is to accept a reality so long as enough mental boxes are checked. Collins had mentioned he knew I’d been talking before he’d arrived for my remembrance, although he didn’t reference Cal or an actual person, just that I’d been the one talking. He’d also

mentioned that they would continue to chip away at knowing my thoughts through various interactions, as he'd called them. If Cal were an AI, both of Collins' statements made sense.

I recalled the two choices I'd faced during my remembrance and reminded myself that with the time I had remaining, I would use it to go on the offensive. I would play no to lose, but I would play to win.

Invigorated, I felt good with my choice and came up with a plan on how to proceed. Despite the pervasive chill, a warmth from within radiated calm, resolute determination. While I wanted to get right to it, to jump out of the cot and begin talking to Cal, the logical side knew it was best to wait, allow the waves of emotions to pass, then act.

Although I was determined to remain silent the rest of the night, lying there under the stiff sheets, resting my head on a lumpy pillow, I smiled.

It was good to have options.

It was even better when you had a plan.

Chapter 13

Long after Mae Donovan left his office, Zach Muhly remained in his leather chair, head tilted back, staring at the ceiling, wanting to savor the gift that had fallen in his lap for as long as possible. He knew it was late, but the hour didn't bother him.

What goes around, comes around, he thought to himself.

Sure, he'd heard about Alexander Donovan. The Council of Three, through all their media outlets, saw that only those that were dead hadn't heard about Alexander Donovan.

As he had with all the other criminals, the Council had paraded in front of their constituents, Zach had ignored Alexander Donovan.

What goes around, comes around, he thought again.

Zach had little to smile about, but the smile he now wore filled him with delight. Leaning forward he scanned the notes he'd scrawled on the yellow legal pad during what turned out to be a lengthy interview with Mae trying to formulate his plan for his investigation.

He glanced around his office, proud it could be mistaken for an antique shop. Not one to subscribe to every new technology, his office was littered with relics from a time long past finding intrinsic value in the old-fashion way of doing things. Sure, newer technology affords faster and more efficient processing, but that comes at a cost—the lack of focus and true understanding.

Over the years Zach found that if he spent a few hours sitting in a darkened office, contemplating the facts of his investigation, free from distraction, allowing his thoughts to coalesce into a plan was better than having a machine spit out some recommendations based on nothing but algorithms.

In this case, he ruminated, a machine could not consider the sensitive nature of this investigation and how dangerous it could be, especially if the emotions from his past were not kept in check.

That's the difference between man and machine, Zach thought. It can tabulate the effects of emotions may or may not have, but not the feel the emotions themselves. Therefore, there would always be a discrepancy, and where there's discrepancy, there's an inaccuracy.

Feeling the betrayal from long ago stab at him anew, Zach allowed the feeling to linger, did nothing to stifle it, let it run free. It would tire itself out soon, it always did. Then, once it had played itself out, he could get back to the task at hand. He'd be helping both Mae Donovan and exorcising his own demons.

He looked at the ancient low-profile pale blue Smith Corona typewriter sitting off to the side of the desk. Sitting near the typewriter, Zach spotted the silver corner of an old laptop sticking out from underneath a volume of an encyclopedia Britannica and a thesaurus piled on top of it.

From what Mae had said, he figured he'd need it at some point and made a mental note to unbury it and plug it in and make sure it still worked. Turning back to the typewriter, he pulled it toward him.

He got up from his chair, both the springs and his vertebra creaking with relief, stretched, walked to the opposite side of the room where the lone bit of technology he subscribed to waited, its single blue light showing it was ready to brew a single cup of coffee. He glanced at his watch, 8:45.

I might need more than one cup, he thought, it's going to be a long night.

Hours later, Zach entered the bar, an upscale place in a bad part of town. He'd never heard nor been to Velocity and as a general rule he avoided anything that resembled trendy. For Zach, a proper bar was one that was dark, possessed a hint of grime and most important of all, sold cheap booze. A place where your expectations weren't very high, and you knew what you were getting.

Velocity was the antithesis of that. Pretentious and snobby the moment he walked in he knew disappointment was near at hand. Of all the places to meet, this is that last place he would've chosen, but this is where his contact had wanted to meet. With contacts, Zach didn't push his own agenda, at least not at first.

Meeting on their terms, on their turf, was not only a sign of respect, but laid the groundwork for trust which in this line of work is worth its weight in gold. It'd been a while since Zach had used this contact, so it was like starting all over again. Sure, there was familiarity, but when you're toeing the line between legal and illegal, familiarity could work against you. The less you knew, the better.

Getting his Jack and Coke from the mechanical tender, he turned around and surveyed the place taking in as many details as he could. Details were important, you never knew when one might come in handy. Some of the most tough cases he'd successfully investigated hinged on a spat of random details that didn't appear important at first.

This joint looked less like a bar and more like a high-end furniture gallery. There was an assortment of couches, lounge chairs, and ottomans arranged in such a fashion that groups of people could congregate facing each other. Large, gaudy animal print area rugs punctuated a glossy white floor brightly lit from garish crystal chandeliers hanging from decorative brass ceiling panels. It was God awful.

Zach glanced at each patron sizing them up. His contact, Niles had not yet arrived. Zach recalled he never was. It was one of his signature safety protocols. Somebody in this crowd worked for Niles and was scoping him out. When whomever in the crowd thought Zach was not with anybody, he'd let Niles know.

This venue choice was surprising. The last time they'd done business, Niles had preferred either low-key, public places, or places out in the open. The World Holographic History Museum, any of the three modern art galleries, or any of the many shoreline parks. Zach wondered what had changed in the several years since their last transaction for him to choose such an uncharacteristic place.

"Can I get you another drink?" the familiar British accented voice came from behind asked.

Turning around, Zach was stunned to see Niles standing behind the bar. He wore a blue crushed velvet tuxedo jacket over a crisp white shirt with blue pearl buttons. His bleach blond hair was spiked, his brown eyes glinted with glee at surprising his guest.

Holing up the still full glass, Zach replied, "I'm still working on my first. Not sure I could afford another one anyway."

"Don't you worry about that. Drinks are on me," Niles said.

Zach nodded, threw back his head back and emptied the contents of the glass in one long swallow. "In that case, I'll take your finest scotch. Make it a double."

Without hesitation, Niles raised his hand and snapped his fingers. The mechanical tender slid down the rail immediately. "Get this man a double of our 75-year Glenmorangie."

"You don't spare any expense," Zach said honestly looking forward to this treat.

“Only for friends and family. It’s been a minute since we saw each other last. How do you like my place?” he said raising his hands, sweeping them around the room.

“This place is yours?” Zach asked. He couldn’t believe it.

“Indeed, it is,” he answered. “I’m sure you well remember my penchant for conducting business in public places. Well, why not own the public place? That way I can control all the aspects of said public space.”

The mechanical tender expertly poured and placed the amber scotch whiskey in front of him.

“Come,” Niles said, “why don’t we go someplace a little more private.”

Zach picked up the crystal whiskey glass, inhaled the earthy aroma, took a sip and relished the smooth heat that slid easily down his throat.

“Come,” Niles said walking down the end of the bar then toward the back of the place.

Zach followed, but kept his distance. Holding the glass in his left hand, his right hand reached into his jacket unsnapping the hammerlock on his holster. Niles had never been trouble, had been a reliable source of good information, but a lot had changed since they’d last done business. Zach wasn’t taking any chances.

The back wall of Velocity was a solid pane of floor to ceiling mirrors framed in silver. Blue velvet ropes cordoned off one section where two unoccupied couches sat, a robotic sentry stood guarding the velvet ropes.

Niles approached the sentry, slid his finger into a slot on its chest. A red light emanated from it and a moment later, the sentry rolled to the right and out of the way. “Good evening, Reverend Green.”

“Good evening, Carl. Myself and one guest only.”

“Very good, sir.”

“Reverend Green?” Zach asked as they walked past the sentry.

“Only a handful of people call me Niles,” he answered over his shoulder.

Niles led them past the couches, and to the mirrored wall where a slight opening appeared to the right. Niles pushed the mirrored door inward, then disappeared into an unknown room. Zach had no choice but to follow.

The room beyond the mirrors was more Zach’s speed. It was small, dimly lit by a single low-watt bulb that hung over a round table with two chairs.

“Please, have a seat.” Niles said pointing to the other chair as he sat down in the other.

Zach did so, took another longer sip from his scotch, then placed the glass on the tabletop.

“This room is fully soundproof and is impervious to any electronic eavesdropping devices. In short, a perfectly secure location to conduct business.”

Zach had known Niles to be a man who could get information, information you didn’t want people knowing you had. He had no idea how Niles could get the information, but what little he’d been able to dig up with his own limited resources as a P.I., he suspected Niles had ties to The States intelligence community.

“Nice little setup,” Zach said. “How long have you had it?”

“I opened Velocity a little over a year and a half ago. Like I said, the more control I have over the information coming in or going out the better for my...longevity.”

Information coming in? That was interesting, Zach thought. He put that in his back pocket to see if he could learn more about that.

“Makes sense to me,” Zach said. “Nice place you got.”

“Bullshit,” Niles said. “A guy like you hates anything modern. I’m surprised you even walked in the door.”

It was time to flex a little muscle. “I wasn’t referring to the House of Gucci outside. That’s an abomination to the senses and sensibilities. I was referring to this little haven set amidst that sea of superficiality out there.” Zach said point his thumb toward the door they’d come in.

Niles chuckled. “Ah, it’s good to hear that some things never change. For what it’s worth, I agree with you, but keeping the superficial people believing they are the masters of their own universe pays more than my former employer, and like I’ve already stated, it provides the perfect cover for the proper business. Speaking of which, why have you come?”

After taking a long sip, Zach said, “If you recall from our previous transactions, I’m only seeking information.”

“Yes, I recall. I also recall there were only two kinds of information you were ever interested in. Either a summary or a fully dossier. Which will you be requiring?”

“I’ve already done the summary inquiry. I need the full dossier.”

“Difficulty level?” Niles asked.

This was the point at which Zach fretted. Once he stepped over the line and said the name, there was no going back. Of course, Niles would recognize the name and be all over that. His ability to leverage that information for himself only seconded Niles penchant for obtaining information. Until this point, Zach had only experienced Niles using leverage for a profit, but this name was different. There was the possibility Niles could ruin everything, but he was a necessary evil.

Zach steeled himself. “I need a full dossier on Alexander Donovan.”

Niles sat unblinking, his face revealed nothing about what may go on inside his mind. Zach couldn't tell if Niles was even breathing.

"Ya know what," Niles said, "I thought that's what this might be about when you first reached out to me."

With a sense of relief, Zach exhaled unaware he'd been the one holding his breath. "Oh good. Needless to say, in addition to the usual amount of discretion, because of the volatile nature of this case, extra discretion is needed."

"Discretion won't be the problem," Niles said. "What may be a problem is the cost of this information. It won't be easy to come by, at least if you want me to leave no trace. This will cost you."

Zach thought back to the conversation he'd had with Mae. Looking deep into his eyes he said, "Money won't be the issue. Name your price."

"Well then, why didn't you lead with that?" Niles said.

"How soon can you get it to me?" Zach asked.

"This will take some time," Niles said looking down at his fingers, slowly picking at the cuticle. "Probably take at least a week, maybe more. And the cost will be \$15,000."

Zach studied Niles for any minor facial tics, dilation or constriction of his pupils, watched to see if he looked to the left or right while thinking. All of those things provided Zach clues as to the authenticity of Niles statements. Before they forced him out of a job and all investigative authority handed to the autonomous constabulary, Zach had been the best interrogator on the force.

“I cannot overstate the sensitive nature of this information,” Zach said. “My client will pay you \$10,000 now and another \$10,000 when the information is delivered within the next three days.”

Niles, no longer interested in his cuticles, looked up at Zach.

Several moments passed before he said, “Please tell Mrs. Donovan not to worry. I’ll have the information to you in short order. Do you have a few hours to kill?”

Chapter 14

I didn't know how long I'd been asleep. Coming to, the lights outside the cell were on and I felt rested. Still lying on my back, I got the impression I hadn't tossed and turned during the time I'd been asleep.

Listening to the quiet, I recalled the final thought that I'd had last night. Not sure if it was the peace that came from making an important decision or a simple matter of the mainframe signaling my hypothalamus to release melatonin, but after I'd come to my decision, I was out. And I slept hard. I cannot recall a time I'd felt more refreshed from a good night's rest than I do now. Energized, even feeling positive.

I wondered how I would expend this energy. It's not like I could go for a run or saddle up and go for a nice long bike ride. I pulled the covers down, sat up, and slung my legs over the cot. Slipping on my shoes, I walked to the back of the cell, stopping in front of the stainless steel toilet. I realized since being here, there had been no urge to relieve myself. Force of habit took me from the bed to the toilet, but there was no need to use it. I also realized I was not hungry and hadn't even been aware of the lack of hunger since being here.

Interesting. I tucked that bit of information away.

I moved to the sink and washed my face. The water was crisp, but instead of adding to the coldness of the cell, I found it invigorating. It's amazing, I thought, how much a good night's sleep can affect your mental disposition. The difference between icy water and water that feels invigorating is like night and day. Yeah, I was feeling good.

Patting my face dry with the single small white towel, I turned and walked toward the bars. I rolled the towel into a small log shape, placed it on my forehead, then pressed my head against the bars. I wanted to see how far down the hallway I could see. Not much.

A concrete floor and hallway stretched as far as I could see in both directions. The ceiling had two light fixtures, each hanging front of the cells on either side of me. Looking to my right, I tried to see Cal's cell, but it was out of sight.

Time to put my decision to work. "You awake over there?"

I heard rustling. "I am now. What time is it?"

"Time for you to get up," I said.

"Yeah, where were you last night when I wanted to talk?" he replied.

I smiled. "Did that stop you from continuing to yap away?"

"I guess you have a point there," he replied. "I'm still tired. I don't sleep all that well. At least not since being here."

"And how long has that been?" I asked.

"Hang on," he said. I heard the rustling sound again. He must've gotten up and was getting himself out of bed. I heard the faucet running. I waited patiently until he was done, then heard him approach the cell bars.

"Okay," he said, his voice very close. "What were you saying?"

"I asked you how long you've been here."

"When you say 'here', what do you mean?" he asked.

"How long have you been here, in this prison?"

“Well,” he answered, “not long before you arrived.”

My brain raced to solve the puzzle.

“Right,” I said, coming to a tentative solution. “Councilman Jefferies created this reality for me. So, what, did he populate it with you and you alone?”

“Couldn’t tell ya,” he answered.

The mental puzzle was still unclear. I had a few pieces, but there were too many missing pieces to determine the full picture.

“How long since your liberation?” I asked, changing tack.

“Again, I couldn’t tell ya. You might though,” he said.

I think I knew where he was going, but I wanted to test to see if I was reading him correctly. “They liberated me in the year 2521,” I said. “The last date I can recall was Friday, November 4th,” I said, hoping to give him a frame of reference.

He was silent for a long time.

“You okay?” I asked.

“Yeah,” he answered. “The last date I remember was Monday June 3rd, 2515.”

6 years ago. I tried to put myself in his shoes. How would I feel if I’d existed in this reality with no real sense of time, no way to gauge its passage? I recalled something Cal said early on. Something about how time would become a blur, becoming not a linear line that moves at a prescribed rate of seconds, minutes, and hours, but becomes a non-linear blur that has no point of measurement. Then, out of nowhere, somebody arrives and reveals you’ve been here for 6 years. Not an easy pill to swallow.

Or is it?

What if you get to a point where time has become a blur, where it's become eternity? Out of nowhere, somebody arrives and says you've only lost 6 years. Wouldn't you feel exhilarated? Perhaps that was just a function of my current positive frame of mind at work.

"Hey, look," I said, "I didn't mean to upset you."

"You didn't," he said. "I'm glad it's not been longer. Compared to what it could've been, 6 years is nothing."

"So where were you before you arrived in this prison?" I asked.

I was in the middle of this vast desert landscape. Sand and scrub brush as far as the eye could see. Off in the distance there was..."

"A mountain range," I finished his sentence.

We both were quiet, allowing the shared traumatic experience to bond us. I felt connected to Cal in a way I'd never felt connected to anybody before, and somehow I felt him connecting with me. In that moment there were no bars, there were no concrete walls, real or inputted, there was no prison of the mind.

"Yes," he said.

"Where did you go from there?" I asked.

"I was told by Collins that the Council of Three had seen fit to allow me to wander in the desert for the rest of my life. So, that's what I did. Since you've been to the same place, you know what it looked like, nothing except a lone mountain range in the distance."

"Yep," I said.

“The way I figured, if the desert was the mainframe, then there had to be an insertion port. A place at which they make a connection, a doorway between this world and the outside and it wouldn’t be located where they’d placed me.”

“Why not?” I asked.

“Think about it,” he answered. “I don’t wanna sound like a sicko, but if you kidnapped somebody and took them to your house, would you take their blindfold off right after you got them in the front door? No. You’d take them down into the basement or some other secure location first.”

It was a sick thought, but his point was an effective one. I got it.

“So,” he continued, “after looking around, my instincts told me to head straight for the mountains. Although far off in the distance, they provided both a goal to walk toward, and unconsciously held the promise of water and protection.”

Recalling my time in the desert, although thankfully brief, I’d felt the same pull toward the mountains. Had Jefferies left me in the desert, like Cal, I was certain that would’ve been the course I’d have set for myself.

“But the hacker in me took over,” he continued. “I knew the mountains were acting as a giant piece of cheese put there to bait me into their trap. I felt the further I walked toward the mountains, the further I’d be going from where they didn’t want me to go. So, I turned around, put the mountains to my back, and I headed off in the opposite direction.”

Brilliant, I thought to myself.

“What then?” I asked, spellbound.

“Well, I walked for a long, long time. I’ll spare you all the bouts of lunacy that hung over me, hotter than the sun that beat down on me, but eventually I saw in the distance a tiny shack. I made my way to it. From the outside, it looked like something from those really old movies with cowboys.”

“I know what you’re talking about,” I said, recalling Mae had loved watching old-time movies on the wall screen.

“It was small. A little bigger than this cell,” he said. “made of wood, bleached by the sun, blending in with the surrounding landscape. It had no windows and a single door. I don’t know how long I’d been walking in that desert, but as excited I was to have found a place where I could at least escape the onslaught from the sun, I was just as cautious.”

Having been familiar with the setting, I tried to put myself in his shoes. After walking with no goal, walking with no shade, no water, but knowing I couldn’t die, how would I have handled that situation? After being assaulted by the relentless pounding of the sun, how would I have reacted to seeing a structure that would afford me a reprieve?

“Cautious? How could you have been cautious?” I asked.

“Easy,” he said. “I knew that I’d become nothing more than a bioelectric set of data points interfacing with a mainframe and the structure I was looking for could either be one of two things. One, the shack was something the sick assholes on the outside of the mainframe wanted me to see. Instead of a mirage fooling desperate fools, there’s water ahead. Perhaps the shack was just their form of hallucination, a tease to put in front of me. See how I’d react.”

I understood what he was saying. Although I'd decided that Cal was likely as real as I was, or at least sharing the same reality as I was, there was still a slight possibility he was nothing more than a sophisticated interactive program designed to map my mind.

"What was the second possibility?" I asked.

"The second possibility was that it was real. Like real, real. The second possibility was that it was not a hallucination. That the shack was home to the actual physical connection between the mainframe and the outside."

The thought that there was a physical connection point between this world and the world I'd known filled me with a hope that became a lust never experienced.

"Well?" I asked.

"Well, what?" Cal asked, teasing me.

"You damn well know what!"

"Settle down," Cal said. "The answer is not as clear cut as you'd think. The shack was a little of both."

Both? I wondered. How could it be both? He let me chew on it, remaining quiet.

"I get the shack has to be a part of this projected reality," I said. "That the operators or architects of the mainframe would need to project the shack to keep this reality seamless. I also understand that the shack must also double as the physical doorway that spans the two realities. I just can't figure out how or why?"

"This is gonna blow your mind," Cal said.

"I wasn't aware I had any mind left to blow," I replied.

“Brotha, your mind is all you have left,” Cal said. “Now, are you ready for a real trip?”

“Sure,” I said.

“Although I have no definitive proof, what I strongly suspect is that in order to integrate themselves into the mainframe, in order to, how shall I put it, interact with us, Collins or Jefferies must become bioelectric data points themselves. They are then uploaded to the mainframe at the point where I saw the shack. Once there, the operator on the other side can put them where ever within the mainframe with the click of a button.”

“And once they’re done with their interaction,” I interrupted, “the process must go in reverse.”

“You got it,” Cal said.

He’d been right. My mind was blown. Myriads of questions flooded my mind, but as I’d been trained through years of risk assessment and management, I quickly triaged them.

“I’ve got some questions,” I said.

“I thought you might,” he replied.

“You said you strongly suspect the shack is real, but you also said you have no definitive proof. Why?”

“Well,” he answered, “I never went into the shed. I don’t know what’s actually inside.”

“What the hell, Cal!”

“Well, while I may not have gone inside the shack, I saw somebody come out of it.”

A steel ball bearing of befuddlement rattled inside my mind.

“Who?”

“Your dear Mr. Jefferies.”

My mind exploded.

“I had positioned myself around the backside of the shack,” Cal continued, unaware of my internal detonations. “He appeared, then, well...”

Cal stopped talking. The prismatic fireballs erupting within also paused, anchoring me back to the moment.

“He appeared, and then what?” I prompted.

“He disappeared,” Cal continued, “and the next moment, I was in this cell.”

Unable to grasp what he’d said, I broke the problem into smaller constituent parts to make it easier to chew on, but even the small pieces were too big.

“I’m sorry, Cal. I’m just not following.”

“Again, I never got into the shack, but if Jefferies walked out and he disappeared and the next moment, I found myself here in this cell, that would explain how I ended up being weaved into your particular reality.”

That was all I needed. My mind felt as if it had been stuck in the mud spinning its wheels, but that bit of information had provided the traction I needed to get unstuck.

“I got it,” I said. “I think I agree with you. That must be the physical connection point. Your logic is sound.”

Reestablishing my mental footing, I recalled the triaged questions, but another new question took priority. “Since you were behind the shack, Jefferies had no idea you were there

and when the operators on the outside took Jefferies, they also took you without knowing you were there.”

“Well, Mr. Scarecrow, it looks like you finally got your brain.”

“Ha, ha,” I replied without laughing. “But now that we’re talking about this, why aren’t we talking in code? Can’t they ‘hear’ this conversation and are now alerted to the knowledge we think we have?”

“Maybe,” Cal replied, unconcerned. “But I’ve got a theory about that too.”

“I thought you might,”

“Here’s how it went down. Try to follow along,” Cal said.

“I don’t think that’s gonna be a problem,” I replied.

“Okay. So, I get liberated. My sentence is to wander in the desert until I either go insane or my brain dies of old age. As we’ve already established, thanks to you, I was 6 years into my sentence when I came across this shack. You with me so far?”

“Yeah, I’m with you,” I replied.

“I work myself around to the back when I see Jefferies appear. The next thing I know, he’s gone, I’m gone and I find myself in this cell. A short time later, you arrive and Jefferies is standing outside your cell. Not warden Collins, but his royal majesty Jefferies. That’s got to be an aberration, don’t you think?”

I picked up his thread and followed it. “Yes,” I confirmed, “once they completed their duties at the surgical center, there was no further involvement by The Council into the matter. From their end, the case should’ve been closed.”

“So, it seems,” Cal continued, “my being here was a mistake. I was in the right place at the right time.”

“Okay, but that still doesn’t answer whether they can ‘hear’ this conversation and are now alerted to it,” I said.

“I don’t think it makes any difference, because I don’t think the mainframe knows I’m here. After all, I’m not supposed to be. For all intents and purposes, the mainframe knows I’m in the system. It’s not like I’ve gone missing, but it doesn’t know I’m in this part of the system.”

“Alright, I think I’m following you,” I said, thinking out loud. “Your sentence was to wander around until you went batshit crazy or your brain died, and it’s not like you wandering around in the desert requires a lot of oversight or supervision. Just let you wander around.”

“Exactly,” Cal said.

With this admission, I became convinced Cal was who he said he was. There was no way an AI could concoct a story such as this, weave all the details that only could be relayed had they been experienced from a human standpoint. Sure, they could program an AI to lie, but the programming would have to be very specific to the situation in which it found itself. It could not program itself, in real time, and come up with a lie.

“So, back to the meat and potatoes,” Cal said. “I think Jefferies, or somebody acting on Jefferies’ behalf, set up a separate entry point in the mainframe.”

Pondering that nugget for a second, I replied, “And you think I have something to do with that?”

“Isn’t that obvious? You said it yourself. Once they had handed the final decree to the surgeon performing the liberation, The Council considered the case closed. But because

somebody who was very close to them, you, did whatever you did, Jefferies saw fit to oversee the transfer of his prisoner himself. And I believe he'll be back."

"Okay, I'm buying what you're selling," I said. "But what about speaking about this now? Why is this not a problem?"

"Yeah, about that. Well, since the operators don't know I'm here, they're not aware you're speaking with anybody real. If they are listening, and I doubt they're actively listening, they'd assume you were talking to yourself. And if that assumption is correct, then their neural cartography will be wrong. They'll be drawing the wrong map."

I was seeing the picture. "I think I've got it. One last question. What leads you to believe nobody is actively listening?"

"The most obvious answer is that if somebody had, we wouldn't have gone this long without some type of response. With the click of a button, they can do whatever they'd like. I could find myself stranded on an iceberg freezing my ass off in the blink of an eye and yet, here we are babbling away."

"Alright, I lied. That wasn't the last question. If they're not actively listening, do you think we're being recorded?"

"It's a good possibility, but then again, there's data storage to consider. Recording every neural impulse would chew up a ton of data. To store that, process it, then have somebody sit and listen to it would be time-consuming. Lest we forget, this in vitro prison is a state-run facility and therefore subject to all manner of budgetary constraints."

"So, possible they're recording, but not probable," I said.

“My guess is there will be brief periods where they may record, but I think they’ll dedicate their resources to situational thought extraction.”

The term sounded ominous.

“Dare I ask,” I said.

“Collins alluded to it. They will put you in various situations, some benign, some not, and see how you react. They will then be able to map the neural connections and by doing so repeatedly, they can use the data to extrapolate a neural map that includes more than the sensory information they have now.”

Everything Cal had said made sense. Reviewing the information gathered, all my initial questions had been answered. Now, the only question I had was how to use this information to get back to the outside reality.

I closed my eyes, concentrating on a solution fluttering at the periphery of my consciousness. A butterfly of a solution with gossamer wings teased in the light of possibility. I resisted the urge to chase it, but remained calm, not wanting to kick up the winds of disheveled thought. Closer, the answer came until I saw a way out.

Like I’d done last night, I wanted to let this marinate for a bit, not wanting to rush headlong without considering it thoughtfully. Besides, not knowing if all this chit-chat was being recorded or listened to, I didn’t want to risk anything getting picked up.

I’d need Cal’s help for sure, and I’d need to talk to him about it soon.

“Cal,” I said. “a light bulb has come on. I’m gonna need a bit of time to let the light shine before I’m willing to share what I’m seeing, but when I do...” I cut myself off wanting to find the right thing to say, so he’d understand that when next we spoke, it would be in code.

“Do you speak Klingon?” I asked.

He paused, which I’d hoped he’d do.

“Fluently,” he replied.

“Good. Until later,” I said.

I moved back to my cot, laid down, and ruminated about the answer that was right in front of me. Excitement, unlike any I’d known, filled every digital pore. I knew I needed to let it run its course, let the tide of emotion subside so I could think about the plan I was formulating with clarity, giving me the best chance of succeeding. I was too amped up.

I closed my eyes and took several deep breaths. I thought of Cal and how it must’ve felt when he first saw that shack in the middle of the desert.

Just as he’d done, as excited as I was, I needed to approach my plan with caution.

Chapter 15

Several hours after I'd laid down, the fragments of ideas had coagulated in my head and I was ready to hash out the plan with Cal.

I got up, walked to the bars, and said, "I love Star Trek."

Hoping he'd know this would be the start of coded conversation, I waited for his reply. I heard the familiar rustling from his cell.

"Me too," Cal replied, "but I'm more the original series kind of guy."

"Yeah, agreed," I replied. "Do you recall the episode where the Enterprise got trapped in an alternate universe and their duplicate selves try to take over the ship and leave the original crew stranded aboard an inferior version?"

"Kinda, but the details are hazy," Cal said.

"Well, once Spock helped Kirk realize what was happening, Kirk knew the only way to retake possession of the superior Enterprise was to convince his doppelgänger to switch back."

I hoped Cal was picking up the nuanced code. For my plan to work, I needed him to go back to the desert right before they had swept him up in my reality, get back to the shack, get inside and hack into the system that lay on the other side of it, which I suspected belonged to Jefferies.

"I kinda remember," Cal said. "But I forgot how Kirk convinced his other self to switch back."

"Easy," I said. "Kirk knew human nature and understood that any iteration of himself would want the best, most advanced ship in Star Fleet. He simply fudged some information,

transferred erroneous data which convinced his other self the Enterprise he'd gone to was inferior to the one he'd left. Once he'd done that, his other self willingly went back."

"Yeah, the details are getting clearer. Didn't his other self get the shaft, though?"

"Yes and no," I replied. "The original script didn't read that Kirk came out the victor. As originally written, both captains were victorious. The doppelgänger Kirk went back to his original universe but kept the knowledge and the memories of the parallel universe."

"Yep," Cal said, "I remember. He escapes one universe, at least his consciousness does, but his memory of that other universe, the memories stored, stays with him and comes in handy on the other side."

Cal saw exactly what I was driving at. But that was only step one. Once he hacked into Jefferies system, I needed him to set up a bridge to the prisons system. And the best bridge between two systems was a zombie bot. How delicious.

"I really liked how the show writers came up with bridging the two different universes," I said.

"It's funny. I don't recall how they did that at all," Cal said.

"Quite creative," I answered, "the doppelgänger Kirk had erected special antennae designed to locate the other universe and once they were within a certain range, they would act as a bridge between the two."

"I remember now," Cal said. After a long silence, he asked, "I still don't remember how the real Kirk came to realize there was an alternate Kirk and crew."

Yeah, Cal was picking up what I was laying down, and I'd thought about this problem. How would Cal and I alert either Collins or Jefferies that Cal was here? And once discovered, could we be sure they'd put him back to the place he'd been?

I wasn't certain, but had more of a guess. As an actuary, I used intuition as much as my analytical sense. My gut told me once Collins came to learn Cal had been mistakenly weaved into my reality, they would restore him to the last known point of origin.

I wanted to convey to Cal that the time to blow the whistle on Cal's whereabouts was when the Collins was actively listening and processing my mind during the daily remembrance period.

"It all started," I began, "when Kirk was transcribing his daily captain's log entry. He said that subspace sensors had picked up an anomaly of unknown origin and Star Fleet Command tasked them to investigate."

"I remember the scene," Cal said. "Spock was looking into that rectangular scanner thing and in his normal, no-nonsense tone reported that the subspace anomaly seemed to be akin to an echo."

"You got it," I said. "Since you're currently aboard my Enterprise, I'll be able to take you with me during the data scan period. Now all we do is wait. Once I tune into that episode, be ready."

"Don't you worry about me," Cal said. "You just worry about what's gonna happen if the wrong episode airs. They will probably cancel the show for both of us."

I was all too aware of the risks involved. I'd already weighed them all, traced their paths to all probable outcomes, and had mentally made a balance sheet until convinced I'd mitigated the risks as best as I could. Besides, if we failed, what was the worst that could happen?

The lights outside the cell dimmed, then came back to on their previous luminosity. A second later, I heard the clickety-clack of Collin's shoes on the concrete approaching.

"Good luck, Cal," I said. "If all goes well, you should be able to beam aboard the alternate Enterprise, get the data you need, and then beam back here before I return."

"Not to worry, Buddy. I'll get that bridge linked up before you can say 'two shakes of a lamb's tail.'"

Collins appeared in front of my cell door dressed in the same outfit as he had on yesterday. It occurred to me what I was seeing was a computer rendition of Collins. It made sense it was the same.

"Good morning, Mr. Donovan," Collins said. His voice was different. Instead of being raspy, today it was sweet as southern iced tea. "I trust you're enjoying your accommodations?"

"Indeed," I said.

"I'm pleased as punch to hear that. Despite the bad rap we often get in the press, we aim to be as humane as possible."

I wasn't sure what was more disgusting. The lie he'd just uttered, the ease at which he uttered it or that he believed it. Despite Collins disgusting nature, I looked forward to my second remembrance period, eager to think about Cal.

I was certain thinking about him, they would home in on those thoughts and once they found him, would restore him to the last known point where he could do his magic.

“Are you ready for your daily remembrance?”

“Ready as I’ll ever be,” I replied.

“Now that,” Collins said, “is a very healthy attitude to have. That attitude will carry you far here. It’s best not to struggle or fight.”

“I’m learning that,” I replied.

“Good, very good.”

He smiled his toothy smile, snapped his fingers, the cell dissolved, and I became connected to what is. Only this time, instead of being shocked and startled, I looked at myself from the outside, passive and calm. I pictured the thoughts that I hoped would put our plan into motion.

There was no going back now.

The second remembrance period was less strange now that I knew what to expect. Like being a passerby looking into the store window while at the same moment being the proprietor inside the store and seeing yourself staring at yourself from the outside.

With all extraneous perceptions of myself stripped away and concentrated into one small, oddly shaped lump of matter, everything that I’d been, everything that I am, everything I was, became focused.

I am nothing more than a collection of neurons, networked together, firing in a coordinated pattern. Nothing more, nothing less.

Resetting my attention to putting my plan in place, I imagined Cal walking in the desert. I exerted all my focus on this singular thought, painting as much detail as I could so Collins would see him and know something was amiss and investigate.

I imagined Cal, his head tucked down against the wind, eyes mere slits to protect them from the blowing sand, saw the mountain range behind him, the landscape dotted with black scrub bush everywhere.

Then it was all gone.

There was no snapping of Collins' fingers, but in an instant I was back in my cell, sitting on the cot. I stood and walked to the cell door and pressed my face against the cold steel.

"Anybody home?" I asked.

Silence. I held my breath, hoping to hear rustling, movement of any kind. There was nothing.

"Cal," I said, "you there?"

Silence. I gripped the bars, squeezed them tight as dread tied itself in knots inside my gut.

What could've gone wrong? Ignoring my emotions, I weighed the possible against the probable? Was Cal still in his cell and was just being an asshole? Possible, but not probable.

If not in his cell, did the mainframe find him linked to my reality and corrected its error? Probable. If so, the first part of our plan had worked.

I had predicted only three potential solutions the mainframe would generate if that were true. One, it would place Cal at the last known data waypoint behind the shack. Two, it would reset the program and Cal would find himself at the starting point where he and I both had begun our journey in the moments after our liberation and subsequent interface with the mainframe. Or three, not knowing what to do, it was holding Cal in stasis until Collins figured out what to do.

Perhaps, I thought to myself, that is why the remembrance period was so short.

Thinking about each of the plausible scenarios further, if placed at the last known point behind the shack and he'd hacked into Jefferies system, perhaps building the bridge between Jefferies system and the prison was taking longer than expected. Did I need to be more patient? Probable.

Okay, next.

If the mainframe reset the program and placed Cal at the beginning, he would have to make his way back to the shack. He'd wandered in the desert for 6 years before he happened across it, but that didn't mean the shack was a 6-year journey from the starting point. I'd reasoned that the shack only appeared once Jefferies goons had created the portal.

Still, if placed at the beginning, he'd need to find the shack, and that could take time. Again, patience.

I didn't want to contemplate the third possibility. However, if Cal was being held in stasis and Collins knew about, I felt I know in short order.

I turned from the cell door to wash my face when I heard Mae's voice behind me.

"Alex," she said.

I inhaled as if I'd jumped into a frozen lake. I spun around and there she stood, right outside the bars. My composure evaporated. I ran toward the door, slamming into it. I reached my hands out to grab her hand, to touch her, to pull her close.

She retreated half a step, just beyond my reach.

"Alex, why?" she asked.

"No," I replied. "Please, Mae. You know I didn't do this. How could I?"

She trembled, her lips curled down as deep creases etched across her forehead. "Why didn't you tell me?"

Her words were razors, slicing deep into my heart. I began to bled sorrow and regret.

“Mae, please,” I said. “I admit, I should’ve said something sooner, as soon as I discovered something was amiss, but in my defense, I wasn’t even sure what was going on and I just needed time to get answers.”

Her features softened. She wiped away a tear streaking down her cheek. Her yellow fingernail polish juxtaposed against the dark environment.

Yellow fingernail polish?

“Since when do you wear yellow nail polish?” I asked.

She got a strange, one I’d never seen in the 15 years we’d been together. I realized I wasn’t looking at Mae.

Crushed, I spoke to whomever was desecrating her image. “It would be best you leave or I’ll chew through these bars and once free, I’ll rip that face off your skull.”

Mae dissolved, replaced by Jefferies, his impish smile begging for my fist to shatter it.

“Now, now. There’s no need for such violence,” he said.

I went to the sink to wash my face.

“I thought I’d stop in and say hello,” he said. “Has warden Collins been treating you well?”

I remained at the sink, keeping my back to him, focusing on the concrete wall in front of me when a flash of light blinded me. I saw nothing but sunbursts against a black background for several seconds until my vision returned. When it did, the wall I’d been staring at had become the barred cell door. Jefferies had somehow altered the program while being a part of it, to force me to face him.

“You’re being quite rude,” he said. “When will you realize you’re the one who dictates how easy or how hard this becomes? The choice is yours. You can give me what I want and I’ll allow you to remain in this cell or you can be a stubborn bull and I’ll create a reality that will keep you just sane enough to realize you’re on the perpetual verge of insanity. And you best believe I will keep you there. The choice is yours.”

“And what is it you want?” I asked.

“There,” Jefferies said, “it’s not all that difficult to be cooperative. What did you do with the data?”

I couldn’t believe what I’d just heard. He couldn’t have just copped to the fact that he’d been the one behind the frame job and had admitted on what I could only assume was an open frequency. Perhaps the frequency wasn’t as open as I’d thought.

Perhaps the separate entry port gave him exclusive access to the mainframe and once he’d interfaced, it was off limits from every other user, even warden Collins. That way, it was safe from any prying ears.

“Data?” I asked. I could’ve said more, wanted to say more, but felt leaving things as open as possible would, at the very least, make things difficult for him to interpret where I was coming from.

“Alexander, I don’t believe you are grasping how futile your position is. You are my prisoner. As such, you are subject to my mercies or my wrath. I will ask you one last time, what did you do with the data?”

I weighed the options Jefferies was presenting. It was clear he possessed an advantage, but I was becoming more confident that his, or even Collins' advantage, was limited. The

question I had to answer was whether I was ready to test how much of an advantage they had? It was a risk.

“Again,” I said, deciding it was a risk worth taking, “to what data are you referring?”

I wanted my question to affect Jefferies. I wanted him to look surprised or angry.

Instead, his eyes glimmered with a joy. He smiled a smile that morphed his jaunt face into one that reminded me of a B-Movie psycho clown ready to unleash murder and mayhem on a sorority house.

He laughed, a cackle that abraded the fiber of my soul while clapping his hands together as if to applaud what he was about to unleash upon me. I did my best to remain passive, unaffected.

Had I overplayed my hand?

“Very well, Alexander. Have it your way,” he said after his laughing subsided. “Such a shame. It really is. There's no need to bring this on yourself.”

My impulse was to turn from him, but I knew he'd just reorient the reality and stand in front of me again. I stood firm, knowing there was more.

“Regardless of how strong you think you are, I will get the answer to my question. I only need one of two things. The right key or enough time. Goodbye for now, Alexander. When next we see each other, I can assure you I will get what I want.”

That said, Jefferies was gone. I didn't know how long it would be until something came my way and broke me, nor knew of the fate of Cal and if he'd been successful.

Powerless to do anything, I sat on the cot and cradled the small flame of hope that Cal would reappear before Collins or Jefferies.

Chapter 16

Cal thought the wait would be longer. Once Alex had begun his remembrance period, Cal thought he'd be waiting a lot longer for things to start, but the change of scenery came in short order.

Only moments after Collins arrived and Alex had begun, Cal found himself behind the shack. Relieved the mainframe had restored him to the last known data point, everything was going according to plan. He hadn't known if this would be the case.

As he approached, it startled him when the door to the shack opened. Since Cal was on the hinge side, the door opened toward him, allowing him to scurry back to the side of the shack. He pressed his back tight against the siding, keeping his head turned toward the front of the shack.

After several seconds, Jefferies walked into view, then disappeared.

Cal surmised Alex must've completed his remembrance period and Jefferies was paying him a visit. While neither of them had thought of that possibility, especially the timing of it, it was a fortuitous coincidence.

Seeing Jefferies emerge from the shack confirmed their suspicion that Jefferies had a separate portal installed in the mainframe and it was located inside the shack. Cal knew that he would have to return to the portal.

If I can time it right, I can follow Jefferies into the portal, gain access to Jefferies system without having to hack into it providing me with zero risk of being discovered, he thought.

From there, it was a simple matter of creating the bridge between Jefferies system and the prison's.

Thinking through the plan, Cal wondered if he'd have a better chance of following Jefferies into the portal if he were inside the shack, close enough to the portal but out of sight of Jefferies.

Indecision drove a wedge between his head and his heart. His head told him to stay where he was, stay still, avoid the risk of being caught in the shed if Jefferies should come back before he could assess the situation or find a hiding place.

His heart told him this was a golden opportunity, one that, if successful, could expedite the plan. There was greater risk on the front end. But if he could pull it off, there was a zero risk on the back end.

Screw it, Cal said.

With his decision made, he took a step toward the corner of the shack when Jefferies reappeared.

Cal froze.

He watched as Jefferies, chuckling out loud to himself, walked the few feet toward the door, opened it and disappeared into the shack. So engrossed in his own thoughts, Jefferies had not noticed him.

Stepping toward the wall, Cal pressed his ear to the bleached wood, listening for any sounds from inside. Not hearing anything, he rounded the corner to the front. He paused, put his ear to the door, listened, heard nothing.

Cal reached for the wooden handle of the door, gripped it tight, anticipation of what lay beyond whipping his heart into a full gallop.

Is Jefferies waiting for me on the other side, he wondered. Is this a trap designed to snare me and Alex in one fell swoop?

If Jefferies were inside and this is a trap, Cal reasoned, there's no escaping it anyway, so may as well stop lollygagging and get on with it.

He took a deep breath and hurled the door open. The pressure differential kicked sand and dirt into his face as he stepped onto the rectangle of light that spilled into the dark interior of the shack. Jefferies was not there, at least not within the puddle of light that illuminated the floor of the shack.

Stepping a few feet in, Cal stopped just inside the threshold. Seeing nothing, feeling a bit more secure, he stepped all the way and closed the door. Although dimly lit, there was nobody inside, only what appeared to be a small inflatable kiddie pool.

“Glad I didn’t come in here,” Cal said, noting there was nothing else inside.

Stepping to the portal itself, he knelt down next to it and placed his hand on the exterior. Not an inflatable pool at all. The outside was a strange blue metal Cal did not recognize. He rapped a knuckle on the outside. Aluminum?

It formed a ring, about one foot high, and 3 feet in diameter. The inside of the ring was half-filled with some kind of silver liquid with a metal grate that protruded from the liquid like a small stage in the center of the pool.

Although he’d never seen one, Cal knew this was the portal. He’d been expecting a computer terminal on a desk, or some kind of chamber, not a ring filled with silver liquid.

Cal looked down into the silver liquid and saw his reflection. He’d never seen such a thing, wasn’t sure what it was. Could it be mercury? Liquid tin? He thought about dipping a finger into it, then thought better of it.

He stood and walked in a slow circle around the ring. The outside was featureless and seamless. On the backside, he found a small 6” x 6” screen inset in the metal. There were no

buttons or switches that Cal could see. He knelt down, reached out and touched the screen, which came alive at his touch.

Cal read the words on the screen. He swiped his finger across the screen several times, which brought up a digital keyboard. After entering several commands, the screen went black, only a white cursor in the upper left corner of the screen blinked.

“What a moron,” Cal said aloud.

Although his first choice would’ve been to follow Jefferies into the portal, which Cal now confirmed the silver liquid pool was, having such a rudimentary system controlling it was a very close second.

He sat cross-legged on the hard packed ground and got to work hacking and building bridges.

Chapter 17

Mae was restless, but the molten lead of exhaustion running through her veins was too heavy to ignore. She engaging the autopilot on Alex's jump craft, sat back and rubbed her eyes. The desire to sleep had almost gotten to where it occluded her reluctance to go back home.

Although the media presence had waned, public interest had increased, so instead of the media circus, random people had set up camp around her yard. Even though they didn't have access to the landing pad, seeing the throngs during the landing cycle was still a stressor.

She turned in her seat and looked at Maxx, who was fast asleep clutching Mr. Bevli-deer. Any jump craft trip put him out like a light. Mae wished she had the freedom enjoyed by toddlers, where the only things to do in a day were to eat, sleep, play, relieve yourself, and repeat.

Turning her attention back to the front of the jump craft, she looked at the interior of the craft. Alex's was a different model than hers. Older, basic, not as many features, not as nice. She reflected how he'd always insisted on giving her the best of everything. The better cup of coffee, the bigger slice of pizza, the cleanest bread plate at a restaurant, the newer jump craft with the better features.

Funny, she reflected, how accurate adages were. It's been a while since I've thought of those sweet things he'd always done. Don't know what you got, till it's gone.

It was true. She'd shut him out when she'd lost Christian, but he'd not really insisted they talk either. She blamed him for that. He should've been more insistent to talk about it and not kowtowed.

That all seemed so long ago. She glanced back at Maxx, happy that despite the growing chasm, they'd tried again and with Maxx had a bridge that crossed that rift that was just healing. They had just reconnected.

Now that he was gone, she didn't feel foolish for choosing to use Alex's jump craft, wanting to feel close to him any way she could. If that meant flying his jump craft or sitting on his side of the couch, so be it.

"Mrs. Donovan," Maurice said, "there's an incoming call from a Mr. Muhly. Do you wish to connect?"

"Yes," Mae said.

"Hello," Zach said. "Did I catch you at a bad time?"

"No, not at all. I'm just flying around, don't want to be home right now."

"Yes, I'm sure," Zach said. "Where are you?"

Looking down at the inset GPS screen, somewhat startled, she said, "I'm way down in 4th sector. I must've been out longer than I realized."

"Can we meet?"

A mix of dread and anticipation blended within her heart, the potent cocktail buzzed inside her mind. "Do you have results?"

"I think it would be best I see you in person. Why don't you come by my office?"

Dread became the more potent agent, diluting any sense of anticipation. Using the buttons on the yoke, she brought up the menu for the GPS, scrolled to the recent destinations, found Muhly's address and engaged the autopilot.

As the jump craft veered to the left, she said, "Yeah, sure. Okay. GPS says I'll be there in a little more than an hour. Will that work?"

“I’ll be here. See you soon,” Zach said, then disconnected.

Mae didn’t recall the hour and 10-minute flight to Zach’s office, had no memory of the landing, nor did she remember the short walk from the landing lot to his dilapidated office, hoping to keep Maxx safely asleep so he wouldn’t have to lay his eyes on this part of town. Not normally a negative person, she’d struggled to hold on to anything that resembled positivity, never mind the hope she’d clung to since Jefferies visit to the house.

The fact of the matter was she’d lost her husband and now, sitting across the desk from Zach, Mae felt what he was about to divulge would be akin to losing Alex all over again.

“I’m here. Let’s get on with it,” Mae said.

Taking his eyes off of Maxx, looking at Mae, Zach thought she looked as frail as a dried fall leaf. Her eyes were puffy, her hair greasy. It was clear she’d not showered since their meeting two days ago, and although she’d changed her clothes, it was obvious she’d been in them longer than intended.

“Mae,” Zach said, “I’ve got solid information from a very reliable source. What I have here,” he said, holding up a manila folder, “is as good as gospel.”

Her fallen expression didn’t change. Her eyes, half closed, looked like she was moments away from nodding off. Not out of boredom, but from sheer exhaustion.

“There’s no clear evidence that Alex did the things they accused him of,” he said.

Like it had infused her with life, Mae sat upright. “So, he’s innocent?”

Keeping himself calm, he continued, “I didn’t say that, Mae. While it’s true, there’s no clear evidence that he did the things they accused him of, there is also no proof he’s innocent.”

Mae’s face crinkled with confusion. “I’m afraid I’m not following you.”

“Until I could procure this report, all we’ve had is information the media has been churning out, fed by the Counsel’s official media relations channels. Because of the information I’ve been able to secure, we can ignore that information. My source accessed personnel files within the secure network used by The Counsel and Alex’s own personnel file.”

Mae’s face ironed out.

“We specifically looked into the computer terminal Alex used daily. The contact I used is, how shall I say, quite adept at seeing the unseen, unearthing things that other bury.”

“And what, pray tell, did your contact unearth?”

“Nothing. Literally, but it’s nothing that’s something.”

“Mr. Muhly,” Mae said, “I’ve got neither the time nor the inclination to sit and try to unravel a riddle. Please, just tell me what you found.”

Although he understood her frustration, he needed to take a few seconds to compose himself and not allow himself to get angry.

“I understand your frustration, Mae,” he said. “In simpler terms, we found a void where there should’ve been something. Think of it like a dictionary or thesaurus with a page missing. You know the page should be there, but it’s not there. After closer inspection, you can see that someone cut it out. Expertly, neatly. Earlier on Friday, before Alex left the office and thus, before his arrest, he had expertly removed a page from the hypothetical dictionary.”

Mae took a moment to process what Zach had explained, trying to fit the puzzle pieces into their proper place.

“What page did he remove?”

“There’s no way to tell for sure, but I can tell you what I suspect,” Zach said.

Mae nodded her head, prompting him to continue.

“I believe Alex found something that implicated Jefferies, gathered all that information into one place on his computer, moved it to another location outside his computer terminal, then, digitally speaking, deleted the page from the dictionary. That missing page is somewhere else that Alex has hidden away.”

Mae closed her eyes and relished the faint breeze of hope that blew across the charred landscape of her mind, savoring its delicate whispers.

“My contact,” Zach continued, “believes Alex may have used an ancient computer storage device called a flash drive to save the information.”

Opening the thin pencil drawer underneath the desktop, he pulled out a small red rectangle of plastic and held it out for Mae. “This is a thumb drive. Some people call it a flash drive. Have you seen anything like this lying around the house?” Zach asked.

Taking it from his hand, Mae looked at it, trying to recall if she’d remembered seeing anything like it. There was nothing.

“No, this doesn’t ring any bells. I’ve seen nothing like this.”

Handing the flash drive back to Zach, a vacuum of doubt sucked the whispered hopes into oblivion.

“Why does your contact believe Alex found something on Jefferies? Couldn’t it be just as likely Alex was trying to hide the information that convicted him?”

Zach’s heart broke for Mae. It was clear she was wrestling with a roller coaster of emotions that raced over the peaks of anger and through the troughs of grief.

“I didn’t know your husband, Mae, but it seems like if he’d been guilty of something, you would’ve been able to tell that something was amiss. Hiding guilt that is your own is far different from hiding guilt that belongs to another. Since Alexander hadn’t spoken to you about

it, it seems reasonable that he did so out of a need to protect you. If he'd told you about what he'd found, and let's assume for the sake of argument that it was Jefferies' guilt, you would've suffered the same fate as Alex did. His silence spared you."

"As I'd explained to you during our first meeting," Mae said, "I sensed there was something eating at him, and he admitted but he told me he needed a bit of space and time to process the information before he was ready to let me in on it."

After a brief pause, Mae continued, "In all the years we were married, I'd never known him to take long to process things. He was quick to come to conclusions about things. Very decisive. For him to have kept this from me, even when I'd prodded him, his reluctance to share it must show it was significant."

"Exactly," Zach said. "And correct me if I'm wrong, but I believe a wife knows when their husband is guilty of something. There's an added feeling, a sixth sense, that something else is amiss. At least that's what's been told to me by many wives of cheating husbands I've investigated over the years."

Mae took her time before answering. "You know, I cannot recall a time when I felt that way about Alex. Even during the holidays, I could tell there was something he was hiding, but that something was a child-like gleefulness. Not a sneaky, nefarious something. I'd never felt that from him. Certainly not last Friday night."

"Mae," Zach said as he leaned forward resting his forearms on the large calendar blotter sitting on the desktop, "there's something else that I need to admit that also leads me to believe Alex is innocent and that he had information that implicated Jefferies."

His intensity caused Mae to sit forward as well.

“You don't know how fortuitous it was that you sought me out, nothing less than a miracle that you found me,” Zach said.

“Yes, well, it was no easy feat. It's not like there are many human detectives anymore and you don't exactly have the best advertising,” Mae said.

“That's by design,” Zach said. “By necessity, really. I never set my sights on becoming a detective. That too came about by necessity, and everything I've accomplished, I've had to do while maintaining a nearly zero technology footprint. I've needed to keep a low profile and not allow myself to be traced. I've been in hiding, waiting for the right opportunity to come my way. And I've sat and waited for so long. And now, through you, that opportunity has finally come.”

“Okay,” Mae said, “just say what you need to say and let's get on with it.”

“Mae,” Zach said. “Councilman Jefferies is my brother.”

Chapter 18

I was tired.

Is this an actual condition? One borne from my cerebral matter, or was this an input from the outside? Regardless of origin, I laid on the cot, closed my eyes, and felt the gravity of sleep pull me out of awareness and into the comforting black orbit of nothingness.

Then I dreamt.

I linked with what I assumed was Cal's reality. I saw the shack in the desert, then I was inside looking at a what appeared to be a pool of silver liquid shimmering in the middle of the dirt floor. Then I was falling, but without wind, without feeling the tug of gravity.

No, not falling. I was being pulled.

I heard a buzzing sound, far off in the distance but getting closer at a rapid rate. Then the buzzing was no longer coming from outside, but was coming from inside me. My senses were abuzz, the cacophony within total.

Then silence, as complete as the cacophony had been. The two had canceled each other out, like some strange, auditory, algebraic expression.

Then I was hovering at the ceiling of a spacious and opulent room. Below me, I saw Jefferies lying on a couch, clad in his white robe, with the same type of cap that was placed on my head in the trail chamber, electrodes dotting the entire surface. Sitting on a table next to the couch was a monitor. On the screen, I saw the outside of the prison. Seeing the prison on the screen, I knew that was the prison in which he'd created for my internment.

In a flash, as if transported by the image that I'd seen, I found myself above the prison and falling toward it. The roof of the massive structure raced toward me. In the last instant, I closed my eyes, bracing for an impact that never came.

I opened my eyes, expecting to be back in my cell. Instead, I was inside a large warehouse, exactly like the one that I'd seen during my remembrance periods. I saw the same industrial metal shelves, but instead of glass cranial pods, the shelves held large glass sarcophagi, each filled with a pale blue liquid. Inside each one floated a human being.

Just like I'd seen in Jefferies' office, all the humans inside the pods wore the same type of electrode cap. Next to each sarcophagus, affixed to the metal shelf bracket, was a small rectangular computer system, the screens all blinking alternatively in blue and green.

I flew down one row until I was floating above a shelf which had only two sarcophagi, one of which was empty. Floating in the other, suspended in the blue liquid, was me.

Not my brain, but me, all of me. Not a constituent part, but whole.

Just like all the others, I too wore an electrode cap. They had affixed a tangle of wires to large needles that pierced every part of my naked body. I could see my fingers, hands, legs, chest, all twitching with the electrical impulses.

I knew what I was witnessing was the truth. Not an image from the outside, but it was a vision of the outside itself and I knew Cal had bridged the system, and saw what really was. Liberation was a lie, nothing more than a grand hallucination.

Then, just as the implications of what I was witnessing impaled upon my consciousness, I flew up and out of the warehouse, across the desert landscape, and toward the prison.

It was then I woke.

I bolted up and looked around. Everything was the same. Impressions of what I'd seen remained like whorls of a fingerprint left behind on a cold window pane. The image of myself lying suspended in the blue water was indelible. I knew it had not been a dream.

I was certain Cal had bridged the two systems, and I'd crossed the linkage. But had Cal made it back?

I got up off my cot, walked to the cell door and said, "Hey neighbor. Anybody there?"

"Well, it's about time you got off your lazy ass and decided to talk," Cal said.

Excitement coursed through me.

"Holy shit, Cal!"

"Easy there, compadre. No need to get all squishy on me," he said.

Getting a hold of myself, there were so many questions I wanted to ask. In my haste for answers, I almost forgot about the need for code and blurted how long he'd been back, but recalled the need for discretion.

Instead, I asked, "How was the episode?"

"After thinking about it," Cal replied, "I had seen the episode before. But there were some surprising twists I hadn't recalled."

I didn't respond, not wanting to complicate anything. It was better to let the information come to me.

"At the beginning of the episode," Cal said, "when we first see two Kirks, two Spocks and so on, although they looked like the doppelgängers, the original crew possessed differences in behaviors and how they reacted to situations. It was those distinctions that made it obvious as the episode went on who was an original and who was a doppelgänger."

I needed to confirm if what he was saying was the same as what I'd just experienced. "You're right," I said. "The episode highlighted the principle that even if given the opportunity to see the world through somebody else's eyes, how you react to what you see may differ from how the other person would."

“I couldn’t agree with you more on that,” Cal confirmed.

“When I first saw the episode,” I said, testing to see if Cal had also experienced the same thing I had, “it surprised me neither party could draw that same conclusion. It took Spock, through his Vulcan logic, to make the real Kirk aware that he was more than what initially appeared to be present in his doppelgänger.”

Cal didn’t reply. If we’d not had a shared experience, what I’d said would have no meaning and would sound nonsensical.

“Indeed,” Cal answered. “Sometimes all of us need to be a little more Spockesque.”

Cal knew, which meant he had witnessed the warehouse as well. I wondered if he’d seen himself suspended in a sarcophagus somewhere before I’d traversed the link and saw myself.

The weight of what we’d seen in the warehouse pressed like glacial ice against the hull of a ship. The ramifications were powerful, relentless, crushing.

It was one thing to accept that the reality of this experience was a contrived illusion, changed with the whims of Collins or Jefferies as they saw fit. It was another thing all together to accept that the concept of liberation had also been an illusion.

As a means of punishment to deter crime, they had taught liberation since middle school. I had accepted it as doctrine, perpetuated by The Council of Three and reinforced by the constabulary.

The truth was, my brain and body were still together. I was whole. What they had led me to believe all my life as truth was a multidimensional lie. A lie propagated to instill fear in those still able to make their own decisions, a lie designed to make prisoner feel helplessness and loneliness so profound some went insane when facing it. A lie that perpetuated the belief there

was no hope. The abolishment of hope or the belief in hope has the power to alter reality, which has proved fluid.

Feeling the surge of a discovery, I continued down the rabbit hole of logic unfettered.

Reality, I concluded, is nothing more than an infinitely complex pattern, self-similar across different scales, repeating a simple process over and over in an ongoing feedback loop.

Even now, perpetuated by a computer mainframe, this reality is nothing more than a fragment of the same reality I'd known on the outside. Just as I'd becoming familiar with this new reality as a series of feedback loops, a new reality, made possible by the bridge between the two systems, an extra detail emerged in the same repeating pattern.

An epiphany, like a bolt of lightning flashing across a coal black sky, lit up the darkness. Reality is a strange and beautiful fractal, a never-ending pattern that is self-similar across different scales. As clear as can be, I see reality as the fractal process of ongoing feedback loops.

If reality is a fractal, any new reality will contain the constituent parts of the previous reality. The good, the bad, the truth, and the lies. If the old reality had both hopelessness and hope, then this new fractal of reality had hope as well. There is always hope. So too, in this reality.

The electric buzz of a breakthrough cascaded through my body and soul. If perception is reality, then reality itself is just a perception.

"Here's an interesting question," I asked. "What do you think would happen if the real Spock performed a mind-meld with his doppelgänger?"

Cal was quiet for a long time before answering. "That is a good question," he said. "Spock is half human and half Vulcan. I think in a mind-meld situation, the Vulcan side, the

logic would understand the situation. However, the human sides of Spock may not react the same.”

I was unclear what Cal was driving at. To clarify, I said, “So in that scenario, do you think that the logical side of him would override his human, emotional side and shut that down or vice versa?”

“As powerful as logic can be, it’s no match for human emotion. Pure will power, borne out of a desire to survive, motivated by emotion, especially one as powerful as hope or even more so, love, those are no match for logic. The human in Spock would win out.”

“Just like the ending of Wrath of Khan,” I said. “While there were logical reasons for Spock to expose himself to lethal doses of radiation, the human emotion of love of friendship for Kirk was the driving force behind the action.”

“Agreed,” Cal said.

Between the revelation I was whole, coupled with the epiphany regarding the fractal nature of reality and knowing there was hope of escaping what they had led me to believe was an inescapable prison, I was exuberant.

I had a faint notion of what needed to be done to alter both my perception and, therefore, my reality, but the answers remained at the periphery, not yet in focus.

“Your knowledge of Star Trek is impressive,” I said. “How familiar are you with The Twilight Zone?”

“TV show or the movie?” Cal asked.

“TV show,” I answered.

“I know pretty much all of them. At one time, I had the complete library.”

I was confident he knew that I'd just changed the code by which I would talk the next phase of my plan out. Now it was only a matter of creating it before either Jefferies or Collins returned.

Chapter 19

Counselman Jefferies, clad only in a towel, sat in a plush reading chair next to his bed, staring at the sleeping whore. Sure, Councils across the globe preferred to refer to them as ‘companions’, but that was putting lipstick on a pig. She was what she was.

His appetite satiated, he wanted nothing more to do with her, wanted her to be gone. He loathed the idle and awkward chit-chat they always seemed to want after they woke.

He got up and walked toward the bathroom. “Xavier,” he said, “ensure our guest is gone before I get out of the shower. If she’s still here when I get out, I will toss her from the balcony. Do I make myself clear?”

“Yes, sir,” Xavier said.

As he stepped into the shower, he washed the memory of the night off of him, watched the desire he’d felt swirl down the drain.

After several minutes, now feeling clean, he turned his attention back to his next move. He’d accounted for Alexander to be a cagey opponent, and while the initial part of his plan had gone off without a hitch, tying up the singular loose end was proving to be more difficult than he’d expected.

Altering Alexander’s reality would not have the desired results, at least not in the short term. And time was something Jefferies knew he had little of.

His exit strategy was rapidly approaching, and he needed to close the loop with Alexander sooner rather than later. He knew the only point of leverage he had left was with Mae, but even she needed to be coaxed. She was not the typical social media zombie who was just pretty to look at. Besides intelligence, she had gumption.

With his first visit, he almost ruined everything. He felt frustration building, didn't like hastily made plans, but he had little choice. He'd not expected the outcome to be what it was.

He knew Mae was unaware Alexander had hidden the information that would implicate him. The constabulary confirmed that when they'd arrested Alexander all of which was now a part of the permanent record not accessible to anyone, not even a Councilman.

As he spun around in the shower, letting the multiple heads scald away his growing anxiety, he turned the problem over, looking for an answer.

The answer burst onto the stage of his mind. Captured by the spotlight of imagination, he saw the answer play out to a glorious conclusion that would solve his problem and leave him free to exit as planned, with no strings attached.

He ran from the shower, grabbed a fresh towel and patted himself semidry, then moved into the bedroom. The woman was getting dressed.

"Sir, I didn't expect you'd be done with your shower so soon," Xavier said.

Although AIs don't get nervous, he knew enough that he should put that inflection in his speech pattern.

"Good morning," the woman said.

"You have exactly one minute to leave. If you're still here after that, I'll see to it you take a drug induced swan dive over the balcony," Jefferies said.

The woman stood, half naked, staring in disbelief at what Jefferies just said. It wasn't so much the threat of being tossed over the balcony, but the matter-of-fact way that he'd said it that paralyzed her. She stood motionless as he made the three steps toward her.

The slap across her face, like a thousand bee stings, jolted her out of her paralytic state.

“You’ve got 45 seconds left. I suggest you get your ass in gear, little lady,” Jefferies said.

She didn’t bother putting the rest of her clothes on. She grabbed them, balled them against her chest, and ran for the door. As soon as the door latched closed, Jefferies said, “Ensure she’s paid triple her normal rate. And make sure you post a rave review. That should suffice in keeping her quiet.”

Angry he had to waste precious time and thoughts on such trivial matters, he concluded, “Also, monitor her media posts. If she says a peep, you know what to do and let me know right away.”

“Yes, sir,” Xavier said.

“Connect me to Herold Vasilli,” Jefferies said.

As he waited for Xavier to make the connection, he finished drying himself off, grabbed a house robe and threw it on, but left it untied. He walked from his room and toward the kitchen when Xavier announced, “Go ahead, sir.”

“Harold,” Jefferies said.

“Councilman. What an unexpected pleasure.”

“Come now, Harold, you’re far too humble. I’m wondering if you’re too busy to make time to come by my private living chambers.”

Silence.

“Harold? Are we still connected?”

“Yes, yes, sir,” Harold said. “Of course, sir. I mean, no sir. I mean, when do you need me to come by, sir?”

“Would within the hour be too soon or too inconvenient for you?”

“Not at all. But how do I...”

“I’ll send my jump craft to fetch you,” Jefferies interrupted.

“Ah, very good. I’ll be ready within a few minutes.”

After disconnecting, Jefferies poured himself a glass of orange juice, a delicacy only a man of his position could enjoy.

Less than an hour later, Harold sat in rapt awe, still not able to grasp he’d been invited into the inner sanctum of a Councilman’s personal quarters. He took in the space, realizing this was likely the only time he’d be here, but hoping it wasn’t.

Opulent wasn’t the right word for the space. It was too tame. Lavish was more fitting.

“May I get you something to drink?” Jefferies said, interrupting his thoughts. “Perhaps you’d like a glass of orange juice?”

Harold was stunned. Orange juice? He couldn’t believe it. His initial instinct was to ask if the orange juice being offered was real, but that would not only be rude, it would be ignorant as well. He’d never had a drop of real orange juice in his life. Hell, he didn’t even know anybody who’d had real orange juice.

“I would love a glass, thank you.”

Jefferies walked toward the kitchen behind Harold. Harold took in the view beyond the glass wall that Jefferies had been sitting in front of. The city spread out for several miles, then stopped at the shore of Lake Canada, which stretched out to a liquid horizon as far as his eye could see.

“Harold,” Jefferies said behind him, “Thank you for making time to come see me during non-working hours. I know I must be keeping you from your family and I’m sorry about that, but trust me when I tell you, I’m most appreciative of the sacrifice.”

“The pleasure is mine, sir,” Harold said. “My family is all too happy to accommodate The Council in any way it deems fit.”

Coming back around to face Harold, Jefferies offered a tall glass of orange juice to him. “Is this your first glass of orange juice?”

Harold felt embarrassment flushing his cheeks and ears. “Yes, sir it is. But I’m most thankful for it,” he said as he took the glass from him.

He brought the glass to his lips and took the first sip. He’d tasted nothing so sweet, like drinking liquid gold.

“Good?” Jefferies asked.

“Divine,” Harold said.

Trying to keep a modicum of composure, he set the glass down on the side table, wanting to appear to be a man of control and class. “So, tell me, Councilman, what is it you need?”

“I appreciate your willingness to get down to business. Although we may be in my personal residence, my job as Councilman is a job that never stops. And while you may not be ‘at the office’, you are still very much under the employ of the Council.”

Picking up the glass of orange juice, Harold took another, longer sip, and nodded his head in understanding.

“I need you to create another entry port in the prison mainframe, but this time we’d prefer the setting to be less formal. We’d like the portal to be installed here. All of this,” Jefferies said, sweeping his hand around the room, “all belongs to the state.”

Harold said nothing, but the crease in his forehead said everything Jefferies needed.

“The Council has decided that it might be beneficial for some of our prisoners to interact with their loved ones, but we’d like to perform a beta test to determine its effect.”

“When you say beneficial, are you referring to the prisoners or to the Council?” Harold asked.

“Both,” Jefferies said.

“Mr. Donovan? Is that who you’re referring to?”

Harold, although star struck, was more insightful than Jefferies had given him credit for. He was treading in dangerous territory.

Keeping it as simple as possible, Jefferies answered, “Yes.”

Harold set the glass of orange juice back on the table, interlaced his fingers and asked, “then why not use either the neural apparatus at the prison or the one that I installed in your office?”

Harold, Jefferies thought, is becoming a loose end I don’t need. Trying to pacify Harold’s growing skepticism, Jefferies answered, “We could, but the Council feels that having less formality for the prisoners loved once creates a more peaceful environment, wouldn’t you agree?”

Harold didn’t reply.

“If what you’re saying, Harold, is that you’re unable to install another port, that’s fine. I can go elsewhere to have one installed.”

The passive aggressive jab did the trick. Harold’s eyes widened a bit as he unclasped his fingers and reached for the now half-drunk glass of orange juice. He drained all but one swallow before putting the glass down.

“I have no problem installing however many ports the Council deems necessary,” Harold said. “I was simply trying to determine the reason for the new port, as that plays a large role in how I design and construct the port.”

“I’m not sure I follow,” Jefferies said, not convinced of Harold’s answer.

“Obviously the port designed for prisoner interface is much stouter, has many more connection points in order to interface with all the neural network connections the mainframe has. Your port, by comparison, is much simpler as its purpose is for brief forays into the mainframe. This is because your interaction with the prisoners is primarily through the 5 senses.”

“And why would the port we’re proposing be any different?” Jefferies asked.

“Because if the Council wants the prisoners, in this case, Mr. Donovan to interact with his loved ones, which I assume would be his wife and possibly his child, the port would need to be substantially more robust as we’d need to have connections to the hypothalamus which gathers the various stimuli and produces the physical response associated with those stimuli. In Mr. Donovan’s case, in order for his wife to behave normally, she’d need a better connection that employs more connections.”

Considering what Harold has just said, Jefferies rolled the problem over in his head.

“Would it be safe to assume,” Jefferies asked, “the interface port you created for me several days ago was primarily programming code?”

“Yes. That, of course, is an oversimplification, but that is essentially the case. There’s also the matter of synching the neural cap to the mainframe, then the synching of your specific neural map to integrate the two into the mainframe.”

Jefferies said, "Since we're dealing with something more complex, in this case the love Mr. Donovan's wife has for him, the programming code would be much more complex in order to account for that."

"Yes, but not as much as you might think," Harold answered. "The real time suck is synching the neural cap to the system and then the subsequent neural mapping of Mrs. Donovan for the system to create a passable facsimile of her. Alexander's neural mapping has already been done, and the map gets stronger with each passing hour."

"How long would it take you to create the programming code for all this?" Jefferies asked.

Picking up the glass and finishing the juice, Harold said, "That depends on the level of confidentiality you wish to have."

Keeping his anger and frustration beneath the surface, Jefferies said, "The highest level of confidentiality is prudent. The Council would hate to have this pilot program leaked and it not work out."

"In that case, since I'd be the only one doing the programming, it would take two days. Three tops. The real time suck, as I've already mentioned, will be the synching to the mainframe, plus however long it will take to map Mrs. Donovan so she can interface in the mainframe."

"How long?" Jefferies asked.

"Hard to say. I'd guess the mainframe and the neural cap synchronization would take another two days, but depending on the complexity of Mrs. Donovan, the detail of the neural map that will be necessary to accomplish what the Council wants could take another three days."

"So, a week from beginning to end?"

“That’s pretty tight, but if everything went smoothly, doable.”

“Good. I want you to get started immediately. I realize this will take you away from your family, so I would like to extend this offer to you. Should we successfully interface Mrs. Donovan with Alexander this time next week, we will provide you with a half a year’s salary as a bonus. Is that agreeable to you?”

Harold’s jaw dropped open.

“I’ll take that as a yes. I appreciate you coming here. Now, I want you to get started.”

Jefferies stood to coax Harold out of his trance and get him on his way.

“Counselman Jefferies, thank you. On behalf of my family, thank you.”

“Think nothing of it, Harold,” Jefferies said. “Now, I’m sure you need to go gather some things. Under the circumstances, I think it would be best if you stayed here. I’ll have my jump craft take you home and bring you back. Plus, as a bonus, I’ll provide you with as much orange juice as you please.”

Harold couldn't speak, so he stood and nodded his head.

“I trust you’ll find your way back to the landing pad?” Jefferies asked, walking Harold to the door.

“Yes, and again, thank you.”

Jefferies closed the door without responding. He’d had quite enough of that little shit. He turned from the door and walked to the full wall window facing Lake Canada, ruminating over what Harold had said.

Jefferies’ jump craft flew into view and headed straight out toward Lake Canada.

“Xavier?”

“Yes, sir.”

“I think I’d like fish for dinner this evening.”

“Yes, sir.”

Jefferies didn’t want fish. He loathed seafood. With the coded command he’d just given, Xavier had sent a command to the Jump Craft.

Jefferies stood with his eye trained on the craft, shrinking in size as it continued its flight path out over the water. Then the nose dropped sharply as the craft spun out of control, a thin plume of smoke trailing behind it. It only took 5 seconds for it to impact the water.

Watching the craft disappear beneath the waves, Jefferies felt the tug of loss pull him ever so slightly toward depression.

Such a shame to lose such a beautiful Jump Craft.

Then again, he mused, that’s one less loose end for me to worry about.

Turning from the window, he said, “Xavier.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Please connect me to Niles.”

Chapter 20

Zach had never flown in a Veneer. His jump craft, an entry-level Contrails model with nary a bell or whistle to be found, was as fancy as he could afford. He'd paid cash from a private seller to not leave a trace of the transaction.

Sitting back in the supple leather seats of the Veneer, the smoothness and suppleness were luxuriant. Scanning the details within the cockpit, he appreciated the subtle yet well-appointed interior that belied a craftsmanship he'd not experienced. After buckling Maxx into his safety seat and settling into the pilot's seat, Mae glanced his way.

"First time in a Veneer?" she asked.

"Is it that obvious?"

She stopped what she was doing, stared out the windscreen, lost in thought.

"We didn't start out like this, you know," she said.

Zach heard the disconnect in her voice. She was nowhere near being present at the moment, instead seeing a yesterday that existed only in her memory. "When Alex and I were first married, we struggled. Really got ourselves into a financial mess."

"Ironical," she whispered, "being an actuary. You'd think he would've seen it coming."

Zach remained quiet, giving her the space she needed.

"I guess that's why I'm flying his jump craft around," she said. "After digging ourselves out of the mess we were in, we made this purchase. Plus, being in here," she swept her hand around in a vague circular motion, "I feel closer to him. More connected. I can still smell his soap."

Zach inhaled, trying to pick up the scent. All he could smell was the leather.

Snapping out of her daze, embarrassed, Mae turned toward Zach. “Sorry ‘bout that. From time to time, I get lost.”

“No apologies necessary, Mae,” Zach said. “I think you’re allowed to feel the way you feel.”

“I appreciate your understanding,” she replied. “But seriously, I need to take my jump craft. As you’d said earlier, this one is probably being tracked.”

“Agreed,” Zach said. “Why don’t we head to your place so I can perform the sweep we spoke about, make sure your place is clean of any listening devices, then we’ll search for that flash drive.”

After receiving departure clearance and vector information, Mae looked at Zach. “You wanna fly?”

Surprise, mixed with joy, revealed itself on Zach’s face as he took the w-shaped yoke in his hand.

“No need to ask me twice,” he said.

Fifteen minutes into the flight, Maurice said, “Mrs. Donovan, incoming call. Caller has blocked transmission source. I have no further information. Do you wish to connect?”

Mae looked at Zach. His face had a look of concern that masked the glee he’d had flying such a well-appointed jump craft.

“Do you get these types of calls often?” he asked.

Not wanting Maurice to misunderstand and either connect the call or refuse connection, Mae shook her head no.

Picking up her nonverbal cues, he nodded his head in approval.

“Yes, Maurice, please connect,” Mae said.

“Standby. Connecting.”

“Hello?” Mae said.

“Hello Mae, Councilman Jefferies speaking.”

Mae didn’t respond. Unconsciously, she balled her hands into fists.

“I know you said you didn’t want me dropping by, but you said nothing about calling. Besides, I have some new information that I think you’ll want to hear.”

Mae engaged the autopilot so both she and Zach could pay 100% attention to this conversation. The green light illuminated, Zach turned in his seat to face Mae. He choked down bile that churned in his stomach, then rose into his throat at hearing his brother’s voice.

The last time he’d heard his voice, he was a newly appointed Councilman. They had streamed his inauguration on all the State-owned networks. He'd barely listened to any of his speeches that promised a brighter future. The only thing that Zach heard was with his brothers position as head of the judiciary branch were words of banishment, an expulsion from a normal life.

As a newly elected Counselman, the only life Zach could hope for was one that existed under the radar. Forced underground to wait until an opportunity to present itself. Zach knew he’d have to become a shadow.

Mae remained quiet.

“Mrs. Donovan? Are you still on the line?”

“Oh, I’m on the line alright,” Mae said, not putting any effort into thwarting her anger.

“Mrs. Donovan,” Jefferies said, his voice smooth and pleasing to the ear, “I may have uncovered some information that may, with your cooperation, clear Alexander’s name.”

“Clear Alexander’s name?” Mae said. “Clear his name! What the hell does that do? Will clearing his name bring him back?”

“Yes, well, while there is nothing that can be done about that, clearing his name opens the door for the Donovan name to be absolved. With a clear name, you and young Maxx will have opportunities that otherwise wouldn’t be available with a name that may be excommunicated.”

Both Mae and Zach’s eyebrow raised in surprise upon hearing excommunication being mentioned.

“Excommunicated?” Mae said. “This is the first I’m hearing of this. I thought excommunication was something that is decided upon by the entire Counsel and not before a tribunal is held.”

“That is the proper procedure in almost all cases,” Jefferies said, unaffected. “However, the Council holds the power, in extreme cases, to excommunicate without a tribunal when sufficient evidence of non-cooperation exists.”

Mae turned to Zach, who looked like a fish out of water, his mouth agape, his chest heaved while he shook his head back and forth. Finally, he looked at her and mouthed, “No.”

Just as Mae was about to refute him, Jefferies said, “Mae, as of now, I’ve got nothing that would lead to such an extreme measure, and truth be told, I’d much rather not have to resort to said extreme measure. So much administrative things to do with an excommunication. The States resources are better served if you’d simply cooperate. Besides, I thought you’d be excited to hear the news.”

“The only thing that would make me excited would be to have Alex back. And we both know that’s impossible,” Mae said.

“There’s nothing I can do about the past,” Jefferies said, “but I’m a powerful man when it comes to molding the future. I can extend the offer for you and Maxx to continue living the life you’ve become accustomed to living, clearing the Donovan name.”

“And if I don’t cooperate?”

“You will force my hand and I will excommunicate the Donovan name. It will force you and Maxx from your current status and you will live on the outskirts of society, disregarded, omitted, and forgotten.”

Zach had caught his breath. He’d also stopped moving his head from side to side and was moving it up and down.

Mae mouthed, ‘yes’ to him, just to be sure she was reading him correctly.

“Yes,” he whispered.

Not wanting to jump in, Mae dipped her toe into the water first. “What is it you want me to do?”

“I like you, Mrs. Donovan. You’ve got sass, but you also possess the rare trait of being reasonable when the situation calls for it.”

She didn’t respond, but rolled her eyes. While his words seemed complimentary, the condescending manner in which he spoke them appeared anything but.

“I’d like for you to come by my office,” Jefferies said. “There, I will present the information to you, which will require you to verify if it’s correct. And that’s all.”

Zach continued to nod his head in affirmation.

“I’m sure,” Mae said, “you, nor the other Council Members, will have no quarter if I should bring my attorney along, just so we keep everything on the up and up.”

There was a slight pause before Jefferies answered. “None whatsoever.”

“Fine. When do you propose we meet?” Mae asked.

“I’ll need to clear my schedule, but why don’t we plan on Monday of next week, say 10:00 am?” Jefferies said.

“I’ll need to check the availability of my attorney. Put us down for Monday at 10:00. If we can’t make it, we won’t show, but you can call me back and I’ll give you the date when we are both available. Unless, of course, you’d like to provide me with your number and I’ll confirm with you when I find out.”

Mae felt a slim blade of satisfaction cut through her angst.

“That won’t be necessary. I know you’ll show. If you don’t, I will not be calling you back. Instead, the constabulary will arrive at your door to escort you and Maxx out of the city proper.”

Without another word, she disconnected the call. In the resulting void, the only sound was the muted whooshing of air slipping around the jump craft.

Finally, Mae turned to Zach and said, “I guess you’re an attorney now.”

Swallowing hard, Zach replied, “Yes, I suppose I am.”

Chapter 21

Time becomes a problem when the outside world is a figment of your imagination. It was becoming difficult for me to keep track of. Although Collins had said that my remembrance periods would be daily, the only event that served as a line of demarcation between day and night was lights being turned off. I had no way of knowing if that was on a 16-to-8-hour cycle or not.

The inertia provided by the discovery I was still whole, along with the resulting trajectory of coming up with a plan to reconnect my mind and body kept me awake.

Cal and I had remained quiet as I pieced together the most effective plan. Like most plans, mine was simple, assumed as little risk as possible, which increased the chances of success. While the success of the plan relied on a few reactions that were beyond my control, I felt I'd come up with a solid plan.

With it formulated, the first thing to do was talk it out. Things sound good in your head, but when you put a voice to them, ideas congeal and sometimes don't come together like you imagined them.

I got up from my cot and walked to the bars.

"You awake over there?"

Expecting him to be on his cot as well, it startled me when he answered from his cell door right away.

"Yeah, man. What's up?"

"Do you have a favorite Twilight Zone episode?" I asked.

"It's a cookbook!"

"Really? Come on. Everybody knows that one," I said.

“Yeah, I’m kidding. I’ve always been partial to The Monsters Are Due on Maple Street,” Cal said.

“That’s one of my favorites as well. It’s a three-way tie between The Monsters Are Due on Maple Street, The Obsolete Man and A World All His Own,” I said.

“Does The Obsolete Man star Burgess Meredith, not as the bank clerk who survives the nuclear holocaust with a stack of books he can’t read, but the one where he’s a librarian in a future society?” Cal asked.

“Yeah, that’s the one,” I answered.

“You’ve got some good taste,” he said. “The other episode you mentioned, A World All His Own, I don’t recall that one. Refresh my memory.”

“Oh, it’s a great episode,” I said. I wanted to relay the first part of my plan, using this episode as the code.

“It’s the first episode that really sets the tone for the other two episodes,” I said.

“I gotcha,” Cal replied.

Knowing he was ready I said, “It’s about a playwright, Gregory West who imagines his characters utilizing a transcribing machine. As he’s imagining each character, he speaks about the details that make each character unique. As he does so, the characters he imagines come to life. His wife, Victoria West, who we find out is but one of many figments of his imagination, believes in her own realism and starts to become her own moral agent.”

“Huh, that’s interesting,” Cal said. “I don’t recall ever seeing that one. Who are the actors?”

“I think Gregory West is played by Keenan Wynn and Phyllis Kirk plays his wife Victoria. There’s a Cameo by Rod Serling and not his usual role as narrator.”

“Oh wait,” Cal said, “yeah, I think I remember. It’s this the one where the playwright dude cuts the dictation tape out of the machine, throws the tape into the fire and the character disappears?”

“That’s the one,” I confirmed. “You got it. I love how there was a safe in the wall with envelopes full of characters tape and one envelope has Rod’s name on it. Gregory throws the dictation tape belonging to Rod into the fire and Rod shrugs, then disappears.”

I moved ahead with the plan now that I knew Cal was on the same page.

“The brilliance of the episode,” I began, “was in realizing the transient nature of reality. Have you ever heard the phrase, ‘perception is reality’?”

“Sure,” Cal answered.

“I think what this episode teaches us,” I explained, “is that while it’s true, perception is reality, it goes further by teaching us that reality is but a perception. It’s much easier to change your perception and, thus, reality is just as easily changed. Reality is not static to the experiencer, but dynamic.”

“Interesting notion,” Cal said.

“Further,” I went on, “you can alter the course of reality.”

“Okay, but wasn’t Gregory West the creator, the one whose reality was, I dunno how to put it, most stable?”

“It would appear that way, but let’s say the episode continued to run. Perhaps Gregory is the figment of somebody else’s imagination just as Victoria was a figment of his,” I answered.

“Man, my head’s starting to hurt,” Cal said.

“The key to the entire episode was the magnetic tape of the dictation machine. It contained all the data, all the details that Gregory spoke of. It held reality. Burn the tape in the

fire, the characters cease to exist. If only we could get our hands on our own tape, we could create another reality,” I said.

Cal remaining quiet while he processed what I’d just laid out. I knew he understood we needed to get a message out and do it through Collins' terminal.

After a long pause, Cal said, “I’m sure when Gregory was transcribing into the dictation machine, he had to be detailed in order for the characters to come to life, yes?”

“Yes, but once he got the hang of it, it became routine. It turns out you can alter reality with very little information,” I said.

I was happy Cal was asking the right questions. It was important that we were talking about the same things. His question and my answer were clear. It would be easier to send a small message.

“For example, in the episode,” I continued to drive home the point, “Gregory imagines an elephant in his foyer to block Victoria, who was trying to leave so she could have him committed to the looney bin. He conjured the elephant in very short order.”

“I sure hope you don’t have any elephants over there. They sure make a mess,” Cal said.

“No elephants, although I hope to at least see one when the circus comes back to my little town.”

“Oh, I’m sure you will. Just make sure you have a bag of peanuts,” Cal said.

“I wasn’t sure if I could feed the elephants,” I said.

“You sure can, but you have to ask first, you can’t walk up to the damn thing and start throwing peanuts at it. It’s likely you’ll get trampled on.”

“So, what,” I said, “it’s just a matter of saying please?”

“Yep,” Cal said. “The real trick is that you know how to speak Elephantese.”

“Wow,” I said, “from Twilight Zone to the circus. I gotta say, Cal, talking to you is never boring. And I suppose you know how to speak Elephantese?”

“Yup,” Cal said.

“So, getting back to The Twilight Zone,” I said, wanting to discuss the next part of the plan.

“I hadn’t remembered A World All His Own, but The Obsolete Man,” Cal said, “I agree with you, such a great episode.”

“Absolutely,” I replied. “I think what I like best is how Burgess Meredith’s character, Romney Wordsworth, while being accused of being obsolete, takes down the high and mighty Chancellor and renders him obsolete. There’s nothing sweeter than the old, rendering the new to become even older than they are.”

“A dangerous game, to be sure,” Cal said. “If I’m not mistaken, doesn’t Wordsworth die in the end?”

“He does, but he lived a life worth living. Isn’t it better to die pursuing life rather than to be dead while still being alive?” I asked.

“You know what,” Cal said, “you’re a regular Aristotle. Are you capable of having a conversation that isn’t deep? Here, like this. What’s your favorite kind of food?”

I picked up what he was laying down. He was more than capable of following me into deep conversations, but even though we were talking in code, talking about it too much is just as suspicious.

“I’m not sure what you think of me,” I said, “but I’m not a snob when it comes to food. My palate is not refined and I’m certainly not the guy that needs caviar or fine champagne. My favorite food is a good hamburger.”

“Ah, yes. My kind of guy,” Cal said. “Do you have a favorite?”

“As I’m sure you’ve learned, I like to break things down into constituent parts. Even with hamburgers,” I said. “I break my favorite hamburgers down into three different categories. Best nostalgic burger, best home-made burger and current favorite burger.”

“Why am I not surprised,” Cal said. “Well, what are they?”

“Best nostalgic burger came from a grill that was at a military space craft museum. It was great. Simple, nothing fancy, but the memories associated with going there with my friends, being able to sit next to the space pilots, and then go out and walk among the static displays of older space craft is a fond memory.”

“Sounds amazing,” Cal said.

“It was. Best home-made burger, hands down, are the burgers Mae’s dad cooks on the grill. While the patty and the double cheese slices easily cement his burgers in the Parthenon of greatness, the condiments were just as impressive. Mae’s mother somehow got the best onion, the best tomato and the best lettuce, cut them in the perfect thicknesses to balance out the flavors. And it was perfect every time we went to visit.”

“Nothing like a bar-b-que burger,” Cal said.

“Finally, my favorite current burger is called The Durango Burger. The patty is thick and has seasoning grilled into it. Topped with shoestring onions, pickle and lettuce with a garlic aioli make it the best current burger.”

“Great, thank you, Alex,” Cal said. “Now I’m hungry.”

“Hey, you asked the question.” I replied.

It was nice to have a normal conversation and although recalling the memories of the space craft museum and visiting with Mae's parents made me long for a time long gone, it still was nice to at least have the memories.

I've always said it's better to laugh because something happened, rather than cry because it's over. Although exponentially more difficult now, I was still happy to have the place to go to deep within, a place that, as far as I was concerned, was still off-limits to both Collins and Jefferies.

"So back to Mr. Wordsworth," I said, putting us back on track.

"Yes, back to our dearly departed, Mr. Wordsworth."

"What he proved was that only when one stops thinking critically, when a person stops questioning information being forced down their throat, when a person gives up and accepts whatever the State mandates, or what the mass of the populous decries as gospel, only then does a person become obsolete."

"I agree," Cal said. "It's funny what we're led to believe to be truth is oft times just a perverted offshoot of the truth."

"Wordsworth sent a message," I said. "A message that was simple and easy to understand. So simple, even the State had to acknowledge the chancellor himself had become obsolete."

Cal said nothing. I knew he understood the code.

"During the next episode," I continued, spelling out the crux of the plan, "I'd like to be known as Wordsworth. When the circus elephants come to town, I'd like to have peanuts handy so I'm gonna need you to teach me to say please in Elephantese."

“Not a problem,” Cal said. “You’ve already got a bag of peanuts and you’ve been speaking Elephantese for longer than you know.”

“Is that a fact?” I asked.

“Indeed. The last of the great three Twilight Zone episodes is The Monsters are due on Maple Street. If you recall, the aliens that landed on Earth had little to do. After studying us, they knew humans were far more effective at killing themselves. Why risk any loss when they didn’t have to engage. All the aliens had to do was connect to the technologies available, use the bridge that had been established between the two systems and manipulate them to cause panic.”

Listening to his code, I realized I had received the same advantage, I just needed to leverage it. During the next remembrance period, all I needed to do was to connect to Collins' terminal through the bridge Cal had installed and, by utilizing it, I would email Mae.

“Enlighten me,” I said. “How much information did the aliens have at their disposal?”

“It didn’t take much,” Cal replied. “For efficiency’s sake, they only used what was needed, nothing more.”

I understood. As desperate as I was to tell her I loved her, that I was still alive, that I had a plan, I needed to keep the message short. Only two things needed to be in the message. One, where I’d hidden the flash drive and two, convince her I was the author of the message. I couldn’t leave any doubt.

I thought of the two words I would write, then counted how many letters. With 7 letters I could inform Mae where I’d hidden the flash drive, but how to write something that would convince her it was me who’s sent the message?

Yes! I knew that if I sent an additional 4 letters she would know without a doubt, it was me who’d sent it. It could be no one else.

“If I recall, the aliens used only two words containing 7 letters, and then an acronym of 4 letters. Do I have that right?”

“Yep, you sure do.”

That’s all I needed. There was nothing left for me to do but sit and wait for the next remembrance period.

Chapter 22

“Sir,” Xavier said, disrupting Jefferies thoughts.

“Yes, what is it?”

“A Vesper jump craft with no transponder code is requesting permission to land. Would you like me to grant landing access or inform the constabulary?”

“Grant them permission and ensure our guest finds his way to my secure room,” Jefferies said.

“Yes, sir,” Xavier said.

Jefferies lingered at the window, watching the extraction tug lifting the mangled wreckage of his jump craft from the waters of Lake Canada. The State operated news stream had reporters on the scene, the broadcast, was on the wall screen behind him.

“Initial reports from aviation investigators,” the pleasant voiced female reporter said, “points to a rare and deadly weather condition called a microburst as the cause for the accident.”

He smiled at the intense pleasure of how neatly he'd tied the loose end. Not bad for having to pivot on the fly, he thought to himself.

He turned from the window, made his way down the hall toward the interior of his chambers, stopped at a single metal door which had an electronic key pad and retinal scanner inset. Punching in the code, he next placed his eye on the soft rubber cup, and waited for the sound of the lock disengaging.

He entered the foam walled room, which contained two chairs. Not only insulated from sound, the room was impervious to electronic eavesdropping. Every Council member had a room like this in their private chambers. He walked to the chair facing the door, sat down, and waited for his guest to arrive.

“A jump craft with no transponder,” he said aloud.

He smiled. If this meeting didn’t go as planned, it was an excellent piece of information to keep in his back pocket.

Several minutes passed until his guest appeared at the doorway.

Without saying a word, Jefferies motioned him in, pointing to the empty chair. Once inside the room and outside the sweep of the door, the door sealed itself automatically.

“It’s a pleasure to see you again, Niles,” Jefferies said.

“The honor is mine,” Niles said. “How long has it been?”

“Before I became Councilman,” Jefferies said.

“Nice place you got here,” Niles said, looking around the space.

“Are you referring to this secure room or my private chambers?”

“Both. Quite a change from where you came from.”

“Civil service certainly has its perks,” Jefferies said.

“I’m sure,” Niles said, feeling the tinge of a slight threat laced into Jefferies otherwise innocuous statement.

While Niles was at home in secure settings such as this, it was always his own custom-built room, his territory, he’d operated in. Here, he didn’t have the home field advantage. He also knew that the pleasantries were over and it was time to get down to business, but he didn’t want to speak first. It would be a show of weakness.

“You’re probably wondering why I called you here,” Jefferies said, breaking the ice.

“The thought had crossed my mind,” Niles responded.

“How computer literate are you?”

That was the code phrase for finding out if somebody possessed hacking skills. One who was illiterate meant they had little to no skills, while a grade 12+ was the best there was.

“I’m at a grade 4 reading level. Not great, but I understand the basics,” Niles replied.

Strike one, Jefferies thought to himself. He’d hoped, as well connected as Niles was, he’d possess better skills than that. If Niles had to rely on outside resources for the job he needed done, that was one more loose end. He was tiring of loose ends.

“Hum,” Jefferies said. “Let me ask this. Let’s say I needed someone who could build a portal into the in vitro mainframe with the ability for neural topography as part of the upload.”

Niles considered what Jefferies asked, rolling several options around in his head before speaking.

“Well, constructing the port to the in vitro mainframe is not an issue. I’ve done similar work in the past. If I’m provided with the access permissions, which I’m sure you’d have no trouble in securing, that component wouldn’t be an issue. The real trick is the neural cartography component. That’s less skill than having the right machine to do the task.”

Jefferies sat quietly, allowing Niles to continue.

Several moments passed, neither one of them speaking. It was another subtle gamesmanship maneuver to gain a verbal advantage. Several moments stretched to a full minute. Then two.

Niles knew what Jefferies wanted to hear, but more important, he knew what Jefferies didn’t want to say or ask. Jefferies was looking for the information to come to him, not search for it and tip his hand he was desperate. Niles realized it was he who had the advantage but didn’t want to play it too hard, too soon.

Another full minute passed, neither one saying a word. Finally, Jefferies asked, “Well?”

That was enough for Niles. Jefferies, without asking, had broken the truce, had flinched first.

“I recently acquired a neural cartography machine. I will admit, it was not a traditional purchase,” he said, using his fingers as air quotes, “so it didn’t exactly come with an instruction manual, but getting the how-to shouldn’t be a problem either.”

“That’s wonderful news indeed,” Jefferies said.

Niles swallowed, his mouth parched. “What did you have in mind?”

“I already have a private access port to the in vitro mainframe in my office, but I need another one here plus an additional one next to it so that I may enter the mainframe with a companion. This companion will need to have a full neural mapping performed so that more complex iterations, capable of hypothalamus stimulation, can occur.”

Trying to regain a sense of footing on a slope that was quickly becoming slick, Niles said, “You just said a lot of ten-dollar words. Could you simplify that?”

“I need whoever I want to bring with me into the mainframe to feel, not just experience, the mainframe reality.”

“Ah, got it. I don’t see that as a problem,” Niles said. “I don’t mean to appear sexist, but do you have a companion in mind and if so, are they male or female?”

What a curious question, Jefferies thought to himself. “Why would you ask that?”

“Males and females process information differently. At least that’s been my experience. My non-psychological experience to sure, but my experience nonetheless. Females are more sophisticated than males and I would assume that sophistication would manifest itself during the neural cartography session.”

“So, it would take longer to map a female than a male subject?” Jefferies asked.

“Again, this is pure speculation. I don’t have a lick of experience. I’m more thinking out loud than anything else.”

“You’re managing expectations,” Jefferies said.

“Of course. Wouldn’t you? And more to the point, would you want to conduct business with somebody who didn’t?”

Jefferies didn’t reply, allowing his silence to be the answer.

“So,” Niles said, “do you have a subject in mind?”

“Yes, but I’d prefer to keep that information close to the vest until we can start the procedure.”

“Hey, you’re the one in charge here,” Niles said. “If you wanna wait until it’s go-time, that’s fine with me. However, I’ve been around the block once and done most things twice. I know when a customer has a time crunch and when they’ve got all the time in the world. You’re not in the second group.”

Jefferies remained quiet, not acknowledging Niles’ statement.

“If you provide me a name,” Niles said, “I can cull data which will only help the cartography process.”

Although he didn’t appreciate having to play by another’s suggestion, Nile made sense.

“I’m sure you’ve seen all the news streams as of late. One of our own turned against us and liberated because of it.”

Niles swallowed hard, his blood pressure pounded his temples. He told himself to calm down. The last thing he needed was Jefferies seeing him sweating, the ultimate faux pas in gamesmanship such as this.

Conflicted, Niles needed a moment to process how he wanted to handle this. On one hand, this was a golden opportunity. He could parlay the monies he'd already received from Mr. Muhly through the aforementioned Mrs. Donovan into a much bigger payday. Hell, he might even curry favor with Jefferies himself. Making a business transaction such as this may be useful down the line and over the long-term, would pay dividends.

On the other hand, the continuation of long-term business depended on trust built up over years with clientele. A trust that didn't come from advertising or commercials, but from word of mouth. By betraying Muhly and playing one side against another, if that information ever got out, his reputation and his business would suffer. Trust, even when dealing with illicit information and the characters of the underworld, was paramount.

Jefferies eyes narrowed, and he leaned forward. "Are you alright, Niles? You're breaking out in a sweat."

Swallowing hard again, Niles said, "I'm fine. The soundproofing in these rooms makes the air warm and stale. I run hot anyway."

"That's interesting," Jefferies said. "I'm quite comfortable. Are you sure there's nothing bothering you?"

Shit, he's onto me. "Really, I'm fine. I'll get all the data I can find about Mae Donovan. Meanwhile, I'll bone up on the operation of the cartography machine. What kind of timeframe are we talking about?"

Jefferies sat back in the chair and slowly brought his hands up and interlaced his fingers. He regarded Niles for several moments, studying the man, turning him over in his mind, patting him down, shaking out his pockets.

"How did you know her first name was Mae?" Jefferies asked.

His question was a noose Niles felt slip around his neck. He knew he needed to answer immediately, but didn't know what the right answer should be.

"The news has only been streaming on every wall screen in the city since Friday of last week. I'm sure I heard her name in the reports."

Jefferies smiled a wolfish smile. Oh, how he loved it when prey had been cornered and hadn't yet realized the true nature of their predicament.

"No," Jefferies said. "The Council never reveals the first names of the remaining family members. The only exception to that rule is if we excommunicate the remaining ones so the populous are aware and knows its unlawful to interact with them."

Trapped, his only play was to divulge the interchange he'd had with Zach. In the grand scheme of things, it was better to take a hit to your reputation than lose your life. However, since it was obvious Jefferies knew nothing, there'd be no harm in leaving out a few minor details.

"Now then, why don't you tell me what you know," Jefferies said.

With only one way out, Niles spilled the beans.

Hours later, stepping out to his landing pad, Jefferies inhaled the cold, damp air. The sky was slate gray, the drizzle created a liquified haze. He turned up the collar on his overcoat and walked toward his new sapphire blue Volta jump craft.

Nice upgrade, he thought to himself as the gullwing door lifted open, detecting his presence. I should've had Xavier override the older model months ago.

Settling in, Xavier's voice said, "Where are heading this morning, sir?"

Jefferies took a moment to enjoy the fresh smell that would diminish as the days wore on. "In vitro prison 861," he said.

Moments later, they were airborne. The Volta was much nimbler and you could barely hear the air rushing outside the windows. Unlike his previous model, this one was fully automated, allowing Jefferies to sit in the back. He watched as the streaks of drizzle ran in horizontal lines across the mylar windows. He imagined each one was a runner sprinting toward the finish line that was the window's edge. While all the droplet runners were moving at about the same speed, some reached the line before others.

Analogous to life, Jefferies thought to himself. He'd not gotten off the starting line of life cleanly, had stumbled early, but had taken matters into his own hands. He'd fought too hard, had given too much for all of that to be wasted now. Especially so close to the finish line.

Snapping himself out of the mini-trance, he turned his attention to the information Niles had given him. A reporter for one media outlet had come sniffing around for information related to Donovan.

He wasn't sure he believed Niles story. He wished he'd had a constable with a full complement of bio scanners so he'd have the truth. Hum, interesting.

"Xavier," Jefferies said.

"Yes, sir."

"Please inquire with central intelligence and see they install a bio scanner in the safe room. It might be a handy tool when delegates are meeting with me."

"Yes, sir."

Turning his attention back to Niles, when he'd pressed for the reporter's name, Niles had provided the name Bernard Nolsten. After Niles had left, Jefferies ran the name, but there were no matches. That was to be expected. Niles was not his real first name and everybody he'd done business with had an alias.

To Xavier, Jefferies said, “Also, please set up a meeting with Mr. Cosmere at the main media conglomerate. Have him come to my office at his earliest possible convenience.”

“I’m connecting the call now. Would you like to speak with Mr. Cosmere?” Xavier asked.

“No, just set up the meeting. If asked, do not provide him with any details. Simply inform him somebody on his staff is trolling for information in an unauthorized manner. Let him stew on that one for a bit.”

“Very good, sir.”

That bit of business complete, he now considered the pressing issue. If Niles was to be believed and somebody from the press had been trying to get their hands on information, it was a good bet there were others and they’d be sniffing around the prison staff. He needed to ensure Collins’s lid was securely clamped shut.

“Do you have the diagnostic report I asked for, Xavier,” Jefferies asked.

“Yes, sir. I have already uploaded the report to your tablet and is ready for your review.”

“What is your initial assessment of the patency of Collins system?” Jefferies asked.

“While it’s secure on most fronts, there are some disturbing anomalies that came up,” Xavier said.

Picking up the small screen tablet from the seat back pocket, Jefferies placed his palm on the screen, which read his print. Once logged in, he skimmed the summary page, then touched the link that took him to the specific report of the anomalies Xavier had mentioned. Yes, Xavier had chosen the correct word when he’d called them disturbing anomalies.

He read on, committing the information to memory.

After touching down at 861, Jefferies made his way into the waiting area of Collins' office, bypassing his administrative assistant who, in a flustered voice, tried to buzz into Collins before Jefferies could barge in. She didn't make it in time.

Throwing the door open and striding in, Jefferies said, "We've got a problem."

As if his chair had been charged with 100,000 volts, Collins bolted up, some papers and his keyboard sent tumbling to the floor. Stooping down to pick them up, Collins struggled to contain his consternation.

"With all due respect, Counselman, you cannot barge in here without at least a knock on the door."

Jefferies ignored his subordinate. "It seems our new guest has garnered a fair amount of interest from the media."

"That's no surprise," Collins said, still trying to collect himself and his belongings. "The media are running almost 24-hour coverage since Mr. Donovan's liberation almost a week ago. What would you expect?"

"Here's what I wouldn't expect," Jefferies said. "I wouldn't expect the warden of a facility as secure as this one is supposed to be, to operate an outdated TRS8064 terminal, the only one of which is located in this office. I ran a diagnostic on your mainframe and all supporting systems."

Collins' face flushed of all color.

"A man as well informed as yourself most likely already knows the answer to that question," Collins said, recovering quickly.

Tricky, Jefferies thought. Very tricky indeed.

"I want you to humor me," Jefferies said.

Setting the keyboard back onto his desk and sitting down, Collins looked into Jefferies eyes and said, "Like I said, I'm sure you already know this, but the TRS8064 allows me to have much more flexibility in navigating the mainframe. This is of vital import when I have to keep tabs on my staff. My responsibilities don't start and end with the prisoner population, Mr. Counselman. I'm also responsible for what my staff does and where they're doing it within the mainframe.

"The TRS8060 renders my movement invisible, so my staff aren't alerted to my presence. This allows me to watch them performing their duties without detection."

"And how," Jefferies asked, "does the system interact with the prisoner population?"

"The same as the mainframes system. The TRS8064 has the computing power to handle all phases of prisoner interfacing," Collins answered.

"How secure is the TRS8064?" Jefferies asked.

Although Collins hoped the questions wouldn't lead to security, Jefferies wasn't the first and he wouldn't be the last.

"Why don't you cut to the chase, Councilman? What is it you're concerned with?"

Jefferies turned and walked back to the office door, closed it, threw the deadbolt, keeping his back to Collins for a beat before turning around and walking back toward Collins' desk. He sat.

"From this point forward, I will be the one asking questions, not you," Jefferies said.

"Do I make myself clear?"

Collins sat back and crossed his arms.

"Do I make myself clear, Warden Collins? I will not ask again," Jefferies said, his voice a whisper.

“Yes, I’m clear,” Collins answered.

“Good, now then is the TRS8064 secure?” Jefferies asked.

“Yes,” Collins answered. “It meets all State requirements as per directive 925.43. It exceeds the state requirement by an order of magnitude.”

“That’s interesting,” Jefferies said. “Tell me, Warden, how was my AI able to pick up a trace program affixed to the outbound data pack on your terminal when I ordered it to run a patency control audit?”

Collins was gob smacked. A trace program affixed to his terminal? He looked at the keyboard sitting in front of him, regarding it as if Jefferies had told him a tiny land mine lay under one of the keys.

“I don’t, I don’t see, I don’t see how that’s possible,” Collins said.

“It’s possible because you don’t have the sense enough to run your own audit. The TRS8064 is notoriously porous when it comes to DNS leaking and you didn’t add enough security backfill to seal the holes, nor did you possess the motivation to perform a patency control audit.”

Stupefied, Collins sat trying to wrap his mind around what Jefferies was telling him. How did Councilman Jefferies know about firewall protection and domain name system leaking? Collins didn’t think Jefferies was that computer literate.

“But why should that matter?” Collins asked.

“No!” Jefferies slammed his hand on top of the desk. “I’m the one who is asking the questions, not you.”

Startled, Collins tumbled backward into his seat.

“How long has it been since you last ran a DNS leak report?” Jefferies asked.

Collins didn't want to give the answer a voice. Especially after Jefferies last outburst.

"How long?" Jefferies asked, his voice turning back into a whisper.

"Last month," Collins answered.

"Good," Jefferies said. "Your laziness and lack of attention to detail might actually be your saving grace. I suspect our new guest may have been responsible for the trace program. We'll be able to tell by comparing last month's data to the new set my AI produced."

Collins dared not say anything, content letting the silence continue.

"How long has it been since his last remembrance?" Jefferies asked.

Scrolling through numerous screens, Collins found what he was looking for. "16 hours, 38 minutes ago."

"Anything unusual show up during that period?" Jefferies asked.

Swiping through several more screens, Collins found the summary page and read aloud, "Total remembrance duration, 74 minutes. Maximum cortisol level was a mere 23 micrograms per deciliter. Still within normal ranges. That can't be."

"Why not?" Jefferies asked.

"Well, I suppose anything's possible, but I've never seen cortisol levels within normal range during the remembrance period."

"Perhaps Mr. Donovan is one cool customer," Jefferies said.

"Or perhaps Mr. Donovan knows something we don't," Collins said.

"Now you're making sense," Jefferies said. "Welcome to the party. Any unusual levels of adrenaline?"

Sliding his finger down the screen until he found the metric, Collins said, “No, that too was within normal limits.”

“Let me ask you two questions,” Jefferies said. “One, it is possible to run a remembrance period without you or I inserting ourselves into the mainframe and two, can we watch the data stream in real time or does that act like a boulder in the river?”

Collins looked up from his terminal, a Cheshire grin plying his face. “While we can initiate a remembrance anytime we choose, mainframe insertion be either one of us gains maximum threat leverage. Although it seems in Mr. Donovan’s case, that’s an exercise in futility.”

“And as for my second question,” Jefferies said.

The clouds parted. Collins saw his opportunity and said, “Yes, we can monitor the data in real time, but only here, on my terminal. That is the beauty of the TRS8064 system. In layperson’s terms, the interface seam is so fine as to be almost invisible, thus my preference to it. So, in answer to your query, yes, we can watch the data in real time. The disturbance will be negligible.”

Jefferies tilted his head back toward the ceiling until he was looking down his nose at Collins.

“Don’t worry, Warden, you need not continue to defend your antiquated system. You’ll be able to keep your little toy.”

Like a fine needle piercing a balloon, Collins deflated with relief, but ever so slowly.

“Shall I set up a remembrance?” Collins asked.

“Yes, but I want my AI to synch with your system. I’m sure you see no harm in allowing me to monitor the monitoring.”

The deflating of relief stopped. “Of course,” Collins said.

“After all, we wouldn’t want anything Mr. Donovan may have up his sleeve to slip through the cracks now, would we?”

“Of course not,” Collins replied.

“Xavier,” Jefferies said into the communicator on his wrist.

“Yes, sir.” Xavier said.

“Please synch with the mainframe system here and monitor all data streams. I want all non-flagged data hard coded and transmitted back to my office terminal. If you see something the mainframe or the TRS8064 system misses, notify me immediately.”

“Yes, sir,” Xavier said.

“I would also like a more thorough check of any previous DNS leaking that has occurred within the last 5 years. Compile a report so that I may present the findings to the rest of the Council. Label the report Compliance Report of Invitro Prison 861.”

“Yes, sir.”

Jefferies brought his head back to level and stared into the frightened eyes of Collins, noting with delight jeweled beads of sweat glistening on Collins' upper lip.

“Worry not, dear Warden,” Jefferies said. “If your system there is as good as you say, any discrepancies my AI may discover will be immaterial if we can catch Mr. Donovan in the trap we’re setting.”

Trying to hide the beads of sweat, Collins lifted his finger and swiped it away. He leaned forward a bit, then typed a few commands onto the keyboard.

“Is everything set on your end, Counselman?” he asked.

Jefferies nodded his approval, safe knowing that Xavier was already monitoring everything.

“What’s the plan if we witness Mr. Donovan doing something outside his programming loop?”

“That’s easy,” Jefferies said. “We use the loophole as a noose and use it to hang him by.”

Chapter 23

With each second that passed, pressure mounted. Waiting for the next remembrance compressed my inert restlessness into anxiousness. Now that I'd come up with the plan, had everything ready to go, I wanted nothing more than to get on with it.

I sat at the edge of my cot, wringing my hands, visualizing the steps once the remembrance began so I could get a message sent to Mae.

I heard the now familiar sound of dress shoes on concrete, but it lasted for a second. I stopped wringing my hands, cocked my head toward the bars, and listened. Nothing. Silence.

“Cal, what are you doing over there?”

Silence.

There was no forewarning. Collins never appeared to regale me with his hollow speeches. In the next second, gone was the world I knew, and the remembrance period began.

As before, I was inside the warehouse staring at the image of a brain, which I now knew was not real. Whatever image that was piped into me was the same image being piped into every other prisoner within this in vitro prison.

Although I wanted nothing more than to release the anticipation and anxiousness that had been building, it was imperative I remain calm, purposeful, and go about my work undetected.

Staring at the brain I knew wasn't mine, I needed to become one with the data stream, merge with it, get into its flow. I needed to be pulled through its loop which would lead me to Collins system.

Just like The Twilight Zone episode The Monsters are Due on Maple Street, my first task is to integrate my data stream with the mainframe stream using the bridge Cal installed. For that to occur I had to be the playwright, Gregory West. I had to imagine everything in exacting detail until that bio-electric feedback created a new reality.

To integrate into the data stream, I imagined the image of the brain they were broadcasting not as a brain, but as the earth. Instead of being in a warehouse, I imagined I was an astronaut floating above it. Instead of seeing two hemispheres of a brain, I saw two continents. I saw green and blue rather than gray, saw the mountains, deserts and rivers, the puffy clouds floating, their shadows cast on the ground below them.

I moved over the face of the Earth toward the horizon that delineated day from night. On the night side of the planet, I saw flashes of lightning flash, the landscape illuminated in strobe. I imagined the lightning not as electricity firing between cloud and ground, but thoughts firing between synaptic gaps.

Directly below me, I saw a concentration of flashes. Instead of continuing my flight over the surface, I lowered my altitude. Soon, surrounded by flashes of thought, I was still separate from it, witnessing it from the outside. It was now time to merge with the thoughts, become a part of the stream.

The flashes ceased, and I floated in blackness. The constricting band of claustrophobia squeezed, then a bead of light flashed in the distance, darting away toward a horizon not yet seen. Fighting the grip of darkness, I imagined myself moving toward the light flash's point of origin.

Another bead of light flashed. I was getting closer. Like the first this, too, shot off in the same direction before disappearing over a horizon. I continued to imagine myself moving closer to the source when a third flash of light buzzed below me.

Determined to follow it, I imagined myself moving toward the horizon in the same direction I'd seen the other flashes of light. The flash of light moved ahead of me, but this time I caught up and stayed with it.

The electric blue light of thought moved toward a small rise ahead. As it reached the peak of the rise, I saw a valley full of pinpoints of the same electric blue light. Some were stationary, most were zipping around in a complex pattern.

I lowered my altitude even further until I felt myself being pulled without my imagination impelling me forward. I acquiesced to the feeling, knowing I'd successfully merged with the information loop. Now it was only a matter of trying to determine where along this stream, Collins' system was where I could synch and get the message to Mae.

At first, the progress toward the mass of lights was slow, but the tug increased. The conglomeration of lights became tighter, the electric hue brighter. I churned along the stream, sensing when the brightness reached a crescendo, that would be the point of Collins' terminal.

After several more seconds, the light became so intense I felt heat, then smelled the distinct odor of ozone. I imagined an island in the middle of the ocean of blinding blue light, with a small harbor of refuge.

I knew I had arrived. That I'd stopped. I was inside Collins system. Instead of keeping pace with the stream of my own thoughts, I was at the interchange where my thoughts stopped being mine and were fused with information embedded in the mainframe. I was in the

hurricane's eye. I was in the eerie calm amidst the winds of two realities. I looked up, and just like the eye, I saw unobstructed sky.

I didn't have time to celebrate. This was the moment to act. Looking into the small patch of sky I gave the message I'd created a voice. I shouted it into the void, screamed the two words and four letters over and over. With each shout, with each plea, I released the fear, the anger, the loss, and the anxiety of everything I'd kept buried. Then, overwhelmed by the overpowering sense of love the message contained, I bellowed the message into the void one last time.

I saw the two words and then the four letters appear above me.

Then, just as quickly as they appeared, they were gone.

Exhilarated, I jumped from the calm of the storm and rejoined the blinding light. As I moved away from the center, the light dimmed. In reverse order, I gained altitude until I was once more staring at the image of the brain floating below me.

I had no way to verify the message I saw appear above me had been sent or if there was a filter on any outgoing data where the message would be captured. Even if it did make it out there were no guarantees that Mae would see it or open it. There were still so many things that could go wrong.

But I could hope. The plan had been a success, and the hope of Mae seeing the message filled me with an energy and an excitement that occluded the despair of my current circumstances. With hope, I could imagine Mae and I standing together, hand in hand, rejoined, renewed, reinvented.

Then the remembrance was over.

Sitting on my cot, facing the bars, I wanted to run and press my face against the cold steel and tell Cal everything had gone according to plan.

As I got up and started for the bars, Collins and Jefferies appeared. Both were smiling, although neither one of them appeared happy.

I stopped dead in my tracks.

“Where are you going in such a hurry?” Collins asked.

I remained still.

“That was quite an impressive remembrance you had. I can’t say as I’ve ever had a prisoner be so comfortable with it,” Collins said.

Jefferies, standing to the right of Collins remained passive and calm.

“Alexander,” Jefferies said, “you’re being rude. The warden here has asked you a question. Where are you going in such a hurry?”

I didn’t respond.

“I think,” Jefferies said, turning to Collins, “he was on his way to talk to Cal. Isn’t that right, Alexander?”

Shit, he knew about Cal. Calm down, I told myself. No need to get riled.

“Yes,” Collins said. “But don’t you think we should give Mr. Donovan here the bad news?”

Calm. Don’t get riled.

“What news?” Jefferies said, turning his attention back to me. “The news that Cal is dead?”

I walked toward the bars, stopping short of touching them.

“What have you done?” I asked. “Cal, hey buddy, you there?”

Nothing. Silence.

“Perhaps dead is not the correct terminology,” Collins said. “More like, deleted.”

I wanted to mask my emotions, didn’t want to give them the pleasure of seeing me fractured. Try as I might, I couldn’t keep my lip from quivering, so I bit hard on it. The searing pain did the job, for the moment. Although I’d never laid eyes on him, Cal had become my confidant, my friend. Now he was gone.

“Would you care to tell me,” Collins said, “what, exactly, were you doing attempting to synch with my system?”

They don’t deserve to know a damn thing, I said to myself. Keep your wits about you. Don’t let your emotions get in the way. Control.

“More importantly,” Jefferies said chiming in, “how did you get into the data stream?”

Nope. If you’re so damn smart and connected, you already have the answers and you wouldn’t bother with a peon such as myself.

“We can do this the easy way or the hard way,” Collins said. “You can either be a cooperative little monkey and give us what it is we’re asking for, or you can remain a stubborn mule and we’ll do whatever is necessary to break you. The question isn’t whether we’ll get the information we want, it’s what lengths we’ll have to go through to extract it from you.”

“What, so you can delete me when you’ve got what you’re after?” I said.

“That’s up to you,” Jefferies said.

I looked at both of them and smiled a smile of my own. In getting the message sent, I had done all I could. My salvation was in the hands of fate and of Mae. If I were deleted, like they’d done with Cal, at least I’d die knowing that I’d done all I could. That I’d exerted myself valiantly, with purpose and with courage.

“And what would your precious Romney Wordsworth have said,” Jefferies said. His taunt was clear.

Clearer still was the passive aggressive way he’d tipped their hand they’d been eavesdropping all along. No surprise.

“I have become Romney Wordsworth,” I replied. “And you, Councilman Jefferies, have become the Chancellor. What would Romney Wordsworth have said? Allow me to quote the great Romney Wordsworth. ‘I’m a human being. I exist. And if I speak one thought aloud, that thought lives, even after I’m shoveled into my grave.’”

Jefferies stopped smiling. He turned to Collins and gave him a slight nod of this head.

Collings looked at me and said, “I sentence you to solitary confinement where you’ll be stripped of all sensory inputs, devoid of any orientation. Most last less than 24 hours before the disorientation squeezes the sanity from the convulsions of your mind.”

Both Jefferies and Collins disappeared. As soon as they were gone, I closed the last few feet I’d stayed behind the bars. I pressed my face tight against them.

“Cal,” I said, “I’m so sorry.”

Before the echo of my voice dissipated, before the silence returned what I knew would be the reply, everything became an abyss of darkness that possessed a hunger that I felt would only be satiated with my demise.

Panic coursed through me.

I tried to scream, but with no sensory input of any kind, I had no way of telling if I was or wasn't.

Chapter 24

The longer he remained in Collins office, the more Jefferies despised the man. The odor of stale coffee and sweat perfused the air.

“Sir, I’m ready,” Xavier said.

“Do you have a preliminary report?”

“Yes, sir,” Xavier said. “During Mr. Donovan’s remembrance period, I recorded and tracked all input and output data streams in real time. What Mr. Donovan accomplished is quite impressive, sir.”

Jefferies pursed his lips in consternation. Leave it to an AI to not know when it was preferable to filter out information. He made a mental note to inquire with whomever was going to replace Harold to look into adding some additional filters.

“How so?” Jefferies asked.

“Besides being a witness to the data stream, Mr. Donovan somehow merged with it and became a part of the data stream. The extraordinary thing was he accomplished this while maintaining a third person vantage point, so the system knew nothing was amiss.”

“Remarkable,” Collins said with a smile.

Jefferies interpreted the smile as the type one has when one doesn’t know how to react.

“I’d be careful how you take this news, Warden,” Jefferies said. “This only highlights deficiencies in your system's safeguards.”

Collins smile disappeared. “I was merely commenting on the remarkable capabilities of your AI, Counselman,” Collins said, backpedaling.

“Xavier,” Jefferies said, ignoring Collins comment, “other than being able to synch with the data stream, were you able to detect any other erroneous readings?”

“Erroneous? No,” Xavier said. “I did, however, detect a spike of interference. My sensors show this spike of interference occurred at the point equidistant from Mr. Donovan.”

Not wanting to appear anything but the epitome of knowledge and power, Jefferies didn’t want to ask Xavier for clarification, as he didn’t truly understand what Xavier said. He nodded his head as if he’d understood.

Collins was not as conscientious about such things. He said, “I’m not quite following you, Xavier. Could you please clarify?”

“Certainly, Warden,” Xavier said. “If the data stream is a loop, one junction point lies at Mr. Donovan’s brain. There is another junction at the mainframes terminal, or more specifically, your terminal, Warden. That terminal lies at the opposite point from Mr. Donovan. Thus, the equidistant phraseology.”

“Understood, thank you, Xavier,” Collins said.

“What do you attribute this spike of interference to?” Jefferies asked.

“After careful analysis, I’ve determined that although Mr. Donovan was part of the data stream, he wasn’t able to maintain the speed of the data stream at all times. This created small eddies within the flow of data. Think of a small raft floating on a fast-moving river. Although the raft is moving in the same direction as the water, because it’s not moving at the same speed, it will create small eddies. Those eddy’s manifest themselves as interference.”

Glaring at Collins, Jefferies asked, “And did you pick up any DNS leaking?”

Collins could not hold Jefferies searing glare and turned his attention to picking up a pen and setting it down on the other side of his keyboard.

“I did not pick up any outgoing DNS leaking or data stream,” Xavier said. “While the outgoing firewall is not as robust as those found in the corporate sector, it exceeds the State mandated levels for this facility. I understand there’s not a fear of corporate espionage.”

Collins looked back up and met Jefferies gaze, a nervous smile quivering the corners of his mouth.

“Although,” Xavier said after a pause, “it’s a possibility some leaking could’ve occurred at the point at which the interference spiked.”

It was Jefferies turn to smile. His was not nervous, but predatory.

“Could we surmise the spike in interference acted as a cover to mask any DNS leaking or data transmission out of the mainframe?” Jefferies asked.

“If it were me,” Xavier said, “I don’t think I’d do that, no.”

“Why not?” Jefferies asked.

“While it’s true, the interference could mask any DNS leaking or data transmission, that same interference could prevent any transmission from occurring at all.”

“So, what you’re saying,” Collins said, “is that based on your detailed analysis, no DNS leaking or any data transmissions occurred? Only a spike in interference?”

“Yes and no, Warden,” Xavier answered. “While I did not pick up any DNS leaking or data transmission, either could’ve still occurred. I was monitoring for anything erroneous, thus the interference I detected could’ve masked any data transmission. If we could replicate the conditions, now that I know what to monitor for, I could pick up any if there was an attempt.”

“While synched with the mainframe, were you able to seal off any weak points in the TRS8064 system?” Jefferies asked.

“Yes, sir. I installed a finer filter,” Xavier answered.

“Thank you, Xavier. That will be all for now,” Jefferies said.

After several minutes, Collins broke. “Well, that’s good news. At least there were no DNS leaks or data transmissions detected.”

“That’s not what Xavier said,” Jefferies said.

“That’s exactly what he said!”

Jefferies was glad Collins was getting excited. It meant he’d lost control of his logic and his emotions were running the show.

“You’re not hearing correctly, Warden,” Collins said. “While Xavier didn’t detect any leaks or transmission, he admits it still could’ve occurred. He was ill-prepared to listen for it, not expecting Mr. Donovan to have created the environment he had.”

“And I could’ve crapped a million credits out my ass,” Collins said. “Just because I say it could’ve happened doesn’t mean it happened.”

Knowing he had Collins exactly where he wanted him, Jefferies moved in. “You’re right, I apologize. Until we have proof, there is nothing we can do. But I have a plan that will allow us to pressure test Mr. Donovan.”

Collins looked up from moving his pen back and forth across his desk. “What do you have in mind?”

“I say we let Mr. Donovan stew in solitary for a while. Soften him up, let him render in his own fat. He’s clearly more advanced than we gave him credit for. The more disconnected from any reality, the better.”

“Yes,” Collins jumped on board, “agreed. In all my years as warden of this facility, I’ve never heard of a prisoner syncing with the mainframe while simultaneously maintaining a third-

person viewpoint to keep the loop open. And correct me if I'm wrong, but that has little to do with the TRS8062 system or any of its perceived deficiencies."

"Relax, Warden," Jefferies said. "Your system is fine. It actually may be the thing we need to catch Alexander in the act."

Collins visibly relaxed, letting out a sigh of relief. Jefferies smiled.

"My plan has two parts," Jefferies said. "First, I need you to keep Mr. Donovan in a state of solitary confinement."

"Done," Collins said.

"Second," Jefferies continued, "I need you to find out more about Alexander's little friend, Cal. Where did he come from? How did he get into Alexander's data loop? Then I want you to run an analysis of all the conversations Alexander had with him. I'm guessing they hatched this plan together and were talking in code. Perhaps we'll find out how Alexander did it."

Collins wasn't following the second part of the plan.

"Sir, I'm not following. We both know there was no Cal. We lied to Alexander about deleting him. There was nobody to delete."

Jefferies wanted to get up and slap the little greaseball across the face like the idiot he was. It took all his willpower to remain seated.

"Warden," Jefferies hissed, "ten minutes ago you didn't think one of your prisoners could synch with a data loop while maintaining third person anonymity. Are you really that shallow thinking? Are you still not able to grasp that perhaps Alexander somehow first synched up with another prisoner and together accomplished what he did? Do you not think it's a possibility that some other prisoner just might do the same thing Alexander did?"

Collins began to sweat once more.

“Now, like I said. Find this Cal and neutralize him. Then analyze all conversations between him and Alexander.”

“Not a problem. I’ll have my people on it right away,” Collins said.

“No, absolutely not,” Jefferies said. “I cannot overstate this. Anything we do from this point onward is between you and me. Once I leave here, I will consult with the rest of the Council. You and the Council are the only ones who can ever know about any of this. Any information that leaks I will trace to you and I don’t need to explain the punishment that would come with that, do I?”

Collins picked up his pen nervously clicking it.

“No, understood.”

“Good,” Jefferies said. “Besides consulting with the Council, I will get the permission needed to gain a tool that I think will pry any information from Mr. Donovan we see fit.”

Collins shook his head in approval. “Understood. I’ll get to working on the analysis right away. How long do I have?”

“I’ll convene an emergency meeting when I leave here. Once I receive approval, I’ll acquire the asset and prepare it for use.”

Collins was silent, mulling over what Jefferies had in mind. It became clear in a flash of understanding.

“You’re going to put Mae into the mainframe, aren’t you?” he said.

Jefferies leaned forward, glowering at Collins, and asked, “Is that going to be a problem?”

Collins didn't answer, knowing his voice would quiver. Instead, he sat back and shook his head back and forth.

"That's good," Jefferies said. "It would be a shame to report to the Council all the deficiencies I've discovered here and have you removed and excommunicated for dereliction of duty."

Without waiting for a reply, Jefferies got up and walked out leaving Collins to smelt in the crucible created by his threat.

Chapter 25

Zach wasn't such a bad guy, Mae thought.

He was proving to be more than an old-fashion gumshoe hired to understand what really happened with Alex. He was proving to be understanding and patient with the swift changes in her mood.

As comfortable as she'd become with him, having him here, alone in the house, was unsettling. She'd never been alone with another man in the home she shared with Alex. Mae watched as he took a handheld device out of a closed-cell foam lined briefcase and powered the unit on.

"I'm sure it must be weird having me here," he said. "Don't worry, I recognize you're still a married woman. Besides, for a guy such as myself, the less attached I am, the better."

"Since you're not wearing a wedding band, I assume there's no Mrs. Muhly," Mae asked.

With his attentions still on the strange device, Zach said, "Oh, no. Never. That, unfortunately, won't be happening. Ever."

The way he'd said it told Mae there was much more behind the statement she was determined to mine, but now wasn't the time.

Glancing her way, Zach said, "Why don't you look for the flash drive down here? I'll head upstairs and do a sweep up there first. Shout if you find it."

"As I told you," Mae said, "Jefferies left that stupid Nan-bot which is right where he'd left it at the top of the stairs. I never bothered to power it on."

"Probably a good idea," Zach said.

Without another word, Mae headed into the kitchen. She stood next to the island, looking around, not knowing where to start.

If Alex had hidden the thumb drive in the house, she asked herself, where would he hide it?

“Not in the kitchen,” she said aloud.

Thinking about him, she figured he’d hide it somewhere in his study. Not bothering to look any further, she headed to his study. Although Alex preferred things to be neat and tidy, he had quite a bit of bric-à-brac on his desk and the shelves of the two dark stained bookcases that spanned two walls.

The enormity of the task that lay before her was overwhelming. She knew Alex more than any other person, but standing at the threshold of his study, knowing he could’ve hidden the flash drive anywhere, she felt she didn’t know him at all.

She eyed his desk chair, wanting to collapse into it and have herself a good cry, the tears pooling at the corners of her eyes.

Damn you, Alex, she thought to herself.

Crossing the threshold and stepping into his office, she recalled the brief conversation they’d had on Friday. Although she knew there was something he was keeping from her, she knew she’d done the right thing by respecting his wish for her not to pry, trusting that he’d come to her with the information when he’d processed it. Hindsight is so clear, but how she wished she could go back and nag him, pull and tease the information he’d withheld.

She knew that if the roles had been reversed, if it had been her holding onto information, she’d want him to leave her be.

All of it was moot. He wasn’t here.

The tears that had formed evaporated. In their place, frustration flowed. Frustration he hadn’t been quick enough to process the information. Frustration with herself for not pushing.

Damn you, Alex!

She walked to his desk chair and sat down, determined to get started on the task at hand and not wallow or feel sorry for herself. Right now, she had a job to do and she would leave no stone unturned. She looked over all the items that were placed in an orderly fashion on his desktop.

The first thing she looked at were three small figurines of extinct owls made of solid plastic. She ruled those out. Next to the owls stood two hourglasses, a taller one which was a 45-minute glass and a smaller one-minute glass. Couldn't be in there.

Moving on, she looked at the three small plastic models of vintage space craft. All were too small or made of solid molded plastic. Finally, there was a replica of a computer from an old-time movie he liked and two small metal unicorns.

Only the metal retro-rocket ship clock she'd bought for him as a holiday present seemed to be a place that could hide the flash drive.

She picked up the ship, opened the back panel to reveal the battery compartment for the clock, and peeked inside. Nothing.

She put the cap back on, set the rocket ship back in its place, and sat back in his chair. She looked at the bookcases that lined two walls. Alex loved to read.

Did he hollow out a book and hide it inside?

Before getting up to look through every book, she tried to put herself in his shoes. Which book would he choose as a hiding place? His favorite book?

Deciding it was worth a shot, she got up and looked at the titles on the spines until she found Ray Bradbury's, Fahrenheit 451. She'd bought him a first edition. Surely, he wouldn't have cut pages out of that book to hide something, would he?

She opened the book, flipping through all the pages. The musty smell of dust filled her nostrils. All the pages were intact.

She slid the book back into its slot and stood looking at all the other books. She knew Fahrenheit 451 was his favorite, but she didn't know what his second favorite book was. Thinking about it further, she wasn't even sure who his second favorite author was, much less the book.

She walked back to the chair and sat down, guilt moving through her. She should know where he'd hidden it. He'd have known if she'd been the one who'd hidden it.

No, she said to herself. You can't do this. This is not the time to feel sorry for yourself. Need to focus.

She looked at the shelves of books, determined to look through every single one of them. While she wasn't sure who his second favorite author was, while she may not have known his second favorite book, she sure as hell would go through the effort of looking through each one. She got up from the chair and went to the first of three bookcases. She grabbed the first book and got to work.

Three hours later, defeated, she sat in the solarium holding a fresh glass of iced tea and staring out the large window at the garden beyond. Although her thumbs were not green, she had an eye for design and hardscape, fountains and lighting brought her a sense of peace.

"We've just begun the search," Zach said, sitting next to her, holding his own glass of tea. "That was as good a place to start as any."

"I was so sure he would've hidden that damn thing in there," she said.

“One thing for sure,” Zach said, “eliminating the library was huge. The search through the rest of the house should be a breeze by comparison.”

“True,” Mae said. “I looked at every single book and I still don’t recall what his second favorite book is.”

“Maybe he didn’t have one.”

“Doesn’t,” Mae said.

Zach felt the sting of regret. He’d been conscientious not to refer to Alex in the past tense.

“Mae, I’m sorry. I apologize. You’re right.”

Turning toward him, she smiled an empty smile and said, “It’s alright.” Then, changing the subject, she asked, “I’m assuming your sweep of the house was clean?”

“Unusually clean,” he said. “Usually, the AI has a cache of short-term memory that stores, at the very minimum, the last conversations it overhears through its microphones. Even that cache was clean.”

“What do you attribute that to?” Mae asked.

“My first thought was that since you’ve not been home much, there was nothing to record. If it purges the memory on a preset time basis, it would dump what little information was there.”

“What’s your second thought?”

“If it’s not on a preset time basis, it would purge its cache when it reached a preset amount of data. If that’s the case, I should be able to pull a report that tells me when it reached that point. Perhaps the memory was close to being full, then what little conversation it picked up tripped the purge function.”

“Is there a third thought?” Mae asked.

“Sure, your AI could’ve been hacked, and the information downloaded elsewhere,” Zach answered.

“Of the three possibilities, what does your gut tell you?”

“I’m not sure. Besides, I’m not tech savvy enough to determine if it was or wasn’t.”

Taking a sip of her tea, Mae turned her attention back to the hardscape beyond. “Say someone hacked it. Who do you think would’ve done it?”

“Here’s the thing,” Zach said, “when Eugene was here, I’m sure...”

“Who’s Eugene?” Mae asked, interrupting him.

Zach chuckled.

“Eugene,” he said, “is my brother.”

Mae almost dropped her glass of tea. By decree, Council members were referred to by their title, their last name or the combination of the two. The official party line was that by becoming the ultimate public servant, they were sacrificing their identity and took on the face of all constituents. Despite this, the first name always gets leaked.

“I thought his first name was Austin,” Mae said.

“Nope. His real name is Eugene,” Zach replied.

“Eugene Jefferies,” Mae said, smiling. “Eugene? No wonder he wanted to become a council member. Who would want to go through life with a name like Eugene?”

Knowing his real name, a name that didn’t conjure up images of strength and power, he didn’t seem nearly as intimidating.

“Don’t let the name fool you,” Zach cautioned as if he were reading her mind. “He’s cunning, deceitful and powerful. The trifecta of narcissism.”

Mae turned her attention back to Zach. She put her glass of tea down on the small table sitting between their two chairs.

“What happened between the two of you?”

Zach pursed his lips and took a deep breath. He clinched his eyes closed tight, the lines of stress cutting deep fissures across his forehead. Although he’d known that a situation like this may come along, now that it was actually here, now that it was time to act, he was having a difficult time.

“I apologize, Mae. Trust is not something that comes easy for a guy such as myself.”

“Zach, no offense,” Mae said, “but if you can’t trust me now, you never will, and if that’s the case, then we need to end our partnership right here and now. And if I may be so bold, I think you need to see this through to conclusion just as badly as I do.”

Zach opened his eyes and smiled. It was a smile all men get when a strong-willed woman calls them out. When they’re reduced to a 7-year-old being scolded by their mother.

“You’re quite perceptive, Mae,” Zach said. “Ever think about becoming a detective?”

“I hear there’s not much of a market for it,” she replied.

“Please understand,” Zach said, “I’m putting my life into your hands by telling you what I’m about to tell you.”

Mae tilted her head, more perplexed than afraid.

“Okay,” she said.

“As long as I can remember, Eugene has always been,” Zach paused, “driven. Perhaps it was because he was teased as a small child, but by the time I was old enough to remember, he always seemed to have a plan, always directed. When the rest of us wanted to build mini jump

craft to fly around the neighborhood, Eugene would spend his time either practicing with his chess team, or he'd be alone at the library studying law."

"So, he always had ambitions to become a council member?" Mae asked.

"I don't recall that specifically, but I was his younger brother. I was always in his way. As we got older, however, I could tell his focus was on achieving a higher station. We were not born of privilege. Eugene and I came from C sector."

Mae shook her head, confused. "I thought only those born from A sector could be elected Counselman?"

"You're right. That's why, before the end of his preliminary schooling, he erased us," Zach said.

Mae could see the anger and pain in Zach's eyes, could see the anguish in his tight lips. "Erased you?" she asked.

"He did it over a holiday weekend," Zach continued, "We were heading to our grandmother's house. Eugene said he wanted to stay behind to study for the upcoming placement tests and he'd be along soon after. While my parents and I were on our way, our jump craft was overtaken by an outside source and crashed. My parents were killed. I survived, but was in a coma."

"Oh my god, Zach," Mae said, grasping at her chest. "I'm so sorry. Do you think Eugene was behind it?"

"There's no doubt. Right before it happened, the on-board AI announced 'override initiated'. Then my father lost all control and the jump craft dove straight down."

They sat in silence for a while. Neither one of them saying anything.

"How long were you in a coma?"

“21 years,” Zach said, his voice monotone.

“21 years!” Mae said.

“And when I came out of it, I found they had excommunicated me. The accident investigation found that I was the one responsible for the override. They said it was a murder / suicide deal.”

Mae had so many questions, but didn’t want to interrupt. She turned in her seat and faced Zach, providing him with her undivided attention.

Bolstered by breaking through the years of silence, Zach felt the inertia to continue.

“Although I have no definitive proof, I’ve held onto the belief that Eugene created an override program, hacked into the jump craft's AI, and severed the flight controls and cut the engine. The plan, of course, was for all of us to die. My survival was an unfortunate wrinkle in his plans.”

Mae saw the faint glint of a tear form at the bottom of his eye. Wanting to keep him on a more positive track, she asked, “How was he able to fool everybody?”

“As far as everybody was concerned, the entire family was aboard the jump craft when it cratered into the ground. Two teeth positively identified my parents. I had not been wearing a harness and thrown clear upon impact. For all they knew, the ash and dust left in the smoldering hole was both a burial and a crematorium. Remember, we were C Sector folks. Ain’t nobody gonna put ash and dust in a chromatograph to ID us.”

“That explains why he wasn’t considered missing, but how was he able to rejoin society?” Mae asked.

“He spent a good amount of time before the crash forging documents and creating his alias, complete with backstory, birth documents, you name it. He’s already taken the placement

tests, but as Austin Jefferies, valedictorian of the best school in A Sector, not as Eugene Muhly of C Sector. Before my parents and I got in our jump craft that morning, Eugene had already been accepted into the best boarding school, on the Western Territory with a full ride scholarship.”

“And once he was in, he could write a whole new story for himself,” Mae said.

“Yep. And since those of the lower class don’t mingle with those of the upper class, since there are such obvious lines of demarcation, there was little fear of anybody recognizing him. Plus, he picked the perfect time to transition, what with puberty and all.”

“Calculating,” Mae said. Then, “That explains his part, but what about you? You said you’d been thrown clear, so how did it come to be that you were ex-communicated even before you came out of the coma?”

“Dear brother,” Zach said. “He knew I’d survived. It was all over the streams. But there was nothing he could do. Personally, I think that was one of many reasons that pushed him toward becoming a part of the Council. And his rise to that post was meteoric.”

“So how were you able to become a cop?” Mae said.

“Eugene isn’t the only one with connections,” Zach said.

Mae took a long pull from her iced tea, then said, “Well, it’s a good thing I found you then.”

“You have no idea. Not only am I invested in this case for you, I’m obviously invested for me, and not just because of the monetary payoff.”

Mae turned and looked at him for a long time. At first Zach had been a necessary evil, somebody she’d tolerate in order to find out what happened with Alex. He was something more

than that now. She decided she liked Zach and invested in his fight as much as he'd invested in hers.

“So that explains why you’ve laid low all these years, just waiting for a chance. That’s why you’ve never married.”

Zach looked at her, his eyes lit up with gratitude for being understood.

“Well, what the hell are we doing cooling our heels out here?” she said. “Let’s head back inside and get back to work.”

Zach’s smile possessed the warmth of friendship, not a simple acknowledgement of familiarity.

“Do you have your own computer,” Zach asked, “or did you and Alex share a device?”

“I have my own, but I rarely used it. We usually shared the same one.”

“Any chance he stored the information on that machine?”

Setting the glass of iced tea on the table, Mae got up and said, “First we’ll need to find it. That may prove just as difficult as finding the flash drive.”

Smiling, she turned and headed into the house.

Twenty minutes later, they sat at the kitchen table, staring at the computer's home screen. There was nothing on the desktop that stood out although Mae didn’t expect to see a filename that read ‘secret documents here’. Then again, she didn't know what she was looking for.

“Where should I look first?” Mae asked.

“Try looking in documents,” Zach said.

They looked through every document, which turned out to be nothing but old files. They next went through every other folder and document, but came up with nothing.

“Are you able to access your email on this machine?” Zach asked.

“Sure can,” Mae answered. “I’ve had the same email account forever.”

“Let’s try looking there. Perhaps Alexander sent them to you rather than loaded them on a flash drive.”

“We can try,” Mae said. “One thing about Alex, with documents containing sensitive information, he wouldn’t willy-nilly send those in an email.”

“Humor me,” Zach said.

She opened her email. The first half-dozen emails were from various retailers offering specials on shoes, clothes, and housewares.

Somewhat embarrassed, Mae said, “I do most of my shopping online these days.”

“Is there any other kind?” Zach said.

Mae stopped scrolling and leaned forward, staring in disbelief, not sure she was reading the line correctly. She squinted her eyes, focusing them on the words displayed on the screen. She read it again, then looked at the timestamp when the email had arrived in her inbox.

Reflex took over. She brought her hand up and covered her mouth and inhaled sharply.

“Look!” Mae said, pointing to the line on the screen.

Zach leaned in. There was an unread email from Alex. The subject line was blank, but the date stamp was yesterday. Zach's eyes widened.

“Open it,” Zach said. “Perhaps he instructed the email server to send this at a later date than when he'd composed it. Perhaps sensing trouble, he composed the email and let it sit.”

The pin prick of logic pierced her balloon of hope. That certainly was something she could see Alex doing. But even then, if that were the case, it was like Alex had reached out and had established a connection where none should’ve been. She closed her eyes, not wanting to

open the email, fearing the disappointment if it was something other than a beacon of hope. She wanted to enjoy this feeling.

“It’s alright, Mae,” Zach said. “Regardless of what this email may contain, this is a big step forward. A win-win.”

“What if this isn’t from Alex at all? What if this is from Jefferies as a trap, a way to monitor if I’m looking for something?” she said.

“I suppose that’s a possibility, but I don’t think we have much of a choice. How would Alex have looked at this? I think he’d say the risk is worth the reward.”

She agreed. With tremors writhing through her hand, she moved the mouse and clicked the email open. She held her breath.

The email was two words followed by an acronym

Key ring

N.A.F.A.

After reading the four letters, she sobbed. She knew the email had come from Alex. In those four letters she heard Alex’s voice, whispering inside her mind. In those four letters she’d felt Alex’s touch, soothing her broken heart from wherever he was. She felt his love.

Zach put his hand on her shoulder to comfort her. “Mae, what is it?”

She pointed at the letters. “This is from Alex. He sent this. I can hear him talking to me.”

Perplexed, Zach looked at the screen. “What does NAFA mean?”

“NAFA is an acronym,” Mae said. “It means Now And For Always. Alex always said that about our love. It was a phrase only he and I knew about that. There’s no way this could’ve come from anybody else. This is Alex telling me he loves me, Now and For Always.”

Fractured, she sobbed the bittersweet tears. Alex had somehow reached out, but as definitive as his words had been, their impact was already fading.

“What about the words key ring?” Zach said. “Is that some kind of code, too?”

“I don’t have the foggiest idea,” Mae said between breaths. “Knowing him, it probably means nothing more than to check my key ring. I’ve been using his Jump Craft and have only had his key ring. Could it be that simple?”

“There’s only one way to find out,” Zach said.

Getting up from the desk, composing herself, Mae moved through the house. She felt pulled, like Alex had become a magnet and she, a bar of steel. The thrill that he had somehow reached out was proof he was alright. Still not back, but she felt one step closer to bringing him back.

Making her way to the kitchen door, she looked for her jump craft keys she always threw in a small reed basket that sat on the counter near the door. The basket was empty. Panic crept in. She thought back to the last time she’d used her jump craft.

Even after retracing her steps, she was certain she’d thrown them into the basket.

“They should be here,” she said.

“Any chance you moved them and don’t recall?” Zach asked.

She ran through the events after Alex had been taken. Not once had she been in the kitchen. Then she remembered her parents. They must’ve moved them. She turned around to face the wall where a wooden mail holder and key ring hook hung.

There, dangling from one of the brass hooks, was her jump craft key and attached to the ring, partially hidden behind the key itself, was the flash drive.

Mae could barely speak. The relief came as a great exhalation of breath.

Zach walked over, picked up the keys off the hook, and said, “We need to get back to my office. I still have a computer with a USB port.”

“I’ll call my mom and have her get here as soon as she can so she can watch Maxx.”

Fifteen minutes later, as her mom walked from her jump craft toward the house, Zach jogged out of the kitchen and toward the landing pad. Mae stood frozen, as she’d been since reading Alex’s message, guilt consuming her. Now knowing the answers had been in easy reach all along, she lamented she’d let Alex down.

“Hey!” Zach said, poking his head back in the doorway, “you didn’t know. You had no way of knowing. Now stop beating yourself up and move your ass.”

Shaking herself from her stupor, she bolted for the door.

Chapter 26

Under normal circumstances, there are differences between sleepiness, tiredness and exhaustion. I was experiencing all three fused together. With no external stimulus, with nothing to orient itself to, they force the brain to work overtime to make sense of the world and its place in it. It takes effort and willpower to ignore the disorientation, and not get sucked into the vacuum of loneliness.

As soon as Jefferies and Collins severed the cord of my computer reality, my first line of defense, my safe harbor, is my internal happy place. The place where memories live. The place where there's no need for the external, where I can replay events in as much clarity as I want.

Like wandering the halls of a vast movie theater complex, I walk into the first and most familiar, sit down and watch what I project onto the screen of my imagination.

Mae and I were at the Fun Park. Everything is in high definition. The scenes contained the finest details. The movie started with us playing hooky on a Tuesday, getting some breakfast at one of our favorite breakfast haunts. Mae eating her eggs benedict, me with my chicken fried steak. Then the drive up the coast to the park.

Because it was a Tuesday, there were fewer crowds, and we strolled hand-in-hand along walkways within the park, sauntering, taking our time, inhaling the smell of cotton candy, caramel corn, and licorice in the air.

I recalled everything about every ride. Every queue line, the sound of the clickety clack of wheels on metal tracks, the lighting, the sound of the wind rushing past our ears.

I saw us sitting in our favorite spot, under an immense oak tree, its shade plentiful. We ate corn dogs, potato chips and sipped on a soda pop while listening to the piano player.

After a while, I leave that theater and walk into the next and watch that movie. The day I'd received the call I'd gotten the job with The State, working under The Council of Three. How that day had changed our lives. How happy we'd been, how relieved we were that we no longer had to struggle at the bottom of those born from B Sector. While we knew we'd never be A Sector inhabitant, this would get us closer to that upper tier.

Watching movies in the theater in my mind is exhausting. As time stretches on, the details are blurring. Through the cracks of fatigue, questions percolate from deep below and saturate my efforts to remain in the past, safe from the present, safe from the slippery ground of questions.

Yet in my weariness, I can't help but wonder if I could sleep. Now that stimulus, even stimulus that is artificial, is gone, what will happen? With no sensation of light or dark, with no sound, with no sensation of weight or gravity, would I even sleep? Even when the body sleeps, the brain remains active. Would sleep just be an absence of thought and consciousness?

Deciding it was best to not get on that train of thought, lest I derail myself, I let nature take its course and turned my thoughts back to the one person who had the power to make me feel whole.

I went into a new theater and watched the day I'd first laid my eyes on Mae.

It was in a commercial Jump Port. She'd flown from the Eastern Territory to meet me in person. We'd "met" over the phone and we'd exchanged old-fashioned photos, both of us refusing to vid chat.

I was standing at the bottom of an escalator, waiting for her. Passenger after passenger came down, none of them a beautiful brunette. Just as I wondered if I'd been stood up, I saw her

at the top. The way she glided down made her appear as if she were an angel. She was breathtaking.

Spotting me at the bottom of the escalator, she smiled at me. That was the instant my life changed.

I have a handful of events that are lines of demarcation, life before the event, and life after. The first demarcation event was the death of my father. That cataclysmic event reshaped the landscape of my life. Shapes weren't as sharp. Light had become diffuse, laughter less boisterous.

Seeing Mae that day, seeing her radiant smile, filled me with a love I'd not known until that moment. The world had been a hazy blur. With her smile, with her love, she'd provided me with corrective lenses I didn't know I needed. In that moment, everything came into sharp focus and with it, a clarity of destiny.

With her smile, she created a new line of demarcation. A time before I loved her, and a time after I fell in love with her. It was rapturous.

I raised the sign I'd made but so flummoxed by the feelings that coursed through me, I'd held it upside down. It didn't matter, she'd fallen in love with me too.

From that day on, we'd been inseparable. We did everything together. I can count on one hand the number of times we've been apart for more than a day, and we're the better for it. We both love spending our time together.

I miss her as much, if not more so, than I miss my body. Not just for the physical interaction, but that we'd allowed ourselves to drift away from that. Lost in the pain, loss and guilt of losing Christian, we'd both closed our eyes to the beauty that was around us.

Phantom aches for her pulse through a body I'm no longer connected.

Beyond exhausted, in my stupor, my thoughts wander.

I think of Maxx. Another line of demarcation. With his birth, a different love I didn't know possible also came into being. Along with that love was a pride for what Mae and I had created.

I wonder how Mae will explain to him why I'm not there for his birthdays. Who would teach him to throw a baseball? Who would teach him how to shave?

I push those thoughts back to the current issue. I wonder if the message I composed successfully found its way out of this looping ether. Had Mae opened it and known what it all meant?

If so, how would that play out?

If Mae got the message and they revived me, how would Jefferies and Collins pay for what they'd done? How would the rest of the Council react? Knowing how severely they reacted to me, even though the accusations were false, I couldn't imagine how they'd punish Jefferies. Would they delete him like Jefferies and Collins had deleted Cal?

Mining that vein more, I imagine myself revived. Free. What would I do? Certainly, I wouldn't be able to work with the Council again, or would I? In my experience working closely with them, I see two avenues they could take.

The first would be they could move on from this public relations crisis quietly. Make no announcement to the media, keep it hush-hush, contrive a story of why they would need to replace Jefferies. Call it an illness or if they were so inclined, create a situation where Jefferies went missing and after an exhaustive search for him, they conclude he must be dead and thus a new Council member would fill his slot.

The second avenue they could take, and I find this the more likely scenario, the two remaining Council Members would embrace the controversy, fulfil the adage there's no such thing as bad press. They could make a big splash about it, drum up sympathy, and support to push agendas that would otherwise not make it past the planning stage. There's nothing like a crisis to eliminate red tape.

But who would they get to replace Jefferies? Under normal circumstances, there are a few alternates in the pipeline ready to go, but with the recent retirement of several sector judges, that pool is gone. They would have to go the unusual route of having a public vote for somebody lower down on the totem pole.

Interesting. It wouldn't be too hard to do a better job than Jefferies.

Jefferies. I couldn't wait to see the look on his face when he realized it was checkmate, when he knew he'd been defeated, see the realization I had beaten him rend his face with anger and spite.

Although I had no way to emote, I felt happiness at the pain I could inflict upon him by beating him. The hatred for him was so clean. There were no contaminants of conscious or empathy, no guilt that might pollute the joy I'd get in exacting revenge on what he'd done to my family.

Perhaps that's a psychopathic thought, but getting a thrill out of causing harm to him is the truth. Besides the wrongs committed against me and the ripple effect that has on all those close to me, Jefferies has wronged the populace by stealing from his constituents, funneled their money to serve his own purposes, lied to the Council and misappropriated the power entrusted to him.

I wonder if Collins knows what he's done. Was Collins in on it as well? I'd not considered that angle before now. Did Collins know about Jefferies illicit activities or was he as much in the dark about everything as everybody else and was simply a pawn in Jefferies game?

If so, I wondered if he could use him?

A rush of exhilaration buoyed me. Energized, hope glowed within. Instead of replaying memories, I indulged in the theater of fantasy.

Should the opportunity present itself and I stood face-to-face with Jefferies, what would I say? How would he react?

Questions and scenarios play out one after the other in rapid succession, and I'm transfixed by the kaleidoscope of prospects each scenario encapsulates.

Then, in a moment of self-awareness, acknowledging I was playing out nothing more than a fantasy in my mind, which I had no outside access, the tide of the true nature of my reality turned ebbing back into a vast nothingness that I couldn't comprehend.

In the tide's ebbing, I had nothing more than a handful of tidal pools, glistening with the barest resemblance to the hope they had once been a part of. Like me, they were cut off from the whole, alone, isolated.

I chided myself for giving in to wild imaginings under the guise of preparing myself for an event that will never happen. I'd used my prudence to be prepared as a rationalization to dare to dream.

I was a fool. I had flirted with hope, allowed her to tease me, and had done so at the risk of extending my expectations too far. From this point on, I vowed to always temper hope with facts.

And the facts were, I was still without access to my body. My attempt to communicate with the outside world had been discovered. Not only was I paying the penalty by being robbed of all sensory inputs, the avenue of potential had been severed.

The facts were, I was nowhere near the place where I had any right to indulge or entertain the notion of hope.

The facts were, I was in a black hole with no hope of escape.

Chapter 27

Waiting for Niles to appear at the appointed meeting location, a public landing facility, Jefferies glanced for the 10th time in as many minutes at the screen inset in the back of the headrest of his jump craft.

Niles was late. In his frustration, he pondered how much of a delay it would cause to leave and find another low-level lackey to manipulate into completing the task that needed to be done. He didn't have time.

Scanning the throng of people streaming by the landing lot, only a few of them bothered to look up from their tabs to glance at his sapphire blue Volta jump craft, certain none of them had seen one in person in their life.

Jefferies spotted Niles as he moved through the crowd, pulling a small suitcase with wheels affixed to the bottom. Spotting his jump craft, the only one sitting on a private landing circle, Niles headed toward it.

"Open the back cargo hatch, Xavier," Jefferies said.

Once secured in the cargo hatch, Niles entered the back cabin.

"It's about damn time," Jefferies said.

"Please forgive me, Councilman," Niles said. "It's not like I can go to any dispensary and pick up a neural cartography machine. I had to call most of my favors to get my hands on this one."

After a brief pause, Niles continued. "Well, at least one that isn't traceable."

"This machine is clean?" Jefferies asked.

"Clean as it can be. It served its useful life as a registered machine for a private practice way out in Old San Francisco. The proprietor, upon retirement, sold it to a recycling scrap

facility which was robbed before they had the chance to enter it into the inventory. From there, it was only a matter of scrubbing the ident and serials from it.”

“How did you get your hands on it?” Jefferies asked.

“I think it would be most prudent if I didn’t answer that question. For your sake, not for mine,” Niles said.

Lifting into the sky Niles gazed out the window wondering with all Jefferies executive powers, would he know he’d just told him a lie. Would Jefferies know he’d owned the machine for years, waiting for an opportunity such as this to come up?

“And you’ve familiarized yourself with its use?” Jefferies asked.

Breathing a little easier, Niles answered, “Yes, although to be perfectly transparent, I also acquired a low-grade AI, at my expense, to assist with the fine tuning.”

Jefferies studied Niles, who continued to gaze out the window. He looked like a small boy, amazed by the wonder of flight. Not convinced everything Niles said was the truth, he swallowed the bitter truth he didn’t have the time to alter course. Niles was a necessary evil.

Besides, if what Niles said was true, he’d soon have Mae ensconced in the mainframe.

If, however, Niles was lying, Jefferies had a plan in place and was prepared to act should there be a need.

“I assume the AI you’ve commissioned to assist is also clean?” Jefferies asked.

“As a nun on Sunday morning,” Niles answered.

“Good. Now, once we land, if any security should stop us, you’re a technician that I’ve hired to install some new systems into my personal office.”

Jefferies opened the lid on a plush leather console compartment and extracted a clear, plastic rectangular badge with a microchip suspended in the center.

“If stopped, which I don’t think we will since it’s Sunday, just hold this out and let the security bot do its thing.”

Jefferies handed the badge to Niles, who took it, turning it over. “Now this is fancy,” he said. “I may have to look into getting something like this for my VIP guests.”

“Xavier,” Jefferies ordered, “please initiate tint on the windows.”

Without a reply, the windows tinted from the inside, making it impossible to see where they were going. Jefferies didn’t want Niles knowing where his private residence was located.

“All of this,” Niles said, holding up the security badge, “for a private residence?”

“What so few understand,” Jefferies said, “is how little personal assets Council members possess. While it’s my private residence, I don’t own it. And because of the delicate nature of what we’re attempting to do, the less you know, the better.”

“For you, not for me, correct?” Niles said.

“Absolutely,” Jefferies answered.

Twenty minutes later, in a back spare bedroom, Jefferies watched Niles unpacking everything from the rolling suitcase. This neuro cartography machine was noticeably larger than the one sitting on the table at the head of his lounge chair.

Jefferies had requested a new lounge to be delivered, and he himself had brought in a small end table, placing it at the head of the new lounge. Watching Niles set it on the table, he wasn’t sure the skinny legs of the table would support the larger unit.

“How old is that machine?” Jefferies asked.

“There’s no way to tell exactly,” Niles answered. “Once the machine was swiped from the inventory yard, it got wiped clean. Those who steal these kinds of items aren’t very

interested in the history or manufacture dates. They just wanna know two things: One, does it work and two, how much can they get for it?”

“And you’re sure it works?” Jefferies asked.

“Yes, I had the AI do a thorough diagnostic to ensure it was operational.”

“And how long will it take for that machine to synch with mine?” Jefferies asked.

“I don’t know yet. However, in preparing for this assignment, I came to understand that although your machine is more modern and has much faster processing speeds, it's forced to function at the slower processing speed of this older machine.”

Niles worked in silence for a few more moments, then said, “We’ll know in just a few moments. But I assure you, this will be ready to go for your meeting tomorrow. You’ll be all set.”

“Good. I’d hate to miss this rare opportunity,” Jefferies said.

There was a diabolical tone to Jefferies voice that was woven into the last comment that Niles picked up right away. He wondered if that had been a veiled threat.

Deciding it best to hedge his bets, Niles said, “As we agreed, I won’t be taking payment for services rendered until the successful completion of said services.”

Walking toward him, Jefferies clasped his fingers together and replied, “Niles, if these services are not successfully rendered, not receiving payment will be the least of your worries.”

Chapter 28

Walking into the Council's Headquarters building, Mae was awestruck by grandeur and opulence. A black granite floor met walls that were made of windows reinforced with clear poly fiber. With no visible support structures on the perimeter, the second floor above looked to be suspended in space.

She'd only been here on one other occasion, long ago, when she'd met Alexander for a Friday date night. They'd gone to a fancy restaurant uptown, followed by a late evening at the symphony.

She stood for a moment, looking for an information kiosk where she could get directions to Jefferies office. Only two security bots stationed near two adjoining body scanning hoops filled the vast space.

She approached one of the security bots. The pounding of her pulse in her temples quickened with each footfall toward a them.

"Please state your name, and who you're here to meet," the security bot said.

"Mae Donovan. I'm here to meet with Councilman Jefferies."

There was a brief pause. "Please stand by."

In his office, Jefferies, trying to keep busy, swiped through an enormous new piece of legislation he and the other two Council Members would vote on later in the afternoon. He wasn't keen on the idea of leaving Niles alone at his residence, but he didn't have any other choice. Besides, he trusted Xavier to monitor things. He also trusted chemistry, which is why he made sure he'd put a heavy dose of midazolam in Niles's orange juice.

Thinking of the orange juice, he wondered why people were so drawn to the drink. True, it had long been a drink reserved for the rich and powerful, but why that juice? Why not apple or cranberry?

The intercom speaker interrupted his thoughts. “Sir, there is a Mae Donovan here who claims she has an appointment, but there’s nothing in the registry confirming this.”

The first thing that could’ve gone wrong was that Mae didn’t show up. The fact she had boded well. Jefferies smiled. He’d not put anything on the appointment registry. If her visit was called into question, it would appear as if she’d come of her own accord and not coerced to do so.

Knowing security bots record all interactions, he answered, “I was not expecting anybody. Is she with anybody else?”

There was a pause. Jefferies held his breath. Mae had threatened to bring her lawyer. If she’d made good on her threat, he’d refuse to see her. While not ideal, by denying her request for an audience, he would lean on Niles and his contingent of security staff to abduct her. Either way, Mae would make it to his residence.

“No, sir,” the bot responded. “She’s alone.”

“I will make an exception for Mrs. Donovan,” he said, pleased he wouldn’t have to go to plan B. “Please see she finds herself to the proper elevator.”

100 floors below, the security bot said to Mae, “Councilman Jefferies has agreed to see you. Please empty your pockets and place the items in the tray. Then proceeded through the scanner.”

Having moved through the scanner without incident, once she was on the other side, the bot said, "Please follow the blue line illuminated on the floor, which will lead you to the elevator. It will know where to take you."

A thin electric blue line illuminated on the black granite floor which led to a bank of eight clear cylinders. The blue light ended at the third cylinder from the left. The elevator door, just as clear as the windows beyond it, hissed open. Mae stepped inside, the door slid closed.

Knowing she was now in the lion's den, Mae took this last opportunity to calm herself. It wasn't fear she felt, but anger. She reminded herself that regardless of what happened, she knew the truth. She'd read, then reread the information that Alex had captured and saved. Although it hadn't directly implicated Jefferies as the one who'd hacked Alex's computer and set up the zombie bot, Jefferies subsequent were enough to confirm his guilt.

She wished she could barge into Jefferies office with the constabulary at her side just as Jefferies had done to them, but that seemed too easy, too light of a tactic. Still, the desire to see the panic on his face was palpable.

Although she and Zach didn't know exactly what Jefferies had planned, they figured the best way to deal with him was to allow him to continue on his path, under the illusion he was in control. Let him speak freely about whatever he wished, all the while none the wiser he was being recorded.

The riskiest part of their plan had been keeping the hidden microphone and transmitter Zach installed in Alexanders jump craft key fob from being discovered by the scanner.

The elevator slowed. Mae reminded herself one last time that if she wanted to get Alex back, she needed to keep calm.

The door slid open, and she saw Jefferies standing a few feet away with that damn cheesy smile greased across his rail thin mug.

“Mae,” he said. “Please, come in, come in.”

Despite herself, Mae kept her cool. Stepping off the elevator, she said, “Mrs. Donovan, if you please.”

“Whatever suits you, Mae.”

She gazed directly at him, unblinking, intense. Keeping her voice flat and even, she responded, “Mrs. Donovan. And I can do this all day. I’ve got nothing else to do but grieve the loss of my husband.”

“Mae, please. I’m on your side here.”

“Mrs. Donovan.”

“Why don’t we sit down,” Jefferies said, not bothering with any name.

“Mrs. Donovan,” Mae said.

Acceding, at least for the moment, Jefferies turned his back and as he walked to his plush executive chair said, “Mrs. Donovan, please have a seat.”

With her stance established, Mae followed and sat in the small chair dwarfed by the massive desk.

Sitting down in his chair, Jefferies noticed Mae looking at his desk. “Impressive, isn’t it? It’s real Oak and bird’s-eye maple with a bubinga inlay.”

Looking back into his eyes, wearing a slight grin on her face, Mae responded, “You know what they say about a man who brags about having a large desk.”

The cheesy grin on Jefferies face disappeared. He leaned forward, resting his clasped hands together on the desktop. His eyes lowered, and he took a deep breath in.

“I’m sure you’re interested in hearing the news I have that may help you,” Jefferies said, not acknowledging her comment.

“Most interested indeed,” Mae said, letting a smile of her own crack across her face.

Jefferies took a moment to pick up on any small nonverbal cues he could read on her face. He was not used to commoners being both calm and aggressive. She was not to be taken lightly. It had been a while since challenged. He relished this rare opportunity to flex his superiority.

“I have reason to suspect Alexander was set up,” Jefferies said.

Dumbfounded, Mae hadn't expected to hear this, but Jefferies was not admitting to the wrongdoing, so he must've set somebody else up to take the fall. This was getting complicated. Trying to find her footing, Mae let the smile slowly dissolve.

“You have reason to suspect,” Mae asked. “That doesn’t sound very convincing. I have reason to suspect my bank account has recently been flush with cash. Suspecting something doesn’t make it true.”

Unfazed, Jefferies went on. “Obviously, there’s an ongoing investigation and I’m not at liberty to discuss the details of that investigation until we have completed it and we have all the relevant facts. Until that time, everything is speculation.”

“I understand. So then, who do you *speculate* it may be,” Mae said, “who *may* be the true criminal?”

“Mae, I invited you here. I didn’t have to do that. I reached out to you when I came to discover that somebody other than Alexander may be responsible for stealing all that money. Again, I didn’t have to do that. I’m under no obligation to share any information with you, but I’m doing so in order to help.”

Knowing the truth, hearing him not only lie, but hearing it spill out in effortless waves of condescension, was appalling. She closed her mouth so she could bite her tongue undetected.

“You’re right,” she said after a long pause. “You didn’t have to reach out and you’re not under any obligation. So, if you’re not willing to share whatever information you have, or if you’re content to play with me, I’ve got better things to do with my time.”

She stood and walked toward the elevator door.

Jefferies let her get as far as the elevator door before saying, “It may have been one of our top computer engineers.”

Mae stopped, but didn’t turn around. “Why do you say ‘may have been’?”

“We’re still investigating it. We don’t have all the facts yet.”

Mae turned around to face Jefferies. “And what good does this do for Alex? Say you complete your investigation and you get all of your facts and find out for certain it’s this computer engineer. How will that help me? I know you said that my name would be cleared and I could move on without the threats of excommunication, but that’s still a life without Alex. If I’m not mistaken, liberation is a one-way trip.”

Jefferies stood up from behind his desk, picked up a mini screen pad and walked around toward her at the bank of elevators. Mae watched him move. Despite being tall and lanky, he moved like a snake, slithering more than ambulating.

Halfway between the desk and elevators he stopped and said, “Xavier, please power up the jump craft and set a course for In Vitro prison complex 681.”

He stopped in front of her, holding the screen pad out to her and said, “I have something I need to show you, but before we leave, I need you to sign a non-disclosure agreement. What you’re about to see, regardless of the outcome, you cannot share with anybody without reprisals

from the Council of Three, which would include but not be limited to a life sentence on the penal colony on Luna. That sentence would extend to include Maxx.”

Grabbing the screen pad from him, Mae glanced at the small font words, her eyes only skimming the legalese, not really absorbing what they said. She’d not expected a field trip.

Her righteous indignation cracked. “Why should I go anywhere with you?”

Jefferies smiled his amiable smile. “You don’t, my dear. You’re under no obligation. Nor am I. But I think if you come with me, you’ll be much more willing to cooperate with the investigation.”

What he said wasn’t adding up and she felt herself treading into territory she was ill prepared to handle.

“If I go with you, is this NDA intended to protect you from what I’m about to witness?”

Without hesitation, Jefferies answered, “Yes, and you’ll understand why it may be possible to get Alexander cleared and may even get him back to you. That’s all I’m willing to disclose until you sign the NDA.”

Alex had talked often of risk versus reward. What was he fond of asking, ‘is the juice worth the squeeze?’. Going with Jefferies was risky, but at the moment she felt the juice would be worth the squeeze.

“Where do I sign?”

Jefferies smile cleaved a deep chasm across his face. “You just did. Xavier, did you capture that?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Good. Now, Mae, if you’ll follow me to the landing pad on the roof, we’ll be on our way.”

Jefferies moved past her, walked out of his office and down the hallway, leaving her alone. She stood at the fork. She could still leave, take the glass tube back down to the lobby, and hope the threat of ex-communication was an idle one or she could follow Jefferies toward an unknown location under the pretense of possibly getting Alex back.

Risk verses reward.

With her mind made up, Mae turned and followed Jefferies and walked out of his office and toward an unknown future.

Chapter 29

When starved of any reality, with no sense of orientation, memories only last so long. At a certain point, the well runs dry and you imagine things that never existed. That's the road that leads to insanity, and I was doing everything in my power to avoid going down that road.

Running low on memories, I explored the attic of my mind, pulling dusty boxes of thoughts out and perusing events long forgotten. I found a memory of a summer trip to visit a cousin. We'd gone to the circus, and I remember why I never liked the circus. Regardless of how real they appeared on the outside, no matter how charismatic the ring leader, I always knew the mechanical animals were just that: mechanical. The spectacle was an illusion, skin deep, with no substance. Even as a young boy, that bothered me.

They convinced my cousin Morty everything was real. Even when one elephant malfunctioned, he'd thought it was misbehaving. To be fair, neither one of us had anything to compare it to. It's not like we'd ever seen a real elephant, misbehaving or otherwise. Still, it annoyed me he couldn't see through the fallacy. The ring leader barked, and they had quickly marched out the lions to distract the audience from the embarrassing truth that lay sputtering and hissing in the center ring.

Despite my dislike for the circus, and the bad memories associated with it, memories, even bad ones, are still memories and I was in no position to be choosy.

Whatever details remained hazy, my brain filled in. Despite the lack of input, I could still smell of the aroma of roasting peanuts, the taste of the cotton candy as it melted on my tongue.

Then out came the trapeze artists. They scared the hell out of me. I remember how sweaty my palms got watching them juggle pins in the middle of the high wire, convinced they were going to fall and I'd witness them falling to gruesome injury or death. Morty giggled with

delight, which annoyed me even further. How could he think the mechanical animals were real, yet not be concerned when real people were at risk? It made no sense and I couldn't reconcile that.

Then, amid this recollection, I wondered how it possible to be aware of two separate consciousnesses at the same moment? What's the mechanism responsible that allows me to be a first-person observer watching myself as a third person experiencer? How could I see myself as a young boy, still feel the fear, the sweaty palms, yet remain isolated as an observer? Was the action of duality something I could control?

If so, how far could I go?

Could I remove myself to another order of magnitude and be a witness to myself being a witness to my younger self while still feeling the fear and sweaty palms as well as the keep the detached viewpoint of the first spectator?

Then, in that moment, the fractal nature of reality came to life. I could see all levels of reality independently, yet remained tied to all of them by the thread of the repeating pattern. I envisioned myself sitting in the first row on the mezzanine level of a vast, empty theatre. Below me, I saw myself sitting in the orchestra section watching the actors on the stage, one of which was the young me at the circus.

If I focused my attention on the me who was sitting in the orchestra section, I could experience everything he was experiencing. If I focused on the me who was on the stage, and he, in turn, focused on the me sitting in the orchestra section, I could feel both iterations of myself simultaneously.

From the mezzanine section, I turned around and looked up at the balcony level. It was vacant. Impelled by discovery, I imagined myself sitting in the balcony level. In a flash, there I

sat. I was in the first row of the balcony looking down at the me who was still sitting on the mezzanine level who was looking down at the orchestra me who was watching the actor me on the stage. Could I reverse the order of awareness?

I focused on the actor me on the stage. Once more, in a flash, I was back to being a boy, angry at Morty, but instead of looking at the trapeze artists, I was on a stage looking out into a large theatre. I saw myself in the orchestra, mezzanine and balcony sections.

Switching back to the balcony me, I came to understand reality is not a construct created by the world around me, but came from the architect within me. As both the actor and the audience, I realized I could change not only the point of view as I saw fit.

I decided I'd had enough of the circus. Like changing the channel, I thought of a different boyhood memory, one that was much more enjoyable. Space Camp.

The circus tents, the high wire acrobats, the animals and Morty disappeared and there, below me on the stage, I saw my parents saying goodbye as I joined the throng of other kids as we walked toward our dorms.

I watched the entire week play out. The building and launching of model rockets, the zero-g machine, me getting into a space suit and feeling like a real-life astronaut. I watched as I formed a friendship with Lloyd, a kid from Kansas City who, like me, wanted to become an astronaut so he could one day fly the space liners that plied the ocean of space between Earth and Mars.

I felt the wonder and inspiration from my younger self work its way into each of the spectator me's. Then, like changing the channel on the wall screen, I switched to another memory. This time as a teenager.

As I watched myself flying my first hover car with my friends piled in the back, I wondered if I could create a new reality instead of reliving one. While it was all fine and good to relive the fun memories and watch them play out, there were only so many to draw upon and I didn't know how long they'd keep me sane in this solitary isolation, cut off from any external inputs.

“If you’re wondering if you can create an entirely new reality and not just relive old memories,” the familiar voice of Cal said, “the answer is yes.”

I leaned over the railing and looked down at the mezzanine level as that’s where his voice had seemed to come from, but nobody was there.

“Cal,” I said. “Where are you?”

A man emerged from the right wing of the stage and walked out toward the middle. He looked up at me and said, “I’m here. Where I’ve always been.”

It wasn’t possible. He’d been deleted. Unless what Collins and Jefferies told me was a lie, a means by which they waged their psychological warfare to take away any hope that I’d felt.

“But how are you here? Were you able to escape?”

He stood at the edge of the stage looking up at me sitting at the edge of the balcony section. Then he disappeared. Vanished, gone. Was I imagining this as well? Was I playing out memories of Cal and now my mind was slipping gears?

“I’m right here,” I heard him say. This time he was standing in the aisle at the edge of the row where I sat.

As he moved toward me, seeing him for the first time, I took in as many details as I could. He was tall, about 6’3 and fit. He had thick, brown hair which he wore spiked, hazel eyes, and wore wire-rimmed glasses.

“I take it our plan didn’t work as we intended,” he said as he sat down next to me.

I paused, not sure how to answer. Jefferies and Collins said they’d deleted him, which I understood to mean they pulled the plug from whatever had been keeping his body alive. Perhaps this wasn’t really Cal. Perhaps this was another one of their tricks.

“What was wrong with the Twilight Zone Movie?” I asked, wanting to reestablish this was not some figment of Collins or Jefferies.

“Wrong question,” Cal replied. “What wasn’t wrong with the movie? Holy hell, was that bad. I mean, is that where the term shit show originated?”

That answer was good enough for me. Even if Collins or Jefferies could’ve conjured an image and projected him as being Cal, I don’t think they would’ve been able to have an AI that would’ve answered that question in that way.

“No, our plan didn’t go as we’d intended,” I said.

“Is that why we’re both in this,” he stopped, looking around, then continued, “where the hell are we, anyway?”

“As near as I can tell, this is all a construct of my imagination,” I said.

Cal looked around the empty theatre for a moment and said, “For fear of sounding stupid, why are you imagining an empty theatre?”

“It wasn’t empty before you arrived,” I answered. “I was reliving memories on the stage, could see them playing out before me, and I could be both the actor and the audience. Look there.”

I pointed to myself below us on the mezzanine and the me sitting in the orchestra floor.

“Huh,” Cal said.

We sat in silence. I stared down at the empty stage.

“All of this, including you,” I said, “must be an elaborate illusion my mind is constructing as a coping mechanism.”

Cal leaned back and kicked his feet up, resting them on the top of the balcony in front of him. He was wearing light green canvas pants, slip on tennis shoes and a deep purple non-graphic tee shirt.

Intrigued, I looked down at myself. I was wearing denim jeans, and had on black sweatshirt.

“Of all the things you could imagine, why are you wasting time reliving childhood memories?” Cal said.

Anger surged through me. The kind you feel when a friend suggests something you know you should’ve thought about, but didn’t.

“Hey, I’m imagining you right now. Keep up that kind of talk and I’ll just go back to watching my teenage self, flying around town and getting into innocent mischief.”

“Suit yourself,” he said. “I’m just saying, if you have the power to control what you imagine, independent of the mainframe, why waste your time and energy on this piddly theatre pinning about what was, when you could imagine the present, or better still, the what could be.”

Now I'm pissed off.

Still able to keep my wits about me, I said, “And what do you call this exchange we’re having? Since this is my imagination, it would seem I selected you to usurp the childhood memories.”

Cal sat staring straight ahead, unflinching, before he finally said, “Are you aware of what you just said?”

Thinking back to my last words to him, I was coming up with nothing except that his question diluted my anger.

“No. What are you asking exactly?” I asked.

“You said, and I quote, ‘it would seem I selected you to usurp the childhood memories’. Do you still not realize the truth?”

Was he speaking in some kind of code and I had missed the que?

“Cal, I have no idea what you’re talking about right now.”

I shifted in my seat to face him. He turned his head and looked at me for a long moment, then was gone.

Stunned, I sat looking at the space Cal had just inhabited, then instinct took over and I looked around the theatre behind me. It was empty. I then leaned over the rail and looked down toward the mezzanine level. The mezzanine me turned around and looked up at me.

“I’m here,” me said in Cal’s voice.

Gob smacked I sat in disbelief.

“Don’t worry,” mezzanine me said, “you’re not crazy. I’m just a minor and very temporary split in your personality. It happens, as a protective measure, to cushion the blow caused by a traumatic event. I’ve been nothing more than an extension of yourself.”

It wasn’t the fact I could see the image of myself saying these things in Cal’s voice. It was the feeling in my gut that convinced me. I knew it to be true, but there remained a few questions I needed answered.

“What about...” I started, but me interpreted me.

“I’m you, so I know what you’re going to ask,” mezzanine me said. “What about hacking into the mainframe and building the bridge between it and Collins system? Yep, that

was you. You just used an alter ego to disassociate yourself, which was brilliant. It added a layer of protection from the mainframe. It couldn't differentiate me from you. From the mainframe's point of view, you remained right where you were supposed to be while your alter ego was free to do what needed to be done."

And what about Collins and Jefferies claim they had deleted you? I asked myself, in a last test of truth.

"They don't know shit," mezzanine me said. "Oh, they suspect something is going on, but they took a shot in the dark, hoping to hit something. Seeing how you reacted to the news, they're probably going crazy trying to find a prisoner that doesn't really exist. Again, brilliant. They're spending time and assets looking for me, when I've been right here all along. This affords us the cover we need to move."

Move where? I thought.

"I've already said it," mezzanine me said. "If you have the power to control what you imagine, independent of the mainframe, why waste your time and energy on this piddly theatre pining about what was, when you could imagine the present, or better still, the what could be? Why not imagine the shack? Why not imagine the portal? Why not use your power to control reality to your advantage?"

Why indeed? I thought.

"Yep, you're right. Time for you to say goodnight, Gracie."

Because mezzanine me was me, he knew the reference how The Burns and Allen show ended each episode.

Mezzanine me smiled at me and said, "Goodnight, Gracie."

I collapsed the balcony and mezzanine me's realities and I was once more in a dualistic state sitting in the orchestra level staring up at the empty stage. I'd been right. I knew I could imagine the shack and the portal along with the confidence to alter reality as needed.

But before I did, there was one last thing I needed to do.

The theatre went dark, and I cast a single spotlight on the stage. I heard footsteps coming from the left wing of the stage and make their way across the darkened stage. From the darkness, Mae stepped into the circle of light. Her beauty outshining the single light shining down upon her.

I could've spent hours drinking her in, but turned the house lights back on. She spotted me sitting a few rows back, smiled, and jogged to the stage stairs to the left. I got up from my seat and ran toward the front of the stage. We embraced. I inhaled the sweet smell of cucumber melon body spray, felt the silkiness of her hair, pressed her body tight against mine.

I wanted to hold her forever, but she broke away and leaned back. There were tears in her eyes.

"I'm not real," she said. "This is not real."

"I know, Baby Doll. But I think I can get back."

She leaned in and kissed me. I kissed her back.

As with the hug, she pushed away first.

"Please, come back to me."

"Mae," I said, my heart overflowing with a rush of emotion. "I'm so sorry for not being there for you when we lost Christian. At the most critical time, I was not present for you in the way you needed me to be. I will be eternally sorry for that."

She smiled, then grabbed my hands. "I know. Just come back to me."

She let go of my hand, walked up the stairs to the stage and then headed toward the curtain where she'd come.

As she reached them, she stopped, turned around, looked at me and said, "You are my sunshine, my only sunshine."

Without waiting for a reply, she turned and disappeared behind the curtain and was gone.

With her scent still lingering in the air, with the electricity of her kiss still tingling my lips, it was time to begin my journey back. Once more, I turned the houselights down, and illuminated the stage. First the stage became covered in hard-pack sand.

I walked toward the same stairs Mae had walked up a moment before. Reaching them, I stopped and turned around to make sure I had collapsed all realities into this one. Convinced all was ready, I took the first step of seven steps.

I climbed the first step, and I heard the desert wind blowing across the stage.

Step up, I felt the hot dry wind on my face, felt it tussle my hair.

Step up, I saw the scrub oak, felt bits of sand pelting my cheeks.

Step up, there, in the middle of the stage, was the shed.

Step up, I felt the arena behind me disappearing.

Step up, the heat of the desert wrapped itself around me like the heated interior of a jacket.

The last step is the stage itself. As I made that last step, I became fully emersed. No longer a stage, the hard sand crunched underneath my feet and I made my way to the shed, just as I had as Cal.

It was now only a matter of being patient and waiting for Jefferies to appear. The thrill of finally being in control of my reality, taking control of my own life, imbued me with purpose and determination.

I entered the shack. The portal was still there. I moved toward the back of the shed, sat down on the dirt floor, brought my knees to my chest and waited, happy that the smile on my face was in anticipation of Jefferies return.

Chapter 30

The Vennier Jump Craft Company made an elegant jump craft, but even to her more refined taste, Jefferies Volta model jump craft was more elegant by an order of magnitude. Hoping everything was going according to plan and Zach was following behind, she thought how he'd react. He'd lose his mind if he saw the inside of the Volta.

Supple white leather couches in the back faced each other. Looking around the interior, she saw gold trim everywhere.

The interior of this craft is more expensive than my house, Mae thought.

“Good to see our tax dollars are being appropriated correctly,” she said.

Jefferies, not used to having somebody be openly sarcastic, did not pick up on it.

“Yes, well, the sacrifices we make as Counsel members carries far greater value than any luxury that is afforded us.”

“Don't you think this is a tad over the top?” She said, waving her hand inside the cabin.

“If there was crumbling infrastructure, no free medical aid available to all constituents, if there were soaring crime rates, I might agree with you. However, since all members of society lack for nothing, I see no problem with a few luxuries to those who sacrifice everything for those who are the benefactors of that sacrifice.”

“And tell me, Mr. Counselman, how has Alex been a benefactor of your sacrifice?”

Unfazed by her attack, Jefferies replied, “We shall soon see.”

Mae stared out the window, watching the city below slide past. She'd didn't have a clue where the prison complex was located, so it didn't raise alarm bells when the jump craft turned toward the residential sector.

It wasn't until they were over the sector itself, did she come to realize something seemed off.

"Where is this prison complex?"

"Don't worry, we're almost there."

Although she understood his words, they sounded muted. She turned her attention from the window, horrified to see his face covered with a mask which had a clear plastic tube running from the nose area to the side of the jump craft.

"Now, Xavier," Jefferies said.

A gas cloud came from the air vents in the craft's roof, drifting down in a white haze. Panic hit as she reached for the door handle. Locked. She held her breath, but knew she couldn't hold it forever.

In a last-ditch effort, she lunged toward Jefferies mask, but found there was a glass partition that separated them. She's been so involved in watching the city out the window, had focused her attention on not paying attention to Jefferies, she'd been unaware that a partition now cut her off from his side of the jump craft.

Instinct betrayed her. Forced her open to her mouth, she took in a deep breath. Immediately, she felt the effects of the gas. It felt cold in her lungs, but then became warm as it worked its way up to her mind. She felt dizzy, took in another breath and felt her eyes shutting. She fought to keep them open, but the deep fatigue washed upon her. Chemistry took over and forced her eyes closed.

The last thing she heard was Jefferies voice, muffled by the mask and muted, say, "Sleep well, Mae."

Five miles away, Zach wondered why Jefferies jump craft had veered toward the residential sector. Were they headed back toward Mae's place? He regretted not insisting on the recorder he'd hidden in the jump craft fob not have a transmitter so he could listen on what was going on, but Mae argued it was likely to be discovered which would ultimately put the whole plan at risk. He knew she was right, but now not only was the plan at risk, Mae herself was at risk.

As they entered the upscale sector, Zach was at least thankful that he was flying Mae's jump craft. It fit right in.

Jefferies jump craft slowed and spun down in altitude over a large green landscaped landing area next to a massive wood and stone craftsman style mansion. As much as he would've liked to follow, Zach continued on for several miles before making a slow, wide circle. By the time he could see the house, the jump craft had landed and Jefferies and Mae were now somewhere in the house.

Zach cursed himself for not thinking of this potential series of events. Of anybody, he was intimately knowledgeable of his brother's cunning. Knowing what his brother had done, his brother's brazenness and the evil intentions he was unafraid to employ that accompanied that brazenness came as no surprise.

One thing was certain. Zach would not fly in a lazy circle until something happened. The time to act was now. Even though he knew Mae would agree this was not the ideal time to play their hand, Jefferies had forced it and he had no choice but to play it.

He pushed the yoke forward and spun the jump craft down toward the large landing pad atop Jefferies residence.

Chapter 31

I was afraid to move. It had been a while since I sat down at the back of the portal, and curiosity was getting the better of me. I wanted to get up and investigate the mechanisms of the portal itself, but I was afraid if I diverted my attention onto something specific within the reality I had created, the spell would break and I'd lose that reality all together. The last thing I wanted was to regress back into the great ocean of nothingness.

Still, I didn't want to sit here and do nothing. If Jefferies should appear, would I see him emerge from the portal or would the operators of the mainframe perform a scan to be sure the entry port was clean before inserting him? Also, I was supposed to be in solitary. If Jefferies or Collins wanted to pay me a visit, I'd have to be removed and placed back into the construct Jefferies created.

Although I had a good handle on altering my point of view within multiple realities when I was alone in the theatre, I was struggling to differentiate between the multiple realities and how each one may or may not affect the others. While I knew what I was experiencing now was real, I also knew it was of my construct and there was a larger, more powerful construct that could overwrite this one.

Despite my misgivings, I got up from my hidden position and walked around the portal as I'd done during my first visit as my alter ego, Cal. Instead of looking to hack into it as I'd done, I wanted to look for a way I could sabotage it should I be lucky enough to be present when Jefferies made his way back.

I ran my hand across the cool, smooth metal rim, looking into the silver liquid of the pool.

The next instant, I was back in my cell, sitting on my cot.

What the hell had happened? Did the mainframe know I'd been there, or was my time in solitary confinement over?

I heard the familiar sound of heels on concrete making their way toward me, although the sound was different. These footfalls came at a quicker pace and were lighter of foot and a higher pitch.

I didn't get up off my cot, nor did I bother looking toward the cell door. Not wanting to give the impression I was an attention-starved dog locked in an animal shelter, I stared straight ahead at the concrete wall.

In my peripheral vision, I saw two people had made their way to the cell door. So, Jefferies and Collins revived their duo act. I wondered if Collins had worn a different dress shoe with a smaller heel, which would explain the variation in pitch I'd heard.

It wasn't until I heard muffled sounds of struggle that I finally turned my head toward the cell door. Standing next to Jefferies was Mae. Not Jefferies using the mainframe to emulate Mae, but Mae.

I knew it was her by the dress and the cardigan she was wearing.

On the first day I laid eyes on her, as she'd come down that escalator at the airport, she'd worn a black full-length summer dress, yellow cardigan and black sandals. Her brunette hair remained naturally wavy, not straightened. Although that had been 15 years ago, she'd bought a similar outfit whenever one wore out.

Her hands were bound at the wrist in front of her, and a gag pulled tight between her teeth muffled her cries of joy, sorrow, excitement and fear.

I bolted from my cot and slammed myself against the cell door, reaching my arm through to touch her.

She tried to do the same, but Jefferies grabbed a fistful of her hair and yanked her backward so she remained just out of reach.

“Now, now, let’s not get excited,” Jefferies said.

I looked into Mae’s eyes, trying to read them. Why was she here? How did she get here? What had happened? Were my fears being realized? I’d known there was a possibility of Jefferies going after Mae, who clearly hadn’t given him what he wanted either.

I didn’t know if she didn’t give it to him because she still didn’t know the information existed. There were only two answers. One - my attempt to reach her had failed, and she never received my email, or two, she had received it but had failed to use it against him.

In either case, having her here was not a good sign.

She was mumbling through her mask, but I couldn’t make out what she was saying.

“I love you,” I said.

She mumbled back, and I knew she said she loved too.

“It’s going to be alright,” I said, trying to sound confident.

“Isn’t this a pleasant reunion?” Jefferies said, still gripping Mae by the hair. “I’d hate to break up the party, but it appears we’re at a point of last negotiations.”

I stood silent, not taking my eyes off Mae.

“Look at me,” Jefferies said.

I kept my eyes locked on Mae. Jefferies yanked Mae’s hair, causing her head to twist to the side. As it did, he reached out with his free hand and slapped her hard. Her knees buckled, and I could hear her muffled yelp behind the gag as her eyes opened wide in shock.

Then I saw a fire light behind them as she straightened up and looked back at me. Tears formed at the corners of her eyes and I knew they were tears not born from pain, but from anger.

“Look at me,” Jefferies repeated.

Mae gave me the slightest shake of her head, telegraphing, “No! Don’t you dare let that man use me to get to you.”

Conflict tore me in two. I didn’t want to see her getting slapped, but I also didn’t want to betray her intentions, however brave they may be. If I looked at Jefferies, she’d taken the slap across the face for nothing. At least if I kept my eyes locked on her, we both would get a small margin of satisfaction in knowing Jefferies hadn’t broken us.

I kept my eyes on her.

Still standing in front of her, Jefferies turned from me, balled his fist and impaled it into her stomach.

She buckled over, the grip Jefferies had on her hair ripped the tuft of hair from her scalp, and she crumbled to the floor. She writhed in pain, the wind knocked out of her along with the gag in her mouth prevented her from taking in gasps of air her body desperately needed.

I wanted to yell out to her. Wanted to rush to her side, but I knew that even now, buried deep within her, the will to keep fighting remained and even though she couldn’t show it, by remaining silent and steadfast, I was doing the defiant action on her behalf.

She laid on the floor for several minutes before she gathered herself up off the hard concrete floor. With her hands bound in front of her, it was awkward trying to stand, but after several more minutes, she did. Tears were now streaming down her face.

“Look at me,” Jefferies said again.

Behind the fire of her eyes, I saw a glint of fear.

Then Jefferies changed tack. He reached up with the back of his hand and ran it softly over her reddened cheek. Mae turned her head away from his touch, yet kept her eyes on me.

Jefferies then lowered his hand and traced small circles on the lower part of her neck, running his fingertip along the boundary where the scooped collar of the sundress met her skin.

The look in Mae's eyes changed. A beating she could endure. This she could not. I could not.

I looked at Jefferies.

"There you are. This didn't have to be this hard," Jefferies said. I barely heard him. I just wanted him to remove his hand from Mae.

"Now that I have your full attention, we both have something the other wants."

The familiar feeling of helplessness trickled in icy rivulets down my spine. It was clear he was still intent on obtaining the information contained on the flash drive, which I realized would only be a matter of time before he would get. If that were the case, where did that leave Mae?

I let my mind tackle the problem, breaking them down into possible versus probable. Did Mae come here of her own volition? Possible, not probable. That meant she was likely forced here.

If forced here, would Jefferies let her return to the other side and allow her and Maxx to lead a normal life? Possible. That meant Jefferies intended on keeping her here, or would take her back and kill her.

Would he keep her here? Possible. Surely the rest of the Counsel didn't know this event was taking place. They'd never condone the action of a non-sanctioned constituent being inserted into the mainframe, especially since the purpose was to strong arm information from me.

Helplessness compounded exponentially, eroding the confidence I'd built in jumping through the levels of fractal reality.

I had an idea, felt the pendulum of advantage swinging back in my direction. I just needed to stall for a few minutes to complete my plan.

“Jefferies,” I said, “what is it you think I have that you need? Look at me, you’ve liberated me, and with that, you’ve taken everything.”

The wolf-like expression spread across his face, but for the first time, I saw a layer of fatigue behind it. I could tell he was near the end of how far he will go and no longer had the patience to play this game.

“I don’t think you understand the precarious nature you and Mae are in,” Jefferies said. “Do you really want to press your luck?”

The only thing I cared about now was getting Mae as close to the bars as I could.

“You’re right,” I said. “Of course, you’re right. I’ll give you what you need. All I ask is before I do, I need your assurance Mae will be alright. Give me your word when you have what you need, you’ll see she’s returned to the outside world and allowed to be free to raise our son.”

“You have my word,” Jefferies said.

“I’m gonna need proof I have your word,” I responded.

“What do you want?”

“I just want to kiss my wife one last time. I want to feel her skin on my cheek. Nothing more. You give me that, and I’ll give you what you want.”

Jefferies wolfish smile widened, yet he remained motionless, deliberating.

“What’s your angle, Alexander?” he asked.

“I don’t have an angle,” I replied. “You’ve worked with me for many years. You know first-hand, sometimes I advocated for surrender. Sometimes walking away is the best outcome in

the game of risk versus reward. In cutting your losses. In minimizing your exposure and thus your risk.”

Jefferies remained unmoved. “Look at me,” I continued. “I’m defeated. You’ve taken my body, you’ve taken my family, and here, in this cell, you’ve got me right where you want me. Now you’re literally holding the only thing remaining that means anything to me. You’ve won, Counselman.”

That was it. I had nothing else I could say. That was my Hail Mary pass. True, Jefferies needed the information I’d uncovered to ensure nobody would ever find out about his crimes, but more than that, he needed to win. To lose was to be weak. Not that he minded losing, so long as he could use those lessons to become better, stronger, not weaker, so over time, he would win. Winning was everything.

He remained motionless.

To my relief, he moved forward, pushing Mae forward.

I turned my attention from Jefferies to her. Her eyes have always been encyclopedic. She says volumes with them. Now, as she stumbled forward, they were asking questions, probing, pleading. Knowing me as intimately as I knew her, she knew I hadn’t really given up, knew that I wasn’t about to give Jefferies what he wanted, but she also didn’t know what I had in store.

I reached out through the bars and, as much as the bars allowed, wrapped my arms around her. She brought her face close, and I place my face next to hers. While I wanted to do nothing more than take a moment to swim in her delicious scent, to run my fingers through her luxuriant hair, now was not the time.

Making sure Jefferies remained behind her and to my left, I whispered in her opposite ear. “Get ready for some magic.”

She responded by giving me the smallest nod of her head.

“Press yourself as close to the bars as you can,” I said.

From Jefferies point of view, we were just two pathetic losers trying vainly to be connected once again. I needed just a few more seconds.

Reality is fluid, I reminded myself. I concentrated on that fluidity, specifically the bars that were pressed between Mae and myself. I imagined them to be just as fluid. The bars between us moved, hidden from Jefferies view. I heard Mae mumble something through her gag, but being focused, I didn't answer. Instead, I squeezed her harder toward me. Although she could not know how, she was smart enough to realize what was happening and responded with her own corresponding squeeze. The bars between us continued to move wider and wider apart.

Just a few more seconds.

“Okay, that’s quite enough,” Jefferies said as he pulled Mae toward him by her hair.

I looked down at the bars, which were just wide enough for me to squeeze through.

Before Jefferies could see or react, I lowered myself and squeezed through the narrow opening. Freed from the cell, I lunged at Jefferies.

His startled expression was exactly what I wanted to see. Gone was the wolfish predator, the man who was used to being large and in charge. The hunter was now the hunted. His look of shock was total and complete. So much so, he never saw my fist swinging toward him.

In a satisfying thud, I made solid contact, and he was out before he hit the floor.

Although I wanted to turn my attention back to Mae, I didn’t have a moment to lose. I ran

toward her, untied her hands, and removed her gag, then ran back to Jefferies and scooped his upper torso under his arms.

“Grab his ankles and help me get him into the cell. Quick!”

Without a word, she grabbed him by the ankles and together we slid him through the bars and into the cell. Using the rope and gag, I hogtied him, then made my way back out.

“Can you bend those things back too?” Mae asked, as if I’d bent metal bars all my life.

“Yes,” I said absentmindedly as I walked toward her and embraced her tightly. She squeezed back. I ran my fingers through her hair. It felt like I was home. Almost.

Pulling away from her, I asked, “How did you get here?”

Nodding her head toward Jefferies, she replied, “He convinced me he had information that would exonerate you. Told me I needed to see something at the in vitro prison complex, but then once aboard his jump craft, he gassed me.”

Looking at the bars of the cell, she asked, “How were you able to do that?”

“I don’t have time to explain now. We need to get you out of here. I need to get you back to the portal.”

“What about you?” Mae asked.

“There’s only one of two ways I’m gonna get outta here,” I said. “One is to find the portal that I’m linked to, like the one we’re going to take you. Even if I find the portal I’m linked to, it’s not like I can just waltz right on through the damn thing.”

“What’s the second way?” Mae asked.

“Did you get the email I sent you with the information?”

I know I’m biased as she’s my wife, but when Mae smiles, something inside of me comes alive, like an awakening of a deeper part of my love for her. I knew the answer before she said

it. I hadn't seen her smile since the day we'd left the obstetrician's office. Now, that smile shone through her face, and I became incandescent.

Although I wanted to bask in its radiance, I had to get things back on track. We needed to get a move on.

"Tell me you found the thumb drive and were able to do something with the information," I said.

"Yes, and no," she answered.

"Look, we gotta get moving. He's not gonna stay out forever, and although I suspect the mainframe operators turn a blind eye and don't monitor outputs while Jefferies is here, it won't stay that way forever."

I grabbed her hand and led her down the hallway. It was then I realized we had a problem. I knew I could alter my reality and jump to the point on the fractal where the shed and portal were located, but I didn't know how to do that with Mae in tow.

I stopped at the end of the hallway to regroup.

"What's wrong," Mae asked.

"I know how to get myself to the shack where your portal link is, but I'm not sure how to get you there. I had been at the shack right before you and Jefferies must've come through. Someone located me there and put me back in my cell a moment before you arrived with Jefferies."

Mae tilted her head to the side, her eyes quizzical, and said, "You could've said everything in Mandarin Chinese and it would've made just as much sense."

"I know," I said. "And you don't know the half of it."

Thinking about the problem at hand, I wondered if Mae and I were linked.

“Do you know how you got here?” I asked.

Mae thought about it for a second, then answered, “I was in the jump craft. I saw the gas, then I was out. The next thing I know, I’m standing in this dark, dirt-floored shack. My hands are bound, and I’ve got the gag in my mouth. Jefferies pushes me out the door and into a scorching desert. He hugs me, then the next thing I know where standing here, at the end of this hallway and he leads me to you.”

I understood Mae must be synched with whatever apparatus was used to insert Jefferies into the mainframe. Wherever Jefferies goes, she goes.

“I’ve got some good news and some bad news,” I said. “Which do you want to hear first?”

“The bad,” she answered.

“Where I’m going now, you cannot follow,” I said. “In order to get back to the portal, you’ll have to be with Jefferies. You, what you are right now, is a digitized computer-generated version of yourself. You’re digitally linked with Jefferies, which means I need to leave you with him.”

“You weren’t lying when you said you had bad news. What the hell is the good news?” she asked.

“The good news is, we’ve forced his hand. I know where he has to go. He only has one way in and out of the mainframe. Also, you’re linked with him, so wherever he goes, you go, meaning he can’t leave you behind.”

“That’s good news?”

“Yes. Since I know where he’s going and I know he has to take you with him, I’ll be able to cut him off at the pass.”

“But what if these, what did you call them, operators, locate you like they did before Jefferies and I arrived and send you back to your cell?”

“You don’t miss much, do you?”

“You’re avoiding.”

“That’s a risk we’ll have to take.”

I took her hand and led her back down the hallway to the cell. Once there, Jefferies was coming to, moaning, rolling his head from side to side.

“Quick,” I said, ducking into the cell. “We’ve got to get the gag and the tie back on you before he’s awake.”

I removed everything from Jefferies. Mae, like the strong woman she was, held out her hands, and I secured the tie around her wrists.

Before slipping the gag back into her mouth, I said, “Whatever happens, please know I love you...Now and For Always.”

Before waiting for a reply, I placed the gag in her mouth, turned from her, and ran back to the end of the hallway. I was free of the cell, now I needed to focus on staying free. I figured Jefferies would expect me to be waiting at the portal.

I just hoped I’d not missed any details.

Time would tell.

Chapter 32

Mae's scalp seared with the pain from being led by her hair. Once he'd regained consciousness, Jefferies had grabbed a fistful of it was dragging her toward the end of the concrete hallway, mumbling about showing Alexander what true pain and suffering would be about.

Despite the pain and gag, Mae smiled. It was a joy to see Jefferies out of control and in a rage because of it. While she understood the need for Alex to have gone ahead of them, she hoped Jefferies didn't have any other plans Alex wasn't aware of.

As they reached the end of the hallway, Jefferies pulled back hard, stopping Mae instantly. He walked up behind her, pressed himself tight against her back, and wrapped his arms around her chest.

The next moment they were outside, the dry wind blasting her face. 20 feet in front of her was a small shack, the one Alex had spoken about. He'd said he would be here, but she didn't see him standing anywhere.

Was he inside? She thought.

Still standing behind her, Jefferies yelled, "I know you must be in there, Alexander. Now be a good boy and come out of there."

Other than the arid wind whipping their hair and clothes, there was no other movement.

"You can come out of your own volition, or I can force you out. It's your choice," Jefferies said.

Nothing.

Mae knew if Alex was inside, he wouldn't be coerced outside.

“Your wife is a stunning woman, Alexander. Just because I’m not allowed a proper relationship does not negate the fact I have certain carnal needs.”

Bile rose in Mae’s throat. She saw only one of two things happening from this point. It would force Alex from the shack, forfeiting his advantage, or Jefferies would violate her in a way she was not willing to think about.

Other than the sand that sputtered and ticked at her heels, there was no movement. No Alex.

“No?” Jefferies asked. “You’re not willing to come out? I’ve got to say, I’m actually happy you’re being stubborn. Ever since meeting her, I’ve wondered what Mae looks like...really looks like. I guess now I’ll know.”

Surely Alex wouldn’t allow Jefferies to do what he was proposing? Mae thought. *Certainly, he would intervene.*

Nothing. No Alex.

Jefferies moved to face her, extracted a small knife from a pocket in his robe, and flipped open the blade. In one smooth motion, he grabbed the bottom of her sundress, pulled it taut, and sliced it from the bottom to the collar. He then pulled on each sleeve and sliced them open.

Searing heat from the sun burned her skin, while waves of humiliation from becoming exposed without her consent burned within her. Too stunned to move, she stood frozen in disgust as she watched Jefferies take a small step back and admire what he was seeing.

“What a wonderful start, don’t you think, Alexander?” he said. “I really hope you remain inside. I’d hate to stop the show now.”

Even with the heat searing her inside and out, Mae shivered. *Why was Alex not coming out? How far was he willing to let this go?*

Jefferies stepped forward and in one fluid motion, pulled the ribbons of her dress and dropped them onto the sand.

In nothing but her underwear, her hands bound, a gag in her mouth, the cornucopia of shame, humiliation, powerlessness, despair, embarrassment and anger all vied to be the predominant emotion. Hope was nowhere to be found.

Still no Alex.

Jefferies once more stepped back to appreciate his handiwork. “Well, lookie here. Matching black bra and underwear set. How lovely.”

Without another word, he took one step toward her. With the tip of the knife, he brushed it against the swell of her left breast. Despite her best efforts, Mae wept.

“Shhhh. No need to cry, Mae. This can all stop if Alexander simply comes out of the shack there.”

Sliding the cold steel of the blade underneath the cup of the bra, he used the back side of the blade to lift the shoulder strap, then lowered it again. “What do you say, Alexander? Would you like to come out, or would you like me to continue?”

There was no movement from the shack. With each second that ticked by, with each moment that she remained alone with Jefferies, she fought to remain positive, but standing before the personification of evil, bound and gagged, in her underwear, that was becoming impossible.

Alex must've not been able to make it, she thought.

She wouldn't allow herself to think he was inside the shack and had allowed Jefferies to go as far as he'd already gone. The Alex she knew would he ever allow that to go on.

Jefferies moved to stand next to Mae, silent as a church mouse, waiting.

*

I had set the trap. Mae was the bait. I'd put all my marbles on this plan, but sitting alone in the shack waiting for them, my mind spun with the alternative moves Jefferies could make.

I wondered if he could contact either Collins or an operator from inside the mainframe. He and Collins had appeared together, but was that a function of pre-planning or had Jefferies called upon Collins once inserted?

The fact I remained inside the shack led me to believe Jefferies did not have access to the mainframe other than as a secondary operator, one that could only alter the programing either before or after being a part of it, not during his time in it.

He'd not planned on me having the ability to alter where I was or what was going on within the fractals of this reality, much less had any idea that fractals even existed. Still, the more time that passed, the more anxious I was getting. It was taking Jefferies and Mae longer to arrive than I expected. They should've been here by now. Had something gone wrong?

I heard a faint rustling outside, something moving other than the wind and the tick-tack sound of sand peppering the side of the shack wall. It was a crunch, maybe a footfall on hard sand?

I had positioned myself next to the door. Peering through a crack between the boards, I saw Jefferies and Mae standing outside.

Letting out a long sigh of relief, I knew I had the advantage. Now I just needed to stay steadfast and let them come to me.

I could see Jefferies talking, saw his mouth moving, but the sound of the wind along with the pitter-pat of the sand hitting the outside of the wood made hearing what he said impossible. It was safe to assume he was telling me to come out.

To my horror, I watched him turn his back to me, bend down, and slice Mae's dress from the bottom to the top. Every impulse I had screamed for me to run to her. The fibers of my muscles twitched in anticipation of sprinting to her rescue.

I had to choke the instinct down.

It repulsed me when he removed the sliced remnants of her dress and threw it onto the ground. Rage pounded in my head at seeing her forced to stand in her bra and underwear, seeing her knees sag and her shoulders hunch as she cried. I knew she was close to breaking.

The war within reached a crescendo. How could I allow this madness to continue? It took every ounce of willpower to remain hidden, knowing that once I came out of the shed, the temporary suffering would end, but the eternal suffering would begin.

Remaining hidden was the only play I had. I knew at some point he had to enter the shack. There was no other choice. At least that was clear to me now.

He stood silent and unmoving next to Mae. I focused my attention on her. She stood up straighter, and I saw a familiar resolution burning bright in her eyes. If I had to guess, she'd realized Jefferies may want to take things to the next horrific level, and she'd just resolved to make that as difficult as possible.

The seconds turned into minutes. Jefferies remained standing motionless next to Mae. As each second ticked by, my confidence grew exponentially. I knew without a doubt he'd played his hand. He had no intention of going any further with Mae. He was only hedging his bets. It had become clear he had no connection with anyone outside the mainframe.

If what I suspected was true and he'd demanded privacy while in the mainframe, he'd cut himself off from any help if needed. That also meant they wouldn't be looking for me, or even if

they knew I was here, it was likely they dismissed my presence as something Jefferies had wanted.

The only unknown that remained was whether Jefferies had established a check-in time. If he didn't contact Collins, or check in by a certain time, would they'd come looking? If that were the case, all Jefferies would have to do is stand there with a half-naked lady until he felt enough time had elapsed.

I was betting there was no check-in time procedure and he would grow impatient. I hedged my own bets he would come into the shack sooner rather than later.

*

Jefferies was fairly certain Alexander was inside the shack waiting for him, but he couldn't be entirely sure. If he wasn't here, the only other place he could've gone was in search of his own portal.

That would not be his best play and so far, Alexander had played the game well. How he'd been able to get out of the cell, he wasn't certain, but for the first time he felt the twinge of fear niggling at the nape of his neck.

He knew he had to make a choice. He'd overplayed his hand with Mae and knew he had to get inside the shed and back to his residence.

He just hoped enough time had elapsed and the operators or Jefferies had found Alexander and dealt with him accordingly.

He gave Mae a shove toward the shack. As they reached the door, he pressed himself tight against her back, not wanting any separation between them. If Alexander remained in the shack, whatever he tried to do, Mae would act as a shield.

"Open the door," Jefferies said to Mae.

She reached out and pulled the door toward her. As soon as it got halfway open, the wind caught the exposed surface, and it slammed against the side of the wall with a loud thud.

“Go on,” Jefferies said with a nudge of his hips, “nice and easy now.”

Mae crossed the threshold of the doorway and stepped into the deep shadow of the interior. Jefferies held her tight. He realized there would be several seconds he’d be blind until eyes adjusted to the dim light within the shed. The only comfort was the portal was not situated too far inside.

Somewhat relieved as Mae, now fully inside the shack, remained close to him and nothing had attempted to pull her away, he entered the inky shadow of the shack until he, too, was fully emersed. Still, nothing moved.

Although he and Mae were inserted into the mainframe simultaneously, getting back to the other side was a different affair. They would have to go back one at a time, and the question he’d been wrestling with was who should go first.

Thinking about this quandary distracted Jefferies enough he didn't register the single crackle of a footfall directly behind him. Although he’d pressed himself close to Mae to shield a frontal assault, he was exposed from behind. He felt something hard wrap around his neck and squeeze.

Instinctively, he let go of Mae and reached up to remove whatever had attached itself around his neck. He could feel it was an arm, knew the arm belonged to Alexander.

Unable to take a breath, he saw the circle of unconsciousness appear at the periphery of his vision. Before it closed completely, his last thought was how delicious retribution was going to be for this outrage.

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Releasing his limp body, Jefferies crumpled to the ground in a satisfying heap. I stepped over him and embraced Mae, who had been running toward the back of the shack.

Caught up in her fight-or-flight response, not realizing Jefferies had become nothing more than a lump of flesh and bone skewed in awkward angles on the floor, she fought against me, not realizing it was me.

“Shh, Baby Doll. I’ve got you. It’s me,” I whispered in her ear, holding her fast.

She immediately stopped thrashing. I pulled her away and saw her wide eyes first look upon me with relief, then filled with anger. She had every right to be.

I pulled the gag from her mouth and untied her hands for what I hoped to be the last time.

“Of all the times to sit and not do a damn thing while this lump of shit humiliated me, how dare you, you’re just, I just,” she said. She was so angry she couldn’t get a full phrase out.

“I know, I know,” I said, keeping my voice soft. “But had I come out of here, both of us would be trapped in this God forsaken mainframe, never to escape. That would’ve left Maxx without either of his parents. I knew I had to at least get you back, even if that meant doing nothing.”

I turned from her. Using the gag and the tie to bound Jefferies again, I let her process the situation.

“Still, I don’t know how you could’ve sat here and let him do what he did!”

“Would it make it any better,” I replied, “to know that it was the hardest thing I’ve ever had to do. Believe me, I wanted to come out there. If the roles were reversed, I know you’d have done the same thing. Besides forfeiting my advantage, I was unsure if I’d be exposed to detection by being out in the open. I’m thinking proximity to the portal creates a blind spot.”

She looked at me, her eyes softened. Satisfied that Jefferies wasn't going anywhere, I pulled her close once more and held her.

After several moments, I whispered, "We're almost there. We're doing good. Now it's on to the next part of the plan."

Pulling away from me, Mae looked at me. Her eyes were back to being bright and lovely. "And what does that entail?" she asked.

"Well," I said, "first things first. You need to go through this portal here. I don't know where you are on the other side, but wherever you are, when you wake up, I'm going to need you to get to the prison complex."

"The prison complex?" she asked. "Why there? Shouldn't I go to the Counsel or the constabulary?"

"No," I said. "As crazy as this is gonna sound, liberation isn't real."

She stared at me unblinking, incomprehension pushing the corners of her features until scrunched with confusion.

"I know," I continued. "The whole idea, the whole propagation of information about liberation, is false. They didn't take my brain, Mae. My body is still mine. I've seen it. I don't know how it works, but I believe it's the same process that allows you to be here and still have your physical body back on the other side."

She blinked, tried to mumble a few words, but the news was jolting.

"You've got to believe me, Mae. And that's why you need to get to the prison complex. Just like this portal allows you entry and exit to the mainframe, my portal is there. That's where I'll need to get to on this side of things and why I need you there on that side. Once I return to my body, I'll need your help."

“I, I’m, I’m not sure I quite understand,” Mae said.

“I know it’s a lot to take in, but of anybody, I know you can handle it. In a nutshell, everything you and I are experiencing right now in this moment, we’re experiencing together, but only in our minds. We’re linked by a computer mainframe. Think of it like we’re both lying in bed sleeping. We’re both dreaming the same dream and able to share that dream-like experience. The only twist is that those who are in control of the dream can alter the dream as they see fit.”

“But you’re sleeping in another bedroom,” Mae said, understanding, “which in this case is in the prison complex,” she said.

“You got it.”

“What if you can’t find your portal?” she asked.

“I may not need it. Once you get back to the other side and you make your way to the complex, the information on the flash drive, along with the evidence of our friend here, you’ll have plenty that will force their hand and agree to your demand they revive me. It will only be a matter of who will get there first. You’ll either beat me there, or I’ll find my portal.”

“What if they don’t listen to me or think I’m some looney?”

“They won’t. Just tell them that Jefferies abducted you and illicitly inserted you into a state-run program without authorization or consent from the rest of the Counsel. Tell them you fought back, and you have proof by telling them where this lump of shit remains tied up,” I said, kicking my foot at Jefferies.

“I don’t want to leave you here,” Mae said.

“Believe me, I wish there was another way, but there isn’t. Now, we’ve got to move.”

I indulged in one last hug, allowing the familiarity of her embrace to perfuse into me. We held each other for several moments before I stepped back and turned her around, guiding her toward the portal.

“Thank you for coming for me,” I said.

“I had help,” she replied, turning back around to face me. “Turns out Jefferies here has a long-lost brother he tried to kill when he killed the rest of his family.”

I wanted to hear the rest, but knew we didn’t have time. “Huh. I’m not surprised. I can’t wait to hear the rest of that story, but for now, you’ll have to save the juicy details until we get out of this mess.”

We made our way and stopped just short of the portal. Mae turned to face me.

“I love you, Alex.”

The entire moment cascaded upon me, stunning me into silence. Here we both were, projections of our real selves in a mainframe program, she in nothing but her underwear, in the middle of the craziest prison break ever attempted.

“I love you too, Mae.”

With that, she turned and went through the portal and was gone.

Chapter 33

After landing next to Jefferies jump craft, Zach remained in the Vennier, waiting for something to happen. Although not 100% certain, he figured this was Jefferies private residence. Looking at the manicured lawn and the architecture of the house, disdain for what his brother had become bubbled to the surface.

Choking down his emotion, Zach dialed in, focusing his attention on the task at hand. Figuring security on a Counselman's private residence would be tight, he guessed he'd have less than 5 minutes to make an escape should the constabulary become alerted to his unauthorized visit.

After sitting for a full minute with no security sentry or any incoming communication inquiring the reason for his visit, Zach decided it was time to act.

Perhaps Dear Brother is too busy to notice I'm even here. He thought.

He pulled an ancient handheld computer from his pocket and loaded a program he wrote which allowed it to synch with any AI in order to distract it with what amounted to electronic white noise long enough for him to get a peek in the windows and see what was going on.

He initiated the program, steeled himself, opened the jump craft's gull-wing door and trotted toward the house. No alarms sounded. All was quiet.

An elevator that led to the interior of the house stood at the end of the landing pad. Next to the elevator, a set of stairs led to the ground level. Bypassing the elevators, he bounded down the stair two at a time until he found himself on the front lawn. He crossed the lawn and headed toward an uncovered window.

Reaching the window, he cupped his hands on either side of his face and peered inside. Ornate white leather furniture sat in a room that had clearly seen the hand of an interior designer. Other than the furniture, he saw no movement, just a still house.

Stepping away from the window, he saw another window further down the side of the house, but it was further away from the relative safety of the stairs he'd just come down. Each step he took away from those stairs was one more step he'd need to take if he needed to make a retreat.

He looked at his handheld. It was still showing green. His AI program was doing its job. Once the program felt things were deteriorating, his screen would flash yellow, which would give him about 60 seconds to bail.

Deciding to take the risk, he sprinted toward the other window. Although covered by curtains, there was a wide enough slit to see inside. Cupping his hands around his face once more, he peered inside. He could only make out about a third of the room, but could tell it was nothing more than a room whose walls were lined with shelves with odd trinkets.

He glanced at his screen. Still green. To go around the side or back of the house, he knew he wouldn't get back to the jump craft within the 60 seconds he felt he needed.

The longer you stand here mulling this over, he thought to himself, the more time is being wasted.

He turned from the window and ran around the corner to the side of the house, which only had one small window high up the wall. Figuring it was a bathroom, he didn't bother, but kept running down the side of the house until he turned the corner and came to the first window on the backside of the house. The blinds were open, and he stopped dead in his tracks.

He knelt down and took a step back and pressed his back against the wall taking one last glance at his handheld. Still green.

He turned his head and peeked into the room.

He saw Mae and Jefferies. Both of them were lying on full-length lounges, each with a cap on their heads. Between each lounge, sitting atop a small table, was a machine manned by somebody whose back faced the window.

That's why the AI is being distracted so easily, Zach thought. With the primary occupant home, and guests in the house, security had become a background running feature, one his AI could keep distracted for as long as needed.

Still, Zach was unsure how to proceed. He didn't know what was going on, had never seen the type of machine that was sitting between the two loungers. He looked at Mae, who appeared asleep and under no duress, and although Jefferies looked to be in the same state as Mae, Zach didn't believe all was fine and dandy. But it wasn't like he could just knock on the door and...

"Or could I?" Zach said to himself.

The man who had his back to the window turned to the side to adjust Jefferies cap. Zach inhaled with shock, recognizing it was Niles.

"That son of a bitch!"

Zach turned from the window and ran back around to the front of the house, toward the front door. Reaching it, he pressed the com button, taking one more glance at his handheld, which now flashed yellow. He didn't know how long ago it had gone from green to yellow, but he'd reached the point of no return. Putting the handheld away, he pressed the com button again.

“May I help you?” the AI said through an unseen speaker.

“Yes, my name is Zachary Muhly. I have information that one of the current guests of Counselman Jeffries is being held against her will. I’m an attorney representing her and I’m sure the information I have is not true, however I would be remiss if I didn’t at least follow up on it. I’m therefore requesting entry so I may determine the well-being of my client or I will be forced to inform the constabulary that the Counselman is in violation of the law and is resisting proper protocol.”

If he’d spewed more crap before this moment, he couldn’t recall, but Zach was pleased with what he’d said.

Several moments passed, then the door slid open.

“Please come in. The Counselman is in the back spare room with his guests.”

Zach burst through the open door, ran down the hallway toward the back corner of the house. Once at the closed door he stopped, put his ear to it and listened. He heard nothing.

He put his hand on the doorknob, slowly turned it, happy it was unlocked.

Knowing he’d be entering from Jefferies side of the room, he unholstered his plasma pistol, made sure the safety was off, and burst through the door.

Pointing the pistol at Niles, Zach said, “Stop what you’re doing and put your hands on top of your head.”

Startled, Niles jumped back, tripping on the chair he’d been sitting on.

“Niles, just what in the hell is this? What the hell have you done?”

Crumbled on the floor, it took a moment for Niles to gather himself and stand with his hands in the air.

“This is not what it seems, believe me. You don’t understand. Counselman Jefferies blackmailed me. I had no choice.”

“First thing,” Zach said, “get those damn hands up on top of your head.”

Nile complied. The fear on his face was clear. Then, to Zach’s surprise, it looked as if there was a sense of relief.

“Now, what the hell is this? What have you done?”

“After you came to see me, Counselman Jefferies summoned me here. He wanted one of these,” he said, pointing to the machine sitting on the table between the lounges. “I didn’t know what it was about until, of course he wanted me to operate it, which I’ve never done, but he didn’t want to enlist yet another person to keep track of so he forced my hand and made me do it.”

Zach had interviewed thousands of people throughout his career and had come across every type of liar there is. He’d become adept at knowing when somebody was slinging the bull or when they were being straight. Niles was being straight.

“Did he inquire about us?” Zach asked.

“Yes,” Niles answered. “Except I told him that Mae was a reporter, and I gave him a false name. I said nothing about you or your involvement.”

Zach believed him. Looking at Mae, Zach asked, “What’s the deal here? What’s going on? Is she asleep?”

Glancing down at her, Niles replied, “Yes and no. This machine is used to synch her and Jefferies to the in vitro prison mainframe. Jefferies is hellbent on using Mae to get to Alex.”

“Can you bring her back?”

“Sure, but since Jefferies had already set up an entry point in the mainframe, she has to come back through the same portal and she can only do that as long as Jefferies is with her.”

Zach was having a hard time following what was being explained. “So, can you, or can’t you?”

The machine beeped, interrupting whatever Niles was going to say. He turned toward the machine and frowned.

“Huh,” he said.

“Huh, what?” Zach asked.

“It looks like Mae has left the mainframe, but Jefferies has remained behind.”

Jumping on the opportunity, Zach said, “Get over there and do whatever you need to do to get Mae back. Just don’t do anything stupid. I’m standing right here and will keep this pistol aimed right at your head.”

Niles took a quick step to the machine, sat back down, and began typing commands on a keyboard. The beeping stopped. Next, he pulled up a display and, using the buttons that had appeared on it, pushed and swiped.

On the couch, Mae moaned and squirmed a bit.

“She’s coming around,” Niles said.

Zach looked at Jefferies, who remained inert. Several more minutes passed and Mae opened her eyes. Zach had positioned himself behind Niles. Mae’s eyes were still unfocused, disoriented, but as soon as she saw Zach standing there holding a pistol, her eyes widened.

“Zach?” she mumbled.

“Don’t worry, Mae,” he whispered. “Everything’s cool. You’re going to be just fine.”

“Where am I?”

“You’re in what I believe to be Jefferies private residence,” Zach answered.

Turning toward Niles, another look of surprise came over her. “Who the hell is that, and what the hell is he doing?”

“At the moment,” Zach answered, “he’s helping you, but he had been under orders from Jefferies to put you in the in vitro prison mainframe.”

“Yes,” Mae said. “I was there. I saw Alex. He rescued me. He’s still there, but we need to go. We need to get to the prison complex and get him out.”

Zach wondered if she’d suffered some kind of mental break. Being synched with both Jefferies and the prison mainframe couldn’t be good for the old noodle, but he didn’t want to remind her that Alex was not coming back.

Ignoring her, Zach said to Niles, “Get that cap off her. Will she be okay, or is there something that you need to do?”

Turning toward Mae, Niles reached over and gently pulled the cap off her head. “Nope, this is it,” he said.

“Can you tell where Jefferies is now?” Zach asked Niles.

Turning back to the machine, he typed a few things, then turned to the screen. “He’s near the portal, but I’m getting a very weak location signal,” Niles answered.

“That’s because Alex knocked his ass out,” Mae said as she sat up and swung her legs over the side of the lounge chair.

Zach held out a hand to help her up. Then said to Niles, “Is there a way you can keep him unconscious?”

“Well, technically,” Niles said, “he’s not really unconscious. He’s a part of a mainframe, and he’s little more than data points. How Alex could render him unconscious is a bit of a mystery, but then again, I’m a novice at this.”

Regarding Niles with a look of disgust, Mae moved behind Zach. “I don’t trust this guy, Zach. I saw Alex do things I can’t explain. He could bend metal and could get from inside the prison cell to the portal, which was inside a shack in the middle of a desert. He’s obviously figured out some way of manipulating data and could knock Jefferies out.”

Turning around, Niles said, “If what you’re saying is true, Alex must’ve figured out how to become a part of the mainframe itself, integrated himself with it in order to manipulate the reality of the program.”

“Whatever he may or may not have done,” Zach said, putting his priority back on track, “can you keep Jefferies from waking up or better still, is there a way to keep him from entering the portal and getting back here?”

Looking at Zach, Niles answered, “I honestly don’t know. I’m not a licensed practitioner. Like I said, Jefferies had come to me to get this machine, then to limit the number of people he needed, he forced me to operate it. And while it’s relatively simple and mostly automated, I’m not versed enough to manipulate things manually.”

“What if you just unplug the damn thing?” Mae asked.

“Again, I’m not entirely sure, but I think there's built in security measures that will transfer to battery power in case of a power outage. Beyond that, I believe that should a power failure should be imminent, the machine would bring Jefferies back.”

“Alex tied Jefferies up and made sure he couldn't get to the portal,” Mae said. “I also wouldn’t be surprised if Alex disabled the portal once I’d gone through.”

“Alright,” Zach replied, “we need to get outta here. Niles, I’m afraid your current employer is unavailable at the moment and we’re poaching you. Now, if you’ll kindly put your hands behind your back, you’re coming with us.”

Niles stood, turned around and without complaint placed his hand behind his back, to which Zach placed a pair of shock cuffs on.

With Niles in front, Zach behind him, and Mae in the rear, the three of them left the house, got into Mae’s jump craft and headed off toward the prison complex.

Chapter 34

After double checking the knots were secure and Jefferies wasn't going anywhere, I stepped from the shack and into the harsh desert sun. Having been inside the shed for a protracted period, I closed my eyes against the bright desert sun.

After several moments, I looked toward the mountain range far off in the distance. Although I had a pretty good idea of where my portal was located, the key to my plan was speed. And the key to speed was for the mainframe to know I was not where I should be.

Knowing it was only a matter of time until they spotted me, I ran toward the mountain range in the distance. A short while later, I stopped, turned around and looked at the shed far off in the distance. I pictured Jefferies inside. By now I was certain he'd regained consciousness, or the semblance of consciousness in this place, and was lying in a tangled mass of constrained limbs.

When I turned back around toward the mountain range, they were gone. I smiled knowing I'd been located, and I didn't bother taking another step.

The next moment, as predicted, I was back in my cell, sitting on my cot. If I'd had my watch that Mae had given to me for our 15th wedding anniversary, and antique Omega, I'd have stared at the second hand sweeping around the blue face, counting the seconds until I heard Collins, clad in his ridiculous shoes.

Instead, I counted. I got to 20, then heard the tippity-tap of his man heels. I got up off the cot and made my way to the door to greet him.

"It seems you've been quite a bad boy," Collins said once he'd reached the cell.

Collins looked tired, haggard, even.

“Yes, that’s what you and Jefferies keep telling me,” I said.

“Did you not learn anything during your spell of solitary?”

“Oh, I learned many things,” I replied.

It was clear Collins was not expecting me to be as verbally assertive as I was. He put his hands behind his back and rocked back and forth from his heels to his toes. I was sure if I blew hard enough, I’d be able to knock him over.

“Why were you wandering around in the desert?” Collins asked.

“Why don’t you ask Jefferies,” I countered. “He’s the one who took me there.”

Collins continued to rock back and forth. His eyes closed for several seconds.

Finally, he opened them and asked, “You expect me to believe that Jefferies took you out to the desert?”

“I’m only answering your question, Warden. You asked me why I was out in the desert and I answered you. I cannot answer for Jefferies as to his motivations behind anything, much less tell you why he took me there. I’m also at a loss why a man in your position would wear a pair of shoes such as those.”

Collins stopped rocking back and forth and looked down at his shoes. He brought his hands from behind his back and brought them to the front, interlocked his fingers as he took one step toward the bars.

Wanting to keep him mentally off balance, I continued, “While it was nice to get out of this dank cell, I found the desert to be, I dunno, too hot for my taste.”

“And Jefferies just left you there?” Collins asked.

“Again, I cannot speak to the what or why Jefferies did. Perhaps the desert was his pathetic attempt at a simulated remembrance period.” I answered. “Between you and me, Warden, I think he was trying to blackmail me.”

“Blackmail you?”

“Indeed. Jefferies is one sick little shithead. He brought my wife, Mae, into your mainframe to extort information from me. If I had to guess, he took me out to the desert so you or your operators couldn’t listen in on what he was really up to. He mentioned something about instructing you not to monitor his actions while synched with the mainframe. I was sure he was lying as a ploy to instill fear in me, but now I’m not so sure.”

The look of shock that came over Collins face revealed everything I needed to know. I was on the right track.

“So, it should be no surprise to you, Warden,” I continued, “that Jefferies was up to no good, but as I’ve already alluded, you already know that, don’t you? You’re here because you don’t know where Counselman Jefferies is.”

From his reaction I knew I’d hit the piñata on his emotional sweet spot. All I needed was the candy of his words to spill out.

“Until I can locate Jefferies and figure out what the hell is going on inside *my* mainframe, I’m relegating you to an indefinite period of remembrance.”

Oh, how the candy flowed. His words were like milk and honey. I knew once he activated the remembrance it was only a matter of time until I made my way through the mainframe and back to my portal.

Collins turned without another word, walked back down the hallway and disappeared from sight. I turned around and looked at the cell that had become my way-point in this

simulated reality. How this small portion of the larger fractal seemed like a haven. How ironic that the place I'd feared had become a place of security.

Despite the sentimentality, I couldn't wait for the remembrance to begin and to say goodbye to this place. Mae was my home, and it was time to go home. In a flash, it was gone and like before, I became everything and nothing. I saw the image of a brain floating in a jar. It was laughable now, and I knew my last journey had begun.

Soon, I saw the familiar flashes of my thoughts, firing like lighting, all over, then I became my thoughts and followed them up and over and around the convolutions of my mind, knowing I'd successfully merged with the information loop.

Unlike my previous sojourn through my consciousness, progress toward the mass of lights that was inside the portal was much quicker. The conglomeration of light was becoming brighter. I churned along the stream, the light becoming intense.

Then I stopped. Instead of keeping pace with the stream of light, it now rushed past me with hurricane-force winds. I looked up and saw the blackness from where I knew I'd come. The portal was directly above me. I projected my consciousness toward it. As I did so, I became aware I was moving toward it. The eye grew in circumference as I ascended. Then in a rush of motion as I was sucked upward into a black abyss as total and complete as the solitary confinement.

Instead of suffocating claustrophobia, I felt peace, a sense of belonging, a familiarity with my inner surroundings. I'd made it back and knew I'd successfully synched with my body.

I was whole.

Chapter 35

Collins sat at his desk, eyes closed, rubbing his temples in a small circle, trying to press the throbbing from within back into his skull. After returning from the mainframe, he'd been unsuccessful in locating Jefferies. The system showed he remained synched, but it could not provide any location to his whereabouts within it. It was like he'd disappeared.

Although unlikely, he contemplated whether Jefferies could've become a residual, a phantom of data that on rare occasions stayed behind, although he'd already departed the mainframe. If that were true, if a miniscule trace of data remained in the system, it would erroneously show he was still there. As he reached for his desk com, there was a light knock on his door.

"Warden," his assistant said. "There are people here that insist on seeing you."

Who in the world would be here to see me? He thought.

"I was not aware of any appointments. I'm in the middle of something important," he replied.

There was a commotion on the other side of the door, then it burst open, slamming against the wall. Collins jumped from his chair as two men rushed in, followed by Mae Donovan. His headache went from pounding to splitting. This was not good.

Trying to gain a measure of control, Collins said, "What the hell is this all about?" Then, looking at his assistant said, "Get the constabulary on the phone, now!"

One of the two men who'd come in turned toward his assistant, drew a plasma pistol from inside his coat, and said, "Get in here and close the door."

The pistol trumped Collins command.

“Now!” the man with the pistol said.

Once the assistant was inside and the door had been closed, Mae stepped forward and leaned on the edge of the desk.

“You know who I am, but you’re wondering why I’m here,” she said.

Collins looked at her, at a loss for words.

“Let me fill you in,” she said.

She reached into the front pocket of her trousers and pulled out a rectangular piece of plastic that Collins deduced was the flash drive Jefferies was after. Collins eyes widened with recognition.

“Yes, I’m sure you know what this is. What I don’t think you know is what it contains. If you did, you wouldn’t be so eager to have the constabulary here.” She leaned forward a bit more, and said, “If you knew what this drive contained, you’d want to be as helpful as possible to build your case and protect yourself from prosecution.”

Trying to gain a semblance of control, Collins pointed to a chair next to Mae. “Please, why don’t you sit down and tell me what it is you have in mind.”

Mae smiled, put the flash drive back in her pocket and turned toward Niles and Zach, who kept the pistol pointed at Collins. To the assistant Mae said, “Why don’t you join your boss on his side of the desk.”

When he had, Mae sat down.

“Now then,” Collins said, “how may I be of service?”

Mae leaned back into the chair, smiled, then said, “I need you to take me to where my husband’s body is located. Then I’ll require that your technicians bring him back.”

With only one card left to play, Collins said, “I’m sorry, but that’s impossible. Your husband was liberated.”

Mae’s smile grew even wider.

“I’m going to explain your choices,” she said. “They’re very simple. You can either take me to where Alex is being stored and bring him back, or my friends here will call the constabulary and we’ll turn over the flash drive and show how Counselman Jefferies robbed the state of hundreds of millions of credits and falsely implicated my husband to cover his tracks. We’ll also be able to show how you aided and abetted Counselman Jefferies, allowing him unrestricted access to a public domain in order to torture my husband and try to extort information using me to reveal the location of the data that would implicate him.”

Whatever smile Collins tried to keep melted. He rubbed the side of his temple.

“Further,” Mae went on, “I think if the world came to know the falsehoods that are being perpetuated regarding the true nature of liberation, there will be a public outcry to such a degree that politicians, being politicians, will rid themselves of such a toxic thing and you’ll be out of a job. Everything you’ve worked for will be gone and you’ll have nothing to fall back on, and that’s if they don’t prosecute you and send you to Luna. Now it’s up to you, but I think the only smart move is to help us, wouldn’t you think?”

Knowing there was no way out, Collins brought his other hand up and rubbed his other temple. After several seconds, he slowly stood up. “If you’ll follow me, I’ll show you to the storage area where your husband is being kept.”

Mae stood, the smile never leaving her face. “You’ve made the right choice.”

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Where there was nothing, now, there is something. The nothingness wasn’t as deep, but instead I sensed a shallowness. More of a veneer of dark rather than an abyss. I felt I was floating through it, but was close to the surface.

Now aware of that awareness, it was curious how the blackness was becoming different. Not lighter, but morphed from black to an inky purple. I continued to float upward, the purple becoming increasingly lighter. What was this?

Then I remembered. It was sleep, or rather those rare occasions when you’re awake enough to know you’re asleep but coming out of it. Where you become conscious of a light source outside yourself, yet can tell it’s penetrating your inner world as well.

I wanted to open my eyes, but my eyelids did not obey. It felt like something was holding them closed.

“Take the tape off,” I heard Mae say.

It was her voice, not a set of complex data synthesized and piped into my auditory cortex, but actual sound vibrations that carried salvation through the air separating me from her. Not a fractal of reality, but only the thin sheen of skin of my eyelids blocked my view of her.

I smelled her. She must be leaning toward my ear. She smelled of cucumber melon body spray. It was intoxicating.

“Alex,” she whispered. “Hang in there. You’re back. You’re safe.”

I felt her lips on my cheek.

I hardly noticed the pull and rip of the tape off my eyelids.

And there she was, standing over me, smiling that beautiful smile.

I wanted to smile, wanted to sit up, wanted to embrace her, but I realized a fatigue in my body I’d never known. Feeling more than weak, deeper than feeble, I felt a fragility, as if my bones were not hardened calcium but hollow tubes of glass that would shatter if I moved too quickly.

She leaned in close to me. “Can you talk?”

The urge to speak was there, but I couldn’t. The energy was not there.

“Can you blink?”

The will to communicate provided the push. I blinked.

I saw her smile a smile that I hadn’t seen in over a year. A smile that disappeared the day we lost Christian. The smile that leveled me.

Then I heard another voice, one that came outside my circle of vision. The voice of Collins. A rush of memories flooded my fatigued mind. I saw everything play out. Mae had been with me in the mainframe. I'd sent her back, and Collins had gone looking for Jefferies, and I'd made it back. Mae had done it, and was here with me.

"It'll take a few hours for the effects to wear off," I heard him saying.

We didn't have a few hours. The rush of accomplishment in successfully escaping the mainframe, in getting Mae back safe, was diluted by the knowledge Jefferies was still in the mainframe and I didn't know how long he could remain.

I mustered all the energy I could, focusing it all on speaking, but the only thing I heard was a raspy whisper. Mae, seeing me struggle, leaned in.

As if she were reading my mind, she said, "Don't worry. We've got the situation handled on this side. Jefferies isn't going anywhere."

We? I thought. Who's we?

"Now, from what I'm being told, you need to allow yourself to come to naturally. Forcing things will only delay it. So, I need you to listen. You just go back to sleep. There's nothing to worry about. This time, it's just sleep. Good recuperative sleep. A good couple of hours will make a world of difference."

I felt her fingertips running along my forehead. They felt wonderful, soothing. I wanted to argue, but had neither the voice nor the energy to do so. Although I craved answers, I succumbed to the river of sleep and felt myself slip into its gentle waters and floated off into blissful rest.

*

When I awoke, I felt like a new man.

I didn't have to focus all my energy on the simple task of opening my eyes. When I did open them, Mae was not standing above me. Instead, I was staring at a dimly lit, textured ceiling. I got the sense they had moved me.

I lifted my head, but it weighed a ton. I put it back down, rolled it to the left and right, which was much easier to do as there was at least a little of gravity to help me. To my left, about 3 feet away, was a wall. I moved my head to my right. I could see Mae sitting in a chair. Around her, two men, neither of which I recognized, stood on either side.

With no way to tell how much time had passed since I first awoke to now, I got the impression Mae had on the same outfit, but I couldn't be sure. I tried to raise my hand, but it felt as if it was filled, not with flesh and bone, but with molten lead. I could raise it, but I couldn't keep it raised up.

One of the men caught sight of the movement, said something to Mae, who turned toward me. Her eyes lit up, and her smile radiated pure happiness. She got up from the chair and walked toward me.

"Good morning, sunshine," she said, placing her hand on mine and giving it a squeeze. "I see you're able to move at least your hand. Are you able to speak?"

The reply formed in my mind and queued at my mouth, impatiently waiting for my jaws to comply and open.

I focused on the task, opened my mouth and heard my own whispered reply, "Yes."

“That’ll do. How are you feeling? Do you think if our friends here lend a hand, they can move you to another location?”

I was confused. Instead of saying anything, I first tried to look confused. Thankfully, Mae recognized the look.

“We don’t have time to explain it all now, but that man standing next to the chair there is Zach Muhly. You’re not gonna believe this, but he’s Jefferies brother. Yeah, that’s the story I was telling you about that’ll have to wait when we’re free and clear of this mess. The other one near the door, he goes by Niles, which of course is not his real name, so that tells you what kind of business he runs, but right now he’s working for us. Again, that’s a story for another time.”

I looked at both men who were looking at me, both with a mix of anticipation and wonder.

“Jefferies is still in the mainframe,” Mae continued.

So, we need to get to him, I thought. I tried to say it, but my jaw and tongue were not quite working in tandem and it sounded more like one continuous word, if one word had been put in a food processor and frapped.

“His portal is inside his private residence. Jefferies is there, still hooked up to whatever that device is that connects to the mainframe. We still have work to do.”

So many thoughts crowded in my mind. I closed my eyes and focused every ounce of energy on speaking them slowly and as clear as possible.

“I gnaw wat to do,” I said.

Mae squeezed my hand. “I knew you would. The device Jefferies used to get me to the mainframe is also there. We’ve got a plan in place, and all is ready to go, but we’ll first need to get you there. Everything is ready if you are.”

It took less energy for me to lift my hand and give her a thumbs up. I couldn’t wait to get back.

Chapter 36

I slept on the trip to Jefferies residence and when I woke up, I felt even better than I had just a while ago.

After being wheeled into the room, I saw Jefferies hooked to a machine which stood on top of a small table between him and an empty chaise lounge. Mae and the others surrounded my bed and explained the details of the plan. Like all good plans, it was simple yet effective, not complicated and prone to error.

Once I gave my thumbs up and they hooked me up to the machine, Mae came back over and said, “I know of all people, you won’t do anything too risky, but between you and me, I hope you give that son-of-a-bitch one hell of a hard time.”

I don’t know if it was the excitement and resulting adrenaline, but I felt good. Ready.

“Regardless,” I said, my voice back to normal, “I will enjoy myself.”

“Just be careful. I just got you back. The last thing I want to do is lose you again.”

I held out my hand, felt her grab mine, and gave it a reassuring squeeze.

“Is everybody ready? Here we go,” Niles said.

And just like that, I was back inside the shack.

The door to the shack was in front of me. I turned around, but other than the portal behind me, the shack was empty. Jefferies was nowhere to be seen. I allowed a moment to adjust to the dim light inside the shack, then saw a disturbance pattern in the hard packed sand from the spot where Jefferies had lain to the door of the shack.

A small twinge of panic scraped its fingernails on the blackboard of my neck. I turned in a slow circle to make sure he wasn't hiding somewhere, but the shack was empty.

I moved toward the door, opened it, and stepped into the bright sunlight. Not far away, I spied Jefferies. In the full sun, it was easy to see he'd wriggled his way to a large manzanita bush, and had backed up against it. The gag that had hogtied his hands to his feet was already loose, and he was currently working on getting the tie around his hands cut.

So focused on the task, he'd not seen me emerge from the shack. I moved toward him slowly until he noticed the movement. When he saw me, his eyes grew large in terror. Seeing the terror filled me with joy. It was delicious, and I savored every second. I stood for a long moment, drinking it in. His terror turned to panic as he tried to stand back up. His lanky limb still held fast at his wrist behind him and his ankles made his thrashing about all the sweeter.

I closed the remaining distance until I was standing above him. He stopped thrashing and sat back against the manzanita.

"What do you think you're doing?" I asked.

I marveled at how quickly he could recover and act as if he were lounging on an exotic beach and I were noting more important than an annoying cabana boy. His practiced composure, while fractured, remained. His countenance tried to portray he had not a care in the world. He didn't answer me, but continued to stare up at me.

To be safe, I reached down, grabbed him by his ankles and dragged him a short distance away from the bush. I then sat him up and checked the tie around his hands. He must've just gotten to the manzanita. The tie looked strong, unworn.

Leaving him sitting on the ground, I moved back in front of him. I knew he would not enjoy having to look up to somebody he felt was beneath him, which was everybody.

“I’m sure you have many questions,” I said. “I have the enviable position of possessing many answers, but I’m not interested in question-and-answer time. What I am interested in is striking a deal.”

“What kind of deal do you propose?”

His voice was raspy. Had he been screaming?

“A deal that ensures freedom for both of us, but in order to have freedom, we need to first establish trust.”

Jefferies let out a quick snuffle type chuckle. “Freedom and trust? Surely, you’re joking.”

I wanted to impale my foot into his stomach, but kept my feet firmly on the ground. “I couldn’t be more serious than I am at this very moment, Jefferies.”

“Let’s hear it then. What have you got?”

“I will hand over all information, which I will admit I procured in a somewhat illegal fashion, regarding your illegal funneling of State monies to a personal account as well as the method surrounding your cover up and setting me up as your fall guy. All of this information, as you well know, I have on a flash drive that you’ve been searching for since my liberation.”

Jefferies sat unmoving.

“Additionally,” I continued, “after speaking with Warden Collins at length, who has already agreed to all terms and conditions, information regarding the truth regarding liberation

cannot be discussed by any party involved in all of this. We're all willing to sign whatever documentation the Counsel feels appropriate. We've all already agreed that any information leaked from either side will lead to the immediate excommunication of said party."

Jefferies smiled. I wanted to kick his teeth in.

"The information you speak of," he said, "what guarantee do I have you've not made copies?"

"You have no guarantee, nor will I give you one. This will ensure everybody stays honest. If you try anything like you did, we'll have everything at the ready. We'll come down on you in ways you can't even imagine. To protect you, if we were to leak any information, you'll have all you'll need to scrub us from society and label us as apostates. Shunned, our words and accusations will mean nothing."

"You're bluffing," Jefferies said. "Besides the information you say you have that could convict me, it would simply be my word against yours," Jefferies said.

Arrogance poured out of him as easily as water released from a dam. I reflected how in previous interactions, this type of arrogance I found to be intimidating, or as a show of strength. Now, I saw if for what is really was. A show of weakness and coming from a place of fear and deep-rooted insecurity.

It was my turn, at long last, to smile a wolfish smile. "No Counselman. It will not be just my word. Thanks to you, the damage to my name has already been done. I'm already stained and it will take a lot of work to erase what you've done. So, no, not just my word, Counselman. There's also his word."

I pointed my thumb over my shoulder at the shack behind me. Until now, Jefferies remained focused on me and hadn't noticed the newcomer who'd walked up behind me.

Zach stepped out and stood before his brother. At first, Jefferies looked at him as a stranger. There was no recognition, no sense of familiarity.

"Hello Eugene," Zach said. "I've watched you from the shadows for a long time, waiting, hoping, praying for this day to come."

Jefferies continued to stare until he realized who was standing before him. It took several more seconds for the implications of what that meant to hit home, but when it did, Jefferies face twisted in torturous repercussions.

"No! How?"

"I've dreamt of this moment, imagined how it would be to exact vengeance upon you for what you did to mom and dad, for what you attempted to do to me."

"I, I, I had no choice," Jefferies said, too stunned to formulate a coherent answer beyond that.

"We always have a choice. Your choice was to murder us. Now that I'm here, looking at the pathetic piece of shit you've become, it makes your atrocities even worse. Mom and dad died for nothing. They died so you could add the word thief to liar and murderer."

Jefferies, despite the shock, composed himself and said, "I'll do whatever it is you want."

"First things, first. I need you to admit you killed mom and dad and attempted to kill me. Acknowledgement of this is the only way we can reach any deal," Zach said.

Jefferies was lost, unable to grasp defeat, especially since that somebody he regarded as inferior to himself. It was beyond comprehension all his plans, his entire life, were built upon fine sand and, with the tidal waves of realizations, knew it was all eroding underneath him.

I spoke up. “With your admission of guilt, all parties involved will sign an NDA and we can all move on.”

Jefferies looked at me, and he looked like a scared little boy who’d cried himself to sleep after being left alone for the first time.

“Who are all the parties?” he asked.

“Warden Collins, the man only known as Niles, who we know you contracted with the purpose of illegally inserting Mae into the mainframe to coerce me, your brother Zach here, Mae and myself. We have all agreed to these terms. All we need, as Zach has already said, is your verbal acknowledgement, and that will be that.”

Jefferies looked from me to Zach, then back to me, “And everybody will agree to a stringent NDA?”

“I can assure you,” I said, “All the parties involved, except for you, have already agreed to sign it. All we’re waiting for is your verbal acknowledgment that everything stated is true and correct. Once that happens, we’ll escort you back to the portal, back to the other side, where the document awaits your signature.”

“And if I refuse?” Jefferies asked.

“Then we’ll leave you here, but not before making sure you won’t go slithering through the sand like the snake we know you are. No, no. We’ll make sure you stay right where we put you.”

I marveled at how he was trying to find an angle, a bit of leverage. There was none.

“I agree,” Jefferies said. Then, in a surprise, he went on. “There isn’t a day I wonder what became of you, Zach. They never did find your body, and I always wondered about that.”

Zach moved toward him, but I put my arm out and stopped him from advancing. “It’s not worth it, Zach. Save it.”

Zach didn’t fight me, but he leaned out and spit on his brother's head.

I bent over and grabbed Jefferies by the wrist and pulled him up. “Come on.”

Once standing, I untied his feet. We walked the short distance to the shack, where Zach opened the door and stood to the side to allow Jefferies to enter first. I had my hand on his back, holding him fast by the tie binding his hands.

As soon as we entered, Jefferies stopped dead in his tracks. Standing between him and the portal, the other two Counsel members stood, their faces placid and calm, but their eyes glowed with suppressed rage.

“Eugene Jefferies,” Counselman Newmier said, “we have heard your confession of guilt and find that admission corroborates the accounts brought to us by your brother and Alexander. Your brother has provided us with DNA evidence to prove he is who he says he is.”

Jefferies fell to his knees, the weight of the moment crushing him.

Continuing where Counselman Newmier left off, Counselman O'Neil said, "Mr. Donovan has provided the details of your crimes. We therefore find the preponderance of evidence sufficient to find you guilty of two counts of murder, one count of attempted murder, conspiracy, embezzlement, and treason. We conscript you to remain in this in vitro mainframe until your death."

With that, the two councilmen raised their arms and held out their fists with their thumbs pointing upward.

"No! Please!" Jefferies said between sobs.

They ignored his pleas, turned, and walked back through the portal.

Holding out my hand, I said to Zach, "After you."

Zach moved toward the portal, stopped, and turned back to face his brother for the last time.

"As much as I'd like to see you suffer, I know that by going through with that wish, I'd become what you are. A lowly coward, too weak to even admit his weakness. I may never have mercy or find forgiveness for the things you've done to our family, and the constituents you vowed to serve, but I will not lower myself to your level. Instead, I will just say goodbye. Once and for all, goodbye. I am now free."

Zach then turned and walked toward the portal and disappeared.

I bent over Jefferies, putting my mouth near his ear and whispered, "This is for the humiliation my wife had to suffer through because of you."

I pulled a knife from my pocket and sliced his robe from the top of the collar all the way down his back. A thin trail of blood followed as I sliced his robe in half, then ripped it off him. I did the same for the underwear he wore until he cowered on the floor as naked as the day he was born.

I then picked up the slashed garments and balled them up and waked toward the portal. Before entering, I turned and regarded the mass of pasty naked flesh that continued to spasm in defeat.

“Don’t worry, Jefferies. Unlike your brother, I have no intention of taking the high road. Instead, I will see that you are never comfortable. I will create thirst you can never slake, a hunger you can never satiate. I will give you what you offered me - just enough sanity to question the legitimacy of that sanity. I will provide the cliff, but not the impetus to leap over it.”

Taking one step into the portal I stopped, then said over my shoulder, “So long, Jefferies, but not goodbye.”

With that, I turned and walked through the portal and left the mainframe behind me forever.

Chapter 37

The fall evening air was a perfect balance of warm and cool. A light breeze carried within its invisible current hints of rain laced with the nutmeg aroma of fallen leaves that skidded along the patio deck. Sitting in my favorite outdoor lounge chair, I looked skyward and marveled at the orange, red and purple hues that striated the sky.

It was a perfect evening.

Behind me, the window to the kitchen was open and I could hear Mae talking to Maxx, who was gabbing up a storm in his baby talk. I smiled.

“Are you coming out to join me?” I said.

“Maxx and I will be right there. We’re just getting his banana cut up.”

“When’s everybody supposed to be here?” I inquired.

“Soon,” Mae replied. “They know where we’ll be.”

I looked around the large deck area, admiring my handiwork, knowing how much work had gone into it. Zach and I had spent most of the last month working on it, with tools and supplies provided by Niles, whose name I now knew was really Cassius Veralldi.

I looked around the backyard and felt the tug of emotion. Although I looked at the future with optimism and promise, I will miss this place and this neighborhood. As long as I had Mae, Maxx and my friends, it mattered not where I laid my head.

Later, after Maxx was in bed for the night and as Mae, Zach, Cassius and I sat around the fire pit laughing and sipping on Mae’s homemade spiked apple cider, I looked at each face and reflected on the friendships that we’d forged in the fire of catastrophe.

As Zach regaled us with wild tales of investigations he'd done, I wondered if I could go back in time, would I alter events so that we'd not suffered the fear, uncertainty, panic, loss, humiliation and pain we'd all gone through. Would I risk forfeiting what we, individually and as a group, now had?

Time and energy. The two most important things when assessing risk vs reward. The time and energy exerted by each of us had been tremendous. It made up the better part of an entire month. Had consumed us in its totality.

Yet, even with such demands on our time and energy, we had spent more than double the amount of both building lifelong friendships. Time and energy. Risk vs reward. While I wouldn't go looking for trouble, looking around at each face, cast in yellow from the fire and framed by the chilly fall night, I decided I wouldn't change a damn thing.

"Alex," Zach said, interrupting my thoughts, "you've been unusually quiet this evening. Everything okay?"

Zach, I'd learned since our ordeal, had a special gift. He could read people as if he could read their minds.

"Better than okay, Zach. Everything is perfect," I replied.

"Good, then it's time for a toast," Zach said, getting up from his chair. "I'd like to make a toast to the new Counselman, Alex Donovan. Although our time together has been short, I know we all agree there's no better fit to fill the vacancy on the Counsel of Three than you."

"Hear, hear," Cassius and Mae said in unison, raising their insulated mugs.

“Thank you,” I said, raising my mug toward Zach. “And if ever there was a more deserving man to head up the new Constabulary oversight division, it would be you.”

I then turned to Cassius. “And to you, sir, head of the newly formed acquisitions division, there’s nobody better.”

While I knew this would be the last time all of us would be here, in this place, the place I’d called home for the past 15 years, I knew that even in our new residence, we’d create new and wonderful memories, just like this one.

Zach sat down and we all became quiet, each of us contemplating the events that had brought us all together, and pondering our future endeavors.

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Later, after everybody had left, Mae I sat on the couch with the lights off. Like that fateful night which seemed a lifetime ago, she’d lit candles, and we sat cuddled up to one another. The silence that ensued results from intimacy that comes from two people who are so attuned to one another that speaking would dilute it. We drank in each second, not wanting to spoil it.

We sat in silence for more than an hour before Mae broke the silence. “I’ve been wondering,” she said, “how were you able to change the conditions of the mainframe? Bend the bars, transport yourself and everything else?”

I knew that eventually I’d have to tell her about Cal, about how I’d become whoever and whatever was necessary in order to get back to her, but first I needed to do some prep work.

“Reality is fluid,” I said.

She was quiet. I knew she needed more information.

“How is reality defined?” I continued. “When you ask things like what is consciousness, what makes up what’s real and what isn’t, you see that reality is not static, but dynamic. Reality, therefore, is malleable.”

Mae remained quiet. I let her process for a moment before adding, “Think of reality as the banks of a river composed of semisolid mud, sand, and gravel. Time is the water that over time cuts and reshapes the malleable banks. Under normal circumstances this takes place slowly, over years, but during storm events and flooding, this process is accelerated. I guess that’s what I did. Instead of being on the bank, because of the flood, I dove in and became the water. Or rather the bank had been eroded from underneath me. Honestly, though, I’m not sure I really understand it all.”

“There’s more,” Mae said. She always knew. “There’s something you’re not telling me.”

Although I was hesitant to speak about Cal, I knew no matter how difficult, I would not keep anything from her.

“Yes,” I said. “There is something else. Something happened to me. I’m not sure if I suffered temporary insanity or what, but I had a split personality. I was convinced there was another prisoner next to my cell named Cal. There was no Cal. Cal was a projection of me. Through Cal, I was able to do things that would’ve been otherwise impossible. It was a smokescreen that I was able to hide behind in order to hack into the mainframe and build the bridge to Collins system.”

Mae was quiet, but the silence was not one that was filled with judgement or accusation. After a few more moments she said, “Is Cal still around?”

I chuckled. “No. Toward the end, after he’d fulfilled his purpose, I came to realize he’d been a projection of me. With that, he was gone.”

Mae leaned into me, resting her head on my shoulder. I draped my arm around her and held her close.

“What is your reality now, Alex?” she said.

The answer came not from my mind, was not born from logic, but came in an instant from my heart that blazed forth from the deepest parts of my soul, filled my entire being, yet I knew I could never emote the degree the feeling compelled me to express it. The void between what I wanted to say and knowing it would never fully capture what I felt left me with a yearning beyond comprehension.

“You. You are my everything. You make up all there is and all that will ever be. What is reality? You, my love. You.”

THE END

